

CHILD REARING FACTORS



# Factors Associated With Perceived Parenting Competence Among Special Needs Adoptive Mothers

Angella Y. Eanes & Anne C. Fletcher

## ABSTRACT

The study reported here considered the nature of associations among children's behavior problems, parenting stress, and mothers' feelings of competence. Seventy-two adoptive mothers reported on their adopted children's behavior problems, their own parenting stress, and feelings of competence. Parenting stress was found to mediate the association between children's attention problems and mothers' feelings of competence. When children exhibited higher levels of attention problems, their mothers felt more stress. In turn, when mothers experienced more parenting stress, they felt less competent as parents. Parenting stress moderated the association between children's internalizing behavior and mothers' feelings of competence. A negative relationship between children's internalizing behavior and mothers' feelings of competence was stronger when mothers reported more parenting stress than when they reported less parenting stress.

**W**ithin the general parenting literature, it is widely recognized that not only do parents influence their children's development and behavior, but also children's behavior affects parents' behavior, psychological well-being, feelings of stress and competence, self-esteem, and perceptions of their families (Abidin, 1990). Hence, the experience of parenting children who exhibit behavior problems is likely to cause lower feelings of psychological well-being, self-esteem, and competence, as well as greater parenting stress. Adopted children might be at a higher comparative risk for psychological problems—externalizing behavior such as acting out or aggressiveness, and internalizing behavior such as depression or social withdrawal—than are non-adopted children (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990). This assumption would suggest that adoptive parents are also at risk for lower feelings of competence. Special needs adoptions involve ethnic minority children,

children with physical or emotional disabilities, older children (generally defined as those older than one year old), and children adopted as a sibling group. Often, these are children who have experienced neglect and/or abuse, and have lived in out-of-home care facilities prior to their adoptive placement (Rosenthal & Groze, 1992). These factors often put adopted children at higher risk for poor adjustment and well-being which might, in turn, impact adoptive mothers' feelings of competence and parenting stress.

## Background

### Theoretical Perspective

Symbolic interaction theory attempts to explain behavior by focusing on social interactions and the meanings that individuals construct about reality through these interactions (Klein & White, 1996). Interpretations of these meanings

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influence how individuals behave, communicate, and perceive themselves. Specifically, individuals' behavior is predicated upon the meanings assigned to the persons and entities with which they interact, as well as their understanding and interpretation of social prescriptions (Wallace & Wolf, 1995). With its focus on personal meaning and interpretation of situations, symbolic interaction theory is helpful in understanding contributors to feelings of parenting competence among adoptive parents.

Symbolic interaction theory offers a way to understand individuals' behavior and self-perceptions by focusing on the meanings they construct about themselves and the world around them. Adoptive mothers' self-perceptions of competence are likely to be influenced by such meanings because of the responsibilities associated with parenting the biological children of others, social pressures to parent well-adjusted children even in the face of children's traumatic prior experiences, and the multiple responsibilities of parenting special needs children. Accordingly, the authors propose that adoptive mothers' self-perceptions of competence would be influenced by the characteristics of the children they parent, the extent to which they perceive their caretaking responsibilities as stressful, and the larger social contexts in which parenting actually occurs.

### ***Children's Behavior Problems Linked with Parents' Feelings of Competence***

An examination of the literature on adopted children indicates disagreement about the extent to which adopted children are at risk for behavior problems, specifically internalizing behavior such as withdrawal or depression and externalizing behavior such as aggressiveness or acting out. Many studies report that adopted children are more likely to require psychological treatment than nonadopted children, while other studies find no support to such claims (McRoy, Grotevant, & Zurcher, 1988). Studies also have found adopted children to be at particularly high risk for hyperactivity and externalizing behavior. Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, and Singer (1984) compared adopted and nonadopted children's behavior as reported by parents. Adopted children scored higher on externalizing behavior than did nonadopted children, but the most pronounced difference between the groups was due to extremely high scores on attention problems among adopted children. In

a similar comparison, Rosenthal and Groze (1992) found that adopted children exhibited more behavior problems than did 90% of their nonadopted peers. Emphasizing perspective, Brodzinsky (1987) stated that the majority of adopted children function normally, but that the percentage of adopted children with clinical levels of psychological or behavior problems is much higher than the percentage of nonadoptees experiencing such problems.

Studies of parents of biological children with behavior problems indicate that these parents report lower feelings of competence than do parents of children without behavior problems. Parents of children exhibiting chronic behavior problems and children with attention problems report decreasing and lower feelings of competence (Mash & Johnston, 1990; Pisterman et al., 1992). In a comparison study of mothers of elementary school students diagnosed with attention problems and mothers of elementary school students with no such diagnosis, mothers of students with attention problems rated themselves as less effective and less confident parents (August, Braswell, & Thuras, 1998; August, Realmuto, MacDonald, Nugent, & Crosby, 1996).

### ***The Role of Parenting Stress in Relation to the Association Between Children's Behavior Problems and Parents' Feelings of Competence***

Children's behavior problems are one key factor influencing parents' feelings of competence. Another factor linked with parents' feelings of competence is parenting stress experienced in relation to parenting responsibilities. However, the specific role of parenting stress in relation to the association between children's behavior problems and parents' feelings of competence is unclear and may differ for adoptive parents versus biological parents. Specifically, parenting stress might either mediate or moderate the relation between children's behavior problems and parents' feelings of competence within adoptive families.

