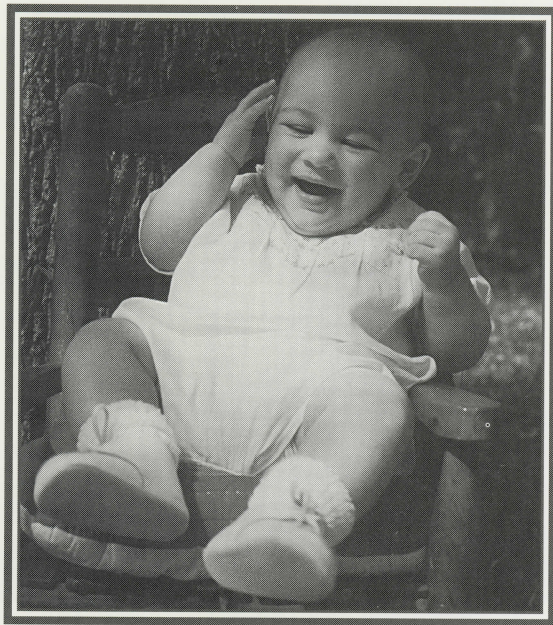
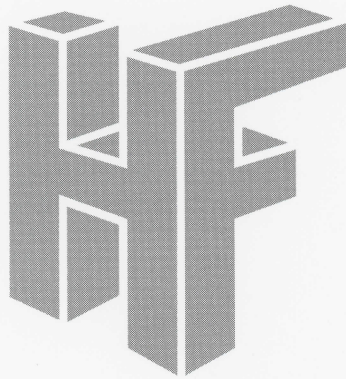


CHANGING PRACTICES IN ADOPTION





More information on "Changing Practices in Adoptions" will be available in a forthcoming book by Harold D. Grotevant and Ruth G. McRoy, *Open Adoption: Researching the Adoption Controversies*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. In press.

CHANGING PRACTICES IN ADOPTION

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FOREWORD

If you have scanned any of the prime-time news magazine telecasts in the last couple of years, you will have likely noted that adoption, for all its long and relatively conservative history, is now a "hot" topic. A number of societal factors have recently converged to give this institutional option a new and significant presence in the lives of U.S. families.

- Increasing infertility difficulties for couples are making adoption a highly sought option for family building.
- An entire industry has arisen around the efforts that both adult, adopted children and birthmothers are making in order to learn about this first life-giving connection.
- More and more of today's birthmothers who have opted for adoption are questioning their loss of the relationship with the children to whom they gave birth.

With all of these new issues, including court rulings that take into account the rights of birthfathers and the increasing desire of birthmothers to maintain contact with birthchildren, very important questions have arisen around the issue of openness in adoption. Professors McRoy and Grotevant, with incredible foresight toward this growing dilemma, approached the Hogg Foundation in 1990 and received support for a research project to examine the issue of openness versus confidentiality in adoption agency practices. Their unique study takes into account the perspective of the adoption agencies, the adoptive parents, and the birthmothers. And while there are certainly no firm answers to the important questions they raise, their work has significantly increased the knowledge base upon which we can draw when confronted with these major decisions affecting the lives of children.

Marion Tolbert Coleman
Hogg Foundation

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT OF ADOPTION

When someone uses the word “adoption,” what does it mean? Perhaps it refers to the infant born to a single mother and placed through a private adoption agency with an infertile couple or to a family with two children by birth who just adopted an orphan from Romania. It might suggest a newly formed stepfamily in which the husband formally adopts his wife’s child from her earlier marriage. Or perhaps it connotes the brother and sister who were removed from an abusive family, placed with a single foster parent, and later adopted by him. All of these are families formed by adoption.

Despite the diversity of these examples, they have in common the fact that a biological parent-child relationship was legally terminated and another parent-child relationship was begun through a legal process. In many cultures around the world and across historical time, however, alternative arrangements for parenting were made openly and informally within a child’s extended kinship network. Today, sweeping changes in adoption practices are taking place in the United States and other western countries. The movement is generally away from confidentiality and secrecy toward more “openness” in adoption, in which either mediated or direct contact occurs between the child’s families by birth and by adoption.

Why such changes? First, the practice of confidentiality in adoption was based on several assumptions: that birthmothers, once tainted by the stigma of illegitimacy, would willingly “relinquish” their children in order to “get on with their lives;” that adoptive parents who were infertile would be able to build a family through adoption just as if they had “their own children;” and that adopted children would be integrated into the new families with minimal difficulty and live happily ever after as if they were biological children of these parents. But these assumptions are not accurate. Birthmothers don’t forget that they gave birth. In fact, many of them spend the rest of their lives wondering how their children are doing. Adoptive parents can’t pretend that a child is their own by birth, especially if they look different or have different interests or talents. And adopted children cannot pretend they had no history before the adoption. Where are their roots? What piece of their identity puzzle is missing? Whom do they look like or talk

like? And why shouldn't they know their biological roots?

Second, the pool of babies available for adoption has shrunk because of the availability of abortion and the decreased stigma associated with single parenting. Thus, adoption agencies have had fewer babies to place.

Third, growing numbers of adopted persons are returning to the agencies that placed them years before to seek information about their birthfamilies. Birthparents have been more keenly aware of the possibility of having at least some knowledge of their children's well-being as they are growing up, and they are sometimes forming search groups in order to establish links with the children they placed through confidential procedures. Adoptive parents are contacting agencies to get information about birthfamilies because they cannot adequately answer their children's questions.

