Adoption and Foster Microaggressions Amidst COVID-19: Pandemic-related Stress May Increase Negative Judgments of Others

Mikala A. Grimaldi
Bridgewater State University, mgrimaldi0221@gmail.com

Holly A. Grant-Marsney
Bridgewater State University, hgrantmarsney@bridgew.edu

Ashley A. Hansen-Brown
Bridgewater State University, ahansenbrown@bridgew.edu

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Abstract

One community that has often been overlooked while facing frequent negative perceptions and stigma is adopted individuals. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic at the start of this research, we hypothesized that scenarios of individuals from foster and adoptive families would be more likely to be associated with common misrepresentations that emphasize child-like qualities and lower competency compared to non-adopted peers. We surveyed 313 participants through Amazon's Mechanical Turk, after exclusion criteria, the sample consisted of 217 participants. Although the original hypothesis was not supported, our results indicate that higher pandemic-related stress influences perceptions of entitlement and infantilization towards others regardless of their adoption status. This study provides further insight into how times of emotional distress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, may increase negative judgments of others.

Keywords: adoption, microaggressions, person perception, pandemic

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Pandemic-related Stress May Increase Negative Judgments of Others

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread rapidly throughout the United States, heightened levels of fear, isolation, and stress also plagued the country (Burtscher et al., 2020). Marginalized populations are particularly vulnerable to the negative psychological effects of the pandemic (Weiden et al., 2021) including increases in discrimination, hate crimes, and stigmatization. Periods of crisis often strengthen and intensify disparities due to individuals being fearful and receiving inadequate resources (e.g., poverty, lack of childcare, lack of safety equipment; Kantamneni, 2020). This pattern has occurred during various historical events. For example, immediately after the attacks of 9/11, discrimination was more prevalent for Arabs living in the United States (Daraiseh, 2012). Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic has increased microaggressions and hostility towards Asian Americans. For example, the nonprofit Stop Asian American and Pacific Islander Hate documented close to 1,900 reports of anti-Asian American discrimination from March 19, 2020, to May 13, 2020 (Gover et al., 2020; Lee & Waters, 2021). Developing a greater understanding of the contexts in which increases in hate crimes, discrimination, and stigmatization occur during these periods of stress is important due to the real risk to marginalized populations.

One community that has often been overlooked while facing frequent negative perceptions and stigma includes adopted individuals (Goldberg et al., 2011). Families created by adoption are not equally represented, and throughout their lives are often misperceived and judged as "less than" a family created biologically (Baden, 2016). Negative stigma, such as this, has impacted societal views of adoption, resulting in adopted individuals experiencing various forms of microaggressions (Baden, 2016), which may increase during times of great stress.

Racial Microaggressions

Originally proposed by Sue and colleagues (2007), racial microaggressions can take the form of straightforward and purely intentional acts of racism, or in more discrete and passive ways. They can be delivered as well-intentioned comments or genuine questions that the offender may not consciously know are judgmental, but subtly diminish or even overly inflate the accomplishments and status of oppressed groups; thus, resulting in further oppression of these groups (Baden, 2016). These acts are done out of innate stereotypes, assumptions, heterosexism, prejudice, and racism that inflict pain and injury upon members of these communities (Singleton, 2013).

Sue and colleagues (2007) determined that microaggressions take place in three common themes: microassaults, microinsults, and microinvalidations. Microassaults are primarily explicit and intentional racial slights, typically committed through verbal or nonverbal attacks, that are done with the pure intention of hurting the targeted individual or group. Examples of microassaults include outward racial discrimination and refusing interactions with people of color. Microinsults include verbal or nonverbal actions that communicate hidden belittling or insulting messages about an individual's racial identity or heritage. Microinsults communicate disrespect and belittlement towards the targeted individual. An example of this includes a White person discreetly following a person of color around a store out of racial biases. The final category, microinvalidations, is defined as communications that ignore, negate, or invalidate a person of color's thoughts, feelings, or experiences. Microinvalidations negate a person of color's lived experience as a racial/cultural individual and diminish the validity of the person's thoughts and emotions. A commonplace example of microinvalidation includes a White person

telling a person of color that they are "just being dramatic" after expressing their thoughts and emotions that arose as a result of facing a microaggression (Sue et al., 2007).