**Parenting Stress as a Mediator of Associations Between Children's Behavior Problems and Parents' Feelings of Competence.** A mediator functions as a mechanism that explains or shapes the association between a predictor variable and an outcome variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Children's behavior problems might be linked with higher levels of parenting stress. Greater parenting stress might lead to lower feelings of competence. Hence, parenting stress might mediate associations between children's behavior problems and parents' feelings of competence.

Studies of children raised by their biological parents have shown that chronic behavior problems and attention problems are associated with greater parenting stress (Mainemer, Gilman, & Ames, 1998; Pisterman et al., 1992). Special needs adoptive parents are at risk for elevated stress levels when they adopt children with

psychological or behavior problems, physical or developmental disabilities, or a combination of these (Rosenthal, Groze, & Aguilar, 1991). In a study of adoptive parents of children with attention and behavior problems, only attention problems were associated with less positive responses concerning the impact of adoption on families (Rosenthal et al., 1991). Yet when parents were asked about difficulties with their adopted children, they most often listed externalizing behavior such as aggressiveness or acting out. Attention problems were rarely mentioned, indicating that parents may not be conscious of the attention problems or the effects of their children's attention problems on their own stress levels.

The parenting literature shows that greater parenting stress influences parents' feelings of competence (Conger, Ge, Elder, Lorenz, & Simons, 1994; Dubowitz, 1999). As parenting stress rises, parents begin to feel that they are less able to nurture, protect, supervise, or interact with their children. Frankel and Harmon (1996) found that mothers who reported more parenting stress evaluated themselves more negatively as parents than did mothers with less parenting stress. No research linking feelings of competence with parenting stress within intact adoptive families is available. However, it is assumed that—as among parents raising their biological children—adoptive parents' feelings of competence would decrease as parenting stress increased.

**Parenting Stress as a Moderator of Associations Between Children's Behavior Problems and Parents' Feelings of Competence.** A moderating variable sets a context in which a predictor variable may deviate from an outcome variable (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Adoptive parents who experience more parenting stress might find that the experience of parenting a child with behavior problems is linked to lower perceptions of competence. In contrast, for parents who experience less parenting stress, parenting a child with behavior problems might not be associated with feelings of parenting competence.

Many adoptive parents feel unprepared for their children's medical, developmental, and behavior problems (Kramer & Houston, 1998; Nelson, 1985; Valentine, Conway, & Randolph, 1988). In the excitement of bringing children into their homes, adoptive parents often disregard warnings by social workers about possible difficulties. In some cases, social workers might not adequately discuss children's problems with prospective parents out of concerns that parents will change their minds regarding the adoption (Valentine et al., 1988). Adoptive parents' unpreparedness can lead to greater parenting stress, which causes them to feel incapable of parenting their adopted children (Kramer & Houston, 1998; Mainemer et al., 1998). In addition, many parents create fantasies of expectations about their adoptive families.

The collision of the parents' fantasy with the reality of parenting special needs children may cause a backlash resembling shock and a lowering of feelings of competence (Kramer & Houston, 1998; Rosenthal & Groze, 1992).

In contrast, for some parents, strong feelings of competence may play a role in their decisions to adopt special needs children. In interviews with special needs adoptive parents, Nelson (1985) asked parents why they decided to adopt special needs children. Many parents viewed adoption as an opportunity to help children through their own competent parenting. One parent indicated the desire to parent a child no one else could handle. Another study of special needs adoptive families showed that foster parent adopters and parents who reported high competence in their parenting skills were less likely to disrupt their adoptions (Rosenthal, Schmidt, & Connor, 1988). Foster parents of special needs children who adopt their foster children have experienced the distressing situations asso-

Special needs adoptive parents represent a population  
that is often overlooked, even by adoption researchers.

ciated with parenting special needs children and feel competent enough in their parenting roles to take such children into their families permanently (Nelson, 1985). These parents' initially strong feelings of competence might buffer them from rising parenting stress that could impact their feelings of competence.

In addition, a subset of adoptive parents might be insulated from negative effects of their children's behavior by an ability to separate their parenting abilities from their children's behavior. Although these parents might have adopted children with behavior problems, they should report less parenting stress. Under the condition of lower stress, the presence of children's behavior problems will be unrelated to parents' feelings of competence.

### Purpose

The general parenting literature indicates that high parenting stress and low feelings of competence can be predicted by specific characteristics of children. The more specific nature of associations among these variables within special needs adoptive families remains to be established. The purpose of the current study is to consider the nature of associations among children's behavior problems, parenting stress, and mothers' feelings of competence, with special emphasis on the role of parenting stress

as a potential mediator or moderator of associations between specific indicators of children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence. The authors hypothesize that parenting stress will both mediate and moderate associations between children's behavior problems—specifically, internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and attention problems—and mothers' feelings of competence.

