Securely Ever After: Attachment, Trust, and Commitment in Married Adult Adoptees

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Securely Ever After: Attachment, Trust, and Commitment
in Married Adult Adoptees

Jill P. Burgon

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Science

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ABSTRACT

Securely Ever After: Attachment, Trust, and Commitment in Married Adult Adoptees

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Master of Science

Past research suggests that adoptees face a higher risk of insecure attachment and encounter more challenges related to trust and commitment in their romantic relationships compared to nonadopted individuals. This study examines the association between adoption status and marital security among newly married couples, with a focus on the potential moderating role of gender. Using data from a representative sample of newly married couples in the United States (n = 2,110), the relationship between adoption status and multiple measures of marital security were measured using OLS regression. Findings indicate that, during the early stages of marriage, adult adoptees exhibited comparable levels of both avoidant and anxious attachment, trust, and commitment to nonadoptees. Furthermore, gender differences in attachment patterns were observed among nonadopted individuals, with nonadopted females showing significantly lower levels of avoidant attachment and significantly higher levels of anxious attachment compared to nonadopted males. Interestingly, these gender differences were not significant among adoptees, suggesting that adoption status potentially attenuates gender-related differences in attachment.

Keywords: adoption, trust, commitment, attachment, adult adoptee, romantic relationship, marriage
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Securely Ever After: Attachment, Trust, and Commitment in Married Adult Adoptees

Over the past two decades, researchers have become increasingly interested in the long-term impacts of being adopted. Some have postulated that disruptions to early biological attachments and potential adversity experienced before placement may negatively affect adult adoptees’ ability to establish and maintain healthy intimate relationships (Borders et al., 2000; Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; Corral et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007; Field & Pond, 2018). This idea is grounded in substantial evidence that adoptees typically experience more emotional, behavioral, and attachment issues as children and adolescents (Brodzinsky, 2011; Grotevant, 2003; Van den Dries et al., 2009). Only a few studies, however, have focused on adoptees’ adult romantic relationships, and almost none have focused exclusively on the marital experience of adult adoptees (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Field & Pond, 2018). This area of study may be especially significant, as forming committed romantic relationships is important to adult psychosocial development (Collins et al., 2009).

Several key factors are believed to play a role in shaping the romantic relationships of adult adoptees. These factors are linked to known vulnerabilities common to the adoption experience and include attachment insecurity and, relatedly, difficulty building trust and commitment (Borders et al., 2000; Despax et al., 2021; Field & Pond, 2018). Studies regarding adopted adults show that adoptees tend to experience lower attachment security in romantic relationships than nonadopted individuals (Borders et al., 2000; Field & Pond, 2018). However, other studies indicate that, despite exhibiting lower attachment security, adoptees were similar in measures of romantic relationship quality, including dyadic adjustment, satisfaction, and commitment as compared to nonadopted individuals (Borders et al., 2000; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Despax et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007; Kitson, 2015). Thus, some have argued that
attachment security, rather than adoption status, may be a more powerful predictor of relationship quality for adoptees (Baker, 2021; Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; Despax et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007; Field & Pond, 2018). These findings emphasize the diversity and complexity of adult adoptees’ experiences and outcomes and the idea that not all adoptees are at greater risk for difficulties in intimate relationships (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; Despax et al., 2021; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010).

Given the paucity of research on adult adoptees’ intimate relationships overall (Greco et al., 2015; Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2010) and marital relationships in particular (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019), the current study proposes a quantitative analysis of how adoption status may predict factors related to attachment security in marriage. This study builds on the existing literature in three primary ways. First, it uses data from a random sample of newly married U.S. couples (random samples are rare in adoption research). Second, it examines marital outcomes that are theoretically meaningful but yet to be explored exclusively in married adoptees, including trust, commitment, and both anxious and avoidant attachment. And third, the study includes a greater proportion of male adult adoptees than most past studies and examines gender differences in the relationship between adoption and marital security. The goal of this analysis is to provide a more nuanced understanding of how married adult adoptees perceive and experience the security of their marriage relationship compared with married nonadoptees.

Literature Review

Adoption

Adoption is defined as “the social, emotional, and legal process in which children who will not be raised by their birth parents become full and permanent legal members of another family while maintaining genetic and psychological connections to their birth family” (Child
Researchers estimate that 100 million people in the United States have been personally affected by adoption, either as adoptees themselves or through connections with adoptees or adoptive families (Jones & Placek, 2017). In the U.S., approximately 1.4 million children currently live with adoptive parents (U.S. Census, 2019). Adoption demographics, or who is being adopted, have shifted radically from norms seen even just a decade ago. The number of intercountry adoptions fell by 93% since its peak in 2004 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021) and the number of children adopted from foster care has increased by 40% (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). This last change has led to an increase in transracial adoptions, older-child adoptions, and special needs adoptions (Wiley, 2017).

Interestingly, though, the percentage of infants adopted at birth in the U.S. has held steady at 0.5% (1.1% of nonmarital births), even as the number of births to single parents has decreased in the past decade. The numbers of same-sex parent families adopting has also grown, along with numbers of single-parent adoptions (Gates, 2015; Wiley, 2017).