Microaggressions Against Adoptees

Due to the degree to which microaggressions harm marginalized groups psychologically, emotionally, and physically (Sue, 2010), researchers have begun identifying microaggressions that are inflicted upon various marginalized populations. As with other marginalized groups, individuals who are adopted and/or fostered may experience microaggressions as a result of negative stereotypes, as being a foster or adopted child is a marginalized identity and experience. Over the past thirty years, previous works have named the various presentations in which adoption stigma is inflicted, such as through behavior, judgments, attitudes, and prejudices (Baden, 2016; March, 1995; Miall, 1987; Wegar, 2000).

Inspired by the traditional three racial microaggression categories discussed above as well as the literature on adoption stigma, Baden (2016) created categories of adoption microassaults, adoption invalidations, and adoption microinsults. Adoption microassaults are verbal or nonverbal explicit attacks that are done with the intent of harming the targeted individual (Baden, 2016). Examples of adoption microassaults include ignoring individuals due to their adoptive status and intentionally participating in acts of oppression. Adoption invalidations, said to potentially be the most commonplace adoption microaggression, are forms of communication that dismiss, invalidate, or deny the thoughts, emotions, or lived experiences of the adoptive family (Baden, 2016). For example, if a colleague were to ask an adoptee if they know their "real family," they are communicating that adopted families are not "legitimate" the way biological families are. Adoption microinsults are communications that relay subtle, rude, or insensitive beliefs about adoption, known or unknown to the offender (Baden, 2016). An

example of this includes infantilizing (i.e., to treat someone as if that person were a child) adoptees by perceiving them as being naïve or needing more support than non-adopted peers (Garber & Grotevant, 2015). Additionally, international and transracial adoptions can intersect with existing racial/ethnic/nationality-based microaggressions due to possessing multiple marginalized identities.

Throughout history, adoption microaggressions have communicated the narrative that biological relations (i.e., bionormativity) between parents and their children and between siblings are superior (Garber & Grotevant, 2015; Wegar, 2000). This believed superiority can lead to stigma toward adoptive and foster families, resulting in adoptive parents feeling as though they are illegitimate or inferior to parents who have biologically related children (Wegar, 2000). In addition, adoptive parents have reported experiencing adoption stigma towards their families, with individuals suggesting that adoption is "second-best" and that their children are not as "real" as parents of biological children (Brodzinsky, 2011). Some adoptive parents have even reported that providing family support was dependent on being biologically related to their child (Patterson, 1988).

Microaggressions affect adopted individuals by adding additional stressors to their daily lives. Adoptees have reported the harm of being forced into public outings of their adoptive status, feeling pressure to teach others about adoption to discount incorrect or stereotypical statements, and being faced with others' negative beliefs about adoption (Garber & Grotevant, 2015). Alongside this, many mental health providers working with adopted clients are unaware of their bionormative assumptions, increasing the risk that clients may face levels of invalidation that are felt within the general public (Garber & Grotevant, 2015), making the safe place that is a therapy room harmful.

Perceptions of Adoptees

From first glance upon perceiving another individual, we rapidly and effortlessly formulate an impression of the person. First impressions are recognized as more important than impressions that arise later in developing an overall impression of a person (Asch, 1946). Specifically, changing a singular aspect of a described person (e.g., using the descriptor of warm or cold when describing an individual's character-qualities) entirely changes individuals' perceptions of that person (Asch, 1946). Moreover, a study by Nauts and colleagues (2014) found that participants presented with a specific list of traits about a targeted individual included numerous additional perceived traits in their open-ended responses. This suggests that participants made assumptions based solely on the initial information provided to them (Nauts et al., 2014). Reflective of these findings, would disclosing one's adopted vs. non-adopted status upon meeting someone influence how people perceive them?

