



Adoption-Related Gains, Losses and Difficulties: The Adopted Child's Perspective

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Abstract

Adoption provides stability, loving care, security, and family interactions for children that have been separated from their birth parents. It also entails many challenges and difficulties, especially for adoptees in middle childhood, since feelings of loss can be particularly strong at this developmental stage. Aiming to use empirical evidence to improve adoption-related policies and practices, this study focused on the adoption-related gains, losses and difficulties, poorly explored in adoption research. One-hundred and two children aged 8–10, who were adopted from care at different ages, were interviewed using the Children's Interview about Adoption. Data collected on gains, losses and difficulties were analyzed using content analysis. Results showed that adopted children identified four main gains inherent to the experience of being adopted. The most frequent gains were related to being part of a family and experiencing family life. Adoptees identified losses related to their pre-adoption life, particularly birth family loss (parents and siblings), and previous relationships loss (especially school peers). Most adoptees reported facing family and social relationships difficulties in their post-adoption life, such as communicating openly about adoption with the adoptive parents and peers. Findings showed that children's adaptation to adoption is complex, ambivalent and individually experienced. Adopted children need parents and professionals to help them elaborate and make sense of their life story. Important implications for practice and research with adoptees, adoptive parents, adoption professionals/practitioners and school staff were drawn from data.

Keywords Adopted children · Middle childhood · Adoption-related gains · Adoption-related losses · Adoption-related difficulties · Qualitative analysis

During middle childhood, the experience of being adopted and the child's adjustment to adoption are essentially characterized by the child's awareness of his/her adoption-related gains, losses, and specific difficulties that emerge in this developmental stage. There is abundant evidence on adoption-related losses based mainly on Brodzinsky's work (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2011, 2014), but research exploring adoption-related gains is nonexistent. Further, there is scarce evidence on adoption-related difficulties that children in middle childhood have to cope with. Therefore, the aim of this study is to

explore the experience of adoption-related gains, losses and difficulties, through the voice of Portuguese adoptees aged 8–10 years who were adopted at different ages, ranging from 2 months to 8 years. Findings are expected to be helpful in improving adoption-related policies and practices.

Research and clinical experience have suggested that being adopted is associated with many challenges and difficulties (Brodzinsky, 2014; Smith, 2002; Soares, Barbosa-Ducharne, Palacios, & Fonseca, 2017), but an in-depth analysis of the adopted child's point-of-view on these issues is absent. The main adoption-related difficulty that research has identified is the adoption communication process (Barbosa-Ducharne, Ferreira, Soares, & Barroso, 2015; Barbosa-Ducharne & Soares, 2016; Brodzinsky, 2006; Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005). Moreover, adopted children need to have the opportunity to communicate openly about adoption and their past in order to cope and make sense of their pre-adoption experiences (Brodzinsky, 2011; Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019).

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As adoption is not a single event in time, but rather an ongoing stage-like process (Jordan & Dempsey, 2013), these specific difficulties are closely related to the developmental ability to understand the meaning and the implications of being adopted (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). As the children develop, their understanding of adoption becomes more differentiated, abstract and hierarchically integrated (Brodzinsky, Pappas, Singer, & Braff, 1981). Middle childhood is characterized by improvements in logical thought, perspective-taking and self-concept development that allow adopted children to differentiate between adoption and birth as two alternative pathways to parenthood, hence to recognize that adoption represents both gaining a new family and losing a previous one (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984). Consequently, children in this stage face the ambivalence of being wanted by adoptive parents and, at the same time, rejected or given away by birth parents (Brodzinsky et al., 1984). These more realistic insights sensitize adopted children to adoption-related losses (Leon, 2002; Nickman, 1985), which, in turn, are core issues in their feelings towards adoption, socio-emotional adjustment and identity development (Brodzinsky, 2009; Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Grotevant, 1997; Smith & Brodzinsky, 2002).

