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OPEN ADOPTION

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Since the 1970s and 80s, there has been a major shift in how adoption is viewed and practiced. Prior to that time, adoption was seen as a way to build a family by effectively subtracting a child from one family and adding that child to another, with the child losing membership in his or her family of birth and gaining membership in a new adoptive family. Identifying information was not shared among birth and adoptive family members about each other, and contact between them was prevented through policies that sealed adoption records and altered birth certificates.

Over the succeeding decades, conceptualizations and practices have changed dramatically. Now, adoption is viewed as the creation of an adoptive kinship network, in which adopted children connect their families of birth and adoption (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Reitz & Watson, 1992). The psychological connections in this network are viewed as real, and personal contact can be facilitated by the sharing of identifying information between adoptive and birth family members. Although official statistics on this topic are not kept, a relatively recent nationally representative sample of US adoptive parents revealed that approximately two-thirds of children adopted through private agency domestic adoptions in the US maintain some form of contact with birth relatives (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). Open adoptions are increasing because growing numbers of adoptive parents and professionals in the field feel that it is in the best interests of the child to have contact (Siegel & Smith, 2012). In contrast, closed adoptions are becoming increasingly difficult to maintain, due to the ability to search for relatives through the internet (Whitesel & Howard, 2013) and the ability to find relatives through genetic testing services that are publicly available (Rosenbaum, 2018). For detailed discussions about the history of open adoption, see Carp (1998), Grotevant and McRoy (1998), and Siegel and Smith (2012).

This chapter reviews the growing body of knowledge about open adoption, differentiating among experiences in the three major forms of adoption in the United States: domestic private adoptions, adoptions from the child welfare system, and international adoptions. Both family dynamics and child outcomes will be addressed. Because important national and cultural differences exist in adoption policies and practices, the main focus of the chapter will be experiences within the United States. However, relevant literature from

other countries with similar practices, especially in Western Europe, Australia, and New Zealand, will be included where relevant.

For this chapter, open adoption is defined as any kind of contact that occurs between birth and adoptive family members. Open adoptions can vary in terms of type of contact. Direct contact includes the sharing of identifying information and thus can include exchange of letters, photos, gifts, and face-to-face meetings, as well as technology-mediated contact that involves e-mail, texting, Skype, and social media. Indirect contact (sometimes referred to as mediated or letterbox) involves exchange of information through a go-between, typically the adoption agency, which removes identifying information before transmitting the communication. Open adoptions can also involve different people: sometimes contact is just between the child's birth mother and adoptive parent(s); typically (but not always) it includes the child; and sometimes it includes many members of the birth and adoptive family networks. Open adoptions also differ in frequency and intensity of contact. Adding complexity to the picture, openness is dynamic and changes across time as individuals, relationships, and circumstances change (Grotevant, Wrobel, Fiorenzo, Lo, & McRoy, 2019).

Domestic infant adoptions

Family dynamics

The Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP: Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013) has followed 190 adoptive families and 169 birth mothers over four waves of measurement spanning 30 years. Illustrating the diversity in dynamics of contemporary domestic adoptions, four major trajectories of contact were observed: one group consistently had no contact between birth and adoptive family members from placement into adulthood; a second group had contact that stopped at some point in time; a third group had ongoing contact, but it was limited in the extent and/or frequency of contact; and the fourth had ongoing contact among an extensive number of adoptive and birth family members (Grotevant et al., 2019). The research team is planning to conduct more detailed analyses of factors contributing to these varying patterns as well as differential outcomes for adopted persons as a function of trajectory group membership.

Since the families in MTARP were pioneers in open adoption relationships, most agreements about contact were developed and maintained informally among the adults. In more recent years, agencies have promoted the use of written post-adoption contact agreements (PACAs) in order to make mutual expectations clear (e.g., Allisan, 2019). Legal requirements around PACAs vary from state to state, and in some states, PACAs are legally enforceable (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2014). Research is needed to examine short- and long-term consequences of PACAs. PACAs are now routinely used in open adoptions in the Australian state of New South Wales, discussed in the section on domestic adoptions from the child welfare system.

