NEW WORLDS OF ADOPTION
Navigating Open Adoption from Placement to Young Adulthood

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TODAY’S PRESENTATION

- Adoption in context
- Adoption in the United States
- Open adoption: What is it? How does it work?
- Our study’s key findings about adopted children, adoptive parents, and family dynamics
- Implications
ADOPTION IN CONTEXT

cultural
economic
legal
historical
geopolitical
DIVERSITY IN ADOPTION

Adopting parents
- Single or couple
- Sexual orientation
- Race same or different from child
- Nationality same or different from child
- Related to the child or not

Adopted child
- Placed as an infant or older
- In good health or with special needs
- Alone or with siblings

Adoption circumstances
- Removed from birth parents by state
- Birth parent(s) seek adoption
- Child abandoned

Adoption intermediary
- Private agency
- Public child welfare system
- Independent adoption
ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

- Population 318.9 million
- 1,527,000 adopted children under age 18
- 50 states which prize their autonomy
- Adoption law is considered part of family law, which differs from state to state
TOTAL U.S. ADOPTIONS BY TYPE

- Domestic Private: 38%
- From Foster Care: 37%
- International: 25%

Source: National Survey of Adoptive Parents, Adoption Chartbook (Vandiveer & Malm, 2009)
CURRENT U.S. ADOPTIONS PER YEAR

- 50,644 adoptions from the child welfare system (2014)
  52% adopted by a foster parent,
  34% by a relative, 14% by a non-relative

- 6,441 international adoptions (2014)
  Down from a peak of 22,991 in 2004

- 14,000 infants voluntarily placed by birth parents each year (estimate)

- 50,000 children adopted by a stepparent following divorce (estimate)

Sources: AFCARS; U.S. Department of State; Child Welfare Information Gateway--updated 2015
ADOPTION TODAY: MANY MEANINGS, MANY CONTEXTS FOR DEVELOPMENT
U.S. ADOPTIONS GOVERNED BY

- International treaties

- Federal regulations
  Multiethnic Placement Act (1994) says placement from foster care cannot be delayed because of child’s race
  Adoption & Safe Families Act (1997) required concurrent planning
  Fostering Connections to Success & Increasing Adoption Act (2008) provides foster care support for children over age 18

- State regulations
  Vary by state, regulate most aspects of adoption
THE CURRENT PARADIGM

Adoption is a legal process: Parenting rights and responsibilities are legally transferred from birth parents to adoptive parent(s)

Child is “subtracted” from one family and “added” to another
The Adoptive Kinship Network is a permanent connection—through the child—between the birth and adoptive families. The child has psychological membership in both families, even if the birth and adoptive family members never meet. A rapidly growing number of U.S. adoptions involve contact between the birth and adoptive families.
CONTACT TRENDS IN THE U.S.

- 55% of private agency adoptions now open (direct contact), 40% involve mediated contact, and about 5% are totally closed.

- Contact in child welfare adoptions is increasing. When not possible with birth parents, it often includes birth siblings and grandparents.

- Contact in international adoptions is on the rise for certain countries of origin.
THE MOVEMENT TO OPENNESS

Began at private adoption agencies in the late 1970s to early 1980s

Why?

• Fewer babies to place, yet high demand
• Birth mothers less willing to lose all knowledge of their child
• Evolving view that contact may be in the best interests of the child (adoption reform movement)
A TYPICAL DOMESTIC INFANT OPEN ADOPTION

- Prospective adoptive parents prepare profile / dossier / video / website
- Birth parent(s) selects the adoptive family with agency assistance
- Direct contact between birth family and adoptive family members
- Legally binding “contact agreement” signed at placement in some states
...Nevertheless, adoptive parents are the legal parents and have all legal parenting rights and responsibilities.
OPEN ADOPTION CONTACTS MAY...

- Include meetings, phone calls, social media (Facebook etc.); exchange of pictures, gifts, letters, e-mails, etc.
- Involve a variety of people
- Vary in frequency, as those involved decide for themselves how often
- Have verbal or written agreements that vary in flexibility, legal enforceability
- **WILL** change over time, as participants and circumstances change.
INITIAL CONCERNS ABOUT OPENNESS

**Adopted children:** confusion, leading to problems with self-esteem, identity, and mental health

**Adoptive parents:** fear intrusion, lack entitlement to feel like “real” parents

**Birth parents:** continual unresolved grief, inability to adjust to changed role
CONCERNS ABOUT OPENNESS: INTERNATIONAL ADOPTION