Based on his clinical and research work, Brodzinsky (2011, 2014) identified different adoption-related losses, emerging in middle childhood but experienced across the adoptees' whole life. The experience of loss is normative for adopted persons, since all adoptees face it in a way or another. However, it is simultaneously unique, as each individual experiences it in a singular way (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002). The main adoption-related loss is the separation from birth parents, with whom the adopted child is, at least, genetically connected (Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002). Closely related to this is the child's loss of birth siblings or extended birth family (Brodzinsky, 2011; Mitchell, 2018). According to Powell and Afifi (2005) these are ambiguous losses, which increase children's feelings of uncertainty and insecurity because they entail the loss of someone who is physically absent but psychologically present. Further, children who had lived in out-of-home care established meaningful and emotional relationships with other significant people that tend to be cut-off when adoption takes place, adding another loss. The absence of a genetic link with the adoptive family can be experienced as a feeling of not fitting into the family, involving a lack of a physical, psychological and/or behavioral identification with the members of the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2011). The experience of this adoption-related loss can impair the sense of belonging to the new family. Closely related to this is the child's feeling of lacking genealogical continuity and intergenerational heritage, which is even more common in transracial adoptions (Brodzinsky, 2011). Moreover, Brodzinsky

(2014) identified the loss of a meaning maker. Parents are meaning makers for children, i.e., they are the repository of childhood memories that represent a child's early life (e.g., through pictures, videos), which are essential for identity development.

Finally, adopted children experience status loss. Most people consider adoption very positively, but "for others, not for me". In fact, it is still seen as a second-best choice, which can lead to negative attitudes from others, particularly from peers. These microaggressions (Baden, 2016) can make the experience of being adopted difficult (Meese, 2012; Reinoso, Pereda, Van den Dries, & Forero, 2016; Smith & Riley, 2006) and accentuate adopted children's feelings of being different, which can complicate the loss resolution (Brodzinsky, 2011). As stated by Neil (2012), most of the stress-related consequences to being adopted, particularly at this developmental stage, is socially built, with an expectation for adopted persons to feel fortunate and grateful, because they were chosen for adoption and, therefore, should not experience loss and grief. This may lead to confusion (Donalds, 2012) and hinder the adopted child's process of grief (Ballús & Pérez-Téstor, 2017; Mitchell, 2018).

Adoption-related losses seem to refer mainly to children's pre-adoption experiences and their impact on the post-adoption period. In turn, children's difficulties associated to these losses and to the experience of being adopted refer more to the post-adoption challenges. Adoption-related experiences are subjective (Neil, 2012) and the way in which each adoptee integrates adoption-related losses, achieves a balance between adoption gains and losses, and copes with adoption-related difficulties serve as the foundation for the child's experience of being adopted during middle childhood, and for the adoptee's identity construction (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2011).

The Present Study

This study aimed to develop an active and interpretive listening of adoptees' understanding of their adoption-related gains, losses and difficulties. Given that the main empirical research on these issues was carried out by Brodzinsky a long time ago, and that emphasis was given mainly to adoption-related losses, the goal of this study is to obtain a more current and balanced perspective on the experience of being adopted during middle childhood, including not only losses, but also gains and difficulties. Our main purpose is to search for the gains, losses and difficulties that adopted children assign to adoption, from their own perspective. A qualitative approach based on interviews rather than on standardized questionnaires or scales, increases the chances of better exploring these subjective experiences. Therefore, Portuguese adopted children, aged 8–10, were asked about the

best thing that happened to them because they were adopted (adoption-related gains) and the worst thing that happened to them because they were adopted as well as the difficulties that they faced because they were adopted (adoption-related losses and difficulties).

Method

Participants

One-hundred and two Portuguese children adopted from care, 59 boys (57.8%) and 43 girls (42.2%), aged 8–10 ($M = 8.79$, $SD = 0.79$), participated in this study. They were living with their adoptive families (all Caucasian; 92 two-parent families) for 5.51 years, on average ($SD = 2.21$, ranging from 1.00 to 9.40) and they had been adopted at 3.28 years of age, on average ($SD = 2.21$, 0.2–8.00). Forty-nine (48%) children had been adopted before the age of 3, 36 (35.3%) between 3 and 5 years-old and 17 (16.7%) at 6 or older. Before adoption, 65 (63.7%) of the children had lived between 1 and 75 months ($M = 24.79$, $SD = 19.06$) with their birth families, where 47 (72.3%) had been neglected and five (7.7%) abused. For the remaining children (15) there was no information about the experiences with their birth parents. Thirty-seven (36.3%) adoptees had no living experiences with their birth parents. Furthermore, all children experienced some time living in out-of-home care ($M = 23.76$ months, $SD = 15.06$, 1–66), most of them in institutional care ($n = 84$, 92.2%), as it is usual in Portugal. These children went through one to four ($M = 1.78$, $SD = 0.73$) placement changes (change of care contexts) until the adoption placement.