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 72 adoptive mothers who adopted children between the ages of four and sixteen years of age in two counties in North Carolina. All parents who received adoption subsidies through the participating counties were contacted by mail, regardless of the age of their children at adoption. Parents were asked to return self-addressed stamped envelopes if they had adopted a child over four years of age and were willing to participate in the study. Researchers mailed 602 letters. The post office returned 12 as undeliverable and 175 parents responded to indicate an interest in participating in the study. Nine parents responded to indicate that they were not interested in participating in the study.

The first author contacted responding parents who indicated interest in the study to determine whether they had adopted a child over four years of age. As a result of those telephone contacts, 56 parents were not eligible to participate because their children were adopted before their 4th birthdays. Attempts to contact another 25 families who had indicated interest in the project were unsuccessful. The authors found that 75 families fit the criteria for the study, and they asked those families to participate. Eleven responses were received after data collection was completed, and the families were not contacted to participate in the study. Parents who participated in the study received a \$10 gift certificate to a local department store as compensation for their time. Due to the recordkeeping systems in the participating counties, response rates are difficult to calculate. Based on state percentages of children adopted out of foster care after their 4th birthday, approximately 50% of the 602 families contacted would have been eligible for the study, resulting in 301 possible participating families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2002). Recruitment of 75 participating families indicates a 25% participation rate. For 29 families, both mothers and fathers participated in the project. Participants included 19 married mothers without their spouses, 24 single mothers, 2 single fathers, and 1 father without his spouse.

When both mother and father participated in the project, each parent completed a survey and an interview separately. Because parents were reporting on the same child, only the mothers' data were analyzed for this project.

**TABLE 1.** *Sample Demographic Characteristics*

	N	% OF SAMPLE	
Black Mothers	29	40%	
Married Mothers	48	67%	
Transracial Adoptive Mothers	11	15%	
	MEAN	MINIMUM	MAXIMUM
Mother's Age	50	30	75
SES	40.75	9	66
Child's Age	11	4	19

Including two reports for the same child violates the independence assumption of regression analyses. Violation of this assumption creates issues in assessing the unique contributions of each variable. In addition, the two single fathers and one father who participated without his wife were not included in the sample because parenting research indicates that fathers experience parenting in a different way than do mothers (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998).

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the study participants. Mothers ranged in age from 30 to 75 years old with children ranging in age from 4 to 19 years old. The authors determined the participants' socioeconomic status (SES) using the Hollingshead (1975) procedure. Scores ranged from 9 (unskilled laborers) to 66 (major businesspersons and professionals) with an average of 40.75 (medium businesspersons and minor professionals). Of the adoptive mothers who participated, 67% were married and 33% were single. The sample consisted of 60% white mothers and 40% black mothers. Fifteen percent of the families had been involved in transracial adoptions with white mothers adopting black or biracial children.

## Measures

### Demographic variables

During parental interviews, the first author obtained demographic information including parents' ages, ethnicities, and educational levels. A family roster created for participants detailed individuals living in the house, including ages and ethnicities of children, children's relationships to parents, (biological child, adopted child, foster child, or other relative), length of time children had been in the home, length of time children had been adopted (for adopted children), and the presence or absence of special needs. When more than one adopted child in a household was adopted after his or her 4th birthday, the adopted child closest to the age of 12 years was identified as the target child for the study.

Using Hollingshead's (1975) procedure, the authors calculated SES by coding parents' educational levels on a 7-point scale ranging from *did not attend high school* (1) to *graduate degree obtained* (7). Occupations were coded on

a 9-point scale from *unskilled labor* (1) to *major business and professionals* (9). Educational level and occupation codes were weighted and summed for each parent and divided by the number of parents in the household to obtain family SES scores.

Although single mothers' marital statuses included single-never married, single-divorced, and single-widowed, these were all coded as *single* (0) because regardless of status all the single mothers in this study adopted their children as single parents. Married mothers' status was coded as (1). Ethnicity for mothers was coded as *black* (0) and *white* (1). Comparison of mothers' and target children's ethnicities was used to code adoption type as *in-racial* (0) or *transracial* (1).

### Children's behavior problems

The authors measured children's internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and attention problems using mothers' reports on the 118-item Problem Item questions of the *Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL)* (Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983). The *CBCL* is a standardized clinical measure used in a variety of settings to assess a broad spectrum of child behaviors. The Problem Items questions yield several scales including the 31-item Internalizing Behavior scale ( $\alpha = .85$ ), the 32-item Externalizing Behavior scale ( $\alpha = .93$ ), and the 10-item Attention Problems scale ( $\alpha = .82$ ). Sample items for the Internalizing Behavior scale include "clings to adults or too dependent," and "refuses to talk." The Externalizing Behavior items include "destroys things belonging to his/her family or others," and "lying or cheating." The Attention Problems scale items include "can't concentrate," and "can't pay attention for long." For all scales, mothers indicated whether their children exhibited a given behavior on a 3-point scale ranging from *not true (as far as you know)* (0), to *somewhat or sometimes true* (1) and *very true or often true* (2). Item scores for each scale were summed. Higher scores on these scales have been associated with higher parental stress levels and lower reports of parenting competence among nonadoptive parents (Pisterman et al., 1992).