As adoption practices continue to evolve, the adoptive family remains a prevalent family structure. The impacts of adoption are arguably greatest for adoptees themselves since, at the time of adoption, adoptees are minors who lack agency to influence adoption-related decisions. Furthermore, adoption is a lifelong process that requires adoptees to integrate their adoptive identity with their biological identity, potentially influencing how they will manage both typical developmental tasks and significant life transitions and events throughout their lifetimes (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992). Therefore, understanding the relationship between adoption status and relationship outcomes over the lifespan is an important research concern.
Adoption as a Risk or Protective Factor

While adoption is generally considered a positive intervention for children who are vulnerable and in need of a stable home environment (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Palacios et al., 2019), it can also be a risk factor associated with worse psychosocial outcomes for adoptees as compared to nonadoptees (Corral et al., 2021; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017; Wierzbicki, 1993; Yoon et al., 2012). As such, it is important to consider adoption as both a risk and a protective factor when exploring its impact on the marital outcomes of adopted adults.

Adoption as a Risk Factor

The adoption experience has been hypothesized to negatively impact adoptees’ ability to form and maintain healthy adult romantic relationships due to two main factors. The first factor is attachment security, as adoptees have experienced disruptions or losses of early attachment figures, which is thought to negatively impact the ability to form secure attachments later in life (Borders et al., 2000; Field & Pond, 2018; Foulstone et al., 2005). Researchers have theorized that adoptees’ early experiences with loss and rejection may lead to negative working models of attachment (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; Despax et al., 2021; Feeney, 1999; Feeney et al., 2007; Field & Pond, 2018). Even adoptees placed as infants are considered to be at risk for insecure attachment due to the disrupted prenatal bond developed in utero with their biological mother (Brodzinsky et al., 1993). Comparing to nonadoptees, research indicates that adoptees are especially prone to insecure-disorganized attachment, the most insecure type of attachment, characterized by the breakdown of consistent attachment strategy in the face of stressful situations, even into adulthood (Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017; Van den Dries et al., 2009). In addition to these findings on attachment, qualitative studies suggest that some adoptees
experience lower levels of trust, greater fear of rejection, and overall feelings of powerlessness (Domyancich-Lee, 2021; Gair, 2008; Vaccaro, 2012). These factors are especially relevant to adoptees’ romantic relationships, as secure attachment is closely linked to increased trust, commitment, and relationship satisfaction, (Feeney et al., 2007).

The second factor that may relate to adoptees being at risk is their tendency toward increased mental and behavioral health challenges (Corral et al., 2021; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017). Specifically, adult adoptees tend to experience lower levels of well-being overall (Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017), with evidence of overrepresentation in mental health settings (Brodzinsky, 2011; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017), more substance use dependency issues (Yoon et al., 2012), more difficulties during periods of identity development (Feeney et al., 2007; Grotevant, 2003), and increases in rates of behavior problems (Corral et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007). A recent meta-analysis by Corral and colleagues (2021) found that adult adoptees have higher rates of psychological maladjustment compared to non-adoptees, particularly in angry emotions, psychiatric care, drug abuse, and depression and anxiety disorders. These mental and behavioral challenges are negatively associated with forming and maintaining high-quality romantic relationships (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). Therefore, adoptees may be at a disadvantage in their romantic relationships in adulthood.

Notably, these adoption-related challenges tend to vary depending on various factors, such as age at placement, pre- and post-adoption adversity, openness of the adoption, adoption-related social stigma, and the relative attachment security and openness of communication of adoptive parents (Brodzinsky et al., 2022; Henze-Pedersen, 2019; van den Dries et al., 2009). Interestingly, however, when researchers have considered such factors in terms of their impact on romantic relationship outcomes, these adoption-related factors, per se, do not seem to be
significantly related to the quality of adopted adults’ romantic relationships (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). These findings challenge the idea that adoption is a risk factor and pose open questions about whether adoption is protective.

**Adoption as a Protective Factor**

Adoption may serve as a protective factor for adoptees in various ways. Adoptive parents are often highly motivated to provide nurturing and supportive care to adoptive children and are generally well-resourced to do so (Hamilton et al., 2007). Indeed, compared to children raised in foster care or institutionalized settings, adopted children tend to experience more positive psychosocial outcomes overall (Van den Dries et al., 2009; Van IJzendoorn & Juffer, 2006; Palacios et al., 2019).

Furthermore, adoption has been shown to have a protective influence on the attachment security of adoptees. For example, children placed with adoptive families as infants tend to exhibit attachment security similar to nonadoptees, suggesting that early placement in adoptive families may promote healthy attachment (Van den Dries et al., 2009). Furthermore, recent research highlights the significant role of adoptive parents’ attachment security in strengthening the attachment security of adoptees. Pace and colleagues (2019) found that adoptees with higher risk factors, such pre-placement adversity or later age at adoption, exhibited higher attachment security over time when raised by adoptive parents who exhibited secure attachment states. These findings emphasize that attachment security for adoptees is not fixed but can potentially improve over time, particularly when raised by parents who demonstrate secure attachment styles themselves.
Adult Adoptees’ Romantic Relationships