Instrument and Measures

The participants' adoption-related gains, losses and difficulties were analyzed using their answers to three open-ended questions collected through the Children's Interview about Adoption (Barbosa-Ducharne & Soares, 2012). This is a semi-structured interview aimed at school-aged adopted children developed in order to obtain the adoptees' perspective on the adoption process and on the experience of being adopted. Issues such as the adoption concept, the adoption communication process within and outside the family, the experience of being adopted in the school setting, memories about the past and the placement into the adoptive family, and feelings towards birth parents were explored with the adoptee in this interview. Specifically, this study answers the questions: (a) "what was the best thing that happened to you because you were adopted?"; (b) "what was the worst thing that happened to you because you were adopted?"; (c) "tell me three things that have been difficult for you related to

your adoption". Namely, the first question intended to access the adoption-related gains, and the second and the third one the losses and difficulties related to adoption.

Procedures

The present study is part of a broader research on individual, family and out-of-family predictors of social competence in Portuguese school-aged adoptees, approved by the National Board of Data Protection (3912/2013) and the University's Ethics Committee. A close collaboration with the National Institute of Social Security responsible for adoption all over Portugal, allowed for the selection of the adoptive families within the criteria of the study: the adoptees' age ranging from 8 to 10 and a minimum of a year in the adoptive placement. The present sample represented 61% of all potential children in the target geographical area at the time of the study. Data were collected during home visits where adopted children were interviewed by qualified adoption researchers. Parents signed a consent form, authorizing their child's participation. Besides the parents' authorization, no child participated against his/her will. Moreover, children could decline to answer any question and could stop the interview at any time. Interviews were audio-recorded.

Data Analyses

Although a qualitative approach was the major focus of this study, a quantitative analysis was also used to complement qualitative data. Therefore, this study used a mixed methods design in the data analysis process. Children's answers to the three open-ended questions were transcribed verbatim and a content analysis was performed using NVivo, a qualitative analysis software application. Four independent researchers used open coding to categorize the children's qualitative answers and identify contents emerging from the data. Broader categories in adoption-related gains and losses and difficulties were identified. Similar codes were combined to reduce the large number of codes. The inter-coder reliability was high (90%) and the discrepancies were solved through discussion. Answers were coded twice, ensuring their correct combination and consistent application.

The categories obtained were then entered into the IBM SPSS Statistics Program (version 24.0 for Windows), for the quantitative analysis. Particularly, the study explored the relationships between the categories emerged from the qualitative data and the adoptees' sociodemographic characteristics and pre-adoption adversity variables. For such, descriptive statistics, Chi square's associations, mean differences (t -tests for independent samples) and Pearson bivariate correlations were performed. Parametric tests were used, considering the normality of variables and homogeneity of variances.

Results

Adoption-Related Gains

Qualitative Data

From the qualitative analysis of the children's answers to the question "What was the best thing that happened to you because you were adopted?", it was possible to identify four main categories on gains inherent to the experience of being adopted: (a) *Family experience*, (b) *New resources, experiences and care*, (c) *Ecological change/transition* and (d) *New social relationships*.

The first category—*Family experience*—was the most mentioned ($n = 62$, 60.8%) and was related to the chance, provided by adoption, to be part of a family and experience family life, with everything involved. Children referred the opportunity of getting to know their family ("Meeting my parents."—C118); spending time and playing with their family ("Being with them."—C13; "Playing with me, going to the beach with me."—C16); and having parents with whom they could identify themselves ("Having parents so similar to me, physically and psychologically."—C64). Parental love was also identified as the best thing that happened to them: "Knowing that my parents love me." (C110); "Having a caring mother." (C120). A 10-year-old boy mentioned being called a son as a sort of love: "...it was when my parents called me son for the first time." (C10). At last, within this first category, children pointed out the fact of having parents and having a family as an important gain. Children were not referring to gaining a new family, but to the existence of one, because they had never had, or they never felt like they had had one: "Having parents and a family." (C3); "...Having a father... I have gained a family." (C16). A 10-year-old girl said that she was sure she had parents for life—"...was knowing that they were going to be my parents forever." (C4).

