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Open Adoption: It's Effect on the Parent-Child Relationship

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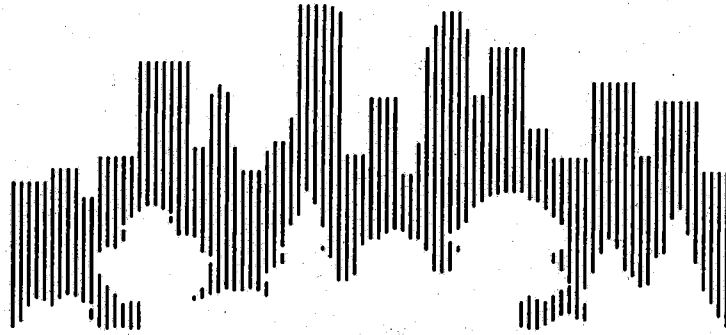
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**MASTERS IN SOCIAL WORK
THESIS**

Connie Johnson

**Open Adoption: It's Effect on the
Parent-Child Relationship**

1996

OPEN ADOPTION:
IT'S EFFECT ON THE PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Connie Johnson

Master of Social Work Thesis

August 26, 1996

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK
AUGSBURG COLLEGE
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Master of Social Work Degree.

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Thank you, Dr. Skarnulis

Who can tell what a baby thinks?
Who can follow the gossamer links
By which the manikin feels its way
Out from the shores of the great unknown
 Into the light of day?
What does he think of his mother's eyes?
What does he think of his mother' hair?
What of the cradle that flies and flies
Backward and forward through the air?

-Anonymous

ABSTRACT OF THESIS

Open Adoption It's Effect On The Parent-Child Relationship

While adoption has been in existence for centuries, only in recent years has open adoption, the procedure in which contact continued between birth parents and their biological children, been practiced. Consequently, the effect of this practice on birth parents, adoptive parents and their children has had limited study. The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of open adoption on their relationship with the adopted child. The outcome of this study indicates that open adoption is a positive change in social work practice and this change in philosophy of family building has resulted in a positive experience for the families in this study.

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OPEN ADOPTION

IT'S EFFECT ON THE ADOPTIVE PARENT/CHILD RELATIONSHIP

I. INTRODUCTION

References to adoption can be found in the Bible. Such references are also found in the ancient codes, laws, and writings of various cultures including the Babylonians, Chinese and Egyptians, along with the Hebrew and Hindu religions.

Terrell & Upton Terrell (1976) state that "In both ancient and early historical times, therefore, adoption was an almost universal political and social institution (in American Indian life). The fundamental purpose of the system was to offset human losses by restoring the dead and missing in their persons of others, both male and female, who were either captured in warfare or acquired by merger. . . adopted persons became bonafide members of the family clan or gens adopting them and thus, by legal fiction, full fledged members of the tribe. . .an adopted man or woman could embody the blood of the departed person." (page 32)

According to Melina & Roszia (1993) the practice of adoption in this country was first given the legal status of a contract when, in 1815, Massachusetts passed a law which for the first time recognized the interests of the child and required that the adoption be approved by a judge. Such a law was in part a response to a much larger and widespread child welfare movement. The reality of the time was that there were scores of homeless and parentless children roaming the streets of New York City and other large cities in this country. Trattner (1989) states that in 1853 the New York Children's Aid Society was founded by the Reverend Charles Loring Brace and this organization was responsible for the "placing out" of these children. Reverend Brace was not fond

of urban life and believed that such children would be better served by being placed in the rural areas of this country. "For Brace, the best of all asylums was the home of the farmer who he believed to be the most solid and intelligent citizen. He was convinced that the availability of such homes, especially in the West, where youngsters could nurture their freedom, their creativity, was most desirable". (page 110) The first orphan train began in 1854 when forty-six boys and girls were taken by train from New York City to a small town in Michigan. This practice continued with placement of the children in western states until the early 1900's and a total of over 50,0000 children were "placed out" in this manner.

Other responses to this problem were the establishment of public and private institutions generally referred to as "foundling homes". However there were high mortality rates with the children placed in these homes due to the absence of mothers to nurse them and the inability to find an adequate supply of wet nurses. Other developmental delays on the part of the children in these homes did not speak well for the care given in such institutions (Lindsay, 1987).