Researchers are just beginning to explore the romantic relationship outcomes of older adoptees. Initial findings suggest that adoptees tend to be less satisfied in their relationships, less likely to get married, and less likely to forge intimate relationships (Field & Pond, 2018; Tieman et al., 2006), supporting the theoretical perspective that adoption is a risk factor. However, other studies contradict these findings. For instance, studies of U.S. adoptees show no difference in the marriage rates of adopted and nonadopted adults (Feeney et al., 2007; Westermeyer et al., 2014). Furthermore, concerning relationship outcomes, researchers have found that adoptees generally experience similar romantic relationship quality as biologically raised counterparts (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Despax et al., 2021). Others, however, go beyond that. Findings from DeLuca Bishop and colleagues’ (2019) meta-analysis suggest that adopted adults are not only reporting similar levels of romantic relationship quality compared with nonadoptees, but, in some instances, they are above the norm. In all samples included in this review, adoptees presented slightly higher levels of romantic relationship quality when compared to the general population (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). These findings support the theoretical perspective that adoption is protective.

Researchers have sought to explain these mixed findings, pointing to differences in samples. For example, differences in age or marital status are likely meaningful, since adoptees’ romantic experiences likely change throughout their lifespan. Supporting this idea, research has demonstrated that partner commitment in a relationship is influenced by the duration of the relationship and the marital status of the partners, with long-term relationships and marriages tending to have higher levels of commitment (Acker & Davis, 1992; Crowell et al., 2002; Meier & Allen, 2009).
Further complicating these findings, the review by DeLuca Bishop et al. (2019) included only five studies that specifically assessed relationship quality (Borders et al., 2000; Feeney et al., 2007; Feigelman, 1997; Kitson, 2015; Tieman et al., 2006). Among those, only two examined the quality of marriage among adoptees (Borders et al., 2000; Feigelman, 1997), and one of those relied on a single-item measure to gauge marital happiness (Feigelman, 1997). Additionally, most studies drew findings from predominantly nonrandom samples of majority female participants (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). Altogether, this evidence suggests that further explorations of the relationship between adoption status and romantic relationship quality in adulthood that include marriage relationships and men would be useful.

**Marital Security of Adult Adoptees**

Given that adoption is thought to be related to the quality of intimate relationships (Brodzinsky & Brodzinsky, 1992), it is important to understand how adoption may influence the marriage experience of adopted adults. This is an area of study that has yet to be fully explored. Marriage plays an important role in adult psychosocial development and is commonly linked to better mental health, physical health, and overall well-being (Collins et al., 2009; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019). Furthermore, marriage—typically life’s most enduring romantic relationship—may hold particular significance for adult adoptees as it offers a chance to improve attachment security, interpersonal closeness, and relational competence (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; Despax et al., 2022; Paperny, 2003), all of which can be influenced by the experience of adoption. Krueger and Hanna (1997) proposed that early loss of biological family may motivate adoptees to seek security and stability by forming close relationships in adulthood, such as marriage, which are not associated with adoption-related loss. This theory has yet to be empirically tested but is particularly important to consider when studying the marriage outcomes of adult adoptees.
Attachment in Marriage

According to attachment researchers Selcuk et al. (2010), marriage is the “prototypical attachment relationship” (p. 259) in adulthood and represents the institutional form of the pair bond. They also suggest that a basic purpose of marriage is to regulate each spouse’s felt security, which is brought about through the marital attachment bond. Felt security then serves to enhance the physical and psychological functioning of each spouse.

Hazan and Shaver (1987) found that adults display romantic attachment patterns or styles. Attachment styles, including secure, anxious, and avoidant, are thought to develop in infancy, based on early caregiver interactions, and make up an individual’s working model of attachment (Bowlby, 1969). Attachment-related anxiety and attachment-related avoidance are the two dimensions of attachment insecurity (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Anxiously attached individuals desire closeness and protection in romantic relationships but also experience intense worries about their partner’s availability. They seek excessive reassurance from their partner and may be clingy after encountering stressful situations in order to sustain proximity to their partner. Avoidantly attached individuals rely on a deactivation strategy and minimize proximity seeking because they perceive attachment figures as consistently inaccessible and unresponsive. They are reluctant to seek support from their partner in stressful situations. Studies examining gender differences in attachment have consistently found that men tend to exhibit higher levels of avoidance, whereas women tend to display higher levels of anxiety (Del Giudice, 2019). Although attachment behaviors may differ, they are thought to help to regulate felt security in marriage relationships (Selcuk et al., 2010).

Studies exploring couple-level attachment suggest that greater attachment security is related to positive marital outcomes and, inversely, higher attachment insecurity is associated
with poorer relationship quality and functioning (Sandberg et al., 2017). These outcomes are similar for both women and men. Although a connection between adoption and attachment styles in relationships has been theorized to exist (Edens & Cavell, 1999; Paperny, 2003), few studies have explored this link in adult relationships (Borders et al., 2000; Feeney et al., 2007; Field & Pond, 2018; Foulstone et al., 2005) and almost none have considered attachment security in married adopted adults.