Interviews with study participants over time have revealed that openness trajectories emerge as a function of interpersonal processes among the participants, especially emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009). In cases where birth and adoptive family members develop trusting relationships based on empathy as well as commitment to the child's dual connection to both families, contact is likely to increase and flourish. When, for a variety of reasons, that trusting relationship has not developed or has been compromised, it is more likely that contact will decrease and might even stop.

Mutually satisfying relationships depend on the participants' communication skills, ability to maintain boundaries, flexibility in day-to-day interaction, and commitment to the relationships (Grotevant, 2009). Because of the highly personalized nature of maintaining such relationships, most existing studies have shown that the degree of contact can fluctuate somewhat over time. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the skills used in maintaining open relationships can be learned, and that contact can be supported through informal, psychoeducational, and therapeutic means (Grotevant et al., 2013).

As adopted children grow up they typically take on more responsibility for determining the pattern of birth family contact (Dunbar et al., 2006); however, their relationships with their adoptive parents continue to be important. During emerging adulthood (late teens through 20s), adoptees in the MTARP study were more satisfied with their openness arrangements when their communication with their adoptive parents was also open and sensitive (Farr, Grant-Marsney, & Grotevant, 2014).

Contact after adoption has also played an important role in adoptions to lesbian and gay couples. In Farr's (2017) longitudinal study with young children adopted through private agencies, having contact has been the norm rather than the exception (Farr, Ravvina, & Grotevant, 2018). The status of contact did not differ by family type (lesbian, gay, heterosexual) when the children were in middle childhood, and most parents were satisfied with the contact they were having (Farr et al., 2018).

Longitudinal research is beginning to reveal dynamics of intergenerational relationships followed over time. Battalen, Sellers, McRoy, and Grotevant (2019) reported that, when birth mothers have contact with the children they placed for adoption who are now adults, and their birth grandchildren, they report the interactions as positive and adding joy to their lives, even if the contact is limited by distance and time. However, the lack of clear societal expectations for this new role (birth grandmother) means that family members need to develop ways of making their relationships work. Nevertheless, there seem to be considerable potential benefits to continued contact for the adopted adults, their children, and birth grandparents.

Outcomes for adoptive kinship network members

A major question for guiding practice and policy is how contact affects those participating in it. In the early days of open adoptions, concerns were expressed that it would be confusing for children, which could lead to identity problems and adjustment difficulties; it would harm adoptive parents' sense of entitlement to serve as the child's full parents; and it would exacerbate grief felt by birth parents (e.g., Kraft et al., 1985). None of these fears have been borne out in the research literature; however, the effects of contact have not been straightforward to describe, because "contact" can be experienced and evaluated in different ways by its participants.

Contact with the child's birth parent(s) certainly provides a source for communication of potentially important information about family health history, which is otherwise unknown in closed adoptions (see May, Lee, & Evans, 2018 for examples and discussion). It also provides children with a reality-based understanding of who their birth parents are (e.g., Siegel, 2012) and an avenue for obtaining answers to the many questions they might have as they are growing up. Wrobel and Dillon (2009) found that adolescents most wanted to gain an adult understanding of why they were placed for adoption. In contrast, emerging adults, who were beginning to enter into committed relationships and think about starting their own families, most wanted to understand their genetic and family health histories (Wrobel & Grotevant, 2019).

Birth relative contact per se was not directly associated with variations in adjustment outcomes for adolescent or young adult adoptees (e.g., Ge et al., 2008; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). However, family members' satisfaction with their openness arrangements was associated with adjustment. Those who were more satisfied with their contact arrangements showed better adjustment outcomes (Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzalez, 2011). The effect of contact on adoptive identity development in adolescence and emerging adulthood was mediated by the presence of adoption–related conversation within the adoptive family. Families experiencing contact talked about birth relatives' roles in the family and their involvement in daily life, stimulating thinking about the meaning of adoption and the construction of adoptive identity. In closed adoptions, little or no new information was available for discussion, and the construction of adoptive identity seemed less dynamic (Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011).