Consequently, agencies have found that options that include openness are attractive to birthparents who might place with them, and many adoption professionals feel that openness is in the best interests of the child. This change has been very controversial. Some adoption specialists argue that fully open adoption should be standard practice for everyone and that the secrecy of confidential adoption is harmful to all parties. Other adoption professionals argue that openness is experimental and potentially harmful. The latter view holds that confidential adoption worked well, so why change it? Yet others take a more middle ground and advocate for communication, as long as it is mediated by a neutral third party.

Adoption professionals, advocates, and members of support groups of adopted individuals and birthparents hold passionately strong feelings about openness; however, almost no research on this topic has been available to guide adoption policy in this important area that touches the lives of many families.

OUR STUDY

Wanting to contribute research data on which recommendations could be made, we developed a study to examine openness in adoption from the points of view of adoptive parents, adopted children, birthparents, and adoption agencies. We were able to carry out the study with the assistance of funding from the Hogg Foundation for Mental Health, the federal Office of Population Affairs, the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, the Minnesota Agricultural Experiment Station, and the University Research Institute of The University of Texas at Austin.

Adoptive families and birthmothers were recruited for our study through 35 adoption agencies located across the United States. We sought families in which:

- there was at least one adopted child between ages 4 and 12 at the time of the interview who was adopted through an agency prior to age one.
- the adoption was not transracial, international, or “special needs.”
- both adoptive parents were married to the partner they had at the time of the adoption.

We simultaneously sought birthmothers who made adoption plans for children placed with these families. As much as we wanted to interview birthfathers as well, this was typically impossible due to their unavailability or unknown whereabouts.

Included in this study are 720 individuals: 190 adoptive families (including 190 mothers, 190 fathers, and at least one child in 171 of the families) and 169 birthmothers. Families were sampled across the full range of openness in adoption. Sixty-two families had confidential adoptions, in which no information was shared between birth- and adoptive parents after the adoptive placement. Others had mediated adoptions in which information was exchanged between birth- and adoptive families through an adoption agency staff member acting as go-between. In 52 of the families, this contact was continuing, and in 17 families it had stopped by the time we interviewed them. Finally, 59 of our families had fully disclosed adoptions, in which information was shared directly between birthparents and adoptive parents, typically

including face-to-face meetings and telephone calls. In 57 of these families, the contact was continuing, while in 2 cases all contact had stopped by the time of our interview.

Almost two-thirds of the fully disclosed adoptions did not start that way. Although they began as mediated or confidential adoptions, trust and mutual respect were gradually established between adoptive parents and the birthmothers until mutual decisions were made to share full identifying information. However, the amount and type of contact might either increase or decrease, as illustrated by two of our families:

We've escalated the amount of openness after that first meeting. Our relationship has become more relaxed, natural, open, comfortable. We hadn't planned on any more meetings, but we broke some barriers as far as meeting again, meeting as the child got older, so we have increased our intimacy. We're in the process of deciding where to stop with that. (adoptive mother, ongoing fully disclosed)*

Now that she [the child's birthmother] is married with children, it is not as easy for her to maintain the closeness we had before. She has tried to go on and make her own life, and she's more on the edge of our life than she was in the beginning. There's also a pretty good distance geographically between us now. (adoptive father, ongoing fully disclosed)

We visited each adoptive family in its home, typically during an evening or a weekend afternoon. Our visit included individual tape-recorded interviews with the adoptive mother, father, child, and occasionally siblings; completion of several questionnaires; and a joint interview with the adoptive parents. Birthmothers completed several questionnaires and an extensive tape-recorded interview either by telephone, in their own homes, or at the adoption agency.

In sections that follow, we will discuss highlights of what we learned about these varying forms of adoption from the perspectives of the birthmothers, adoptive parents, adopted children, and adoption agency personnel.

*Identifying details have been removed from quotations to protect confidentiality, but all quotes and vignettes are based on actual participants in our study.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE BIRTHMOTHERS

At the time of the study, birthmothers were between 21 and 43 years of age. However, the majority (77%) had been adolescents at the time they made the adoption decision. These young women considered themselves to be emotionally healthy; most reported no problems such as alcoholism, depression, schizophrenia, or physical or learning disabilities. When interviewed, they had completed an average of 13.4 years of school, and the majority had average annual earnings between \$10,000 and \$29,000. More than half were currently married and had given birth to other children since the adoptive placement four to twelve years earlier. Most of the birthmothers had chosen to place their children for adoption due to financial reasons, age at time of pregnancy, encouragement from family, desire to complete their education, being unmarried at the time of pregnancy, or feelings that they did not have the support of the birthfathers in raising the children. Although many seriously considered parenting rather than placing, they felt that the children would have better opportunities in adoptive families than they could provide at that point in their lives. Religious and moral reasons tended to deter these young women from choosing abortion.

Fifty-two of the birthmothers were in confidential adoptions, 18 in time-limited mediated adoptions, 58 in ongoing mediated adoptions, and 41 in ongoing fully disclosed adoptions. Those in confidential adoptions typically had chosen that option because it was the only one available or the only one they were aware of at the time of the adoption decision. They generally had little or no input in the selection of the adoptive parents for their children. However, birthmothers in fully disclosed or ongoing mediated adoptions were much more likely to have selected the adoptive parents. Regardless of the type of adoption, most of the birthmothers in the sample had an opportunity to see, hold, bottle feed, as well as name their babies while in the hospital. About half had other family members who also had contact with the baby while in the hospital.

Birthmothers in confidential adoptions, once the children were placed for adoption, would only receive limited non-identifying information until finalization of the adoption, about six months later. In a few

cases, updated information on the birthmother or the adopted child might be placed in the agency files, but it was not intended for transmission to either party. When these birthmothers were asked what kind of information they felt birthmothers should have, some typical responses were as follows:

Information about the child's personality, his looks, his interests;

When he entered high school, how he did, if he was sports oriented, what career he had chosen;

If he died; if he was healthy; if he had a birth defect that was noticed afterwards or a terminal illness; if the family was trying to adopt another child;

Things about my child that would satisfy my peace of mind—but at the same time would not be too revealing so that I could find out who he was or where he was.

