

Adolescents' Feelings about Openness in Adoption: Implications for Adoption Agencies

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Adoption research commonly uses parents' reports of satisfaction when examining openness in adoption arrangements. This qualitative study aimed to fill a gap in the adoption research by using adolescents' voices to gain a better understanding of their adoption experiences. Adopted adolescents ($n = 152$) were interviewed concerning their satisfaction with the openness in their adoption arrangements with their birthmothers. Results and implications from this study may affect how adoption agencies work with adopted adolescents and their families, and may influence a broader understanding of the recent trend toward open adoption arrangements.

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The adoption process has undergone a transformation from the older model (where there was a complete break with the adopted child's past) to newer trends in which openness in adoption has become common (Avery, 1998; Berry, Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Dukette, 1984; Groth, Bonnardel, Devis, Martin, & Vousden, 1987; Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003; Pannor & Baran, 1984). The term "openness" is used to describe a continuum of options available to the biological parents and adoptive couples where more information or communication can be shared. Openness can range from the biological parents simply having input into the selection of adoptive parents for their child, to exchanging letters or pictures with the adoptive families (usually mediated through the agency), to face-to-face meetings with the adoptive parents, adopted child, or both (fully disclosed adoption) (Groth et al., 1987; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Adoption agencies have implemented changes toward more openness in varying degrees. For instance, there are some agencies that offer a continuum of options, including confidential, mediated, or fully disclosed, whereas other agencies offer only fully disclosed adoption arrangements, and a few agencies offer primarily confidential arrangements with some indirect contact (Henney et al., 2003; Henney, Onken, McRoy, & Grotevant, 1998; Pannor & Baran, 1984).

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Although openness in adoption is becoming more common, there is little evidence of how adopted children have responded to this practice (Berry et al., 1998; Churchman, 1986; Mendenhall, Berge, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004). Most published research regarding adoption-related issues has been framed through the lenses of adults—either the adoptive parents or birthparents. Thus, the purpose of this investigation was to discover the meaning of adolescents' satisfaction with adoption arrangements, which vary in openness.

History of Openness in Adoption Agencies

Adoption laws in the United States are state statutes. In the 1800s, the state statutes did not bar access to court records of adoption (Kuhn, 1994). Confidentiality was not an issue because adoption was infrequent, court records were minimal and there were no adoption agencies to mediate or record the process (Henney et al., 2003).

By the early 1900s, institutionalized secrecy in adoption took hold (Avery, 1998), and social mores shaped the form that adoption took. Secrecy about adoption was encouraged by societal attitudes about sexuality, which ostracized unmarried pregnant women and the children born to them (Dukette, 1984). The "placing out" movement, which was primarily designed to rescue the children of unmarried pregnant mothers, had begun in the mid 1800s and was at its peak in the early 1900s. Child welfare agencies and child-placing orphanages were in operation with few regulatory or legal guidelines (Dukette, 1984; Henney et al., 2003). Because of the unregulated practice of placing out, professionals in the field of child welfare and adoption pushed for more standardization of the process. This resulted in the licensure of adoption agencies.

At this time, adoption agencies and the legal system believed that secrecy and confidentiality protected all the members of the adoption triad (birthparents, adoptive parents, and the adopted

child). By the end of the 1940s, most states had enacted statutes that protected adoption confidentiality (Avery, 1998). With the civil rights movement of the 1960s, secrecy became a synonym for discrimination, and open records became a requirement. In courts, some adopted children maintained that their civil rights had been violated, because others had information concerning them that they could not have (Dukette, 1984). Fewer infants became available to adopt, abortion and reliable contraception became more available, and marriage was no longer viewed as an essential prerequisite for a respectable pregnancy. In response to societal pressure for greater openness, state legislatures began to pass amendments to sealed record laws by the end of the 1970s, (Kuhn, 1994). Searches for birthparents became more prevalent, and many adoption agencies responded to clients' needs for openness by either helping past clients search or providing more openness from the inception of the adoption process (Groth et al., 1987). The power of the clients' need to know their birthfamilies was so strong that regardless of how agencies felt about openness, many moved to offering openness as an option, in order to stay competitive with other agencies and with independent adoptions (Henney et al., 2003).

A recent study investigated the trend toward openness since 1987 in 31 adoption agencies and in independent adoptions; of the agencies surveyed, it found that openness has become the preference of most pregnant women seeking adoption placement (Henney et al., 2003). The researchers followed 31 agencies that provided placement services to adoptive families and birthmothers from 1987 to 1999. During this time, adoption agencies had steadily increased their provision of fully disclosed adoption arrangements. In 1987, only 36% of the agencies offered fully disclosed adoption arrangements, but 79% of the agencies offered this option by 1999. Also, by 1999, there was not a single agency that offered only confidential adoptions, and the number of agencies that did not offer fully disclosed adoptions decreased from 65% in 1987 to 21% in 1999.