As previously mentioned, adult adoptees report comparable levels of relationship quality to nonadoptees in romantic relationships. However, this similarity in relationship quality is especially noteworthy given that adoptees generally experience lower levels of attachment security (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Despax et al., 2021). The reason for this paradox is not fully understood. One explanation is that attachment security may vary depending on the relational context (Despax et al., 2021; Jones et al., 2018) or adapt to match the attachment style of a romantic partner (Despax et al., 2022). Another possible explanation is that attachment plays a unique and stronger role in adoptees’ romantic experiences. Despax and colleagues (2021) found that attachment was a stronger predictor of dyadic adjustment in adoptees than in non-adoptees, indicating a unique role of attachment in adoptees’ romantic experiences. This finding is consistent with earlier research by Feeney et al. (2007) and emphasizes the specific predictive power of attachment in adoptees’ romantic relationships.

**Beyond Attachment: Marital Trust and Commitment**

Most quantitative studies regarding intimate-relationship outcomes of adoptees have focused on measures of attachment (Despax et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007; Field & Pond, 2018). However, qualitative research has revealed additional factors relevant to adoptees’
romantic relationships. For example, evidence from qualitative studies suggests that adoptees experience decreased levels of trust and commitment (Domyancich-Lee, 2021; Field & Pond, 2018; Gair, 2008; Vaccaro, 2012). Interview data from these studies show that adult adoptees experience fear of being abandoned, not feeling loved or that they belong, a feeling of inner emptiness, mistrust of others, and a lack of power to control their emotional lives. Taken together, adoptees themselves point to important themes of trust and commitment. Trusting and committing to intimate relationships and feelings of loneliness can be included under the larger umbrella of attachment security (Field & Pond, 2018) but are also thought to be distinct constructs important to marital security (Collins & Read, 1990; Stanley & Markman, 1992; Wang et al., 2017). Feeney and colleagues (2007) studied commitment and trust as indicators of marital quality separate from attachment security, however these constructs were combined with other factors to form a composite measure of relationship quality and were not considered separately.

Trust

Trust is the belief that one’s partner has their best interests in mind (Gottman, 2011). In marriage, trust develops as partners gain knowledge of each other’s values and priorities through daily interactions. If a partner is deemed trustworthy, trust grows, leading to greater marital satisfaction. However, if a partner is unresponsive or insensitive, trust erodes, leading to negative outcomes in the relationship (Wang et al., 2017). While trust is important to attachment security, researchers argue that trust and attachment are conceptually different and have shown that these two constructs have only small to moderate correlations (Collins & Read, 1990).

Trust is central to relationship quality for adoptees because it is closely tied to the level of openness or secrecy they experienced in their adoptive families regarding adopted-related issues.
For example, parents who keep certain aspects of their child’s adoption secret may violate trust and intimacy within the parent-child relationship (Passmore et al., 2007). For example, adoptees who find out about their adoption later in life are especially likely to experience a loss of trust or a sense of betrayal (Baden et al., 2019). This is not to say that complete openness is always preferable to absolute secrecy, but rather openness and secrecy in adoption communication can be seen as existing on a continuum that varies over time depending on the unique needs of each member of the adoptive family and the adopted child’s stage of development (Brodzinsky, 2005). Furthermore, the degree of openness between adoptive parents and their children is shown to be more predictive of healthy adjustment than whether the adoption itself was open or closed (Brodzinsky, 2005). A study by Foulstone et al. (2005) showed that adoptive status predicted stronger trust in romantic relationships. However, since these results did not include data on relationship status or type and were drawn from a small (n=137), predominantly female (75%) sample, they should be interpreted with caution. In sum, although trust is especially relevant to marital security for adoptees, very little is known about how trust is experienced in adoptees’ marriage relationships.

**Commitment**

In light of the current study’s focus on marriage, it is important to note that a partner’s level of commitment in a relationship is influenced by the duration of the relationship and the marital status of the partners (Despax et al., 2021). Specifically, the longer the relationship lasts, the more committed the partners tend to be. Furthermore, research suggests that individuals who are married are typically more committed to their partners than those who are not married. This increased commitment in marriage may be related to higher levels of attachment security and trust in the marital relationship (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Therefore, it is possible to hypothesize
that adoptees who are married may exhibit similar levels of attachment security and commitment as non-adoptees in long-term relationships, based on their marital status and the potential for increased levels of attachment security that may be associated with marriage (Despax et al., 2021).

Indeed, attachment has been found to be a strong predictor of commitment and relationship persistence (Etcheverry et al., 2013), making commitment particularly relevant for adopted adults who generally exhibit lower attachment security compared to nonadoptees (Van den Dries et al., 2009). A recent study investigating adult adoptees’ romantic relationships (Despax et al., 2021) found no significant differences in commitment levels between adoptees and nonadoptees. However, it is important to note that this study was conducted in France and included a purposive sample of mostly unmarried (77%) female (70%) adoptees, which may limit the generalizability of the findings to married adoptees in the United States.

The Importance of Gender

Among the small body of literature on adult adoptees’ romantic relationships, very few studies have explored potential gender differences. The findings are inconclusive and may be biased by the preponderance of female samples (DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Field & Pond, 2018). Some studies have found that female adult adoptees have more relationship difficulties, such as higher risk of trust and attachment issues (Groncki, 2010; Nilson, 2000), compared to male adoptees; while other studies suggest that male adoptees are at greater risk for attachment problems in romantic relationships than adopted women (Feigelman, 1997; Tieman et al., 2006).