Again, according to Lindsay (1987), with the increasing number of children placed in adoptive homes during the last half of the nineteenth century, there was a growing concern for the need to regulate this practice. Trattner (1989) states that in 1891, Michigan became the first state to mandate preadoptive investigations. "This marked the beginning of child legislation that emphasized the human elements in adoption." (page 113). By 1929 all states in this country had enacted some form of adoption legislation and almost all state statutes emphasized the "best interests of the child" as the justification for such adoptions.

However, along with these laws also came the statutory requirements for secrecy, anonymity and the sealing of adoptions records. The Minnesota Act of

1917 is credited with having initiated the secrecy and sealed records of adoption (Melina & Roszia, 1993). According to Gross (1993) these practices were not designed to preserve anonymity between biological parents and adopters, but to shield the adoption proceedings from public scrutiny. These statutes barred all persons from inspecting the files and records on adoption except to the parties for the adoption and their attorneys. Melina & Roszia (1993) state that by the 1930's virtually all states had followed the lead of Minnesota and had the same closed record practice. This uniformly led to the practice of confidential adoptions and as stated all records including the child's original birth certificate were sealed at the time of the adoption. Within these confidential adoptions, new birth certificates were given. These birth certificates listed the adoptive parents as the parents of record. The adoption records, which not only included the birth certificate but also any identifying information on the biological parents was sealed away, supposedly forever. Melina and Roszia (1993) go on to say that the reason given for the sealing of records was to allow the child and unmarried mother, (who was usually believed to be promiscuous) to get a fresh start. The child was also, theoretically spared the stigma of being born to parents who were assumed to be poor. At the time these conditions of promiscuity and poverty were thought to be inheritable. Gross (1993) states that this practice of sealing the child's records, was endorsed by social workers in child-placing agencies because of their concern for the child with the possible stigma associated with being labeled illegitimate and the social worker's fear for what this could mean for the child in society. If all information regarding the child's past were sealed away and if no one was aware of the child's "illegitimacy" the child would supposedly be spared also being labeled in such a manner. There was also a belief that the child's integration and transition into the adoptive family would be easier and the child as a result would feel more

secure in the placement if his or her past was sealed away forever. In many instances, children were never informed of their adoption and grew up to believe that their adoptive parents were actually their biological parents.

Some authors speculate that confidential, closed adoptions were also endorsed by the social work community because it gave them the opportunity to serve as the intermediary between birth parents and adoptive families. In effect social workers became "providers" of children to these families. It has been suggested that closed adoption and tight control by the social work community were a form of guaranteed employment for the social workers (Melina and Roszia, 1993).

During the past thirty years however, there has been a growing feeling on the part of experts in the area of adoption, that psychological problems observed in adolescent and adult adoptees, birthparents, and adoptive parents appeared to be the direct result of the secrecy, anonymity and sealed records in aspects of closed adoption. "the ghosts of the birthparents, inherent in the closed system are ever present. . ." (Baran and Pannor, 1990, p. 94). In 1975, these authors recommended that open adoption be initiated for infants and children and in 1984 they recommended that open adoption become standard practice.

According to Melina and Roszia (1993) the 1960's and 70's were a time of changing social mores, in that there was a different attitude toward sex and the stigma of unmarried women having children out of wedlock was no longer considered in the same negative way as in past generations. They go on to say that at this same time John Bowlby, M.D. and Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, M.D. each published information about death and dying. Their theories of loss were that people need to go through the stages of loss in order to avoid long-term emotional discomfort and possible serious emotional problems. The practice of

closed adoption certainly did not help either adoptive couples grieve their infertility or birth parents their loss of a child.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the effect of open adoption on adoptive parents in this adoption triangle. Particular emphasis was given to the effect of the open adoption on their relationship with the adopted child.