**Adopted children**: confusion about adoption circumstances, culture of origin, feeling pulled between cultures

**Adoptive parents**: language and cultural barriers to communication, fears of financial exploitation

**Birth parents**: cultural differences in understanding the permanence and meaning of adoption
CONCERNS ABOUT OPENNESS: CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM ADOPTION

**Adopted children**: safety risks, consequences for mental health

**Adoptive parents**: fear of intrusion and for safety of child and family

**Birth parents**: if involuntary placement, feelings of anger, shame, guilt; differing reactions within extended family; birth parent(s) dealing with mental illness or substance abuse
OUR RESEARCH FOCUS:
DOMESTIC INFANT ADOPTIONS
CURRENT KEY COLLABORATORS

- Hal Grotevant, U of Massachusetts Amherst
- Ruth McRoy, Boston College
- Gretchen Wrobel, Bethel Univ (Minnesota)
- Susan Ayers-Lopez, Univ of Texas Austin
- Ann Schwartz, Concordia University Texas
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Supporting research to improve the lives of young people
MTARP STUDY DESIGN

  Middle childhood (ages 4-12)

Wave 2: 1996 – 2000
  Adolescence (ages 12-20)

  Emerging adulthood (ages 21-30)

Wave 4: 2012 – 2014
  Young adulthood (ages 25-35)
WAVE I
INITIAL PARTICIPANTS

- **190 adoptive couples**: mostly white, middle to upper middle class; mean age 40 years

- **171 adopted children**: ages 4 – 12 (M=7.8 yrs); 81 females; infant placements; no transracial, international, or special needs

- **169 birth mothers**: 93% white, ages 14-36 at placement (M=19.3 years); all voluntary placements, wanted a better future for child
WAVE 2 PARTICIPANTS

ADOLESCENCE

- At least one member in 177 of 190 original families was seen in their homes across the United States
- 173 adoptive mothers and 163 adoptive fathers
- 156 adopted adolescents (ages 11-20; M=15.6 yrs)
- 127 birth mothers (ages 29-54; M=35.4)
WAVE 3 PARTICIPANTS
EMERGING ADULTHOOD

- 169 young adult adoptees
  (52% males; ages 21-30; mean 25.0 yrs)
- 103 close relationship partners
- 151 adoptive mothers
- 134 adoptive fathers
WAVE 4 PARTICIPANTS
YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Young Adult Adoptees (N=114)

- Age range: mid 20s to mid 30s
- 92% have completed some post-secondary education, 34% have completed some post-graduate work
- 77% in a committed relationship; 57% married, 43% have from 1 to 5 children
PROCEDURES

- Waves 1 and 2: Home visits to adoptive families. Visits or phone interviews with birth mothers.
- Wave 3: Interviews and questionnaires administered online.
- Wave 4: Online questionnaires; follow-up phone interviews with some birth mothers.
METHODOLOGY

- Multiple respondents
  Adopted child, both adoptive parents (W1,2,3), agency staff, birth mother (W1,2,4), relationship partner (W3)

- Multiple types of measures
  Extensive personal interviews, standardized questionnaires, family interaction task (W2), school records (elementary school into college)

- Quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods

- Technology used
  Web-administered online interactive interview (chat) at W3 for young adults; online measures at W3 and W4
FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS: IDENTITY

Q: Would contact lead to confusion about who are the child’s “real” parents and ultimately cause problems with identity?

A: Children were not confused. They have many adults in their lives, and know how to differentiate among them.
IDENTITY

An active, constructive process at the intersection of self and society
ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY

- Chosen
  - Career
  - Values
  - Religious and political ideologies
  - Views of self-in-relationships

- No choice
  - Gender
  - Race and ethnicity
  - Being adopted
ADOPTION ADDS COMPLEXITY

- Natural need to know who we are and how we fit into the world
  - Adoptees may lack information about their history, family, genetics, health risks, and culture
  - Child may look very different from adoptive parents

- May be the need to integrate difficult information
  - Having complete and accurate information is increasingly viewed as a human right
INTEGRATING THE ELEMENTS OF IDENTITY
As soon as I met my birth father, I knew who I was. I don’t know why that had anything to do with it, but I was more focused on me. I didn’t actually feel a part of the [adoptive] family until I met my biological parents.
IDENTITY INVOLVES
CONSTRUCTING A NARRATIVE
...a developmental process whereby young people reflect on and explore the meaning of adoption and integrate their experiences and thoughts into coherent adoptive identity narratives.