The second category of gains ($n = 25$, 24.5%) was related to the *New resources, experiences and care* provided by the adoptive family, in comparison to pre-adoption experiences. Associated to material gains, children referred the opportunity of getting things and owning their own objects: "I asked for a PlayStation (...). I asked for things and they gave them to me immediately." (C74); "I had things just for me, toys..." (C21). Regarding experiences, children mentioned: "...vacations, learning to ride a bike." (C44). Children also mentioned care as a gain: "(the best thing that happened) ...was my parents who raised me..." (C55); "(parents) that helped me with homework." (C63); "... helping me have health (...) giving food, giving clothes." (C119).

The third category—*Ecological change/transition*—was mentioned by 23 (22.5%) children and entails responses

that referred to the change itself, from pre-adoption contexts to the post-adoption ones, as a gain: "Having another life, another family." (C97); "Coming to a new house." (C99). A 10-year-old boy specifically verbalized "Coming into a new phase." (C7). Two children reported the exact moment of transition—"Going to the parents' house for the first time." (C124); "when I saw the faces of my parents and they said": "Hello daughter, we are your new family, your new parents" (C47)—, and another one reported the cut-off with pre-adoption environments: "...having new parents. Leaving the institution." (C15). Children compare pre- and post-adoption experiences and seem to consider the discontinuity between the two pathways a gain: "... because I have new parents, the old ones were rubbish." (C5); "I stopped eating only soup and bread and wearing clothes with holes." (C23); "Not being stuck in the institution and being able to go outside for a walk." (C122).

The last gain-related category—*New social relationships*—referred to gaining social relationships, including the extended family and friends ($n = 10$, 9.8%): "...having new friends, aunts and uncles and a grandmother." (C8). It was interesting to notice that a child understood the fact that classmates invited her more to play as they had interest in her adopted status: "My colleagues started inviting me to play a lot so that they could know more about me being adopted." (C100).

Quantitative Data

Eleven from the 102 children (10.8%) did not identify any adoption-related gain. In comparison with children who did so ($n = 91$, 89.2%), they were significantly younger, $t(100) = -3.57$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.90$, 95% CI [-0.93; -0.24], and had spent significantly lesser time with their birth family, $t(100) = -3.66$, $p = .001$, $d = -0.78$, 95% CI [-18.39; -5.20]. Most children ($n = 61$, 58.9%) identified one adoption-related gain; the remaining identified two or more gains ($M = 1.27$, $SD = 0.82$). The total number of identified gains was significantly and positively correlated to the time lived with the birth family ($r = .26$, $p = .010$) and the child's age at adoption placement ($r = .20$, $p = .046$). The longer the experience with the birth family and the older the child at placement, the higher the number of adoption-related gains that were identified.

The quantitative analyses also showed that children who reported *New resources, experiences and care* as gains ($n = 25$, 24.5%), in comparison with children who did not ($n = 75$, 75.5%), had lived more time with their birth parents, $t(100) = -3.56$, $p = .001$, $d = -0.79$, 95% CI [-23.36; -6.65], and had had more adversity experiences with them, $t(85) = -3.95$, $p < .001$, $d = -1.01$, 95% CI [-1.02; -0.34], had a higher number of pre-adoption placement changes, $t(100) = -3.10$, $p = .002$, $d = -0.68$,

95% CI [-0.82; -0.18], were significantly older at adoption placement, $t(100) = -3.34$, $p = .001$, $d = -0.75$, 95% CI [-2.59; -0.66], and had a shorter length of adoption, $t(100) = 2.97$, $p = .004$, $d = 0.69$, 95% CI [0.48; 2.43]. This adoption-related gain was significantly associated to the child's gender, $\chi^2(1) = 4.48$, $p = .034$, $\phi = -0.21$, showing that boys had a higher probability of mentioning this gain. In relation to the other gains-related categories, no significant differences were found.

Adoption-Related Losses and Difficulties

Qualitative Data

Children answered the question "What was the worst thing that happened to you because you were adopted?" and the request "Tell me three things that have been difficult for you related to your adoption". The initial qualitative analyses differentiated losses and difficulties, however, since the categories for both contents were very similar, they were merged and, therefore, will be presented together. Five categories emerged: (a) *Family relationship difficulties*, (b) *Birth family loss*, (c) *Social relationships difficulties*, (d) *Loss of social relationships*, and (e) *Adversity experience*. Although in a holistic view these categories referred to pre- (b, d and e categories, mentioned by 46% of the participants) and post-adoption experiences (a and c, mentioned by 66%), it is worth analyzing each of the five categories.