Given that adoptees experience microaggressions, examining others' perceptions of adoptees compared to those of non-adopted peers in various situations is an important step toward understanding how to prevent adoption-based microaggressions. The current study looks at perceived entitlement, infantilization, and lower level of competence of adoptees in comparison to those of non-adopted status. These commonplace adoption microinsults were selected as examples of the various ways in which adoptees are negatively perceived due to adoption-based stigma.

As discussed, stereotypes and other harmful acts towards adoptees may all be exacerbated during particularly stressful times. Moreover, one factor that impacts person perception is stress. Individuals under stress reduce cognitive effort by diverting information and reducing the time needed for processing, which has been shown to increase social stereotypes

(Friedland et al.,1999). In social contexts, this reduction of inputted information may result in the

perceiver using innate stereotypes in place of being fully aware of the social environment

(Friedland et al., 1999). In addition, when the perceiver is experiencing anxiety, they identify

their effect as a primary source of information regarding judgments of the individual being

perceived (Curtis & Locke, 2007).

The COVID-19 Pandemic

Alongside the physical health problems experienced by individuals during the COVID-19

pandemic, there has also been an increase in psychological problems among the general

population, front-line workers, and patients suffering from the disease (Wang, 2021). The

pandemic has considerably altered our day-to-day lives and sense of safety, impacting

psychological processing and mental health (Qiu et al., 2020). Even small amounts of time

participating in forms of social distancing are associated with increased levels of psychological

distress, including increases in overall distress, emotional disturbances, panic, and depression

(Best et al., 2020).

The Current Study

The current study aimed to examine people's perceptions of individuals from diverse

family backgrounds (e.g., foster or adoptive) compared to individuals from biological families.

Based on the findings of previous adoption studies discussed above (Baden, 2016; Garber &

Grotevant, 2015; Brodzinsky, 2011), we hypothesized that scenarios of individuals from foster

and adoptive families would be more likely to be associated with adoption microaggressions that

emphasize perceived infantilization, higher levels of entitlement, and differences in competency

compared to non-adopted peers. While our initial research plan focused solely on assessing

people's perceptions of adopted individuals, we also incorporated a measure in our study to assess how worried, anxious, and/or stressed participants felt about the ongoing pandemic.

Method

Participants

A convenience sample of 313 individuals participated in a survey study through Amazon's Mechanical Turk (MTurk), which is an online crowdsourcing marketplace often used by researchers to recruit participant samples for research studies. Participant requirements included that they must be at least 18 years of age and a citizen of the United States. Participants were compensated $1 for approximately 10 minutes of time for this study. We excluded 96 participants' data for either not fully completing the study (and thus not receiving compensation), rating a '1' on a 1-5 scale that asked how seriously they took the experiment, providing written responses suggestive of bots, or failing the manipulation check, leaving a total of 217 participants. Participant ages ranged from 20 to 78 years old ($M = 37.06$, $SD = 11.43$). Among them, 139 (59.9%) identified as male, and 78 (33.6%) identified as female. Among participants' racial/ethnic backgrounds, 164 (75.6%) were Caucasian/White, 15 (6.9%) were Hispanic/Latino, 14 (6.5%) were Asian/Asian American, 12 (5.5%) were African American/Black, eight (3.7%) had more than one racial/ethnic background, three (1.4%) were American Indian/Native American, and one (.5%) did not disclose their racial/ethnic background.

Materials and Procedure

This study was approved by the Bridgewater State University Institutional Review Board. Participants provided consent before beginning the online study. Participants were informed that the purpose of the study was to investigate how people view themselves and others. They were then presented with one of three possible introductory paragraphs shared by a new coworker

introducing themselves, with the only difference between the introductions being whether the target person disclosed adoptive, foster, or biological family status. Participants were presented with questions about their impression of the target person including scales measuring entitlement, competence, and infantilization (see Appendix A for a complete list of questionnaire items). Participants then completed a series of questions regarding what they believed the research question was that the study was aiming to answer, whether anything seemed strange or surprising during the experiment, and their demographic information. Participants were provided with a written debriefing at the conclusion of the study.