### Parenting stress

Mothers completed the 34-item Child Domain subscale ( $\alpha = .92$ ) of the *Parenting Stress Index (PSI)* (Abidin, 1990). The *PSI* has been used to assess parenting stress in a variety of families, including adoptive families (Mainemer et al., 1998). The Child Domain subscale assesses parents' stress levels surrounding their children's adaptability, acceptability, demandingness, and mood. Mothers responded to statements on a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). Sample statements include: "I often have the feelings that I cannot handle things very well," and "My child turned out to be more of a problem

than I expected." Higher scores indicate higher levels of parenting stress.

### Feelings of competence

Mothers completed the 10-item Parent Performance subscale of the *Cleminshaw-Guidubaldi Parent Satisfaction Scale* (Guidubaldi & Cleminshaw, 1985). This subscale reflects parents' assessments of their parenting skills ( $\alpha = .77$ ). Mothers responded to statements about how they felt about themselves on a 4-point Likert-type scale ranging from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (4). Statements include "I wish I did not become impatient so quickly with my children" and "I am satisfied with my childrearing skills." Higher scores indicate higher levels of parenting competence.

### Procedures

Adoptive mothers living within two hours' driving distance of the first author ( $n = 65$ ) provided demographic information about their families and completed questionnaires and a qualitative interview in their own homes. Mothers living outside North Carolina or at too great a distance to drive ( $n = 7$ ) provided a questionnaire, a qualitative interview, and demographic information during a telephone interview with the first author. The authors did not analyze data gathered during qualitative interviews for use in this article.

### Plan of Analysis

In order to test for mediation among variables, four requirements must be met (Baron & Kenny, 1986). First, all variables should be correlated. Second, a significant relationship should be established between the independent variable (IV) and the dependent variable (DV). Third, a significant relationship must be found between the mediating variable and the DV. Finally, when the mediating variable is introduced as an additional predictor of the DV, the previously significant relationship between the IV and DV must be reduced to nonsignificance.

A series of hierarchical linear regressions was conducted with mothers' perceived feelings of competence as the DV. On Step 1 of all regressions, researchers simultaneously entered demographic variables of mothers' age, SES, mothers' ethnicity, marital status, age of child, and ethnic similarity between mother and child as predictors of mothers' feelings of competence. On Step 2, children's behavior problems were entered as predictors of mothers' feelings of competence. Children's behavior problems included the Internalizing Behavior, Externalizing Behavior, and Attention Problems scales of the *CBCL*. On Step 3, parenting stress was entered as a predictor of mothers' feelings of competence. If previously significant effects of children's behavior problems on feelings of competence were reduced to non-significance, this would

**TABLE 2.** Descriptive Statistics and Correlations for Associations Among Child Behavior, Parenting Stress, and Feelings of Competence

	INTERNALIZING	EXTERNALIZING	ATTENTION	STRESS	COMPETENCE
Internalizing ( <i>N</i> )					
Externalizing ( <i>N</i> = 70)	.49**				
Attention ( <i>N</i> = 70)	.72**	.57**			
Stress ( <i>N</i> = 68)	.55**	.73**	.71**		
Competence ( <i>N</i> = 69)	-.78*	-.29*	-.42**	-.46**	
Mean	9.49	13.61	7.80	115.58	27.93
Std Deviation	6.99	9.68	4.74	25.44	4.42
Minimum	0.00	0.00	0.00	53.00	19.00
Maximum	34.00	54.00	19.00	168.00	37.00
<i>N</i>	70	70	70	69	71

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ 

indicate that parenting stress mediated associations between children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence. On Step 4, the interactions of parenting stress and children's internalizing behavior, parenting stress and children's externalizing behavior, and parenting stress and children's attention problems were entered as predictors of mothers' feelings of competence.

If significant associations were to be observed between interaction terms and mothers' feelings of competence, parenting stress would be determined to moderate associations between children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence. A moderator relationship indicates that the link between the IV and the DV is different based on the levels of a third variable. For example, if parenting stress were to moderate the relationship between children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence, there could be two different groups of mothers: those who report higher parenting stress and those who report lower parenting stress. For mothers who report higher parenting stress, the relationships between behavior problems and feelings of competence might be negative so that the more behavior problems children exhibit, the fewer feelings of competence their mothers report. However, for mothers who report lower parenting stress, there might be no relationship between children's behavior problems and feelings of competence.

## Results

### *Descriptive Statistics and Bivariate Correlations Among Child Behavior Variables, Parenting Stress, and Feelings of Competence*

Table 2 presents means, standard deviations, ranges, and patterns of intercorrelation for child internalizing behavior, child externalizing behavior, child attention problems, parenting stress, and feelings of competence. The three measures of child behavior were positively intercorrelated. Children who exhibited higher levels of any one type of behavior problem tended to exhibit higher levels of the other types of behavior problems as well. Strong positive correlations between parenting stress and each of the child

behavior variables suggested that higher levels of behavior problems among children were associated with higher parenting stress among mothers. Negative associations between feelings of competence and each type of child behavior indicated that higher levels of behavior problems exhibited by children were linked with mothers' lower feelings of competence. There was a negative association between parenting stress and feelings of competence. Mothers who experienced higher parenting stress tended to report lower feelings of competence. The patterns of correlations among children's behavior problems and parenting stress, children's behavior problems and feelings of competence, and parenting stress and feelings of competence fulfill the first requirement for mediation as discussed by Baron and Kenny (1986).