The first category, *Family relationship difficulties*, was mentioned by 50 children (49%). Within the family interactions, adoption communication seemed to be the hardest family task, mentioned as an adoption-related difficulty by 37 children. It involves difficulties as knowing s/he is adopted—"I felt a little bit sad to know that only my friend and I were adopted, and the others were not." (C80)—and lacking information about the birth family—"...I do not know where they live." (C82); "Not knowing if they are dead or alive. Not knowing if I have siblings." (C83); "Not knowing why my mother/my parents decided to leave me at the institution" (C53 and C117). Children reported feelings of discomfort associated to conversations they have with their adoptive parents about adoption: "Feeling ashamed to talk about adoption with adoptive parents." (C41); "I don't have courage to tell them (adoptive parents) everything, everything, everything..." (C81). An 8-year-old boy said it was very difficult "to talk about adoption, because I always think about my birth parents." (C97).

Some children also indicated the moment of placement and the adaptation to adoption/adoptive parents as difficulties: "Fear of not knowing where I was going." (C48); "I did not like my parents, now I do, and when I saw the whole family I was nervous." (C5); "It was difficult to adapt to the house, to the bed, because I could have nightmares"

(C15). An 8-year-old girl specifically said it was difficult to get close to her father, she was afraid of him, because at the institution there were just ladies and no men (C29). A 10-year-old boy specifically said he was afraid that his adoptive parents would leave him: "Thinking that these parents are going to leave me" (C10).

The second category, *Birth family loss*, was mentioned by 33 children (32.4%). It includes loss of parents, loss of siblings and family rejection: "Not knowing my birth parents, not remembering them." (C11); "Thinking about my (birth) mother at school, how long I had not seen her, if I could see her." (C58); "Not knowing my birth sister" (C118); "Not seeing my brothers and sisters" (C12); "Leaving brothers and sisters, leaving them sad." (C33); "...was being rejected (...) by the family that gave me life." (C71); "Knowing that my parents did not want me. I was left in an institution when I was seven days old" (C65); "Realizing that I had a mother who did not like me." (C67). Some specific answers deserve a special mention, namely, a 9-year-old boy that said, "Separating myself from my birth siblings" (C90), as if he was the one who took the decision of being apart. An 8-year-old boy showed preference for the new family environment, desiring it for his brothers/sisters: "I would have preferred my birth parents to have given my siblings to these parents to take care of." (C97). Other children presented a more forgiving vision of the separation: "Because my parents were poor and couldn't take care of me." (C2). At last, a child seemed to be linked to the birth family and to the adoptive one, fantasizing about spending time with both: "Having lost the other family, I would also like to be with the other one. They could join the two." (C87).

The answers of 21 children (20.6%) formed the third category, *Social relationships difficulties*: "It was difficult to adapt to new friends, because I was used to friends at the other place (institution)" (C15); "Shame of going to new places, for example, a new school." (C123). Some children specifically reported the difficulty of revealing their adoption and talk about it with friends: "...telling friends I'm adopted." (C13); "My friends always saying my 'true parents'." (C64). Others described episodes in which school peers picked on them because they were adopted: "The first time they teased me (...) they knew I was adopted and started to make fun of me. I was 3 years old and felt bad" (C30). Some children also said they were set aside by their school peers: "...not talking to me, a friend of mine, because I'm adopted." (C20); "My friends not playing with me." (C32); "...Kicking me out of the group." (C109). At last, there was a child who reported being treated with privilege because she was adopted: "A boy started to play more with me because I was adopted!" (C100), although that special treatment was motivated by her friend's curiosity "don't pass the ball to her if she doesn't tell us things about herself" (C100).

The fourth category, *Loss of social relationships*, was indicated by 12 children (11.8%): “Saying goodbye to my friends.” (C90); “No longer being with my best friend at the Centre.” (C68). Some children also reported the loss of schoolmates “Losing a friend who liked me, who was at my school when I was in a foster family” (C123).