Adoptive parents also make meaning of their relationships in the adoptive kinship network, and those attitudes and values shape and are shaped by their contact. For example, at Wave 1 in MTARP (when the children were 8 years of age, on average), adoptive parents' fear that the birth mother might try to reclaim her child varied significantly as a function of contact. The highest rating of fear (coded from both adoptive mothers' and fathers' interviews) was found among those who had no contact and no identifying information about their child's birth parents; the fear was based on stereotypes about birth parents in general, which were often fueled by negative media portrayals of birth parents who wanted their children back. The least fear was found among adoptive parents who had ongoing direct contact with their child's birth mother; in many cases, the birth and adoptive parents had spoken directly about this issue, and birth parents assured them that they would not attempt to reclaim their child (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994). When their children were adolescents, adoptive parents with contact were also more satisfied with their contact arrangements than were those with no contact (Grotevant et al., 2011).

Findings from MTARP also contradicted assumptions that birth mothers with contact would experience high levels of unresolved grief, preventing them from moving on with their lives. Interviews with birth mothers, both when their placed children were in middle childhood and in adolescence, revealed that those in fully disclosed adoptions had the lowest levels of unresolved grief, whereas those in confidential adoptions or those in which contact had stopped had the highest levels (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, 1997; Henney, Ayers–Lopez, Mack, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007). MTARP findings also contradicted the assumption that birth mothers would not welcome contact from the children they placed for adoption. Among birth mothers who thought their adolescent child would search for them if they lost contact, 80 percent of them felt positively about being contacted, 5 percent felt neutral, 15 percent felt ambivalent, and none of them felt negatively about a search the child might initiate (Ayers–Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2008).

Domestic adoptions from the child welfare system

When children are removed from their homes and placed in foster care, one of the key goals of the child welfare system is family reunification; thus, contact with birth family is an important aspect of the foster care experience. In these cases, when contact with birth parents can be arranged that assures the safety of the child, it can be beneficial in terms of psychological adjustment (McWey & Cui, 2017). However, when efforts at reunification are ended and parental rights are terminated, the child can be placed for adoption.

Even following of termination of parental rights and subsequent adoption, contact in the case of adoptions from the public child welfare system is becoming more common (Neil, Beek, & Ward, 2015). In contrast to the case of private domestic adoptions where placements typically occurred in infancy, the average age of children adopted with public agency involvement in the US is 6.3 years (USDHHS, 2018). Most children are adopted by a foster parent (51 percent) or relative (35 percent); only 14 percent by a non-relative. During the years prior to adoption, the child might have experienced maltreatment by parents (neglect and parental drug abuse are the most common reasons for child removal; USDHHS, 2018) and may have experienced one or more placements in foster homes. Thus, determinations about whether contact is in the child's best interest must take into consideration the child's safety in order to prevent retraumatization; it must also consider birth parents' capacity to participate in helpful ways.

Until fairly recently, it was thought that the child's best interests would not be served by maintaining contact with birth relatives. However, despite termination of birth parents' rights, many children desire contact with family members, including parents, grandparents, siblings, and extended family. A key question for future research is how the child's safety and well-being can be assured while permitting continued contact.

In the United Kingdom, domestic infant adoptions and international adoptions are rare; most adoptions are through the public care system. Most children are adopted from care under the age of five. When contact occurs, it might occur through the exchange of letters ("letterbox contact" through the agency), through meetings with biological siblings from whom they have been separated, or (for less than 20 percent) through meetings with biological parents or grandparents (Neil, 2019).

Neil's longitudinal research has concluded that "staying in touch with birth relatives can be positive for adopted children when arrangements carry minimal conflict and where the child's place in their adoptive and birth family are both respected" (Neil, 2019, p. 1). Three considerations are particularly important for child welfare professionals working with these families: making individualized decisions rather than "one size fits all" policies, considering the quality of the contact, and offering support when needed (Neil, 2019).