### *Are Behavior Problems Among Children Associated with Lower Feelings of Competence Among Adoptive Mothers?*

Table 3 illustrates the results of a four-step regression analysis for predicting mothers' feelings of competence from demographic variables, child behavior variables, and parenting stress. In Step 1, demographic characteristics of mother's age, socioeconomic status, mother's ethnicity, mother's marital status, target child's age, and an indicator of transracial adoption were entered as predictors. No demographic characteristics were associated with feelings of competence.

In Step 2 of the regression analysis, child behavior problems (internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and attention problems) were added as predictors of feelings of competence. Only attention problems were associated with feelings of competence,  $t(67) = -3.10$ ,  $p < .01$ . Mothers of children who exhibited more attention problems reported lower feelings of competence. The significance of this relationship satisfies the second requirement for mediation of associations between attention problems and feelings of competence in the presence of demographic controls as discussed by Baron and Kenny (1986). Because attention problems were the only children's behavior problems associated with feelings of competence

**TABLE 3.** Four-Step Regression Analysis for Prediction of Mothers' Feelings of Competence from Specific Variables

VARIABLES	MODEL 1			MODEL 2			MODEL 3			MODEL 4			R <sup>2</sup>	ΔR <sup>2</sup>
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β		
Mother's Age	-.02	.07	-.03	.00	.006	.00	.01	.06	.01	.04	.006	.08	.13	
SES	-.03	.05	-.08	-.04	.04	-.11*	-.08	.04	-.23	-.06	.04	-.19		
Mother's Ethnicity	-1.34	1.53	-.15	.70	1.44	.08	.21	1.36	.02	.34	1.33	.04		
Marital Status	2.60	1.35	-.29	3.21	1.20	.36	3.74	1.14	.41**	3.89	1.09	.43		
Target Child's Age	-.15	.15	-.14	-.15	.13	-.14	-.07	.13	-.07	-.13	.12	-.12		
Mother-Child Same Ethnicity	-1.68	1.70	-.14	-1.43	1.50	-.12	-1.51	1.41	-.12	-2.02	1.48	-.17		
Internalizing				.08	.10	.12	.70	.10	.11	1.68	.63	2.71	.35	.22
Externalizing Behavior				-.04	.06	-.10	.70	.07	.15	-.31	.29	-.68		
Attention Problems				-.52	.17	-.57**	-.25	.18	-.28	-1.61	.72	-1.76		
Parental Stress							-.10	.03	-.58**	-.11	.05	-.67	.44	.09
Internalizing X Stress										-.01	.01	-2.97*	.52	.08
Externalizing X Stress										.00	.02	.99		
Attention X Stress										.01	.01	1.88		

\* $p < .05$  \*\* $p < .01$ 

after controlling for demographic characteristics, meeting the second requirement for mediation, only attention problems were used in the test for parenting stress as a mediator of associations between children's behavior problems and feelings of competence.

#### **Are Associations Between Children's Behavior Problems and Mothers' Feelings of Competence Mediated by Parenting Stress?**

Parenting stress was added as a predictor in Step 3 of the regression analysis. The significant negative association between parenting stress and feelings of competence,  $t(67) = -3.02, p < .01$ , indicated that mothers who reported higher parenting stress felt less competent as parents. This significant relationship satisfies the third requirement for mediation as delineated by Baron and Kenny (1986). In addition, the previously significant association between attention problems and feelings of competence was reduced to non-significance when parenting stress was added to the model. This fulfills the final requirement for mediation (Baron & Kenny, 1986), indicating that parenting stress mediated the relationship between attention problems and feelings of competence. When children exhibited higher levels of attention problems, their mothers felt more parenting stress. In turn, when mothers experienced higher levels of parenting stress, they felt less competent as parents.

#### **Are Associations Between Children's Behavior Problems and Mothers' Feelings of Competence Moderated by Parenting Stress?**

In Step 4 of the regression analysis, interactions of parenting stress and children's behavior problems were entered. The interaction of parenting stress and internalizing behavior was significant,  $t(67) = -2.97, p < .05$ , indicating that parenting stress moderated the relationship between

internalizing behavior and feelings of competence. The direction of the regression coefficient indicated that the negative relationship between children's internalizing behavior and feelings of competence was stronger when parents reported higher parenting stress.

## **Discussion**

The findings reported here indicate problem-specific relationships between behavior problems among adopted children, mothers' feelings of competence, and parenting stress. Children's attention problems were linked to lower feelings of competence among mothers, with this relationship explained by parenting stress. In contrast, parenting stress functioned as a moderator of associations between children's internalizing behavior and mothers' feelings of competence, such that higher parenting stress intensified the negative relationship between internalizing behavior and feelings of competence.

The authors hypothesized that attention problems would be associated with mothers' lower feelings of parental competence. This association was present such that higher levels of child attention problems were linked with lower feelings of competence. Similar associations have been documented in studies of biological mothers raising children diagnosed with ADHD (August et al., 1998; August et al., 1996). Within the framework of symbolic interaction, role strain is defined as difficulty in managing a role or multiple roles (Klein & White, 1996). The constant monitoring and vigilance required in parenting children with attention problems might produce role strain in adoptive mothers, which might cause psychological and physical drain. As mothers' psychological and physical resources dwindle, they might perceive themselves as being less capable of parenting their children well.