I wouldn't want to know too much, just enough to make me feel happy.

Most birthmothers who were in confidential adoptions would be pleased if the adoptive parents wished to give them updates through the agency on the children's development and activities.

Half of the birthmothers in time-limited mediated adoptions felt this option was best for them, and others chose it because it was the only option available to them. The mothers who selected to have ongoing mediated non-identifiable contact felt that it was best for them or for the children. The majority of birthmothers who either have received and shared information for several years after placement but have now stopped—as well as birthmothers who are currently exchanging information—generally felt positive about this experience. The following quotes provide examples of their varied beliefs about having non-identified contact through the agency:

I think it makes them [the child's adoptive parents] feel comfortable, that they can get information to help him. But I've also let them know that I'm not a threat to the

adoptive parents. I would never, ever try and take him away from them.

I think it helps [my child] to know a little bit about who I am and that I feel peaceful with this, and that it's o.k... I think it should be important for them.

Once she [the child] gets older, she won't think I just totally abandoned her, I didn't just give her up. She's gonna know I just did what I thought was best...I didn't back out...I'm just glad we keep in touch. It will help me I guess later, I because I know she's gonna one day look me up.

I write and her adoptive mother saves the letters for her... Her adoptive mother writes me back every time and sends pictures. The adoptive mother reads my letters to Susan.

As noted in the illustrations below, a few birthmothers discussed issues involved in ongoing contact.

Having ongoing contact would be a constant reminder to my spouse that I had a child by another man. I don't want that to happen. (time-limited mediated adoption)

It's hard to say because their [adoptive parents] letters to me are totally devoid of emotion. So from that, all I can do is infer that it makes them pretty uncomfortable, and they'd just as soon not have to worry about it. (ongoing mediated)

I'm not sure how it will affect my other children. I haven't told them about Kerry. I'm not ready for them to know that I had a child as a teenager. I may have to stop seeing my birthchild when she gets old enough to ask to see my other children. (ongoing mediated)

I think a fully open adoption would drive a birthmother crazy. She might just tend to drive by there and see the child. (ongoing mediated)

Fourteen of the birthmothers in ongoing mediated adoptions and three in time-limited mediated adoptions not only exchanged information but had also met the adoptive parents at placement or a short time later. However, identifying information was not exchanged. Most birthmothers expressed feelings of happiness during the meetings because they felt assured that their decision was the right one or they derived satisfaction from the delight of the adoptive parents. A few acknowledged they had feelings of sadness at the loss of the children as well as positive feelings of reassurance that the children were happy and well cared for.

Birthmothers who chose fully disclosed adoptions typically believed that this would be best for themselves. They were involved in the selection of the adoptive parents and wanted to know the identity of the adoptive family and future whereabouts of the children for whom they were making adoption plans.

GRIEF AND LOSS

Some advocates of confidential adoptions believe that only in this form of adoption can birthmothers really experience and resolve the loss of the children for whom they made adoption plans. Advocates of this philosophy believe that a birthmother who has information on her child's adjustment after placement may have a much harder time accepting the loss and moving beyond it than if she had severed all ties completely. However, this belief was not substantiated by the majority of birthmothers in this study. As one birthmother stated:

I think it is healthy for me—it has allowed me to heal and not be so consumed with the relinquishment. Kelly's adoptive parents think this is good for him, too. They initiated face-to-face contact, and so I visit their home occasionally.

Most who chose openness believed that knowing that they had not lost permanent contact with the children they placed for adoption allows them to heal. Further, they believe that their children will feel better about themselves as a result of knowing their birthmothers.

For example, according to one birthmother:

I think that it will continue to be a positive thing for her. Maybe once she gets to that stage where she starts to realize what it means in a social context, it might be some turbulence for her there—a little bit of an emotional problem. But through the long run, as she goes through her teen years and becomes an adult, I think that knowing somebody really cared about her enough to keep in contact will be positive for her. It will be a reassuring factor for her.

Others said:

It's a positive impact. I mean everybody agrees with the type of relationship we all have. Everybody says it's good. They wish that most adopted children can know where they come from and all that. Nobody's ever disagreed with it.

It's kind of hard when my husband and I discuss it, because he doesn't want me to get hurt. He's afraid that I'm going to get hurt by it. But as long as I believe in what I'm doing and I think it's right, then he wants me to go along with it.

Despite the personal benefits from contact, some of the birthmothers still experience grief reactions after seeing their children. One birthmother described her husband's observations of her behavior after a meeting:

My husband fusses a little bit when it's time for me to go to the meetings, because he says, "You come home and you mope around a day or two because you want a baby." And I never knew that I did that. I never saw myself do that.

DESIRE TO RECLAIM

Although visits with adoptive families can rekindle issues of grief and loss for a few birthmothers, only a very few had ever expressed a desire to reclaim the children they placed for adoption. According to one birthmother:

It was after we had developed a close relationship that I told them [the child's adoptive parents] how I felt that first day. I cried and wanted her back. I wanted to call my worker and tell her to tell them I wanted her back. When I told them, they were real understanding and felt for me. If they had known how I felt, they probably would have given her back. Now, the only way I would ever want her back is if something happened to her adoptive family. But Mary Ann is so close to them, I would hate to see anything happen to either one of them.