Evidence-Based Benefits of Openness

Several researchers have attempted to investigate the effects of openness on the adoptive kinship network, which includes the adopted child, and the members of his or her adoptive and birth-families (Berry, 1991a; Berry, 1991b; Berry et al., 1998; Gross, 1993; Grotevant, 2000; Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; Groth et al., 1987; Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, Woods, & Schmidt, 1985; Mendenhall et al., 2004; Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996; Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 2003). Many benefits have been linked to increased openness in adoption for the adoptive kinship network members. For a birth-mother, more openness in adoption allows her a more active role in the child's future (for example, choosing the adoptive family), as well as the ability to ensure that information will be provided regarding the child's well-being (for example, placing the child with the agreement that contact be maintained) (Berry et al., 1998). This active role facilitates self-determination and self-worth, and enables a confirmation that the adoptive parents will be the psychological parents. It is believed that all of this facilitates the birthmother's grieving process (Fratter, 1991; Groth et al., 1987; Miall, 1998).

A relationship between adoptive parents' feelings of entitlement to the child and the degree of openness has been found (Belbas, 1987; Berry, 1991b; Grotevant et al., 1994; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; McRoy & Grotevant, 1991). The more open the adoption, the more comfortable adoptive parents felt with openness. One reason adoptive parents feel more comfortable is that, once they get to know the birthmother, they realize she has no intention of attempting to reclaim the child, and the fear and anxiety of the adoptive parents diminish (Belbas, 1987; Chapman, Dorner, Silber, & Winterberg, 1986; Chapman, Dorner, Silber, & Winterberg, 1987; Gross, 1993; Grotevant et al., 1994). Furthermore, when contact with birthparents exists, adoptive parents feel better equipped to answer questions the adopted child may have later on, and it is for

this benefit (to the child) alone that many adoptive parents pursue open adoption arrangements (Berry et al., 1998; Castle, Beckett, Groothues, & the English and Romanian Adoptees (ERA) team, 2000). One recent study indicated that adoptive parents were no more or less likely to report feelings of closeness to their child in an open adoption and were equally satisfied with their level of closeness with their child in comparison with adoptive parents of children in confidential adoptions (Berry et al., 1998). Thus, open adoptions were not likely to threaten adoptive parents' ability to have a close relationship with their child simply because the adoptive family has a relationship with the birthparent(s)—which was a common fear noted by parents who favor closed adoptions (Kraft et al., 1985).

The children are probably the ones who benefit most from openness in adoption (Logan, 1999). Adopted children are faced with the task of integrating the facts surrounding their birth into their identity (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Grotevant, 1997; Groth et al., 1987), and identity formation can be more complex for adopted adolescents because of the existence of many unknowns. Adolescence, especially, is a crucial period in the development of identity. For example, knowing about one's medical background, why one was adopted, where one's red hair came from, or who else in the family was artistic is a basic human need; it is a need that is unrecognized by most people who have automatic access to such information. Denying adopted children this information is seen by some as an infringement upon basic human rights; this infringement can lead to an array of emotional and identity problems (Berry et al., 1998).

Many adopted children desire contact with their birthparents; contact allows them access to this information and facilitates identity development and overall satisfaction with the adoption experience (Berry et al., 1998; Logan, 1999; McRoy & Grotevant, 1991; McRoy, Grotevant, & Ayers-Lopez, 1994; Ryburn, 1995; Sykes, 2000; Wrobel et al., 1996; Wrobel et al., 2003). Furthermore, research has shown that a confidential adoption, in comparison with

an open adoption, gives rise to more fantasies about the biological family and the circumstances surrounding the adoption, which in turn promotes more need for counseling for emotional problems in adopted children (Groth et al., 1987).

Although these results appear to favor openness in adoption, there is still a lack of research indicating how adopted children feel about openness. This study aims to fill this gap in research by using the voices of adopted adolescents to report on how they experience openness. It is expected that the results of this study will be useful for adoption agencies, as they assess what they believe to be best for children's welfare.

This article was envisioned after an earlier study by the authors found that adopted adolescents were more satisfied with the degree of openness in their adoptions when contact was occurring with the birthparents than when it was not (Mendenhall et al., 2004). The authors wanted to understand more fully why the adolescents were satisfied or dissatisfied with their openness arrangements, and decided to probe the qualitative data to get a deeper understanding of the adolescents' experience with openness. This article focuses specifically on adopted adolescents' satisfaction with contact with their birthmothers. Studies are currently underway by other researchers on the project to look at adolescents' experience with their birthfathers.