The last category, *Adversity experience*, containing mentions to previous adversity as intimately connected to adoption, appeared in 12 answers (11.8%): “Thinking I was going to die because I was abandoned, a bad man was going to kill me.” (C20); “Having a mother who was on drugs.” (C67); “The possibility of having no family and staying there (institution) all my life, not having parents, not knowing the world, not knowing the school and not having friends.” (C82); “I went to many families, always going in and out of homes” (C2). Two children seemed to still be suffering from previous adversity, one remembered the hospital, had dreams, shudders and, because of it, it seemed, he did not like to hear the word adoption (C106). A boy had nightmares about previous adversity impacting on the present, namely about his birth mother stealing him, knocking down the door and taking him far away (C21).

Quantitative Data

Sixty-eight children (66.7%) could not identify the worst adoption-related thing that had happened to them because they were adopted. There were no significant differences (in adoptees’ characteristics and past circumstances) between children who were able to identify the worst thing and children who were not. Regarding difficulties related to adoption, 16 children (15.7%) did not identify any. Once again, no significant differences were found between children who identified difficulties and those who did not.

Children who mentioned losses and difficulties related to the life before adoption (*birth family loss*, *loss of social relationships* and *adversity experience*) had lived significantly longer with their birth families than children who did not mention these kinds of losses/difficulties, $t(100) = -2.06$, $p = .043$, $d = 0.41$, 95% CI [-15.56; -0.27]. Within this group, children who referred birth family loss, were significantly older than children who did not, $t(100) = 2.13$, $p = .036$, $d = 0.44$, 95% CI [0.02, 0.67].

Quantitative analyses also showed a significant association between the loss of social relationships and the child’s gender, $\chi^2(1) = 4.91$, $p = .027$, $\phi = -0.25$. There were more boys, than those randomly expected, experiencing this loss. Moreover, loss of social relationships was mentioned by older children at adoption placement, $t(100) = 3.11$, $p = .002$, $d = 1.08$, 95% CI [0.74; 3.33], children with shorter length of adoption, $t(100) = -3.04$, $p = .003$, $d = -1.07$, 95% CI [-3.28; -0.69], longer time spent in out-of-home care, $t(100) = 1.04$, $p = .005$, $d = 1.16$, 95% CI [4.05; 21.77],

more adverse experiences in their birth family, $t(85) = 3.06$, $p = .007$, $d = 0.80$, 95% CI [0.15; 0.82], and more pre-adoption placement changes, $t(100) = 2.42$, $p = .017$, $d = 0.79$, 95% CI [0.10; 0.96]. Concerning adversity experience, there were no significant differences in adoptees’ characteristics and past circumstances between children who mentioned this category and children who did not. Regarding difficulties related to children’s post-adoption life (*family and social relationship difficulties*), there were no significant differences between children who reported them and children who did not.

Discussion

The aim of the present study was to perform an in-depth exploration of the gains, losses and difficulties that 8–10 years-old Portuguese adopted children expressed about their adoption. Regarding adoption-related gains, participants identified the benefits of belonging to a family, the new resources, experiences and care provided by the new family, the positive change associated with it, and the establishment of new social relationships. Overall, children valued relational and affective gains, in accordance with the literature and research showing the enormous need of loving and caring attention these children have, due to their past of adversity, and the recovering role of a positive adoptive family setting (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019).

One of the most striking findings is the adopted children’s perception that, perhaps for the first time in their lives, their right for a family had been respected. Some children were able to recognize that the adoption link is permanent, presenting a good understanding of adoption (Brodzinsky et al., 1984), and recognizing themselves as part of a family structure, playing the role of sons and daughters who should be protected and cared for by their parents. According to Brodzinsky (2011), the experience of being physically, temperamentally or behaviorally dissimilar to family members is common among adoptees. Therefore, when children can actually identify themselves as family members and develop a sense of permanence and belonging, they value it as a gain.

When asked about adoption gains, participants in this study were indirectly requested to think about the pre-adoption experiences they had and compare them to their present life. Thus, it makes sense that children with a more adverse and prolonged past identified more adoption-related gains, in contrast to what happened with children who did not identify any gains. Participants were able to clearly identify the discontinuity between pre- and post-adoption experiences, and the gains associated with this ecological change (Palacios, 2009). Specifically, these children seem to value the individualized resources, experiences and care provided by the new family setting.