According to Melina and Roszia (1993) open adoption is the outgrowth of a belief that:

1. Child have a connection to their parents, beginning before birth that cannot be altered or denied by use of the legal system.
2. In order for children to not live a fantasy life regarding their biological parents, children need to have information regarding their origins.
3. Children need to know that even though their parent(s) placed them for adoption, this does not represent a rejection on their part and that in fact their biological parent does care about them.
4. The biological parent need not represent a threat to them or to their relationship with their adoptive family.
5. In order for biological parents to feel at peace with their decision to place them for adoption, they need to know the outcome of their pregnancy.
6. Permission given by the biological parent(s) to the adoptive parent(s) to raise their child will ultimately benefit the adoptive parents and result in their feeling of entitlement to the child. Also, that involvement with the biological parent does not diminish their relationship with the adoptive parent(s).
7. In general, relationships within the family system are healthier with an atmosphere of openness and honesty by those involved.

Silber and Speedlin (1983) described how birth mothers were counseled by their adoption agency to write letters to their children, explaining their reasons for making adoption plans. This allowed the birth mothers to say good-bye to their

child and enabled them to move on to the next stage of mourning. The other benefit of these letters to the child was that they helped the child to understand their mother's reasons for choosing adoption and also helped them to understand that their placement was not a rejection by their birth mother. In effect the children were helped to understand that their placement was an act of love by their birth mother. This helped the children deal with their feelings of rejection and inferiority as they grew up and come to terms with their status as adopted children. It also enabled the children to see their birth mothers as real, valuable human beings.

In the book, *Dear Birthmother, Thank You for Our Baby*, Speedlin and Silber describe the agency's commitment to encouraging the exchange of information between birth families and adoptive families. This practice enabled birth parents to know the outcome of their decision to place their child for adoption and gave adoptees access to information about their origins.

Important medical information was also shared as such information was known or became known. The exchange of this information is vital in enabling the adoptive family to both anticipate any potential health problems for the child as well as their ability to provide physicians with needed information. Since many health conditions are inherited, this information is vital data for the health care practitioner.

In this practice of open communication between adoptive and birth parents, there began to be a growing trust on both parts. Adoptive parents realized that they had less of a need to be fearful of birth parents. They also came to recognize that the birth parent need not be shut out of their child's life forever.

Birth parents also gained more power, in part due to the fact that there were less children available for adoption. They began to make more demands in the entire placement process. This included a growing trend to the birth parent's

having a voice in the selection of potential families for their child as well as insisting that there be more openness in the relationship with the adoptive family and in many cases insisting that they be able to maintain some contact with the child as well.

Some researchers (see for example, Melina and Roszia 1993) believed that adoption agencies that didn't respond to these demands for change by birth parents suffered a loss of business. Birth parents turned to attorneys and doctors for assistance with their demands for more input in the placement decisions regarding their child and one in which they could maintain more control.

The Child Welfare League of America began recommending open adoption as standard practice in 1986 (Gordner, 1986).

Increasingly, the practice of open adoption was begun.

Berry (1993 p.232) defines open adoption as the "sharing of information and or contacts between adoptive and biological parents of an adopted child, before and or after the placement of the child and perhaps continuing for the life of the child."

Open adoption is a relatively new concept and research therefore, is minimal in comparison to other areas of child welfare practice. Such research will be important in meeting the need for future adoptive parents to learn from the successes and failures experienced by the adoptive parents who have been down this road before. In addition, research would be immensely helpful in assessing the consequences of such decisions by adoptive and biological parents since such consequences are life long and affect the physical and emotional well-being of their children.

This in-depth research paper was qualitative in structure and encompassed interviews of five adoptive parents. Two of the adoptive families had each

adopted two children in such an open adoption and for the others, this was their first experience with open adoption.

II. REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

While open adoption is a fairly new practice within the field of social work, there have been a number of studies of the practice. There are significant differences in the findings of studies done on the effect of openness in adoption on the adoptive parent/child relationship.