Method

Participants

Participants in the current study included adopted adolescents from 177 adoptive families who were evaluated in Wave II of the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; McRoy et al., 1994). MTARP is a longitudinal project that includes a nationwide sample of adoptive families and birthmothers who were recruited through 35 adoption agencies, located in 23 different states, from all regions of the United States.

In 1986, project staff contacted 40 private adoption agencies across the United States to assess the range of the openness arrangements being offered and their interest in assisting with the study. Agencies who offered a range of openness options to families and birthparents were preferred. We sought families in which there was at least one adopted child (the "target child") between the ages of 4 and 12 at Wave I. Other parameters were that the adopted child must have been adopted through an agency before his or her first birthday, and the adoption was not transracial, international, or "special needs." Also, both adoptive parents must still be married to each other.

Agency staff sent letters to families and birthmothers who met these inclusion criteria. If interested in participating, the parents mailed identifying information to the research project staff. A few families (6.3%) were recruited through advertisements in newspapers and periodicals. Although this sample was voluntary, and not a fully random one, the families participating were not recruited on the basis of having a successful adoption. Wave I data were collected between 1987 and 1992, and Wave II data were collected between 1996 and 2000; interviews were spaced approximately 8 years apart. The larger Wave II MTARP sample includes 173 adoptive mothers, 162 adoptive fathers, and 152 adopted adolescents (74 boys and 78 girls). The ages of the adolescents during the Wave II data collection ranged from 11 to 20 years old (mean age = 15.7 years). The vast majority of the adolescents were white. Of the 152 adopted adolescents, 147 of them identified themselves as white, 3 as Latino, 1 as African American, and 1 as Latino and white.

Data Collection

Interviews with the adolescents were conducted during a home visit at which time other interviews and measures were administered to parents and participating siblings. The interviewers explained the project to the parents and adolescents before asking them to provide consent to participate. All participants were told that they could decline to participate or to answer any specific

questions they did not wish to answer. In most cases, interviewers were the same sex as the respondents. Interviews were conducted so that other family members could not hear the respondents' answers. The home visit typically lasted four–five hours. All interviews were audiotaped and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

The adopted adolescent interview was designed to elicit open discussion of the adolescent's experiences and feelings about his or her adoptive family situation and knowledge of and attitudes about his or her birthparents, as well as school/future professional plans, friendships, and religion. The semi-structured interview covered general adoption issues, as well as issues specific to the type of adoption in which the child was involved. The adolescent interviews lasted approximately one hour, and interviewers were trained to probe for answers to the interview questions when necessary. Interviewers were either graduate students or faculty in family science or social work, and all received standardized training in the conduct of research interviews, followed by practice interviews and detailed feedback.

Definitions

Contact Status. Contact status was defined in terms of whether or not contact had ever occurred between the adopted child and birthmother. Cases identified as having contact included those adolescents involved in either mediated or fully disclosed openness levels.

Satisfaction with Contact. Satisfaction with contact was defined in terms of the adolescent's satisfaction with his or her degree of contact, no matter what it was. An adolescent with no contact could be very satisfied that there is none or could be very dissatisfied, wishing for some contact. Likewise, adolescents with contact could be satisfied with the level of contact they are having or dissatisfied with it, wishing for more or less contact or a different form of contact. Satisfaction was coded in one of six categories: very dissatisfied, dissatisfied, neutral, satisfied, very satisfied, and mixed/ambivalent. For this study only those in the two dissatisfied groups

($n = 46$) and two satisfied groups ($n = 77$) were analyzed. The 27 cases coded as neutral or mixed/ambivalent were dropped from the analysis (total $n = 123$). For a complete description of how researchers coded satisfaction and contact status in adopted adolescent interviews, see Mendenhall et al. (2004).

Research Design and Analysis

Thematic analysis, which is used in phenomenological research, was used in this study (Creswell, 1998). The first three authors read the interview transcripts, and their goal was to understand the participants' experience with openness in their adoptions with their birthmothers, and to give meaning to these transcripts by identifying recurrent themes in the data. The transcripts were randomly selected from four groups of adolescents:

- adolescents who were satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers,
- adolescents who were not satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers,
- adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers, and
- adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers.

Each of the three researchers read interview transcripts from one of the four groups of adopted adolescents (the first author read two sets of transcripts). The researchers read the adolescents' transcripts until saturation occurred; that is, until no more new themes were evident (Creswell, 1998; Kvale, 1997; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The researcher must read past the saturation point to know that saturation has occurred. Once saturation has been achieved, the researcher stops reading the transcripts. Saturation occurred in this study when approximately 50% of the transcripts were read ($n = 62$).