The close adoptive parent-child relationship in fully disclosed adoptions makes it difficult for most birthmothers to consider reclaiming their children. Most truly believe that despite their love for these children, they now belong to the adoptive families. Birthmothers are comforted in knowing that the children are happy and secure with the adoptive families. These women seem to be taking the perspective of the children and adoptive parents and recognize what psychological damage they could cause if they chose to attempt to disrupt the placement.

One birthmother stated:

I'd really love to have her, but no way. That would just tear her apart. She would hate me. For her sake, no, because I just couldn't imagine what that would do to a child.

Another expressed her feelings as follows:

She definitely belongs [to the adoptive family]. I have never regretted my decision, and I know that she is well loved and taken care of.

After a period of time in which birthmothers feel confident that the children are all right, most of them are able to concentrate more fully on their own lives. Some may request to reduce contact because they are very involved in their own careers or families and no longer have the time or need to maintain such frequent contact. This is an important finding, as many opponents of fully disclosed adoptions have expressed concern that birthparents will demand increasingly more contact with adoptive families over time, rather than less.

A birthmother who has contact with her child's adoptive family usually sees herself in the role of friend or relative rather than a mother. Almost all are comfortable hearing children refer to the adoptive mother as "mother" and seem accepting of the child's referring to the birthmother by her first name.

Clearly, birthmothers have much to consider before making the decision to place children for adoption or selecting the type of adoption. There are concerns and issues inherent in each type of adoption not only for the birthmother but for her family, the adoptive family, and the child. Although many of the potential problems of openness such as desire to reclaim and unresolved grief and loss have not held true for most of the birthmothers in this sample, other issues have been identified in each type of adoption. Overall, however, nearly all of the birthmothers in the study were satisfied with their choice to place. Let's now take a look at how the adoptive parents in the study were faring in each type of adoption.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE ADOPTIVE PARENTS

Virtually all the parents in our study adopted because of infertility. Their average age was around 40, their average educational level was three to four years of college, and their average family income exceeded \$50,000 per year.

Many adoptive parents were initially reluctant to consider an open relationship with the birthmother of the child they hoped would join them through adoption, as illustrated in the following example:

Mr. Young was quite skeptical about openness at first, because he felt that sharing information would put stress on their marriage by reminding them that they are not the child's biological parents. Mrs. Young thought that some contact might be beneficial for her son because he would know that he had not been abandoned by his birthmother, but this benefit was overridden by her concern that the contact would be both confusing and painful for the boy. (adoptive parents, ongoing mediated adoption)

Two major issues, both reinforced through sensationalized stories in the media, involve the concern that adoptive parents will not be able to control the birthmother's (or birthfamily's) involvement in their family's life and the fear that the birthmother will try to reclaim the child as her own. We discussed both of these issues in depth with our participants.

SATISFACTION WITH CONTROL

After reviewing the interviews conducted with all adoptive parents, trained coders rated each one for the degree to which the parents showed satisfaction with the amount of control they had over the birthmother's involvement in their family's life. Did they feel that they could regulate the involvement of the birthmother, either through preventing unwanted intrusion or through stimulating greater involvement when they desired it?

We first found that the overwhelming majority of adoptive parents across all levels of openness indicated satisfaction with their ability to control such involvement. There were a number of parents who were dissatisfied in this regard, however, and so we examined their cases in more depth. In almost every instance, the problem was that the adoptive parent wanted more contact with the birthparent rather than less contact. The adoptive mother or father typically felt that the lack of contact was either a unilateral decision by the birthparent or sometimes an agency decision or policy.

The gradual development of a sense of mutual control is illustrated in the following case:

At the time of placement, the Jones family did not meet their child's birthmother because she was afraid to come to a meeting. Within a month, however, she felt comfortable enough to do so. The Joneses proceeded cautiously, withholding their surname and address even after the birthmother provided hers. At that point, the Joneses anticipated that they would meet once, share letters periodically through the agency, and then not meet again until the child was near adulthood. Once they met the birthmother, however, they began to feel there were advantages in continued association with her. By their third meeting, the three adults seemed to agree that "no one was trying to take over," and the adoptive parents shared identifying information about themselves. For the members of this adoption triad, control over openness appears to be based upon mutual respect and an understanding that evolved over time.

Parents in confidential adoptions also tended to be satisfied with their control over the birthmothers' involvement:

I think every set of circumstances, this one included, has its own particular set of problems which might be...present or future tense. I have no problem with any set of circumstances when I know what they are. The circumstance we had with the closed adoption is something I accept as a factual circumstance and I'm very happy with our child and with the process, whatever it will bring and as it is.
(adoptive father, confidential)

There were a number of reasons why adoptive parents wanted more contact and felt unable to bring it about. Sometimes parents adopted a child through the confidential process, but later adopted another child with more openness and then wanted to open up the earlier adoption so that the older child would have contact with his or her own birthparent(s), as well. In other cases, the adoptive parents wanted more contact at a time in life when the birthmother felt the need to have less. Perhaps she was marrying someone who did not favor ongoing contact with the family that adopted her child, or perhaps she moved away because of a career opportunity or a new relationship.

The general picture that emerged, however, was one in which adoptive parents expressed satisfaction with the way that the degree of openness was working in their family. For families with more open adoptions, the concern that openness would lead to unwanted intrusion seems groundless.

FEAR OF RECLAIMING

Adoptive parents did discuss another type of fear, however: the fear that the birthmother might try to reclaim the child born to her. These fears have been fed by stories on television and in magazines, and they have been at the center of arguments used by opponents of openness.

Interviews conducted with the adoptive parents were coded for the degree to which the parents feared that the birthmothers might try to reclaim the children and their reasons for having or not having fear. In contrast to the predictions by opponents of openness, the lowest degrees of fear of reclaiming were in the ongoing fully disclosed adoptions. In fact, 77.2% of adoptive mothers and 82.5% of adoptive fathers in fully disclosed adoptions indicated “no fear” of reclaiming.