Regarding adoption-related losses and difficulties, more than half of the participant children, with a very positive view of their adoption experience, could not identify the worst adoption-related aspect. However, this finding needs to be interpreted cautiously, as it may occur because these children may not feel supported and validated in grieving their losses and dealing with their difficulties, opting for silence. If this is the case, this study serves the purpose of acknowledging the risk of adopted children feeling ignored, misunderstood and unsupported (Brodzinsky, 2011; Mitchell, 2018).

The rest of the children in this study identified adoption-related losses and difficulties regarding both their life before adoption (birth family loss, loss of social relationships and adversity experience) and their post-adoption experience (family and social relationships difficulties). Children who identified losses and difficulties related to the past had spent more time living with the birth family, implying separations and the cut-off of significant relationships and, therefore, a more acute experience of these losses (Brodzinsky, 2011). The qualitative analysis of the participants' discourse highlighted the complexity of these ambiguous losses, reflecting the difficulty of grieving for persons that are physically absent but psychologically present in the children's thoughts and feelings (Powell & Afifi, 2005).

According to previous research, the current study stressed the fact that birth family loss, involving loss of parents and siblings, is the main adoption-related loss, particularly relevant in middle childhood (Brodzinsky, 2011, 2014; Leon, 2002; Nickman, 1985; Smith & Brodzinsky, 1994, 2002). Children who identified this loss were older than children who did not, which seems understandable considering the older children's capacity to differentiate birth and adoption and to recognize that gaining a family implies having lost a previous one (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky et al., 1984). Nevertheless, there were no differences between those who acknowledged the birth family loss and those who did not, regarding the length of adverse experiences in their birth family, the amount of time spent in out-of-home care, the number of pre-adoption placement changes, the age at adoption placement and the length of adoption. Therefore, no specific pre-adoption circumstances led to the expression of this type of loss. In accordance to Smith and Brodzinsky (1994, 2002), the birth family loss seems to be inherent to the experience of being adopted.

The loss of pre-adoption social relationships was also frequently reported by participants, especially those who were late adopted. According to Brodzinsky (2011), it is common for adoptees who stayed longer in care to report stronger relationships with non-relative caregivers before adoption. These individuals were sources of emotional security, perhaps the first ones that these children ever experienced.

It is interesting to note that, when children were asked about the worst thing that happened to them because they were adopted and the difficulties that adoption had brought to their lives, they included pre-adoption adverse experiences in their answers, as if these were a consequence of adoption. Children's understanding of adoption and the meaning making of their personal experience of being adopted brings together pre- and post-adoption experiences. It is worth noting that, since this study included only domestic same-race adoptions, the losses reported by Brodzinsky (2011, 2014) related to transracial adoptions were not identified.

The gender differences found in the current study were related to both gains and losses. When compared to girls, boys seemed to assign more value to material gains and reported more frequently the loss of previous social relationships. Although in the Neil's (2012) study, girls were considered to have a more advanced expression of their adoption-related feelings, there is no clear evidence of whether and how gender matters in the child's experience of being adopted. These gender differences deserve further attention from researchers.

Regarding postadoption-related difficulties, the placement, adaptation and construction of a relationship with parents seemed to be more difficult for late adopted children. When a child is late-adopted and, therefore, exposed to adversity for a longer period, it becomes more difficult for him/her to trust an adult due to his/her negative expectations, increasing feelings of uncertainty about the unknown. These specific findings highlight how crucial it is to prepare each child for adoption, and closely support the establishment of the parent-child relationship.

Within family interaction difficulties, adoption communication emerged as a relevant issue, as adoption research has stated (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2011; Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). This difficulty is greater the earlier the child is adopted, owing to adoptive parents' difficulties in revealing adoption and in openly communicating about it, throughout the child's development (Barbosa-Ducharne et al., 2015; Barbosa-Ducharne & Soares, 2016; Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005). This difficulty can be closely related to what Brodzinsky (2011, 2014) named the loss of a meaning maker. Adoptive parents should be the meaning makers of their child's life story, through an open adoption communication, regardless of whether or not they have any information about their child's past. Without memories related to their past and without opportunities to openly discuss adoption, past adversity, birth parents, and the feelings involved throughout the process with their adoptive parents, adoptees will have great difficulties in making sense of their past experiences and childhood.