Although face-to-face contact is less common in the UK than is letterbox contact through the agency, direct contact appears to be more lasting and satisfying (Neil et al., 2015). Some study participants felt that letters did not convey a real sense of the individual, making it more difficult to feel a sense of real connection. A significant advantage of having direct contact is that children have a better understanding of their families of origin and reasons for placement; this helps them feel more at ease with their adoption story as a result (Neil et al., 2015). However, "how the adults think about and manage contact is vital to the child's experience" (Neil, 2019, p. 3). Contact seemed to work better when the adoptive mother displayed high levels of communicative openness and when the child's birth relatives accepted the finality of the placement. Relationships were more difficult when the birth relatives were unable to come to terms with the permanence of the placement (Neil, 2009).

In the Australian state of New South Wales (NSW), children in foster care can only be adopted by their foster parents, and arrangements permitting face-to-face contact are required by law (del Pozo de Bolger, Dunstan, & Kaltner, 2018). A legally enforceable post-adoption contact plan is agreed upon by the parties in advance of the adoption and must be approved by the court. The most frequent types of contact are with biological siblings, grandparents, and mothers (del Pozo de Bolger, Dunstan, & Kaltner, 2017). A three-fold benefit for adopted children was envisioned in promoting contact: reassurance (for the child, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents), identity, and continuity (Wright, 2018).

Early reports from research in progress in NSW suggests that open arrangements can be positive if it is safe for the child. However, beyond safety, a positive experience requires that all participating adults are able to acknowledge the child's connections to two families, maintain appropriate boundaries, communicate effectively, and demonstrate mutual respect (del Pozo de Bolger et al., 2018). These conclusions are consistent with results of other studies of open adoption, including Grotevant et al. (2013), Neil (2009), and Siegel (2012).

Evidence is also beginning to accrue about outcomes of open adoptions from care in NSW for adolescents and young adults who were adopted before the age of five. A qualitative study reporting on identity development in nine adoptees (age 9–23) revealed that the continuity created through foster parents adopting contributed to adoptees' sense of belonging with their adoptive family (Luu, de Rosnay, Wright, & Tregeagle, 2018). The young people reported that contact with birth relatives allowed them to understand their birth parents and their histories; they uniformly spoke about the importance of being in contact with their biological siblings. As was noted earlier in the MTARP study, frequency and type of contact changed over time.

Interviews with the adoptees also underscored the important role that adoptive parents play in supporting their quest for knowledge about and contact with birth relatives. Interviews also suggested that communicative openness (openness to discussion about adoption within the adoptive family) could even be more important than contact, but further research is needed about whether communicative openness and direct contact play distinctive or coordinated roles. Consistent with results from MTARP, communicative openness within the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2006) was viewed as supporting adoptive identity development (Luu et al., 2018; see also Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011).

A recent review of 11 studies of children adopted from care in the UK concluded that where contact occurred, child outcomes depended on certain moderating variables. Outcomes of contact were positive when there was a collaborative relationship between the birth and adoptive parents, and were poorest when children had contact with birth parents who had maltreated them (Boyle, 2017). It is clear that contact has the potential to be positive for children. However, further research is needed to clarify the conditions under which contact can be beneficial and the support that might be needed for families who have contact.

International adoptions

Because contact in international adoptions is still quite rare, much less empirical evidence is available to evaluate its impact. We do know, however, that contact between adoptive and birth family members in international adoptions is more difficult than in domestic adoptions, but increasing (e.g., Baden, 2013).

For some children, accurate identification of their birth parents is difficult or impossible to obtain. Despite the safeguards put in place through legislation implementing the Hague Convention on Intercountry Adoption, birth records might be missing entirely (e.g., in the case of abandoned children) or might have been falsified at some stage in the process to obscure evidence of child laundering (Smolin, 2010).