The reasons for having fear of reclaiming differ strikingly as a function of whether the adoptive parents have a personal relationship with the birthmother. In confidential and mediated adoptions, the most frequently cited reason for fear of reclaiming was parents’ stereotypes about birthparents developed from generalized experiences and knowledge. The second most frequent reason for fear in confidential adoptions was other people’s experiences with adoption including “horror stories,” media portrayals, and widely publicized court cases. In the very few ongoing fully disclosed adoptions showing any evidence of fear, however, these concerns were based on the actual birthparents’ life circumstances.

The reasons for *not* having fear were also very different across levels of openness. Families with confidential and mediated adoptions cited the degree of openness selected and their control over information shared as their primary reasons for having no fear. The legal and social barriers inherent in their types of adoption protected them from the realities of reclaiming. However, parents in fully disclosed adoptions

cited impressions about their children's birthparents, the actual birthparents' life circumstances, and statements made by the children's birthparents most frequently as reasons for not having fear of reclaiming. They often spoke of birthparents who specifically stated that they would never try to take a child from his or her adoptive parents.

After watching several television shows which examined openness in adoption, the Hogan family decided to seek a fully disclosed adoption. Even though these adoptive parents admitted to some uneasiness prior to the first face-to-face meeting with the birthmother, their subsequent experiences with her allayed their fears. They now feel so comfortable with the birthmother that they invite her to spend nights in their home. The adoptive mother related that, for her and her husband, "whenever there is something that you don't know, it seems worse than if you know, bad or good...the unknown is more frightening. When you're involved in openness you see every day that [reclaiming the child] is not the thought that is on [the birthmother's] mind." (adoptive mother, ongoing fully disclosed)

PERCEIVED IMPACT ON CHILD

Children today whose adoptive parents and birthparents are exchanging letters or meeting together have potential access to information about their birthparents that was unheard of several decades ago. An ongoing professional debate continues as to how this may affect these children as they grow up. Will they be confused about who their "real" parents are, will they have divided loyalties between birth and adoptive families, or will the impact be much more positive? Perhaps these children will have a greater sense of "who they are" when they reach adolescence, a more realistic understanding of the circumstances of their placement and, therefore, more positive feelings about their birthparents, origins, and themselves.

As this debate continues, questions remain unanswered, largely because adopted children involved in the earliest open arrangements are just now becoming adolescents. Despite the lack of knowledge of implications

for the child, openness in adoptions is a fast-growing trend. Currently, many adoptive parents are faced with a new set of choices regarding a child's adoption. When and how should they include the child in the sharing of information or contact that is occurring?

In our study, parents in each type of adoption had a wide range of feelings on the subject. Even though parents in confidential adoptions did not have to make decisions about including the child in the openness, they did have a variety of feelings about the possibility of receiving information from birthparents or meeting them. The majority of confidential adopters were satisfied with their arrangements, and many voiced their hesitation about opening up the adoption:

I know of several situations where problems have occurred.

There would be comparisons for the child.

I would be willing to share some information, but I don't feel it would be best—too confusing for my child.

Others seemed to feel that information and meeting birthparents would be all right in the future:

At the appropriate age, I would help my child search.

I'm open to my child seeing his birthmother when he's older, but I don't want him having an option at this point if things are not smooth at home.

Some parents expressed a desire for more openness in the adoption but were prevented from opening up because of the legal agreement or because the agency had lost contact with the birthmothers. Perhaps these parents desired more openness because the children began asking questions they could not answer, or perhaps some had recently adopted additional children in more open situations and were trying to create equal access for first and second children.

The adoptive parents in mediated and fully disclosed adoptions, however, are not faced with hypothetical situations of sharing and contact.

They must make specific decisions about if, when, and how they will include the children. Almost half of the adoptive couples in mediated adoptions versus only a handful of the couples in fully disclosed adoptions reported that their children were involved in only one aspect of the openness. For example, a child might read correspondence from the birthmother but not know anything about meetings that occur between the birthmother and the adoptive parents.

Most of the parents in the mediated group were quite comfortable with the sharing arrangement as it currently existed. Some, however, expressed feelings that they would not be comfortable having the birthmothers become an ongoing part of their family life. Reasons given were very similar to those of the adoptive parents in the confidential group. However, the primary reason given for not sharing information received from the birthparents with the children at the current time was each child's young age or developmental level. These parents fully intend to share information "when he's older, more his own person and able to deal with it," "when she understands the situation better," or "when she starts asking questions." A few of the parents were unsure how to deal with the fact that one of their adopted children had no access to information about birthparents, while another did. They were trying to sort through the inequality of the situation, thinking about possible repercussions for each sibling before sharing information with a particular child.

Conversely, parents who were including their children felt strongly about doing so primarily for the children's benefit.

I want my child to have contact so she'll have answers, up front with honesty.

He'll have a good feeling about his heritage.

I think the meetings and information are beneficial and will provide him information about his roots.

Parents also expressed empathy for the birthmothers' loss and felt that the meetings would reassure the women about their decisions. Some parents expressed surprise at the unforeseen personal satisfaction they were experiencing, "We enjoy sharing the common bond and learning

about our child's genetic heritage."

Most of the parents of children between ages four and seven seemed to feel that the meetings with the birthmothers were having no effect on the children because they were too young to comprehend fully their relationship to these women. However, one mother of a six year old stated, "There is a naturalness to this situation which has developed over time which will give her the freedom to ask any questions; it makes all of us more comfortable with the adoption." Plans for future contact were varied—some felt the contact would always continue; some said that once their children got older, they would take their children's cues on whether or not to continue the contact; and some expressed feelings that if the contact became confusing for a child they would cut it off.