Children also pointed out difficulties associated to their current social relationships/interactions. Discussing adoption with friends seemed to constitute a difficulty, especially

when the child is not ready to talk, explain or answer questions about adoption. Additionally, when s/he is the only adopted child in class, feelings of being different and, consequently, the fear of others' reactions intensify (Baden, 2016; Soares et al., 2017). In fact, at this developmental stage, most of the stress related to being adopted is socially dependent (Neil, 2012). When adoptees recognize that their peers may have negative attitudes about adoption or towards them because they were adopted, they are experiencing "status loss" (Brodzinsky, 2011, 2014). This type of loss accentuates feelings of non-acceptance and difference that can destabilize adoptees' self-esteem and identity, namely, feelings towards the adoptees' school experience of being adopted (Soares et al., 2017). Through an open family adoption communication, adoptive parents can help their children coping with these negative social reactions.

Finally, it is worth mentioning the individual differences found in the way adoptees experience and express their adoption-related gains, losses and difficulties. Children's discourse varied in content and intensity. These differences are surely related to the heterogeneity among adoptees and to the variety of their adoptive families.

Implications for Practice and Research

This study has important policy and practice implications for all of those surrounding adopted children. Findings proved that adoption-related interventions should be child-centered, individualized whenever possible/appropriate, in order to address each adopted child unique experiences.

Adoption professionals need to be adoption-competent, that is, having specific training and personal sensitivity to work empathically with these children. This work entails preparing children for adoption placement and their separation from previous contexts and relationships. Results also note the importance of preserving emotional connections between children and previous significant caregivers and peers. Besides this, findings indicate that, during the period of children's placement and the first months spent with the adoptive family, adoption professionals should focus their support not only on the family as a whole, but specially on children's efforts to adapt, trust, bond and deal with their fears. Special attention needs to be given to the adopted child in the adoptive environment, both in the family and at school. Social workers and psychologists working in post-adoption services should help adopted children talk and reflect on losses and gains related to their adoption in order to give a positive meaning to the experience of being adopted.

Regarding adoptive parents, findings highlight the importance of being well prepared for the challenges their developing children might face, particularly during their school years. This will allow parents to help adoptees cope with

their adoption story. Essentially, parents need to know what their children are likely to understand and be able to establish and maintain an open communication within the family. This implies validating and normalizing children's curiosity and feelings, encouraging all sorts of questions, conversing in a safe and loving atmosphere, avoiding children's feelings of discomfort, and restraining negative judgments/being respectful about birth parents and children's heritage (Brodzinsky, 2006). To sum up, it is crucial to work on the reflexive functioning ability of prospective adopters and adoptive parents, both before and after the child's placement. This will allow them to see their own child's perspective.

Results of this study reveal the urgent need to work alongside with teachers and school staff, in order to avoid micro-aggressions (Baden, 2016), specially coming from peers. It is important to involve parents in this work, promoting an open communication between the family and the school, and helping them in the task of supporting children build effective coping skills to deal with negative social reactions. School psychologists and school social workers can mediate the relationship between the school setting and the adoptive family. They can also play an important role in the socialization of adoption with the school staff, teachers and schoolmates.

Finally, findings highlight the relevance of the socialization of adoption-related losses (Pinderhughes & Brodzinsky, 2019). The social acknowledgement of the adoptees' adoption-related losses will help parents, teachers and professionals to interpret children's behavior and feel more empowered to support children manage separation, loss and the associated distress, throughout the grieving process.

Conclusions

No adopted child chooses to be adopted. However, adoption is an important event in adopted children's lives, to which they have to give meaning. In addition to pre- and post-adoption circumstances, which vary from one adoptee to another, the way each child makes meaning of these experiences is very personal. The present study gives a voice to Portuguese children adopted from care, aiming to achieve an in-depth analysis of their adoption-related gains, losses and difficulties.

Overall, findings proved that gains and losses/difficulties are closely related, justifying the consideration of both dimensions when accessing children's adoption-related experiences. The way in which gains and losses were accessed may constitute a shortcoming of this study, since children were not asked about these concepts in a straightforward way. Indeed, questions were set trying to overcome the children's cognitive limitation in understanding abstract notions of losses and gains. As added values, this study: (a)

gave voice to the adopted child, resorting to a qualitative approach based on face-to-face interviews, in a large and representative sample of 8–10-year-old Portuguese adoptees; (b) used a mixed methodology combining qualitative and quantitative analyses; (c) filled-in a gap in adoption literature/research; (d) focused attention not only on adoption-related losses, but also on gains and difficulties and (e) drew relevant implications for adoption professional practice.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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