By comparing the impact of gender on marital security outcomes for adopted and nonadopted spouses, this study considers whether adoptees align with established gender differences described in the literature. Gender differences in the general population have been
reported in terms of attachment, marital quality, and relational satisfaction (Brassard et al., 2007; Gottman, 1994; Del Giudice, 2019; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). For example, some studies have found that women tend to place more emphasis on emotional intimacy and communication in their relationships, while men tend to place more emphasis on companionship and shared activities (Gottman, 1994). Gender differences have also been reported regarding romantic attachment. These differences have been explored in terms of attachment theory, which has been expanded to consider how attachment might function differently for women and men (Del Giudice, 2019). Researchers hypothesize that these differences may arise from socialization or from biological differences (Del Giudice, 2019). In general, women tend to have higher attachment anxiety, which is characterized by fear of abandonment and a need for closeness, while men tend to have higher attachment avoidance, which is characterized by discomfort with intimacy and a tendency to avoid close relationships (Brassard et al., 2007; Shulman & Scharf, 2000). Despite these known gender differences, little is known about how marital outcomes may differ by gender for adult adoptees. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring how gender influences the relationship dynamics of adult adoptees, contributing to a more accurate representation of the experiences of married adoptees.

**The Current Study**

This study aims to investigate the link between adoptive status and marital security. The construct of security includes an exploration of both avoidant and anxious attachment, as well as trust and commitment, with special consideration of gendered differences of adoptees. These findings will help us to better understand the relationship outcomes of a unique subset of adult adoptees—those invested in one of life’s most committed intimate relationships: the marriage partnership.
Objective 1: Determine if adoption status predicts measures of marital security.

Hypothesis 1: Studies suggest that married individuals exhibit higher levels of commitment compared to their unmarried counterparts (Despax et al., 2021), and theory suggests that attachment styles may become more secure (Brassard et al., 2007) or adapt to match the attachment style of a romantic partner (Despax et al., 2022). Furthermore, recent research has shown that adoptees report similar levels of romantic relationship quality as non-adoptees (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Despax et al., 2021). Given this empirical data and theoretical basis, this study hypothesizes that adoptive status will predict similar levels of attachment (avoidant and anxious), trust, and commitment for both adopted and nonadopted newly married adults.

Objective 2: Investigate within-group gender differences in adoptees’ marital quality outcomes.

Hypothesis 2: Based on previous research supporting gender differences in romantic relationships, specifically the higher value that females place on closeness within these relationships as compared with males (Shulman & Scharf, 2000), this study hypothesizes that gender will moderate the relationship between adoption status and marital quality outcomes. Previous studies of adult adoptees’ romantic outcomes have included mostly female samples and have not considered gender differences in relationship quality; therefore, the direction of this relationship remains unclear.

**Methods**

**Data and Sample**

This study proposes secondary analyses of data from the Couple Relationships and Transition Experiences (CREATE) survey (Yorgason et al., 2018), a longitudinal, nationally
representative research survey exploring the development of positive relational qualities in newly married couples in the United States. The CREATE data set includes a total sample of 2,177 couples married between 2013 and 2015 who were randomly selected and have been followed for six years (2016–2022), with additional waves in progress. Participants were selected using a two-stage cluster stratification sample design. In the first stage, counties were sampled and, in the second stage, newly married couples within those counties were sampled by using publicly available marriage records. To be included in the study, partners needed to be between 18 and 36 years of age, living in the United States, and at least one partner needed to be marrying for the first time.

To maximize the number of adoptees included in the study, data was drawn from the first wave (Time 1, collected in 2016). Same-sex couples (n = 67 couples) were excluded from the study to allow for an examination of gender differences within couples. The final analytic sample included 4,220 married individuals (within 2,110 couples). Of the total sample, 68 wives and 69 husbands reported that they had been adopted as children (n = 137).

Measures

**Dependent Variables**

The primary objective of this study was to explore the overall security experienced by adoptees within the context of marriage. Marital security, conceptualized as attachment, trust, and commitment, was operationalized as the following specific variables: avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, trust, and commitment. Various instruments were employed to assess these variables during the first wave of CREATE data collection in 2016.

The 12-item short-form Experiences in Close Relationship (ECR) scale, developed by Wei et al. (2007), includes two six-item subscales used to measure avoidant and anxious
attachment in relationships. Sample items from the avoidant scale include, “I want to get close to my partner, but I keep pulling back” and “It helps to turn to my romantic partner in times of need.” Items from the anxious scale include, “I get frustrated if my partner is not available when I need him/her” and “My desire to be very close sometimes scares my partner away.” Participants responded to the items using a 7-point, partly anchored, Likert-type scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Reverse items were recoded as necessary, and the mean scores were calculated for each subscale. Higher scores indicated higher levels of either avoidant attachment or anxious attachment. Cronbach’s alpha scores for avoidant attachment were 0.84 for wives and 0.85 for husbands. For anxious attachment, the Cronbach’s alpha was 0.72 for wives and .72 for husbands.

The trust construct was measured using the ten-item Rempel et al. (1985) scale. Participants were asked to respond on a seven-point Likert scale with -3 (strongly disagree), 0 (neutral), and 3 (strongly agree). Sample items from the measure include, “I feel very uncomfortable when my partner has to make decisions which will affect me personally,” “I can rely on my partner to keep the promises he/she makes to me,” and, “Whenever we have to make an important decision in a situation we have never encountered before, I know my partner will be concerned about my welfare.” Higher scores indicate greater trust between partners. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was 0.83 for wives and 0.81 for husbands.