For example, Etter & Giovani (1993) found a high level of satisfaction of both adoptive and biological parents in open adoption. The parents in this study were allowed to choose the level of openness they desired before being matched. Giovanni also found that success in placement was strongly related to the amount of preadoptive preparation in helping adoptive parents understand the open adoption process and their own comfort level with it. In addition, a written agreement with regard to transportation costs to visitation, correspondence etc. was found to be helpful in successful placements. McRoy and Grotevant (1988) interviewed biological and adoptive parents in 17 adoptions and found a relationship between openness and a sense of entitlement (or right to the child) the adoptive parents felt. In such cases, the more open the adoption, the more comfortable the adoptive parents felt with such openness. These parents had some concern about the maturity of the biological mothers and the amount of time and energy expended in contacts with them but felt strongly about continuing such contacts for the benefit of their children. Siegel (1993)) studied 12 adoptive couples with children three to five years of age. This study concluded that open adoptions were successful from the perspective of both the biological and adoptive parents. They found the overall tone of interviews with adoptive parents to be "overwhelmingly and strikingly positive towards open adoption" (Siegel, page 14). Berry (1993) studied families involved in open

adoption of infants who planned and subsequently did have contact with biological parents and found high levels of satisfaction with the adoption at the early postadoption stage: 90% were very satisfied and 95% stated they would do this again.

Adoptive parents who had a sense of control over the frequency of contacts between their children and former caregivers expressed feelings that such openness was helpful to them in their relationship with their children. Those who did not find the openness helpful at all said they had no control over the contacts (Barth and Berry, 1988).

Berry (1993) found the key predictor of adoptive parents comfort with open adoption had to do with the fact that these parents had planned for openness from the beginning of the placement. Other indicators of comfort were: the fact that the child had not been abused or neglected prior to placement (in the case of children one year and older at time of placement), the birthmother's higher level of education, the directness of contact, the adoptive mother's older age, along with the fact that adoptive parents had talked with the birthparents prior to the birth.

Healthy adoptive parent/child relationships have been found to exist in relation to openness in adoption. Campbell et. al. (1991) studied 114 families in which openness was initiated at a latent age of the child and found from a mail questionnaire that when the adoptive family is supportive of openness, the self-esteem of the children improved as did the relationship they had with their adoptive parents. Reunions did not seem to disrupt the lives of the adoptees, and enhanced their relationship with the adoptive family. Meezan and Shireman (1985) found that the adoptive parents of older children with the most extensive contact with their children's biological parents had more understanding of their children. Baran et. al. (1976) discussed the many advantages of open adoption

when biological parents were reassured that they had provided a loving and secure home for their child and were given an opportunity to know their child in the future. They were not made to feel excluded or rejected because of agency or legal stipulation. Open adoption allowed biological and adoptive parents to develop new strengths and resources and eliminated many fears and fantasies that had hampered the relationship with their children.

Belbas (1986) interviewed twelve adoptive parents of infants and found the more frequent and direct the contacts, the less adoptive parents worried about not being the child's real parents or not feeling entitled to the child. Adoptive parents who had letter-only contact were those who worried most about the biological parents wanting or taking the child back. Belbas (1986) studied 15 adoptive couples with children four to six years of age. It was found that families with the least amount of contact were more likely to worry about kidnapping than those with more contact of 2-4 times per years. (Iwanek, 1987:33; Belbas, 1986:192; McRoy, et. al., 1988; Siegel, 1990:13) found that adoptive parents do not fear the unknown and have "no secrets". Such adoptive parents take comfort in the knowledge that their child will have access to information and communication links that may eliminate unhealthy fantasizing about biological heritage. Bowen (1978) suggests that the more complete the cut off of the child from the biological parents the more intense the involvement of the child with these absent figures. Bowen and his colleagues developed a therapeutic method of coaching a person is to reconnect with important members of their family of origin which has been helpful in assisting these individuals to feel at peace with the decision their parent(s) made to place them for adoption and also enables the individual to find peace in their current adoptive placement.

Groth, Bonnardel, Devis, Martin and Vousden (1987) cite a number of advantages of open adoption. It allows adoptive parents to work through their

infertility more easily, since open adoption does not support their denial of the reality of their infertility and their fantasy that the adopted child is biologically theirs. For adoptees, identity formation is easier when they can integrate the parts about their birth and biological parents. Groth et al. (1987) believe that open adoption should be offered as an option to the traditional closed adoption of children.

The disadvantages of open adoption have been documented as well. Berry (1993) found uncertainty among adoptive parents about the potential effect of openness on the child and on their family. One third to one fifth admit that they do not know what that effect will be and levels of uncertainty were found to be highest among those most surprised by post-placement contact.

Partridge M. (1986) found that 14% of disrupted adoptive placements in their study of older child adoptions were found to be attributed to difficulties arising from the ongoing relationship between the child and his or her biological parents.