(Grotevant, 1997)
“I think that I am who I am not just because of my family who raised me, or because of the two people that made me. I think it’s a combination of all that. Being able to know all of them has really helped me to become who I am.” (female, age 18)
IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT IN ADOPTED ADOLESCENTS

- An active process involving engagement with many people and ideas over an extended time period
- Adoption is not a chosen identity; this adds layer of complexity to the process
- Adoptive identity is not just the sum of one's "facts"
  - Involves construction of coherent narrative
FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS: ADOPTIVE IDENTITY

- Parents’ communicative openness during adolescence predicts information seeking (an aspect of identity exploration)
- Parents’ facilitation of contact with children’s birth relatives sparks family conversation
- Adoption-related conversation, in turn, facilitates adolescent identity development and the creation of a coherent narrative
ADOPTIVE PARENTS

**Q:** Do adoptive parents in open adoptions worry about birth parents reclaiming their child?

**A:** We found less fear of reclaiming in open than in closed adoptions:

- Birth and adoptive parents in open adoptions discuss these issues
- Inferences based on real relationships rather than fears based on stereotypes or media portrayals
FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS: BIRTH MOTHERS
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Birth mothers have chosen not to parent the child, but they do want to know how the child is doing and take comfort in that.

Birth mothers with contact showed less unresolved grief than those without contact.
Birth mothers in open adoptions were more satisfied with their openness arrangements than birth mothers with no contact.

Open adoptions reassure the birth mother that she made the right decision for the child.
Most birth mothers who had contact wanted it to continue.

Most without contact would welcome it, but felt it was the adoptee’s right to initiate.

Many establish connections between their current family (spouse, new children, grandparents) and the child they placed.
FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS: FAMILY DYNAMICS

- Open adoption requires us to re-think the meaning of family and adoption.
- Open adoption requires expansion of family boundaries to include birth relatives. Families form adoptive kinship networks that involve real (not just psychological) relationships.
Contact means “intimate strangers” build relationships in the shared belief this is in the best interest of the child.

The adults must be able and willing to play their parts to make contact work.
KINSHIP NETWORK DYNAMICS

- Adoptive parents have full parenting rights, so birth relative participation is at the pleasure of the adoptive parents.
- Outcomes seem to be better for all when there is a mutual feeling of satisfaction about the openness arrangements.
- How does that evolve?
Q: How do adoptive kinship networks regulate emotional distance to create and maintain a situation that “works?”
COMFORT ZONE OF INTERACTION

- Individuals have "range of tolerance for separation and connection—a comfort zone." (Farley)

- In an adoptive kinship network, differences in comfort contribute to a dynamic process of connection and separation over time.

- Adoption often pulls adults out of their comfort zone.


(Grotevant—2009)
My job is to protect my daughter and do what is best for her and give her the most stable, normal life there is.... My goal is that she would never feel any different or think of herself any differently than Joey [older biological son]. This gives a level of normalcy, stability, unity, and cohesiveness that I am very quick to defend and very protective over.
Another adoptive mother’s view

"To me, when you’re going into adoption you have to be willing to accept the fact that the biological parents are in the picture, and if they’re not in the picture you wouldn’t have a child. That’s just the bottom line, and to recognize that, and that they have rights too -- to know their child is alive and well and healthy and being taken care of."
“We used to write daily and call each other weekly, in the beginning. When the children were real little, it was tremendous intensity. And I think as our birth mother became more secure in herself and went on to finish college, her need to see them once a week or once a month became less and less. And you know, she feels more comfortable with us, we feel more comfortable with her, and we just know that we always have access. You just take it one day at a time. If you want it to work, you’ll work at it. We feel it’s healthy and want it to work because of our children.” (adoptive mother)
ISSUES IN CONTACT

- Age, educational, and economic disparities between birth and adoptive parents that reduce mutual understanding
- Mental and physical health–ability and willingness of key adults to make and keep commitments
- Can there be two mothers? What are their roles?
- Loss of control
- Extended family views and roles
As the child develops, his or her voice plays more of a role.

Are the adults able and willing to be responsive to the child’s wishes?
IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

- One size does not fit all families
- No evidence that contact is necessarily harmful
- Contact can be very positive for all
- Like any important relationship, contact requires care on all sides
- If contact is not happening, parents may want to keep the door open for future contact
IMPLICATIONS - 2

- Need for post-adoption support
- Need to take social media into account
- Adoption-competence movement
I feel adoption has given me a lot. A complete sense of perspective that not a lot of children and young adults, or adults have for that matter. It has allowed me to be completely accepting of others’ families, and be able to see issues within families that I wouldn't have normally been aware of or really even cared about. …I like the viewpoint it gives me.

(age 27)
Thank you for your interest!

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