Adoption Status Manipulation

Participants were first randomly assigned to an experimental condition where the coworker disclosed adoption status, an experimental condition where the coworker disclosed foster status, or the control group where neither adoption nor foster status was disclosed. Next, they were given the task of reading an introductory statement shared by a new coworker who entered their office to introduce themselves. We selected the name "Alex" for the new coworker as it is a gender-neutral nickname, used as a shorthand for both male and female given names. The target person to form an impression of said:

> Hello, it is nice to meet you! My name is Alex. I just started at the organization last week and have already met so many wonderful people here. Let me tell you a little about myself. I love movies, music, and spending time with friends. Hey, that is a very nice picture you have here on your desk, is it of you and your family? My parents [adoptive parents/foster parents] are very important to me too. I would love to learn more about you and your family sometime! Anyways, since I am new around here, would it be alright if I came to you if I have any questions? It was really nice meeting you!

Measures

Perceived Entitlement

        We next measured entitlement by using a self-created scale (shown in Appendix A). This

measure assesses impressions of the target person using nine items rated on a Likert scale from 1

(*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*), three of which assess perceived entitlement (e.g., "This

person is demanding"). The three items assessing perceived entitlement had good internal

consistency ($\alpha = .85$). We summed the items for a total perceived entitlement score.

Perceived Competence

        Participants then completed a modified version of the Perceived Competence Scale for

Learning (Williams & Deci, 1996; shown in Appendix B). The original scale contains four items

to assess participants' perceptions of their competence in the classroom. We modified the

original items to reflect the job performance context (e.g., "I feel they are able to meet the

challenge of performing well in this job") as well as changing all items from self-perception to

other perception (e.g., "I feel confident in their ability to learn how to do the job"). We also

added five additional items to assess for perceived competency in the scenario (e.g., "They

display a sense of capability"). The modified scale measures competency with nine items, rated

on a scale from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The original scale's internal

consistency ($\alpha = .87$) was satisfactory, and the modified version we used has also demonstrated

excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .89$). We summed the nine items for a total perceived

competency score.

Infantilization

    Next, we measured infantilization by using a self-created Likert scale (shown in Appendix C)

with eight items (e.g., "This person seems immature for their age"), rated from 1 (*strongly*

disagree) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The scale items have good internal consistency ($\alpha = .90$). We summed the eight items for a total perceived infantilization score.

Pandemic Stress

Lastly, participants completed an item developed by the authors to assess how worried, anxious, and/or stressed they feel about the current ongoing COVID-19 pandemic (shown in Appendix D). The measure was rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 (*not at all worried, anxious, and/or stressed*) to 5 (*extremely worried, anxious, and/or stressed*). This scale was originally included as a control in our main analysis, as data collection occurred amid the pandemic.

Results

A series of one-way between-subjects ANOVAs were conducted to compare the effects of disclosed adoption, fostered, and biological family status on perceptions of entitlement, competency, and infantilization. However, there were no statistically significant differences between group means of family status. Thus, contrary to our predictions, entitlement ($F (2, 214) = .88, p = .42$), infantilization ($F (2, 202) = .56, p = .57$), and competence ($F (2, 214) = .08, p = .93$) were not dependent on family status.

We also analyzed whether pandemic-related stress was correlated with individuals' judgments of others using Pearson correlation coefficients. Findings showed that regardless of whether the target person disclosed adoption or foster status, individuals who endorsed higher levels of being worried, anxious, and/or stressed about the current ongoing COVID-19 pandemic judged the target person as more entitled, $r (215) = .30, p < .001$, more infantilized, $r (203) = .18$, $p = .01$, and trending less competent, $r (215) = -.13, p = .06$, regardless of their family status.