Thematic analysis requires the researcher to suspend preconceptions and assumptions regarding the phenomenon under investigation, in order to fully understand the experience of the

participant and to not impose an a priori hypothesis on the experience (Creswell, 1998). To achieve this, the researchers used Geertz's (1988) process of "thick description" and "thick interpretation" to analyze qualitative data. Thick description and interpretation means that the researcher goes "beyond merely describing the objective, physical behavior of human beings and puts ... emphasis on ... detail in order to grasp and set down the meanings of human acts." (Geertz, 1980, p. 140). The thick description level of data analysis was achieved as researchers organized participants' detailed quotes that were similar into groups without any attempt to provide interpretation. Accomplishing thick interpretation flowed from the thick description of the data, by grouping similar statements into thematic patterns, and then into individual themes for each group of adolescents.

The data analysis involved a series of interactive meetings among the researchers. Early in the process, both the thematic analysis approach and the definition of saturation were discussed in order to ensure that the researchers were consistent. Several meetings were held by the researchers during which the data was cross-checked for trustworthiness. For instance, the coding process, criteria for including or excluding categories and themes, and theme identification were all discussed and agreed upon.

Results

The findings are reported separately for the four groups of adolescents:

- adolescents who were satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers,
- adolescents who were not satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers,
- adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers, and
- adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers.

The following themes were identified according to each of the four groups of adolescents. All quotes used as examples of the identified themes have been stripped of identifying markers.

Adolescents Who Were Satisfied with the Contact They Were Having with Their Birthmothers

There were 56 adolescents (30 males and 26 females) who had contact with their birthmothers and who were satisfied with the contact they were having. Three main themes came forth from the statements of these adolescents:

- positive affect towards their birthmothers,
- increased identity formation, and
- desire to meet other birthfamily members.

Theme I: Positive Affect Towards Birthmothers. The adolescents who were satisfied with the contact they had with their birthmothers had very positive feelings about them. Terms such as: "love her," "think she is a great woman," "like our relationship," and "friend" were used by the majority of the adolescents in referring to their birthmothers. An adolescent female related,

She, I mean, she's really easy to talk to and we got along really good, I guess, and we have a really good relationship. I feel like, I mean, I feel like I want to tell her everything, or anything. I mean, I love her.

As exemplified in the above quote, the positive affect the adolescents had towards their birthmothers compelled them to talk in "relationship" terms. The word "relationship," or terms that imply a relationship such as "friend," were commonly used. When asked how he felt about his birthmother, a male adolescent shared, "Mainly a friend, I guess. I mean she doesn't have like a parental role, because I already have that. She's mainly just another person who loves me."

Adolescents also said that the positive relationships they had with their birthmothers provided extra support for them. One adolescent female said, "The support that comes from having another

strong relationship in my life is irreplaceable." Another adolescent female stated, "It is nice to have another person looking out for you and caring about what happens to you." An adolescent male said, "I have so much support." Another male adolescent stated,

I love her, she's awesome, and she's really supportive, really nice. Oh, it's like having another close older role model, like my parents. Yeah, it's a blessing, I think, and it's really nice having an open adoption because you can just interact with her and like, know what she's like, instead of wondering throughout your life how your birthmom's like and everything. And I know her personality and so it's good. It's also like having another family, sort of. I get lots of support from both of them. You'd want that, no matter what happens in my life, I'll know I have a lot of support.

Theme II: Identity Formation. Adolescents who were satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers frequently mentioned how this contact contributed to their identity formation. The first aspect of identity formation that was referred to by adolescents had to do with their physical features. An adolescent male commented, "I know why I look the way I do." An adolescent female said, "I finally know why I look and act the way I do."

A second aspect of identity formation that the adolescents mentioned had to do with their personality characteristics. One adolescent male said, "I act just like my birthmother." Knowing how they were similar in personality traits to their birthmothers helped adolescents make sense of who they are. A female adolescent related,

It's hard when everybody's like, like my mom's family looks a lot alike, and I don't look anything like them. And you know, they say "so and so looks like so and so" and it's really hard. When I see the pictures of my birthmother or visit, I see the similarities and can say I look more like her. Or my birthmother would write me in a letter something that would sound like me and I'd say, "Well, oh that is

where I get this from." That's, I think, the part that interests me the most about it. It's discovering why I am the way that I am.

The third component of identity formation that the adolescents brought up was biological information that provided answers to who they are. A female adolescent stated, "I feel like, more like, complete, I guess, because I know everything about myself now." One adolescent male commented, "I feel like I know who I am now." One female adolescent shared the following experience.