Finally, commitment was measured using the Stanley and Markman (1992) commitment scale. Respondents were asked eight questions, such as, “My relationship with my partner is more important to me than almost anything else in my life,” “I get satisfaction out of doing things for my partner, even if it means I miss out on something I want for myself,” and, “I want this relationship to stay strong.” These items were rated from 1 (strongly agree) to 7 (strongly
disagree), with higher scores indicating greater levels of commitment in marriage. Cronbach’s alpha for this measure was 0.79 for wives and 0.81 for husbands.

**Independent Variables**

The explanatory variable was a binary measure of adoption status, which was measured as a dummy variable indicating whether participants self-reported as having been adopted as children or not (1 = adopted, 0 = not adopted). The influence of adoption status was considered separately by gender (1 = female, 0 = male).

**Controls**

Five control variables were included in the analyses, including education, income, race, age, and gender. Although 15 levels of educational attainment were assessed, due to sample size limitations, education was included as a binary variable (Associate+) indicating either having a college degree (Associates level or higher) or not (1 = college degree, 0 = no college degree). Income was assessed using a 15-category scale, ranging from $0 to $150,000 or above, with participants selecting the category that best represented their income level. Income was treated as a continuous variable and mean levels were reported. Due to the small sample size of adoptees (n = 137) and limited representation of nonwhite racial categories among sampled adoptees, a binary race variable was created (1 = White, 0 = non-White) to incorporate racial information while accounting for sample size limitations. Age was measured continuously in years.

**Analytic Strategy**

To compare and analyze the relationship between adoption status and marital security for both wives and husbands, cross-sectional analyses were performed using data collected at wave one. First, descriptive statistics of all study variables were estimated using Stata 17 (StataCorp, 2021). To examine the differences between adoptees and nonadoptees regarding the control
variables, independent sample t-tests were conducted using Stata 17 and differences were evaluated at a 5% significance level. Next, to predict the outcomes of the four dependent variables, multiple linear regression analyses were performed. To account for missing data, multiple imputation was used to create and analyze 25 multiply imputed datasets (Rubin, 2004). This imputed data was used in the multiple regression models. The initial set of models examined the relationship between adoption status and avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, trust, and commitment. These models included adoption status as well as control variables as predictors. Finally, to explore the potential moderating effect of gender on the relationship between adoption status and marital security, interaction terms (female*adoption) were incorporated individually for each dependent variable. This led to a total of eight models, with the first model including all predictors and an additional model for each dependent variable that included the gender interaction term. In addition, each regression model was adjusted with survey weights to ensure representative estimates and was clustered on couples to account for potential intra-group correlation and allow for accurate estimation of regression coefficients and appropriate adjustment of standard errors.

**Results**

**Descriptive Statistics**

The sociodemographic characteristics of adopted and nonadopted respondents were compared using t-tests (see Table 1). Overall, adopted and nonadopted participants in this study were similar in measures of income, race, and age. In terms of education level, a significantly lower proportion of adoptees (38%) reported having an associate degree or more compared to nonadoptees (51%) ($z = 3.09, p < 0.01$). Income levels were similar between adoptees and nonadoptees, with both groups earning between $50,000 and $59,999 annually. The majority of
participants, both adopted and nonadopted, identified as White, with adoptees having a slightly higher percentage of White participants (66%) compared to nonadoptees (65%), although this difference was not statistically significant. The mean age of adoptees ($M = 28.33$ years, $SD = 5.61$) was comparable to nonadoptees ($M = 28.75$ years, $SD = 5.35$) and the difference in age between the two groups was not statistically significant ($t = 0.90, p = 0.37$).

**Regression Analyses**

Regression analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between adoption status and the four dependent variables: avoidant attachment, anxious attachment, trust, and commitment (see Table 2, Models 1, 3, 5, and 7). Control variables included educational attainment, income, race, age, and gender. The results indicated that adoption status did not significantly predict any of the four marital security variables: avoidant attachment ($b = 0.22$), anxious attachment ($b = 0.06$), trust ($b = 0.12$), and commitment ($b = 0.05$).

Several control variables had significant relationships with the four measures of marital security. Education showed a significant negative association with avoidant attachment ($b = -0.24, p < 0.01$) and anxious attachment ($b = -0.17, p < 0.01$), and a significant positive association with trust ($b = 0.26, p < 0.01$) and commitment ($b = 0.13, p < 0.01$). Being White had a significant and positive relationship with trust ($b = 0.22, p < 0.01$) and commitment ($b = 0.22, p < 0.01$). No significant associations were found between race and avoidant attachment ($b = -0.10$) or anxious attachment ($b = -0.10$). Being female had a significant positive relationship with avoidant attachment ($b = 0.10, p < 0.01$) and anxious attachment ($b = 0.19, p < 0.01$). However, gender did not significantly predict trust or commitment. Income and age were not significantly related to any of the four marital security variables.
Gender as a Moderator

Additional regression analyses were performed to investigate the potential moderating effect of gender on the relationship between adoption status and variables related to marital security (see Table 2, Models 2, 4, 6, and 8). There were no significant differences by gender in the relationship between adoption status and levels of trust or commitment, challenging Hypothesis 2. There were significant gender differences, however, in the relationship between adoption status and attachment styles—both avoidant and anxious attachment (see Figures 1 and 2). Women and men did not differ in their levels of avoidant or anxious attachments among adopted respondents. Nonadopted respondents, alternatively, experienced significant gender differences in both avoidant and anxious attachment styles, with women reporting lower levels of avoidant attachment and higher levels of anxious attachment.