This finding suggests that individuals feeling more emotional distress may be more likely to judge others negatively.

Discussion

Overall, we did not find differences in how people perceived individuals from diverse family backgrounds. However, this does not mean that microaggressions against adopted individuals do not occur, as previous literature suggests that microaggressions are frequently experienced by this community (Baden, 2016). We believe the discrepancy between what adoptees report versus what was found in this study may have been due to the participants uncovering what we were examining, i.e., the perceptions of individuals from diverse family backgrounds (e.g., foster or adoptive) compared to individuals from biological families. Moreso, it could also be that this particular scenario was not strong enough to detect judgments that may have existed in different contexts (e.g., family closeness, perceived validity, stability, etc.). This does not mean that judgments against adoptive/foster families do not exist, rather the outright dismissal of diverse family backgrounds is likely deemed by society as unacceptable, which may sway individuals to want to negate that impression. We are a society that values children having families, but we also are a society that has a clear preference on how families are formed, and which are perceived as "second best" (Sherman, 2019).

If our methodology had been different, we may have obtained different results. For example, if we informed participants that the purpose of the study was to investigate how individuals think when meeting a new person instead of how people view themselves and others, participants may have been less likely to uncover what we were examining. We also could have chosen a more discreet way of disclosing adoptive, foster, or biological status in each of the three introductory paragraphs presented. These less direct methods of the disclosure may have

prevented participants from possibly uncovering exactly what we were examining, which may have revealed different results.

However, somewhat unexpectedly, we found correlations between pandemic stress and our variables of interest. Our findings suggest that under times of great stress, such as a global pandemic, people may be more prone to judge others negatively (e.g., as more entitled, more infantilized, and somewhat less competent). We believe this finding may mean that stressful life events lead to an increase in judgments towards marginalized populations, including but not limited to microaggressions, hate crimes, and discrimination.

The findings from this study indicate there is a relationship between emotional distress and judgement towards others, offering a basis for further exploration. Moreover, further research may help grant us a better understanding of why we observe influxes of harmful acts across various stress-inducing events. Through the examination of individuals' perceptions of marginalized populations during times of global distress, we may gain insight into preventing these influxes of harmful acts inflicted upon these populations.

Limitations and Future Directions

This study provides knowledge into how individuals may show an increase in judgment during times of emotional distress, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the results should be considered in light of the study's limitations, some of which suggest directions for future research.

First, self-reports run the risk of socially desirable responses, which may lead to underreporting of socially undesirable traits and overreporting of socially desirable traits (Meisters et al., 2020). It is possible that our participants were motivated to respond in socially desirable ways to our survey questions, particularly if they suspected our true hypothesis.

Although the survey was anonymous which helped to reduce this issue, the study would have

been improved by including a social desirability scale and controlling for it in our analyses.

Second, 164 (75.6%) of participants identified as Caucasian/White, making other

racial/ethnic backgrounds underrepresented in our sample. Given that the racial representation is

not reflective of that of the general population, future studies should include a more diverse

sample to ensure that external validity is maintained. By doing so, we will ensure our findings

meet the needs of a diverse population. A future direction that could be used to address this issue

is to gather a community sample.

Third, we selected "Alex" as the name for the hypothetical coworker in this study, as it is

commonly used as a nickname for both men and women. We intended this to be a gender-neutral

name, but it is possible that participants were more likely to think that this new coworker was

either male or female; we cannot test this possibility in the current data. However, if this were

the case, it may introduce some bias to the results.

Furthermore, we recognize that the scenarios used in this study may have been limited

due to a potential lack of sensitivity when the target individual presented themself as being from

an adopted, fostered, or biological family. By disclosing this in the scenario, participants may

have made inferences regarding what it is that we were analyzing, resulting in potential changes

in responses. Future studies could explore this by making this disclosure more subtle.