Yeah, I remember in, like fifth grade, this one girl was like, "I feel so sorry for you because your parents, like, gave you up," and I'm just like, "you know it's not like that. I've met my birthmother and know the whole story, and she loves me and still does and did me a favor letting me be raised, you know, in a better situation." If I hadn't met Karen I wouldn't have been able to answer that question and it would have probably screwed me up and made me feel less of a person or something.

"Knowing the whole story" helped this female adolescent answer questions posed by curious friends about her biological background. Having the details allowed her to feel equal to other adolescents.

Theme III: Desire to Meet Other Birthfamily Members. Adolescents who were satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers said that they wanted more contact and they wanted to meet other birthfamily members. This included (in order of frequency mentioned): siblings, birthfather, grandparents, aunts/uncles, and cousins. The contact the adolescents had with their birthmothers seemed to act as a catalyst in creating desire to have other birthfamily members in their lives. One female adolescent related,

Well, I know that, you know, I want to see her more. I'd like to also meet the rest of her family. You know, spend more time with them and get to know them in every aspect. Not

really what they were like then, 'cause they were all young, but you know, what they are like now. I'm just, I'm really grateful my parents wanted an open adoption because, I mean, being able to know my birthmother is very, very important to me and it's been really wonderful and I'm glad it worked out like that.

An interesting finding in this theme is that adopted adolescents were more curious about meeting their siblings than their birthfathers. Meeting siblings might be considered less intimidating than meeting an adult, since siblings would be closer in age, have more in common, and could be viewed as a peer/friend. It could also be the case that siblings would have no negative preconceived notions, such as there might be with a birthfather. For example, an adopted adolescent may be afraid to meet his or her birthfather because of the perception that he may not have desired the child's birth—but siblings never would have been in a position to make that decision or voice that opinion.

In summary, adolescents who had contact with their birthmothers, and who were satisfied with that contact, took advantage of the opportunity to create relationships with their birthmothers, which provided feelings of extra support in their lives. Adolescents also felt that the contact contributed to their understanding of who they are. Finally, adolescents who were satisfied with the contacts they were having with their birthmothers wanted more contact and wanted to meet other birthfamily members.

Adolescents Who Were Not Satisfied with the Contact They Were Having with Their Birthmothers

There were 20 adolescents (7 male and 13 female) who were not satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers. Only three of the adolescents wanted the contact to stop. Two main themes were noted:

- desire for more contact or a different intensity level of contact, and
- gratitude toward their birthmothers.

Theme I: Desire for More Contact or a Different Intensity Level of Contact.

One of the reasons adolescents who had contact with their birthmothers were not satisfied with the contact they were having was because they desired to have more contact, or to have a different level of intensity of contact that they were not able to bring about. For instance, some adolescents who were having contact with their birthmothers by mail wished to meet them but were too young to do so (according to adoptive parents or state law). Another example was an adolescent who wished to go from mediated contact through the adoption agency to talking with his birthmother on the phone, but couldn't arrange this. Adolescents identified that there was a difference between sharing feelings and experiences, rather than just demographic information regarding employment and physical characteristics, and that they desired the former. One female related, "I want to have deep conversations with my birthmother about who she is."

Theme II: Gratitude Towards Birthmothers.

Adolescents who had contact with their birthmothers, but were not satisfied with the contact, related that they were "thankful" or "appreciated" what she had done for them. They believed that their birthmothers were acting selflessly by placing them with a family who could provide better for them. One male adolescent said, "I want to thank her for loving me so much that she gave me up." Another male adolescent expressed,

I hold no resentment towards her, I thank her, even though I don't know why she made the choice or, at all, I think it was the right choice, and I think it was more selfless, because I feel like she thought I could have a better life with, you know, in a different family.

In summary, adolescents who were not satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers had a desire for more openness in their adoption. They were unhappy with the current contact they were having with their birthmothers, because

they wanted to have more intensity, or depth, in the type of contact. The desire for a qualitatively different type of contact (in other words, more intensity) may differentiate these adolescents from the first group of adolescents who desired more contact as well. The adolescents in this second group also had deep gratitude toward their birthmothers. They were very grateful that their birthmothers had cared enough to find better lives for them and they viewed the decisions to give them up for adoption as acts of selfless love.

Adolescents Who Were Satisfied With Not Having Contact With Their Birthmothers

There were 21 adolescents (12 males and 9 females) who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers. Four themes were identified:

- low relevance of their adoption status,
- positive affect about their adoption,
- believing there was no need for contact with their birthmothers, and
- negatively evaluating what it might be like to have contact.