Among problems with open adoption are the continuing pain felt by biological parents, McRoy et. al. (1988) adoptive parents identification with that pain, McRoy (1989) Belbas (1986) the need of adoptive parents to defend themselves against the worries and fears of relatives and friends, Iwanek (1987) feelings of burdensomeness on the part of adoptive parents in preparing for meetings, McRoy et. al. (1988) having to meet the emotional needs of biological parents, McRoy et. al. (1988) and the concerns of adoptive parents in not having similar information about their other adopted children. (Iwanek, 1987; Belbas, 1987; McRoy et. al., 1988).

(Kirk, 1982; Foster, 1979; Andrews, 1978; Van Guilden Wicker, 1986) all voice concern about harboring unrealistic fantasies in birth parents, with this changing trend toward openness in adoption. They caution that changing the perceived status of adoptive parents to that of providers of foster care; about letting the

pendulum move too quickly from secrecy to openness, before the long term consequences of open adoption are known.

III. METHODOLOGY-RESEARCH DESIGN

The methodology chosen for this research project was a qualitative design. According to Rubin and Babbie (1989) this type of research "subjectively taps the deeper meanings of human experience". Grinnell (1988) defines qualitative research as "being used inductively i.e. deriving concepts and theory from the social reality being studied. This inductive strategy for theory development has been referred to as grounded theory and is more suited to the study of relatively uncharted social terrain." (page 188). This type of design allowed this student to use field research involving the direct observation of social phenomena in its natural setting. The research design for this study was exploratory in nature. This researcher attempted to evaluate the specified populations experiences with open adoption. Units of analysis in this study were the adoptive parents who participated in the open adoption of their children. According to Grinnell (1988) "qualitative research studies usually rely heavily on participants observation and methods and purposeful conversation (page 189). Accordingly, in-person, in-depth interviews were the data collection tool used for this exploratory, qualitative study.

SUBJECT SELECTION

Participants in this study were referred to this researcher by a Social Worker, Sue Wein, who has worked with them in the adoption of their child. Ms. Wein was sought out by this researcher as a reference person due to her varied social work background and reputation as an authority on services to families. Ms.

Wein holds a Masters Degree in Guidance and Counseling as well as a Masters Degree in Social Work. She has extensive experience as a foster parent, day care provider, and child protection social worker, public education trainer and college teacher. She is currently is director of a BSW Program (in candidacy) at Presentation College in Aberdeen, South Dakota and also works part time privately doing adoptive home studies and providing ongoing services to adoptive families in northeastern South Dakota. Ms Wein agreed to send the introductory letter and releases (prepared by this researcher) to possible participants who were either current or former adoptive clients.

Subjects for this study were obtained using "snowballing" techniques. This type of research has been defined as "nonprobability sampling procedure. . .It is particularly useful if we are interested in a very special population of limited size and know only a handful of appropriate persons from that population. The procedure is simply to gather data from the known persons and to request information from them as to other appropriate person. This cycle is repeated until we have exhausted the potential respondents or have a sample of desired size. The sample increases in size, or snowballs, with each repetition of the cycle." (Grinnell, page 253) Such snowballing techniques were used and these participants had the option of referring other adoptive couples to this researcher. The known referring source, Ms. Wein agreed to send a letter to possible study subjects describing the research. It was then up to these parties to contact this researcher if they were interested in becoming a part of the study. The anonymity of participants was thus ensured with this process in that participants would not be known to each other. In reality, however, none of the participants gave names of other interested parties and all participants in this study used were referred by Ms. Wein.

Participants adopted their child(ren) from 2-6 years ago. There were originally eight couples who indicated that they wished to be a part of this study but due to their schedules, three of the families were unable to commit the time necessary for the interview and the population was narrowed to five families.