Notably, we would also like to recognize the timing of when the study was conducted, as

it was completed by participants in April 2020 when COVID-19 was still new to the public and

highly distressing. Future research should continue to examine the impact of pandemic stress on

perception and judgment processes. For example, although we found no effect of our adoption

status manipulation in this study, other manipulations regarding race/ethnicity and other

marginalized groups may find entirely different results.

Further exploration is needed to understand how international and transracial adoptions

intersect with existing racial/ethnic/nationality-based microaggressions. As adoptive status is

visible for international and transracial adopted individuals, the frequency of both racial and

adoption microaggressions inflicted may be greater than those of invisible adoption identity (i.e.,

same-race adoptees). Moreover, visible differences within adoptive families have been correlated

with increased distress (Baden, 2016; Berg-Kelly & Eriksson, 1997). As a result, greater insight

into the intersection between adoption and racial microaggressions is essential. Although not

addressed in the current study, we propose a follow-up study that includes this as an added level

of exploration.

Conclusion

In sum, the results of our study suggest that individuals experiencing emotional distress

may be more likely to judge others negatively. As stress and therefore judgments increase,

influxes of commonplace microaggressions, discrimination, and hate crimes have been observed,

creating real risk for marginalized populations, potentially including adoptees. As a result, the

need for community resources, clinical services, and mental health care for target populations is

even more prevalent. Although we did not find differences in how people perceived individuals

from diverse family backgrounds in this study, continued research examining person perception

of adopted individuals is critical to gaining a greater understanding of how we can better support

and destigmatize the adoptee population.

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Appendix A

Perceived Entitlement Scale

Please respond to the following items using the number that best reflects your impression of your

new coworker, Alex. Please use the following 7-point scale:

1 = strong disagreement.

2 = moderate disagreement.

3 = slight disagreement.

4 = neither agreement nor disagreement.

5 = slight agreement.

6 = moderate agreement.

7 = strong agreement.

1. This person is entitled.

2. This person is friendly.*

3. This person is rude.

4. This person is intelligent.*

5. This person is privileged.

6. This person is funny.*

7. This person is creative.*

8. This person is demanding.

9. This person is happy.*

* Indicates reverse coding

Appendix B

Perceived Competence for Learning Scale (modified from Williams et al., 1996)

1 = strong disagreement.

2 = moderate disagreement.

3 = slight disagreement.

4 = neither agreement nor disagreement.

5 = slight agreement.

6 = moderate agreement.

7 = strong agreement.

1. I feel confident in their ability to learn how to do the job.

2. They are capable of learning how to do the work for this job.

3. They are able to achieve their goals in this job.

4. I feel they are able to meet the challenge of performing well in this job.

5. I do not feel that they will be proficient in their work.*

6. They are suitable to work in a professional role.

7. They will not be able to master a difficult task.*

8. I do not feel confident in their ability to do their job efficiently.*

9. They display a sense of capability

Indicates reverse coding
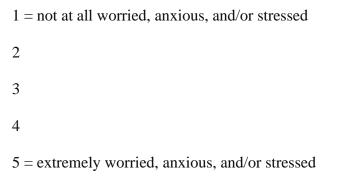
Appendix C

Infantilization Scale

1 = strong disagreement.

2 = moderate disagreement.

3 = slight disagreement.

4 = neither agreement nor disagreement.

5 = slight agreement.

6 = moderate agreement.

7 = strong agreement.

1. This is a mature person.*

2. This person needs additional support.

3. This person seems childish.

4. This person seems responsible.*

5. This person seems immature for their age.

6. This person seems secure.*

7. This person seems naïve.

8. This person seems juvenile.

* Indicates reverse coding

Appendix D

Pandemic Stress

1 = not at all worried, anxious, and/or stressed

2

3

4

5 = extremely worried, anxious, and/or stressed

Lastly, please indicate using the scale below how worried, anxious, and/or stressed you feel

about the current ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.