Theme I: Low Relevance of Adoption Status. Adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers didn't think that being adopted had much impact on them personally. For instance, one female adolescent stated, "It doesn't bother me that I'm adopted." An adolescent male commented, "I forget that I'm even adopted, I just don't think about it." Another male adolescent said, "It [adoption] doesn't affect my life, I mean I don't even think about me as an adopted person. It won't affect my career choice, my friends, you know, my future family or anything in my life like that."

Another reason why adolescents felt that their adoption status didn't really affect them was because it was not discussed in the family. For example, one male adolescent pointed out "We, I mean my family, never talk about the fact that I'm adopted,

it just doesn't come up, I'm just me." A female adolescent said,

I don't really tell my friends that I'm adopted, you know, and like, those that do know never ask me about it, you know. I don't really think, like, that it is so important to bring it up all the time, you know.

These adolescents seemed disconnected from their adoptions, as if adoption were a general, abstract concept and not connected to them personally.

Theme II: Positive Affect About Adoption. Adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers referred to feeling "blessed" and "fortunate" that they were adopted because they "have a better life." Although they viewed themselves as "lucky," they didn't necessarily connect this to any particular feelings of gratitude towards their birthmothers.

Along with positive feelings about their own adoption, these adolescents had positive feelings about adoption in general. For instance, many adolescents indicated that they would adopt a child later in life if the opportunity arose. One female stated, "I would adopt a child later in life for sure, it's a good thing, I think."

Theme III: Contact Not Necessary. Many of the adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers did not feel contact was necessary. One male adolescent commented, "I am fine with no exchange of information." A female adolescent stated, "Contact would be a distraction." Another adolescent female said, "I have no desire for contact." A male adolescent commented, "No contact equals no reminders." These quotes suggest that not only do some adolescents believe contact shouldn't happen, but also that they may be uncomfortable with having to face information about their adoption.

Theme IV: Negatively Evaluating What It Might Be Like to Have Contact. Many of the adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers believed that such

contact would be a negative experience. One negative evaluation adolescents pointed out was the potential effect that contact could have on them. Adolescents thought the contact may be "uncomfortable," "confusing," or "unnecessary." One male adolescent stated, "Birthmothers should not know the location of the children they give up ... the child is better off not knowing her ... it would feel funny, you know, to meet her." Another adolescent male believed, "Information exchange should not occur, it would confuse the kid." Another adolescent female said, "My birthparents should not even care about, or contact me. It could mess up my life."

Another negative evaluation adolescents identified was connected to how adolescents thought contact would affect their adoptive parents. A female adolescent shared, "My parents [adoptive parents] would be hurt, you know, if I tried to search for my biological mother." A male adolescent said, "I worry how my adoptive parents would feel, you know, like I'm betraying them or something." Adolescents felt a need to protect their adoptive parents from any hurt that having contact with their birthmothers might cause.

In summary, adolescents who were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmothers viewed adoption as a blessing and thought they were better off in their current situation. They also felt their adoption status had no effect on who they were or who they would become. These adolescents also believed that it was not necessary for adopted children to have contact with their birthmothers; and if they did, it could be a negative experience for themselves and their adoptive parents.

Adopted Adolescents Who Were Not Satisfied Because There Was No Contact Occurring with Their Birthmothers

There were 26 adolescents (10 males and 16 females) who were not satisfied because there was no contact with their birthmothers. Four main themes were identified:

- negative affect towards their birthmothers,

- desire for more contact and identity information,
- problematic experiences with attempts to contact their birthmothers, and
- negatively evaluating how their adoptive parents and birthmothers would feel about contact.

Theme I: Negative Affect Towards Birthmothers. Having negative feelings toward their birthmothers was a prominent theme among adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers. Adolescents used words such as: “angry,” “sad,” “hurt,” and “disappointed” in describing their feelings towards their birthmothers. These words were usually also connected to the phrase “She has not tried to contact me.” In other words, the adolescents had negative feelings towards their birthmothers because there had been no efforts to find them. One female adolescent expressed,

I worry why my birthmother has never ever tried to find me. It kinda hurts me and I hope, you know, that my birthmother will search for me someday. I sometimes wonder if my birthmother is healthy or alive even.

Another female adolescent shared, “I really wish my birthmother would have, you know, kept in contact with me even just, like, holidays or something ... it’s kinda disappointing.”

Theme II: Desire for Contact and Identity Information. Adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers stated that they “hoped,” “wished,” and “desired” to have such contact. One adolescent male said, “I want to know where my birthmother is, what she looks like, and if I am anything like her.” Another adolescent male stated, “I hope my birthmother will search for me, I want her to know what I look like.” A female adolescent expressed, “I want to meet my birthmother and have a normal relationship with her.” Another female adolescent stated,

I'm curious, to ask my birthmother about, like, if she still cares or thinks about me ... or is interested in what, like, the things I am doing. That's one of the main reasons I want to meet her, I guess.