DATA COLLECTION

Data Collection was accomplished via in-person, in-depth interviewing using an open-ended interview tool and informal conversational probes to add depth and clarification to the responses of participants in this study. Standardized, open-ended interview questions were used to reduce interviewer bias and effects on the adoptive parents. Such data collection was used to allow participants in this study the opportunity to establish a general direction for the interview. Participants in the study did most of the talking and even though there was a specific list of questions, it was important to allow them the flexibility to expand on their answers by at times diverting the interview to an area not necessarily in line with the specific questions being asked, although all questions in the survey were answered by the participants. Probing was a technique used with open-ended questioning also and involved the attempt by the interviewer to obtain further elaboration by the respondent to a question. Such probing, however was attempted in a neutral and non-invasive manner so as to not affect the response given. Participants were interviewed only once and for a limited time of one to two hours. Participants were interviewed as a couple. This was not difficult as I am accustomed to interviewing couples or families as a part of my profession and have no difficulty with such multiple participant involvement. In the course of the interview, women were much more verbal than their partners. This may be partly attributable to my gender. Separate initial interviews may have resulted in more information being gained from the adoptive fathers in the study.

INSTRUMENT DESIGN

Standardized, open-ended interview questions (see appendix) were developed to include the following categories of questions:

1. Background Information
2. Adoptive Parent's Knowledge of, and Motivation to, Participate in an Open Adoption
3. Relationship with Biological Parent
4. Adoptive Parent's Present Level of Satisfaction with the Open Adoption

The researcher obtained demographic/background information at the beginning of the interview in an attempt to build a rapport with them. We then proceeded on with the more invasive questions of the study. The researcher began the interview with an open-ended question inviting the participants to ask any questions of the interviewer prior to proceeding.

Verbal and written permission to audiotape the interviews was obtained from each adoptive couple prior to beginning the interviews. Each audiotape was later transcribed with the knowledge and consent of the participants in this study. Audiotapes and consent forms were kept in a locked file in the principal investigator's home and will be destroyed following completion and publication of the research. No one other than the principal investigator has access to identifying information of the participants in this study. Please refer to the Appendix for a copy of the interview questions.

ETHICAL PROTECTION

The proposal for this research, as prescribed by the Augsburg curriculum, was presented to the Internal Review Board. This research was approved by the IRB prior to beginning the study.

Included in the initial letter to participants was a consent form (see appendix) for informed participation in this research. Participants returned this form to the researcher in an enclosed self addressed envelope. No names were used in this thesis, which would identify the participants in this study. Responses from participants were not attributable to them, nor were direct quotes of these parties used in this written product. Participants were made aware of the fact that the researcher would share a results of this study with them, should they so desire. None of the participants indicated a desire to have the results sent to them.

ANALYSIS

Analysis of the data in this qualitative study was accomplished with a two-part process of organizing data into patterns, themes, categories and descriptive units and then interpreting the organization of data by explaining themes and recognized patterns.

According to Rubin and Babbie (1989) data analysis in a qualitative study is done in this manner as observation and analysis are interwoven processes. According to Grinnell, "Brief examples, often in the form of quotes from clients, may be used for purposes of both illustration and documentation." (page 454) Inductive logic is an important element in this pursuit of patterns which participants in the study all share. In this pursuit it is also important to be mindful of differences or deviation from the norms as well. Theories or general understandings are developed over the course of the observations or in this case the interview of parents of child with an open adoption. Inductive analysis also guarded against the principal investigator fitting data to prescribed themes and patterns.

Rubin and Babie (1989) state that this process of reporting on themes and concepts would substantiate findings within the literature review. A sensitivity to new and or contrary organizations of data which would either refute previous findings or add to new perspectives on this research subject.

IV. DESCRIPTION OF STUDY SUBJECTS

FINDINGS

Five adoptive parents returned the consent form to this principal investigator. They were then contacted by phone and agreed to be interviewed. The date, time and location of this interview was scheduled at their convenience and was held in the subjects homes. The interviews were approximately two hours in length.

Four couples were Caucasian and one couple Caucasian and Japanese. The adoptive couples were all married and all but one of the couples were childless prior to this adoption. All participants in this study had a high school education and three of the five couples held college degrees. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 40 years of age and all could be described as middle to upper-middle class in standard of living.

Two of the couples had each adopted two children and in each case the adoptions were open. In one case the couple was approached by the biological mother to adopt her child two months after the birth of the child. However, the second child for this couple was planned with the mother prior to the baby's birth.