PERSPECTIVES OF THE CHILDREN

How do the children themselves feel about information from birthparents, knowing their birthparents, or not having any connection with them? In order to understand the child's point of view, the 90 male and 81 female children from the adoptive families were asked to participate in the study as well. Fifty-seven of the children were in families that had confidential adoptions, 59 were in families with mediated adoptions, and 55 were in families with fully disclosed adoptions.

In their interviews, 22 of the children in mediated adoptions and 3 in fully disclosed adoptions indicated that they either had no information about their birthparents or only basic information, such as the age of the birthmother at the time of the birth. This finding is not surprising in light of the fact that some of the children were unaware of the contact and sharing, and some were too young to understand the situation clearly. However, virtually all of the children, no matter what type of adoption they had, wanted to know more about their birthparents. The following quotes illustrate their desire for information:

I felt fine about asking. I just asked and my Dad told me.
I guess I got curious about it 'cause I'm here, who did it

and who was I? And my dad says like I kept on asking my neighbors and teachers like “was it you?” but it was none of them. And I asked questions like “what is the color of her hair?” (10-year-old girl, fully disclosed adoption)

Sometimes I make my tummy so upset that I throw up. I’m worried about my birthmom might not have a husband. (6-year-old girl, mediated adoption)

If they’re dead or if they’re alive. (6-year-old boy, confidential adoption)

Children with less information about birthparents tended to wonder most about their health, well-being, and what they looked like. Children with more information or contact tended to wonder most about when they would see the birthparents again, about birthsiblings they had not met, and what the birthparents have been doing since they last heard from them.

Most of the children currently desired some information about their birthparents. However, some of the adoptive parents had not yet shared information received from the birthmothers. In these situations, adoptive parents must consider a gradual revelation of the information in stages determined by the age, developmental level, and receptiveness of the child.

Young children seem to derive benefit from contact with their birthparents, reaffirming the birthparents’ love and providing opportunities to explain the circumstances which led to the adoption plan. For example, as one eight-year-old child stated:

I asked if my birthmother still loved me and my mom goes, “Of course she does.” My mom says she does and I believe her, ‘cause every time my birthmother comes up to see us, she’s always hugging me and stuff.

We live in a highly mobile society; birthparents and adoptive parents may move frequently, making ongoing face-to-face contact difficult.

Also, birthparents may gradually reduce contact as they begin to marry and parent children or as they become assured that the adopted children are safe and well. Some of the children in this study spoke about this kind of decrease in contact or their perceived lack of contact:

Couldn't we just stop talking about my birthmother? It's making me sad. Because she used to live real near us and now she doesn't, and I'd like to see her.

The only things that bother me about Sara [birthmother] is I never get to see her. (7-year-old girl, ongoing fully disclosed adoption)

Clearly, if contact has begun between an adopted child and a birthparent and circumstances arise which necessitate reducing the contact, it becomes important for birth- and adoptive parents to consider implications for the child and to develop alternatives that help maintain the contact over time.

ADOPTION AGENCY PERSPECTIVES

Most adoption agencies now offer a continuum of openness options which clearly carry both advantages and disadvantages to each party in the triad. So far we have examined the continuum from the perspectives of birthmothers, adoptive parents, and children. Agencies have offered families these innovative options, which for many represent a major shift from their previous commitment to maintaining complete confidentiality in adoptive placements.

In order to understand how agency practices have changed over time, a representative from each of the 35 agencies located in 15 states who identified families for participation in this study was interviewed at two points in time—between 1987-89 and in 1993. Interviews focused on the range of openness options offered, the factors which led these agencies to change their practices, perceived advantages and disadvantages regarding the continuum of openness, experiences with openness, and other changes in agency programming during the five-year period.

RANGE OF OPENNESS OPTIONS OFFERED

In 1993, two-thirds of the agencies were offering a continuum of openness in adoption, from confidential to fully disclosed, whereas in 1987 most agencies primarily offered confidential and mediated adoptions. The types of adoption currently offered actually range from confidential to cooperative or identified adoptions, in which both parties find each other and the agency facilitates the adoption. Most agency personnel indicated that although confidential, mediated, and fully disclosed adoptions are offered to birthmothers, they encourage birthmothers to choose mediated or fully disclosed adoptions. Adoptive parents are usually told that if they must have a confidential adoption, it is highly unlikely that they will ever receive a child or they are referred to other agencies. Only one agency involved in the study indicated that it offered only confidential adoptions in both 1987 and in 1993.

Some agencies offering mediated adoptions are willing only to exchange communications between parties for six months or until the adoption is finalized. At that point, they notify birth and adoptive families that they will no longer be screening and de-identifying all information coming into the agency. Therefore, if exchanges are to continue, participants must accept that there may be identifying information transferred in the exchange process. Some agencies only become aware that the adoption has changed from mediated to fully disclosed as a result of the decrease or cessation of correspondence transmitted through the agency.

FACTORS WHICH LED AGENCIES TO CHANGE THEIR PRACTICES

Staff members identified several factors that have led to a change in practices. Among those most often mentioned were client demand and competition from independent adoptions and other private agencies that had begun offering openness. More and more birthmothers have refused to make adoption plans in which they will lose contact forever. For example, an agency staff member recalled one birthmother's poignant declaration:

You want me to leave my baby with strangers? I wouldn't leave my child for 30 minutes with a sitter who wouldn't tell me her last name. How could I leave my child for a lifetime with someone I don't know?

As more and more pregnant women began to demand ongoing contact, adoption agencies recognized the need to change practices in order to stay in business and remain competitive.