Although these significant differences are not reflected in Table 2, they were observed through estimating simple slopes and predicted probabilities among all groups represented by the interactions (results not shown but available upon request). Predicted probabilities represent the most likely score respondents of a certain group are to score on the dependent variable. Adopted individuals, both wives (predicted probability = 2.21) and husbands (predicted probability = 2.27) were predicted to demonstrate higher levels of avoidant attachment compared to their nonadopted counterparts (predicted probability for non-adopted women = 1.97, for non-adopted men = 2.08). In terms of anxious attachment, adopted husbands (predicted probability = 2.72) were lower in anxiety than nonadopted husbands (predicted probability = 2.76). However, adopted wives (predicted probability = 3.09) showed the highest anxiety levels overall and were predicted to be more anxious than nonadopted wives (predicted probability = 2.94). In other words, when comparing the levels of anxious attachment in adopted wives and husbands to their
nonadopted counterparts, adopted wives tended to exhibit the highest levels of anxious attachment, while adopted husbands, alternatively, presented the lowest levels of anxious attachment overall. In the case of each of these gender differences, none were significant except for those between nonadopted wives and husbands with regard to avoidant and anxious attachment. Only interactions with any significant relationships were displayed in figures.

**Discussion**

This study examined factors related to marital security in a sample of newly married adults who had been adopted during childhood, comparing them to adults who were raised by biological parents. This study built on previous research in several ways. Firstly, although the sample of adoptees in this study was relatively small (n = 137), participants were randomly chosen, and adoptive status was not part of the selection criterion. Thus, this sample was more wholly representative of adoptees as compared to convenience or self-selected samples typical of other adoption studies. Additionally, no other relationship study of adult adoptees, to the best of our knowledge, has included randomly selected adopted participants who are also known to be in a marital relationship. Furthermore, by including a nearly equal ratio of female and male (females: n = 68; males: n = 69) adopted participants, it was possible to systematically examine gender differences. Lastly, while previous research on adoptees’ romantic relationships has primarily focused on attachment, this study included two additional relevant measures of marital security: trust and commitment.

Two hypotheses were tested. Firstly, it was hypothesized that married adults would report comparable levels of attachment (avoidant and anxious), trust, and commitment in newly married adults, regardless of whether they are adopted or not. This hypothesis is grounded in empirical evidence and theoretical framework supporting the idea that adult adoptees can attain similar
levels of attachment security (Brassard et al., 2007) and relationship quality (Cashen & Grotevant, 2020; DeLuca Bishop et al., 2019; Despax et al., 2021) as their nonadopted counterparts. Research suggests that the context of marriage may contribute to these similarities, as married individuals, regardless of adoption status, tend to exhibit higher levels of commitment compared to those who are not married (Despax et al., 2021). This suggests that the commitment inherent in marital relationships may contribute to comparable levels of marital security experienced by both adoptees and nonadoptees.

Supporting the first hypothesis, the results revealed no relationship between adoption status and either avoidant or anxious attachment, trust, and commitment within marital relationships. These results contradict some previous studies that indicate adoptees tend to demonstrate lower attachment security specifically in romantic relationships than nonadoptees (Borders et al., 2000; Despax et al., 2021; Feeney et al., 2007). However, it is worth noting that these prior studies examined the attachment security in a broad range of relationship types, whereas this study only considered outcomes within the context of marriage. Furthermore, it is important to consider the practical significance of attachment-level differences between adoptees and nonadoptees reported in previous studies, as they varied considerably. For example, Feeney et al. (2007) found that adoption status explained only 7% of the variance in observed attachment levels (n = 140).

Taken together, the findings from this and previous adoption studies suggest that relationship security is influenced by a range of factors and is not strongly related to adoption status alone (Corral et al., 2021; Melero & Sánchez-Sandoval, 2017; Van den Dries, 2009; Wiley, 2017). Furthermore, the similar levels of marital security between adopted and nonadoptees, despite adoption as a known risk factor, also underscore adoptees’ resilience
(Despax et al., 2021) and potential catch-up in attachment security (Pace et al., 2019; Van Ijzendoorn & Juffer, 2006) noted in previous studies.

The second hypothesis posited that gender would moderate the relationship between adoption status and measures of marital security. Given that prior studies on adult adoptees’ romantic outcomes have drawn from predominantly female samples and have not explored gender differences in relationship quality, this is an important area of consideration. The inclusion of the gender moderator in the analysis yielded both expected and unexpected findings. In terms of trust and commitment, gender did not significantly predict levels of these variables among either adoptees or nonadoptees, indicating that gender does not significantly moderate the aspects of trust and commitment in marital relationships, regardless of adoption status. However, significant gender differences in attachment patterns emerged among nonadoptees, with nonadopted females showing higher levels of anxious attachment compared to males and nonadopted males demonstrating higher levels of avoidant attachment compared to females. While these findings were statistically significant, they align with the existing understanding regarding gender variations in attachment styles within the nonadopted population, supporting previous research in this area (Del Giudice, 2019).