The authors hypothesized that children's internalizing

and externalizing behavior would be linked with mothers' feelings of competence such that mothers of children who exhibited more internalizing and externalizing behavior would report lower levels of competence. However, the research demonstrated no such associations. These associations might be absent because of the lack of extreme behavior problems reported by mothers in this study. Adoptive mothers might decide to adopt children with special needs because they feel prepared to handle behavior problems (Valentine et al., 1988). Social workers and adoption licensing classes often stress the prevalence of extreme behavior problems in adopted children (Nelson, 1985). The mothers in this study might have felt that their children's behaviors were not problematic or extreme when compared to the behavior problems of special needs adopted children described by their social workers or adoption training instructors.

Parenting stress mediated the association between children's attention problems and mothers' feelings of competence. When children were perceived as exhibiting greater attention problems, mothers reported feeling more stress. Mothers who reported greater parenting stress felt less competent as parents. This finding is consistent with studies of biological mothers who have reported higher levels of stress to be associated with lower feelings of competence (Frankel & Harmon, 1996). According to symbolic interaction, mothers might perceive feelings of stress as indicators of poor parenting ability or feel that others consider them as being less able to parent their children well because of their perceived stress.

The authors hypothesized that parenting stress might moderate the association between children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence. In fact, the association between internalizing behavior and mothers' feelings of competence was moderated by levels of parenting stress. This finding suggests that for mothers who experience stress associated with their children's internalizing behavior, this stress intensifies the negative relationship between children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence. Mothers who do not feel stress associated with their children's internalizing behavior might be those who made the decision to adopt because they felt highly competent as parents (Nelson, 1985). These mothers might have developed a well-defined perception of the role of adoptive mother or changed their expectations of themselves and/or their children, thereby buffering them from perceiving difficulty in parenting.

Mothers who experience stress associated with their children's internalizing behavior might have developed ambiguous or extreme expectations for themselves as parents, feeling that they must fix every child or be in control of every situation. It is difficult to feel in control of children who internalize their problems (Phares & Danforth, 1994). Depression, anxiety, and withdrawal cannot be restrained, disciplined, or controlled. Some mothers whose children exhibit higher levels of internalizing distress might begin to feel out of control of their children and unable to correct or alleviate the behaviors. The stress that accompanies such feelings might combine with parenting experiences to result in mothers feeling less capable of nurturing and supporting their children.

**Limitations**

This study is not without its limitations. The cross-sectional nature of data analyzed in this project provides only a snapshot of adoptive mothers' experiences. Hence, the directionality of the associations reported here is unclear. The focus of this study was on adoptive mothers' well-being. Most parenting research examines the impact of parents' practices, skills, or styles on children's outcomes. These studies often find that parents who use positive parenting practices or styles have children who exhibit more positive outcomes. However, it might be that well-adjusted children enable their parents to use more positive parenting practices. The bidirectional nature of parent-child relationships is well established (Bell, 1971). For example, research has indicated that parents who feel less competent are less effective parents and tend to have children with more behavior problems (Stice & Barrera, 1995). The current study focused on the possible association of children's behavior problems with mothers' perceptions of their own parenting ability.

The diversity of the families participating in this project, including the ages of children at the time of the interviews, adoptions, and placements, is potentially problematic. However, the difficulty in obtaining a more homogenous sample is inherent in adoption research. Adoptive families are not a homogenous group. Each child and family comes to the adoption process with its own set of circumstances and experiences. Hence, the diversity of this sample of special needs adoptive families reflects the diversity found among adoptive families in general.

Finally, it is possible that associations reported in this paper are due to shared source variance, as the researchers used only mothers' reports to measure all variables. More

Agencies would be advised to create interventions and post-adoption services focused on reducing stress levels associated with specific problem behaviors.



competent mothers might be predisposed to perceive their children as exhibiting fewer problem behaviors. However, the differing patterns of associations between mothers' perceptions of competence and different indicators of children's behavior problems, specifically internalizing and attention problems, suggest that mothers who perceived themselves as "good" parents were not merely perceiving their children as "well-behaved." Reports of children's behavior obtained from other sources, such as teachers or social workers, might have resulted in different findings. Still, understanding mothers' perceptions of their own roles as special needs adoptive parents was a goal of this study. Obtaining such an understanding requires reliance on self-report measures completed by mothers themselves.

The mothers who chose to participate in this study might not be representative of the larger population of special needs adoptive parents. Mothers with children exhibiting higher levels of behavior problems, and those with higher levels of stress and/or lower feelings of competence might have chosen not to respond to the invitation to participate in this project, thereby restricting the variance in indicators of children's behavior problems. It is possible that the nonrepresentative nature of the sample could account for the absence of associations between children's behavior problems and mothers' feelings of competence.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings presented here offer suggestions both for future research and for agencies working with special needs adoptive parents. Special needs adoptive parents represent a population that is often overlooked, even by adoption researchers. Because parenting is such an important factor contributing to children's well-being, developing interventions for special needs adoptive parents who are experiencing higher levels of parenting stress and/or lower feelings of competence should be a priority for agencies.