For some agencies, changes in practice were associated with staffing changes, when new staff members advocated for greater openness. Some agency personnel have found that openness makes the choice of adoption more acceptable and more clear to the birthmother. Others have reported that their movement toward openness was a response to the many problems and experiences they found triad members encountering. Agency staff became aware of some of the problems of total secrecy as adopted adults returned to the agency to seek more information about their past, adoptive parents brought adopted children in for counseling, or birthmothers asked for help in searching for their birth children.

As one social worker from an agency which has moved towards openness stated:

Keeping secrets is unhealthy; this child never agreed for those secrets to exist. The birthparents and adoptive parents may have wanted them, but the child had no say-so. In the long run the child has a right to that information. In the process, we're finding out that it also benefits the birthmother and the adoptive parents.

Others stated:

We want to empower the adoptive parents to take charge of their own adoption. We believe that the best adoptions are the fully identified ones—the more rapidly we can encourage families to be fully identified, the better.

We used to believe that young women needed to make a clean break and get on with their lives. But as they talked to us about their longing to know how their child was, we decided we were not being sensitive to them and began aggressively changing our policies.

As policies were changed, some agencies also began rethinking who they defined as their primary client. In 1993, the majority of the agencies interviewed indicated that the birthmother was the primary client. For years, agencies tended to view their role as the protector of both the adoptive parents and birthparents. Now, many agencies tend to view their role as a facilitative one that recognizes the cooperative nature of the arrangements that are negotiated between adoptive parents and birthparents for each particular situation. In these new roles, birth- and adoptive parents are empowered.

PERCEIVED ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES

Along with changes in policy, agencies have changed their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of each type of adoption during the past several years. Although some agencies are still offering confidential adoptions, they are now much more likely than earlier to see them as preferable in only a few circumstances.

The following quotations from agency representatives illustrate perceived advantages of confidential adoptions:

- Confidential adoptions should be available if a birthmother demands it so that a woman will never feel that she has no alternatives.
- Confidential adoptions are preferable if unstable people are involved. A meeting with a mentally disturbed birthmother could be upsetting to a child.
- Confidential adoptions may be better for the birthmother who perceives the child as a reminder of a bad relationship or experience.

However, most agencies in 1993 noted that confidential adoptions make it more difficult for birthmothers to grieve their loss adequately. As one agency staff member said:

In confidential adoptions, birthmothers develop a false sense of security; they think they can avoid the pain of the adoption.

For adoptive parents, agency personnel stated that the major advantage of confidential adoption was not having to share the child with a birthparent. Although this may be perceived as a gain for the adoptive parents, most agency personnel believe the child has more difficulty developing his or her identity when limited to the background information contained on a piece of paper.

Agency personnel identified advantages of mediated adoptions which include the following:

[Mediated adoptions] ...give birthmothers a more realistic way to deal with grief.

Questions can be asked. A child knows that the birthmother cares; she assists in her child's adjustment.

Mediated adoptions help the birthmother in planning—reducing any guilt she may feel about not being able to parent.

The mediated adoption is best. The birthmother can work through her feelings and has information about the child and child's family. The adopted child has the information that he/she needs.

However, adoption professionals also noted that mediated contact adoptions have a number of drawbacks. Agency staff found these arrangements particularly time consuming since they were responsible for mediating all the correspondence, gifts, and other exchanges. Moreover, some indicated that this arrangement sometimes leads to lack of trust between parties as all of the information is handled through an intermediary, and extreme caution is taken to omit any identifying information.

For mediated adoptions to work, cooperation is needed from adoptive parents, birthparents, and agency personnel. If there is a loss of contact, birthmothers and adopted children may experience a renewed sense of grief and loss. Similarly, adoptive parents may also experience disappointment if a birthparent fails to maintain the contact. For example, an agency representative stated:

It hurts to be in the group with adoptive parents showing pictures and bragging about the openness and your birthmother is not writing.

Other problems with mediated adoptions included the following:

Going through the agency can be time consuming, and there are delays in getting information transmitted.

The child is not involved in obtaining of information.

This method can play into adoptive parent fears that the birthmother will change her mind and want her child back.

By 1993, the majority of agencies had moved toward offering fully disclosed open adoptions and could delineate both benefits and issues to be addressed. According to agency representatives, benefits of a fully disclosed adoption include the following:

It gives a child direct access and increases the child's sense of power because he or she is not dependent on adoptive parents or agency for information; it helps with identity.

It reinforces entitlement for adoptive parents. They no longer fear the birthmother—she is real to them.

It takes away fear of running into the birthmother in a public place.

It gives adoptive parents a sense of entitlement since birthmother says, "I am entrusting you with this child."

It is superior because of relationships that develop.

Concerns about full disclosure were expressed as follows:

There can be limitations when the birthmother is really encouraged to meet a family very rapidly, very early in her pregnancy—encouraged to form an emotional relationship with the adoptive parents. It may cause her to lose the ability to change her mind and decide to parent—she feels like she owes this child to this family.

Birthmothers who have a lot of problems may rely on the adoptive parents for support.

Difficulties between adoptive parent and birthparent may cause confusion or pain for the adopted child.

The agency can lose control.

The birthmother might intrude in the adoptive family.

The child may be forced to deal with the reality of a birthmother who is still trying to get her life together.

Adoptive and birthparents have to deal with the good and bad in the relationship.

The child might play birth- and adoptive parents against each other.

The child might feel torn between two sets of parents—a loyalty conflict.

The birthmother could choose not to have anything more to do with the child.

Having different levels of openness in adoption of children in the same family could provoke problems.

Although agencies identified a number of potential disadvantages in fully disclosed open adoptions, most concluded the advantages significantly outweighed the risks. One agency indicated some concern that not enough research had been done on the outcomes of fully disclosed

adoptions and considered this essential before they would move from mediated adoptions to fully open. The majority of agencies did report that since they began offering open options, the number of birthmothers placing children for adoptions has increased.