In contrast, gender was not a significant predictor of anxious or avoidant attachment among adoptees. This may indicate that adoption status has an attenuating effect on the typical attachment differences between women and men. It is also important to note, that while adoptees do not seem to share the same pattern of attachment differences as nonadopted wives and husbands, their attachment security was not significantly higher or lower than that of nonadoptees of either gender. The absence of typical gendered attachment patterns noted among married adoptees lends support to the idea that adoption is closely related to attachment
dynamics (Borders et al., 2000; Field & Pond, 2018). Perhaps because adoptees often share similar experiences of loss, rejection, or a desire for belonging (Domyancich-Lee, 2021; Feeney et al., 2007; Gair, 2008; Vaccaro, 2012), these experiences, common to both male and female adoptees, may contribute to a more balanced expression of both anxious and avoidant attachment states across both genders. More research is needed in this area of study.

The findings of this study may have important implications for therapeutic interventions and can add to what is known about the relationship between adoption, attachment security, and gender dynamics, especially within the context of marriage. Therapists could use these findings to challenge negative assumptions about adoptees’ security as romantic partners, alleviate concerns about adoption-related gender differences in attachment styles, and promote resilience and attachment security, trust, and commitment in adoptees. This same strengths-based approach could be taken with adoption support and interventions for adoptive parents and families, focusing on enhancing attachment security, trust, and open communication about adoption-related topics with adopted children.

While this study provides valuable insights, it is not without limitations. First, the sample of adoptees was relatively small (n = 137), which limited the power and types of statistical analyses possible. Next, the study relied on self-report measures, which are subject to biases and subjective interpretation, and it focused on a sample of newly married couples in the United States, which may limit the generalizability of the results to other populations or stages of the marriage relationship. Another limitation is the cross-sectional nature of the study. Longitudinal studies tracking adoptees’ relationship trajectories over time would provide a more comprehensive understanding of the long-term impacts of adoption on marital security. Specifically, examining the long-term stability of attachment patterns in adoptees and their
partners would contribute to our understanding of the changes in attachment security over time. Furthermore, future studies could explore other aspects of marital relationships, such as relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution, or the distribution of power. Future research may consider incorporating a broader range of variables to give a more comprehensive understanding of the marriage outcomes of adult adoptees.

**Conclusion**

By focusing specifically on the outcomes of married adoptees, the study provides valuable insights into experiences within the context of marital relationships. The findings indicate that adoption status is not associated with variables related to marital security for newly married wives or husbands, challenging prevailing assumptions and possibly dispelling concerns held by adoptees or their partners about their life-long attachment security, particularly in romantic relationships.
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### Table 1
**Demographic Descriptive Statistics of Adopted and Nonadopted Wives and Husbands**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Adopted (n=137)</th>
<th>Nonadopted (n=4,083)</th>
<th>Significant Difference</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>% / M</td>
<td>% / M</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education Level</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate+</td>
<td>37.96</td>
<td>51.40</td>
<td>***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-60</td>
<td>50-60</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>66.42</td>
<td>65.26</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age (M±SD)</strong></td>
<td>28.33 (5.61)</td>
<td>28.75 (5.35)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Data: CREATE Study, Wave 1, 2016*

*Note: Education Level (Associate+): 1=associate degree or higher, 0=lower than associate degree. Race (White): 1=White, 0=non-White. Age=age in years at the time of study.
***p<0.01, **p<0.05, *p<0.1; determined by t-tests.
*aReported in tens of thousands of dollars.*
Table 2

Summary of Regression Results: Adoption Status and Gender Predicting Marital Security

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Regression Models</th>
<th>Avoidant</th>
<th>Anxious</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Commitment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Adopted</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>-0.04</td>
<td>0.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.18)</td>
<td>(0.13)</td>
<td>(0.19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education Level</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate+</td>
<td>-0.24***</td>
<td>-0.24***</td>
<td>-0.17***</td>
<td>-0.17***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
<td>(0.06)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Income</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
<td>-0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
<td>(0.01)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>-0.10**</td>
<td>-0.10**</td>
<td>0.19***</td>
<td>0.19***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.04)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
<td>(0.05)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interaction Term</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopted x Female</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>0.04</td>
<td>--</td>
<td>-0.10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.26)</td>
<td>(0.22)</td>
<td>(0.20)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: CREATE study, Wave 1

Note: Adoption Status (Adopted): 1=adopted, 0=nonadopted. Education Level (Associate+): 1=associate degree or higher, 0=lower than associate degree. Race/Ethnicity (White): 1=White, 0=non-White. Age=age at time of study in years. Gender (Female): female=1, male=0.

***p<0.01 , **p<0.05, *p<0.1. SE=standard error.
Figure 1

Adoption Status and Gender as Predictors of Avoidant Attachment

Data: CREATE, Wave 1, 2016
Figure 2
Adoption Status and Gender as Predictors of Anxious Attachment

Data: CREATE, Wave 1, 2016