Cultural differences in people's basic understanding of the meaning of adoption can also work against contact. Roby's work in the Marshall Islands (Roby & Matsumura, 2002) revealed that birth mothers, despite what they might have read or been told, assumed that their children would return to them and their community once they were adults. In this communal culture, the western idea of termination of parental rights is difficult to

comprehend, since they consider a child always to be a part of his or her family, even if all the family members do not live together. Likewise, detailed accounts of interactions between Finnish adoptive mothers and South African birth mothers portrayed the complex dynamics within the child's adoptive kinship network, exacerbated by cultural differences in understanding of adoption (Högbacka, 2016). Thus, incompatible views of the permanence of adoption can make establishment of post-adoption contact quite problematic.

In addition, in some cultures, pregnancy outside of marriage or the placement of a child for adoption might bring stigma to the birth mother and shame to her family (e.g., Rotabi & Gibbons, 2012). Thus, placements are often hidden, even from close family members (e.g., Docan–Morgan, 2016). Contact with her birth child would unmask her secret, possibly exposing her to social stigma or even danger.

Even if birth parents are willing to have contact, some adoptive parents might have opted for international rather than domestic adoption so that they would not need to deal with the possibility of contact (Baden, 2013). Their decisions might have been rooted in views predominating in the 1960s and 1970s, holding that contact would be harmful for adopted children, adoptive parents, and birth parents alike (Kraft et al., 1985).

Finally, contact in international adoption involves logistical challenges, including possible language barriers between birth and adoptive family members, long distances, and travel difficulties. Large economic disparities between birth and adoptive parents can also complicate social interaction (Högbacka, 2016).

New Zealand provides a useful context for studying open international adoptions, because, in general, the country is quite accepting of the concept of contact in domestic adoptions. Scherman and Hawke (2010) studied 73 New Zealand families who had adopted internationally, mostly from Russia and Romania. Approximately one-half of the families had attempted contact, and half of those had succeeded. Positive outcomes for the child included having more and accurate information about birth family members and establishing personal relationships that can continue into the future. Difficult aspects were distance, pain of separation, additional unanswered questions, and seeing birth relatives living in poverty. Despite the complexities of contact, a number of adoptive parents viewed making early contact as important, so that birth family information does not "dry up" or become impossible to obtain.

Although ongoing contact from an early age is still rare, the recent Modern Adoptive Families project (MAF: Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2017) examined contact in international adoptions for children adopted by heterosexual (N=479) and female sexual minority (N=38) parents in the United States. Although the children's birth countries were quite varied, contact was more likely to occur when the child came from Africa (especially Ethiopia) than from other regions. Sexual minority parents were more likely to have had contact than heterosexual parents, but most contact was indirect and occurred once a year or less. Most parents reported a neutral to positive relationship with birth family members. Among families with no contact, most were unsure about whether they would seek it in the future, with about one-third indicating that they would and less than 25 percent indicating that they would not. The results from MAF were consistent with those of Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, and Downing (2011), who noted that lesbian and gay parents in general had positive attitudes toward open adoption, consistent with their beliefs about openness concerning their sexual orientation (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2017).

In addition to increasing rates of contact during the childhood years, there are increasing numbers of international reunions with birth families that occur after the adopted person reaches adulthood. In one interview study of Korean adoptees post-reunion, participants

noted a number of cultural differences: family roles and expectations, standards for beauty and femininity, expectations for social interactions, and past and present circumstances, including secrecy about the adoption (Docan-Morgan, 2016). The 19 participants had strikingly varied reactions to these differences, with some feeling a deep sense of belonging in birth family and culture and others feeling estranged. Further research is needed to identify circumstances that would best facilitate positive contact, both during the adopted person's early years and as an adult experiencing reunion.

The number of children being adopted internationally worldwide has been decreasing for over a decade. It is possible that international adoption rates will continue to fall, or that the practice might cease (Baden, 2019). Nevertheless, Selman (2009) has noted that between the end of World War II and 2010, approximately one million children had been adopted across national boundaries worldwide. Many of the impediments to contact that had been cited in the past are being circumvented by widespread use of the internet and genetic testing services (Rosenbaum, 2018; Whitesel & Howard, 2013). Thus, research on contact in intercountry adoptions will continue to be important as these children come of age.