GENERAL DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

The face of adoption in the United States has changed dramatically in the last decade and will likely continue to do so. Changes in societal attitudes about sexuality and parenting, the supply and demand for babies, and experience with “new” forms of adoption suggest that American adoptions will continue to become more open in the future. This means that parents, educators, adoption workers, mental health professionals, and the public at large will need to be better informed about such family arrangements in order to be responsive to the needs of all triad members and respectful of their experiences.

Every adopted child will have a unique set of feelings and reactions to his or her own adoption. While it is impossible to predict the needs of any one child regarding openness, it is likely that most children desire information about their birthparents, possible birthsiblings, and their genetic heritage. It is important to take cues from the child—are questions being asked? If not, discussions should be initiated and information offered—providing an opportunity for the child to give feedback about readiness to hear information or meet birthparents. It is important to be sensitive to the children and let them provide their input when adoptive parents are making decisions for what is age-appropriate inclusion in the openness.

Our many discussions with birthmothers, adoptive parents, adopted children, and agency professionals have shown us that openness in adoption is an ongoing process rather than a final state. Relationships that work the best seem to be those that can evolve mutually over time. Initially, they appear to fall well within the participants’ limits of acceptability, and the relationship process toward greater openness is interactively determined by all those involved.

Perfect harmony in the evolving relationship might only be seen in the ideal world, however. Our data suggest that what may be “best” for one party in the adoption triad at a given time may not be “best” for other parties. Furthermore, parties’ needs for greater or lesser openness may change over time and not always in synchrony with other triad members.

The adoptive parents call and ask me to send cards to Sara. They seem to want more contact and they keep calling and saying that she is asking a lot of questions. They want me to be more involved than I am. But I just don’t have the time to just really devote a lot to her now cause I’ve got so much of my own going on. (birthmother, fully disclosed)

In many of our interviews with adoptive parents and birthparents experiencing openness, we have noted the importance of allowing the relationship to develop gradually so that all parties can find a mutually comfortable level. Such relationship growth requires time, communication, negotiation skill, and flexibility on everyone’s part.

How gradual is best? We don’t think there is a simple answer to this question. Each adoption involves a unique set of adoptive parents, birthparent, and child who bring their individual personalities and relationship histories to the experience. As one adoptive father told us, “Different adoptions fit different situations. I don’t think every glove fits every hand.”

Adoption professionals, as well as members of the triad, are finding that they must be prepared to deal with some of these inevitable vulnerabilities inherent in each type of adoption. Agencies tend to advocate for their preferred adoption option during the preplacement process. They often find that they must educate some prospective adoptive parents about the advantages of openness and help them overcome their initial fears about contact.

As the birthmother is often viewed as the primary client, the decision-making power seems to be almost totally in her hands. Increasingly large numbers of birthmothers seeking agency services are requesting ongoing contact, and agencies are responding by changing their prac-

tices to reflect this. Since agencies typically have long waiting lists of prospective adoptive families, it is not too difficult to find a family willing to accommodate the birthmother's wishes in the placement of her child. Agencies in the study which have moved toward openness report positive experiences, and only two agencies prefer confidential adoptions. However, critics of openness do admit that "the jury is still out" on the long-term outcomes for adoptive parents, birthparents, and adopted children who are participating in these innovative practices.

Readers should be aware that this study, just as all research studies in the social sciences, has limitations. Participants were all volunteers, so they may not be representative of all families who have adopted children. Second, it is impossible to make causal statements about the "effects" of different levels of openness, because there were many factors that contributed to birthmothers' and adoptive families' decisions about openness levels. These included personalities of the parties (e.g., flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity), knowledge of agency practices, availability of options, and agency pre-adoption counseling. Third, since many of the fully disclosed adoptions evolved gradually over time, our findings may not be applicable to adoptions that begin completely open without a period of relationship building or without adoption agency personnel to assist in the preparation process. Finally, our sample only included two-parent families who adopted same-race infants through private adoption agencies. Any generalizations beyond a similar group must be made with caution.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

The participants in our study were interviewed between 1987 and 1992, when the children were between the ages of four and twelve. Issues such as fears of birthparents' reclaiming and intrusion and adopted children's divided loyalty, which had been hypothesized to occur in fully disclosed adoptions, were not occurring at the time of the study. However, other issues have emerged such as: adoptive parents' desires for more contact, birthparents' concerns about relationships with spouse and future children, adoptive parents' exclusion of the

child from the exchange of information or contact, children's worries and anxieties about birthparents, impact on the child of reducing amount or ceasing contact, impact on other children in the home with less open adoptions, and lack of knowledge about long-term impact. Agencies have experienced a gradual increase in placements since offering open options and have relinquished much of their power and decision-making authority to birth- and adoptive parents in planning their adoptive arrangements.

We plan to re-contact all our participants and agency personnel in order to check in on their lives and experiences once again as the children reach adolescence. What changes will have occurred in the level of openness in the family's adoption, if any? Will family composition have changed since the original study through parental divorce, death, or birth or adoption of new children? In what ways will the child and adoptive family have been involved with the extended family of the birthparent(s), if any? How does a personal relationship with one's family of birth influence the adopted child's struggle with the identity questions that face all adolescents? What kinds of social supports have been most helpful to our participants over the years? What services do they wish they could have had?

Will we find the number of agency placements continuing to increase? What new post-placement services will be offered? How are adoptive and birthparents resolving differences? The rapid change in attitudes toward adoption and social policy in our country makes it critically important for us to continue learning from the experiences of the parties involved in these forms of adoption.