Many of the adolescents mentioned wanting medical information, as well as wanting to know similarities—both in physique and personality—that they had with their birthmothers. They felt that this information would help them feel “more complete” and answer those “unanswered questions” they have about why they were placed, why they look the way they do, why they act the way they do, and if their birthmothers still care about them.

Theme III: Problematic Experiences with Attempts to Contact Birthmothers. Many of the adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers had attempted to make contact but had problematic experiences. Some had written letters and then decided not to send them, and others had written letters to the adoption agency to send on to their birthmothers and never heard anything back. Others had asked their adoptive parents if they could search for their birthmothers, and their adoptive parents had not given them permission to do so. An adolescent male shared,

I wrote her a letter once, put it in my drawer, got it out later and read it and, you know, I thought it sounded so dumb so I put it back in the drawer. Then the other day I found it and I think I might want to try to send it to her again.

Theme IV: Negative Evaluation of Adoptive Parents' and Birthmothers' Feelings. The majority of the adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers had specific ideas about how they thought their birthmothers and/or adoptive parents would feel about them having such contact. One female adolescent shared, “I'm not sure how my birthmother feels about meeting me.” Another adolescent female

said, "I worry it would hurt my parents if I wanted to meet her [birthmother]." A male adolescent stated, "My birthmother probably won't search for me because we haven't ever had contact with her and she might think I'm not interested." Another adolescent male expressed,

I worry that she won't want to meet me, because I really want to meet her, and I am worried that if I meet her, she might, you know, it might not be important to her, or something like that.

In summary, adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers had negative feelings, because they were aware of no efforts made by their birthmothers to search for them. Although adolescents were rather negative in their feelings towards their birthmothers, they nonetheless still had a desire to have contact with them; many had made efforts but were not successful. In thinking about having contact with their birthmothers, adolescents negatively evaluated how their adopted parents and/or their birthmothers might respond to their desire to have contact.

Limitations

One of the limitations of this study is that it cannot be generalized to all types of adoptions, such as special needs adoptions. All of the adolescents interviewed for this study were adopted as healthy infants; thus, the findings are specific to that population. Another limitation of this study relates to the qualitative thematic analysis. For a pattern in the data to be identified as a theme in this study, the majority of the adopted adolescents had to mention it; however, themes were not otherwise organized by frequency of occurrence. For quantitative ratings of adolescents' satisfaction with contact with their birthmothers, see Mendenhall et al. (2004). A final limitation, candor of the respondents, is an inherent vulnerability in all interview studies. Care was taken to make the interview setting as comfortable and confidential as possible.

Discussion and Implications

This qualitative study was designed to understand the lived experience of adopted adolescents in regard to their satisfaction with the openness in their adoption arrangement with their birthmothers. Because the results of this study come directly from the voices of adopted adolescents, they are particularly significant and can be beneficial to adoption agencies, whose goal is to attend to the welfare of the children.

This study helps to debunk two common myths that adoption workers encounter. First, these results challenge the concern that searching for birthparents will make the adopted child love their adoptive parents less. The two groups of adolescents that had contact with their birthmothers related experiences completely opposite to this view. Many of the adolescents mentioned that the relationships they had with their birthmothers were different than parental; the relationships were more like friendships. Most adolescents appreciated having more support people in their lives. When asked about what he felt about his birthmother one male adolescent eloquently said, "Mainly a friend, I guess, I mean she doesn't have like a parental role, because I already have that. She's mainly just another person who loves me." When adolescents had contact with their birthmothers, those relationships did not replace their adoptive parents, or cause them to love them less; rather, they viewed their relationships with their birthmothers as a separate type of supportive relationship.

Second, these results challenge the belief that when there is contact, the birthmothers will try to reclaim the adopted children. The two groups of adolescents who had contact with their birthmothers did not identify this as a difficulty they experienced. In fact, none of the adolescents stated that their birthmothers had ever tried to, or made mention of trying to, reclaim them.

The four different groups of adopted adolescents provide information that can be helpful to adoption agencies. First, the adolescents who were satisfied with the contact they were having

with their birthmothers indicated that having contact with their birthmothers

- provided an opportunity for relationships to emerge, which in turn provided feelings of extra support in their lives,
- felt that the contact contributed to their understanding of who they are, and
- made them want more contact with their birthmothers and want to meet other birthfamily members.