There appears to be something uniformly stressful about parenting children with attention problems. Special needs adoptive mothers of children with attention problems experience increased levels of stress and lowered feelings of competence. In contrast, internalizing behavior seems to be disruptive to parental competence for only a subset of special needs adoptive mothers—those who experience stress associated with the behavior. This finding would indicate the need for assessments of potential special needs adoptive parents to include evaluations of parents' feelings of competence and susceptibilities to environmental stressors. In addition, agencies would be advised to create interventions and post-adoption services focused on reducing stress levels associated with specific problem behaviors.

Although most adoption professionals provide information to prospective adoptive parents about the possibil-

ity of behavior problems among adoptive children, one study indicated that only 18% of prefinalization adoptive parents reported concern regarding potential behavior problems among their adopted children (Mainemer et al., 1998). Prospective parents' initial lack of concern might make parenting children who exhibit higher levels of behavior problems particularly difficult (Berry & Barth, 1990). Post-adoption parenting classes might wisely provide parents with information and skills to deal with their children's behavior problems. Additional information and skills might also shift parents' perceptions of their own parenting, potentially raising parenting competence and lowering parenting stress levels.

Parenting support groups might also be arenas in which adoptive parents can share information and experiences with each other (Berry & Barth, 1990). More experienced parents might share their parenting knowledge in order to give newer adoptive parents ideas of what to expect from their children and how to develop appropriate parenting solutions. Researchers have found that adoptive parents' informal social networks, including best friends, parents, extended family, and church, are a great source of support when dealing with parenting difficulties (Kramer & Houston, 1998). Agencies and adoption professionals could encourage adoptive parents to develop and strengthen their informal support networks, including other adoptive parents. However, network members should also be directed not to withdraw support when adoptive parenting situations become extreme (Kramer & Houston, 1998). For parents of children with attention problems and those experiencing stress associated with their children's internalizing behavior, these types of support could be particularly helpful and lead to lowered levels of parental stress and higher feelings of competence.

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**Angella Y. Eanes**, PhD, is assistant professor, Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, South Carolina State University. **Anne C. Fletcher**, PhD, is associate professor, Department of Human Development and Family Studies, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to the first author at [aeanes@scsu.edu](mailto:aeanes@scsu.edu) or the Department of Family and Consumer Sciences, South Carolina State University, 300 College Avenue, NE, Orangeburg, SC 29117.

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clients from diverse backgrounds. Using vignettes, the authors were able to show the many benefits of the narrative approach including social workers' ability to gather additional information about clients, and to help their clients define challenges and interpret the meaning of their stories. If social workers provide an opportunity for clients—whether they are families or individuals—to use narratives, it would enable growth, understanding, and a better overall therapeutic approach.

### **The Epistemology of Cultural Competence**

*Charmaine C. Williams*

This article supports the importance of cultural competence when working with clients of ethnically or racially diverse backgrounds. Through a detailed vignette of a Japanese immigrant, the readers learn about cultural competence and the paradigms used when working with a diversity of clients. The paradigms discussed are based on postpositivism, constructivism, critical theory, and postmodernism. These paradigms can be potential tools for developing a better understanding of what constitutes effective multicultural practice and what contributes to cultural impasses. As no master theory exists in social work when working with cultural competency, the author suggests working across multiple paradigms to find ways to engage with clients.

### **A Multilevel Approach to Cultural Competence: A Study of the Community Response to Underserved Domestic Violence Victims**

*Loretta Pyles & Kyung Mee Kim*

Cultural competence—once perceived as an individual skill—is now addressed at the interpersonal, agency and systems level. By moving toward a holistic approach to cultural competency, a service agency would set an overall standard for every social worker and provider. Specifically, this article studies the level of cultural competence and its relevancy when working with domestic violence and battered women. The findings show battered women's advocates have the highest levels of individual cultural competence as the women often come from different races, levels of disabilities, economic status and both urban and rural areas. The authors promote incorporating community organizing and community practice strategies with individual cultural competence creating a multilevel system which would lead to policy and program changes that are conducive to diversity issues.

### **Hmong Immigrants' Perceptions of Family Secrets and Recipients of Disclosure**

*Zha Blong Xiong, Arunya Tuicomepee, Laura LaBlanc, & Julie Rainey*

Reluctant disclosure of family issues is a problem social workers face daily. All families have issues of disclosure when dealing with unplanned pregnancies, illegitimate

children, adultery, debts, violent acts, mental illness, and chronic illness. This article focuses on Hmong immigrant families and the cultural barriers that exist when working with these clients. Most often, with little more than a translation, Hmong immigrants receive mainstream treatment from social workers with no background of the Hmong culture and their immigration. How does the social worker deal with the disclosure of adultery when it is acceptable for a man to take more than one wife in the Hmong culture? This study educates the worker on how to work within the Hmong cultural beliefs and the potential deleterious consequences of these family problems if not dealt with.