Conclusions

Taken together, what can we conclude from the small, but rapidly growing body of evidence about open adoption? The following conclusions apply equally to domestic infant, child welfare, and international adoptions; however, each type of adoption carries its own unique set of issues which must also be taken into account, as reviewed in the previous sections.

1 Open adoption is not inherently harmful to adopted children, adoptive parents, or birth parents.
2 Open adoption can provide a very positive set of relationships and experiences for adopted children, adoptive parents, and birth parents.
3 Open adoption implies a fundamental expansion in one's concept of family, from a smaller, traditional nuclear family to a broader adoptive kinship network.
4 Open adoption requires understanding that individuals and relationships change over time, and that families change as members are added and depart. Thus, open adoptions are dynamic and complex, and change over time should be expected.
5 In order for open adoption to work, several things must occur:

   a The safety and well-being of the adopted child must be paramount. If these criteria are not given precedence, direct contact can be counter-productive.
   b As children grow, their wishes and thoughts about contact might change and should be taken into account by adults.
   c The relevant adults – the birth parents and the adoptive parents – must be committed to entering into this family situation and making it work over time by communicating openly and keeping agreements.
   d Their commitment means honest engagement, undergirded by empathy for one another, effective communication, and flexibility in day-to-day interaction.
   e Family members should be resourceful and open to seeking help when needed, with the realization that, at the present time, open adoption is neither universally understood nor accepted.

Recommendations for practice and policy

Several recommendations for practice and policy follow from the set of conclusions listed above.

1   Adoption intermediaries who are arranging placements or counseling birth or adoptive family members before or after placement must develop competence in understanding the dynamic nature of open adoptions. This should be a key component of any training for adoption competence for social workers or mental health professionals.
2   Adoption professionals should have deep understanding of typical and abnormal child and adolescent development, and in particular, children's growing understanding of adoption and complex families.
3   Agencies must find ways to provide support and services to birth and adoptive families in an ongoing way, realizing that counsel might be needed at unanticipated times. Cost of services should not be a barrier to access.
4   Agencies must ensure that full and complete information about medical and health histories are collected from birth parents and shared with the adoptive family.
5   One size does not fit all. Each adoptive kinship network is unique in some ways, and the uniqueness of the family composition and dynamics must be taken into account in guiding practice and policy.

Recommendations for future research

The following recommendations for future research follow from the literature reviewed above:

1   Additional longitudinal, culturally sensitive research is needed on open adoptions for a variety of situations: domestic infant placements, child welfare adoptions, international adoptions, adoptions by sexual minority parents, and adoptions by single persons. Inclusion of large-scale quantitative, in-depth qualitative, and mixed-methods approaches will contribute to a more thorough understanding of open adoptions.
2   Research is essential to identifying best practices for use of PACAs. That research should become the foundation upon which practice and policy recommendations about PACAs are made.
3   Research should address sibling relationships more comprehensively, with acceptance of the reality that adopted siblings growing up together will likely have different types of contact with birth relatives and that the presence of parents' biological child(ren) could complicate family dynamics.
4   Researchers who are adopted persons or birth parents should be encouraged to contribute to this growing literature, and the growing number of memoirs and videos produced by adopted persons and birth parents should inform the research literature.
5   Further research is needed into the role of social media and new technologies in open adoptions.
6   In regard to international adoptions, the United States is both a country of destination and a country of origin ("outgoing" international adoption). Many outgoing international adoptions involve contact between birth and adoptive family members, but research on these adoptive kinship networks is needed.

7   Researchers interested in openness in adoption should inform their work by studying other family forms across cultures in which children grow up with multiple adults who take on different biological and social roles in their lives, including customary and indigenous models of adoption, child circulation, guardianship, long-term foster care, and contact in the case of families created through assisted reproductive technologies.

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