The development of identity for an adopted child is a benefit of open adoption that has been cited in previous research (Berry et al., 1998; Logan, 1999; McRoy & Grotevant, 1991; McRoy et al., 1994; Ryburn, 1995; Sykes, 2000; Wrobel et al., 1996), but the other two findings that the adolescents identified—having a relationship with their birthmothers that provided added support to their lives and the desire for more contact and to meet other birthfamily members—have not been previously identified in the research. These two added benefits of having openness in adoption can help to further the acceptance of openness as an option, because they suggest that adolescents could receive even more support than they were already experiencing with their adoptive families. This added support during adolescence can be especially significant. This information would be important for adoption agencies to share with adoptive parents and birthmothers when they are considering the type of openness arrangement they will have in their adoptions.

Adolescents who were not satisfied with the contact they were having with their birthmothers wanted more openness than they were currently experiencing. They described this as a qualitatively different type of contact, with more depth or intensity. For instance, they not only wanted to see their birthmothers more often, but also wanted these contacts to be meaningful, such as deeper conversations. This finding indicates that the adolescents had begun to taste what it was like to have contact with their birthmothers, and because it wasn't as often or fulfilling as they would have liked, they experienced the contact as unsatisfactory. These

adolescents also stated that they had deep gratitude toward their birthmothers and that they were very grateful that their birthmothers had been "selfless" enough to find better lives for them. These two findings together suggest that adopted adolescents can embrace the dialectic. Adolescents can be happy and content with their adoptive families, and also have positive feelings for their birthmothers. They can desire to be closer, by having more contact with their birthmothers, without having to choose one arrangement over the other. This is helpful information for adoption agencies because they can present openness as an option that is not threatening for the adoptive parents. This finding has also been supported in previous literature (Belbas, 1987; Berry, 1991b; Chapman et al., 1986; Chapman et al., 1987; Gross, 1993; Grotevant et al., 1994; McRoy, Grotevant & White, 1988).

The adolescents who were not satisfied because there was no contact occurring with their birthmothers had negative feelings towards their birthmothers—because they perceived that the mother had made no effort to contact them so far. These adolescents had a desire to have contact with their birthmothers and many had made unsuccessful attempts to have contact. The adolescents attributed some of these unsuccessful efforts to their adoption agencies for not sending their letters on to their birthmothers. In these cases, adoption agencies could be helpful by assisting the process of contacting the birthmothers. Likewise, adoption agencies could offer postadoption services, in the event that issues surrounding openness arise. Another finding from this group of adolescents was that they negatively evaluated how their adoptive parents and/or their birthmothers might respond to their desires to have contact. These situations could present a role for adoption agencies. For instance, an adoption worker could facilitate the process by helping the adoptive parents and adopted child talk about their feelings concerning contacting their birthmothers.

One similar finding across the three groups of adolescents reviewed above was the adolescents' desire to have contact, or more contact, with their birthmothers. This finding supports earlier

research that shows a trend toward openness in adoption agencies and independent adoptions (Henney et al., 2003). Henney et al. (2003) found that openness has become the preference of most adoption agencies and of pregnant women seeking adoption placement since 1987. This is meaningful information for adoption agencies because it indicates that not only are birthmothers seeking agencies that offer openness arrangements, but also the children who will be adopted desire to have openness in their adoption arrangements.

Adolescents in the fourth group were satisfied with not having contact with their birthmother. They felt their adoption status had no effect on who they were or who they would become. They saw adoption as a blessing and thought they were better off as they were. These adolescents also believed that it was not necessary for adopted children to have contact with their birthmothers, and if they did, it could be a negative experience. This information is helpful for adoption agencies because it suggests that there are some adolescents who are happy without having contact with their birthmother. In this era of greater openness in adoption, the desire not to have contact should not be viewed as problematic by agency workers (Wrobel, Grotevant & McRoy, 2004). This is a legitimate feeling and indicates that openness is not necessarily indicated for every adoption arrangement at all times.

Summary Recommendations

In summary, the findings of this study highlight the diverse nature of the needs that adopted adolescents have, in relation to openness in their adoption arrangements. First, adolescents desired and benefited from having openness in their adoption arrangements. Also, the majority of adopted adolescents desired more contact with their birthmothers and other birthfamily members. This information is essential because it shows that for these adolescents, having contact with their birthmothers was not harmful. Thus, openness is valuable in adoption arrangements when it is

desired, and in fact, it can be a cause of distress if it is desired but not obtained. A second important finding is that openness is not desired by all adopted adolescents and that some were happy with their lives without it. The diversity among the needs and desires of adoptive families and birthfamilies supports our earlier conclusion that "no single adoption arrangement is best for everyone" (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998, p. 197). Additional policy and practice recommendations are discussed in Grotevant, Perry, and McRoy (2005).

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