### **Therapist Self-Disclosure From a Gay Male Perspective**

*Brent A. Satterly*

Little research or literature exists on Therapist Self-Disclosure (TSD) by practitioners who are gay. What if the client asks if you're gay or uses terminology offensive to you? Everyday therapists are put in situations where disclosing their sexual orientation would have a serious affect on the client-therapist relationship—a relationship of critical importance in the healing process. This study looks at the decision-making skills of gay male therapists dealing with both straight and gay clients. The results of the study show three dominant themes: identity creation, pre-client contact identity management, and client contact identity management. Each theme shows the affect of TSD on the client and therapist and the process in which to disclose. The author agrees that more research needs to be done to develop skills and guidelines to help the therapists manage the TSD process.

### **Factors Associated With Perceived Parenting Competence Among Special Needs Adoptive Mothers**

*Angella Y. Eanes & Anne C. Fletcher*

Special needs adoptive children often have experienced factors that put them at higher risk for poor adjustment and well-being, and the experience of parenting them is likely to cause lower feelings of psychological well-being, self-esteem, and competence. This article examines the association between parental stress and types of children's behavioral disorders (e.g. attention problems or internalizing behaviors). With *attention problems*, findings suggest something uniformly stressful about parenting affected children. As mothers' psychological and physical resources dwindle from things like constant monitoring and vigilance, stress increases and they might perceive themselves as being less capable of successful parenting. For children with *internalizing behaviors*, mothers' feelings of competence were instead moderated by levels of parenting stress. In other words, a buffer may already be in place for mothers who felt less stress associated with this type of behavior. Examples of a buffer might be an existing well-defined perception of the role

of adoptive mother or changed expectations of themselves and/or their children. To further support parents, agencies might consider creating interventions focused on reducing stress levels associated with specific problem behaviors and providing better education to shift parents' perceptions of their own parenting, potentially raising competence and lowering stress levels.

**Exploring Fathering Roles in Low-Income Families:  
The Influence of Intergenerational Transmission**

*Jeffrey Shears, Jean Ann Summers, Kimberly Boller,  
& Gina Barclay-McLaughlin*

This article is a report of the first phase of a multi-year, 15-state initiative called the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project that includes a component to address the lack of information known about fathers and father figures in low-income, ethnically-diverse families. As might be expected, present paternal roles and attitudes in men may be strongly influenced by the relationship and experiences (positive or negative) with one's father. Beyond those expectations, though, is the recognition that these Early Head Start fathers defined good fathering as filling not just "traditional" roles like economic provider and disciplinarian, but also included more contemporary roles such as caregiver, partner with mother, and being affectionate. While this is preliminary data, it suggests that perceptions of fathering in low-income families are not very different from that in other socioeconomic classes. Fragile families need to know and understand the importance of fathers to children's emotional and financial well-being, and the benefit of specialized education and information for these fathers could further strengthen their families.

**A Pilot Study on Children With Limitations  
in Self-Care, Mobility, and Social Functions:  
Effects on Family Strengths**

*Silja Pirila, Jaap van der Meere, Ritva-Liisa Seppanen,  
Raija Korpela, & Pirkko Nieminen*

This article looks at the strengths of families that have children with disabilities. Many times the support and aid of the family directly correlates with the child's ability to communicate and interact. Social workers understand the level of expertise the parent or family member must hold when raising a disabled child. The article presents a pilot study to show the relation between the type of disability and the level of family strength. Despite the great expertise or strength the family holds, the authors note the importance of the family's need to take advantage of social services for both the individual disabled child and the entire family. Utilizing available resources and services acknowledges that it is not always easy for caregivers to fulfill the role of expert.

**Valued Characteristics of Children  
in a Changing Social Environment**

*Nancy Scotto Rosato & Mark F. Schmitz*

What influences social change in children? This article examines the 1986 and 2000 General Social Survey to compare the social factors affecting childhood autonomy and obedience. The impact of several major events, especially welfare reform, along with the personal values that are conveyed by parents show a social affect on children. The authors noted that the time period alone does not affect value orientation. There are a number of factors (i.e. income, education, race) that influence the preference of a particular quality. The findings contribute greatly to the understanding of how individuals' social environment, such as their religious affiliation, influence the values they convey to their own children. Educators and practitioners should be sensitive to a wider range of social values when promoting programs, school curricula, and therapeutic techniques that involve support for only one value orientation.

**Lessons Learned From African American  
Women About Participation in a Family-Based  
HIV Prevention Program**

*Rogério M. Pinto & Mary M. McKay*

Given the fast spread of HIV among African American women in the past decade, greater public attention has been focused on the prevention needs of this population. However, program participation of minority women has been shown to be difficult to attain, posing a threat to the potential effectiveness of community-based programs. In this article, the authors identify possible factors that influence women to participate in services such as the Collaborative HIV Prevention and Adolescent Mental Health Project (CHAMP), a family-focused program for low-income, African American participants. Citing high participation levels due initially to intensive outreach strategies, clarification of the program's purpose, and identification of privacy concerns, researchers identified additional factors within 3 domains (individual, program, and social support) that influence service utilization. Program developers and staff may be better able to increase attendance by focusing on several important modifiable factors. For example, helping participants develop positive personal attributes and knowledge-building was well-regarded. A commitment to cultural competency training and support for program staff is critical for maintaining participants' positive perceptions. Staff friendliness coupled with a warm and supportive program environment are also influencing factors, as are monetary incentives, children/friends/family, and the availability of emotional support.