The second couple became aware of the availability of their first child through a mutual friend of the mother but did not meet the mother until she was in the delivery room. The introduction of perspective adoptive mother and the biological mother in this manner was due to the fact that she delivered the child two months before her scheduled delivery date (because of a miscalculation). The second child for this couple was referred by an agency and plans were made for this placement prior to the birth of the child.

All five couples indicated their adoptions are open but to varying degrees. As can be noted by the responses in the interviews, participants each had their own definition of what open adoption means to them. This is evidenced by their various decisions of the adoptive parents to have open but different relationships with each of the biological parents.

REASON FOR CHOOSING TO ADOPT

All five couples in this study came to the decision to adopt due to problems with infertility. All of the couples had received medical services in their attempt to conceive a child. Only one of the couples involved is still attempting to conceive a child.

ADOPTIVE PARENTS KNOWLEDGE OF AND MOTIVATION TO PARTICIPATE IN AN OPEN ADOPTION

Following are the questions (in bold print) asked by the researcher of the adoptive parents with regard to the above criteria. A summary of their responses follows each question. Direct quotes by the participants are in italics and appropriately marked.

1. Question: Where did you first hear of the concept of open adoption?

Participants in this study first heard about the concept of open adoption in a variety of ways. Two couples heard about it in an adoption support group:

"We were members of Resolve, an organization for infertile couples and at one meeting open adoption was discussed and began thinking about it at that time."

"At a support group, someone talked about the concept, we began thinking about it at that time as our older child had many issues around not knowing his birth father and the openness of this concept was interesting to us."

One couple was already in the adoption process when they heard about open adoption. One couple was solicited to adopt their child by the biological mother,

who suggested that they have an open arrangement. One couple heard about open adoption through a discussion with friends. One of the marriage partners was also adopted and only recently met her biological father. This participant always wanted to know more about her father as she grew up and this was a motivating factor behind the decision of this couple to give serious consideration to open adoption.

2. Question: How much information did you have on open adoption prior to seriously considering this option?

Participants had heard of open adoption but had little information about it prior to seriously considering this option. Two couples had heard speakers on the subject and became interested following the speech. One of these couples had friends who had adopted their child in an open type of arrangement and also became interested in it for that reason.

3. Question: Why did you choose to adopt your child in an open adoption arrangement?

Participants had a variety of reasons for making the choice to have an open adoption. All of the couples thought this would be a quicker way to actually get a placement, because they had heard about the long waiting lists for babies. One of these two couples also indicated they did it also for the child:

"For (child's name)-we never had a fear of not being mom and dad-felt it was the right thing to do for her."

One of the couples stated they were open to either closed or open adoption but the biological mother approached them prior to delivery indicating that she wished to have some openness in the placement.

"Our baby's birthmother, asked to meet us before (child's name) birth-after she had already chosen us as adoptive parents. This was about two weeks before her due date. We consented and our relationship proceeded to get more open as our comfort levels increased."

Two of the couples came to know the biological mothers through mutual friends. Both couples realized that openness would need to be a part of the adoption when they proceeded with the adoption for the obvious reason they would always be aware of the other through the mutual friend.

4. Question: Who did you first contact to initiate the open adoption of your child?

All of the couples involved, made their first contact in this decision with either an attorney or adoption agency or support group. Two of the couples however, made the major decisions regarding initial agreements of openness on their own and without the traditional social work agency involvement.

5. Question: What was the process involved in your pursuit of adopting a child with such an open arrangement? If there was agency involvement was this a supportive experience?

Three of the adoptive couples utilized agencies for the placement and all three were very satisfied with the services received.

"...our agency deals in both kinds of arrangements. They allowed us to seek out own level of openness, counseling and supporting as the need arose. We felt they were very supportive to us as well as (biological mother's name) throughout the entire adoption experience."

"We found our agency to be very supportive. the decision to adopt openly was a big decision but the extent of the openness is totally under our control."

As previously stated, the other two couples made their own arrangements with the adoptive parents and also felt satisfied with the outcomes.

The families who did not have agency involvement prior to placement did receive the follow-up services of a private social worker for support and education following placement. Participants in this study talked at great length about the level of stress involved in making open adoption work for them and for their child. They all indicated that because this is such a new area many of their friends and family find have found it difficult to be as supportive as needed by the adoptive family. All of the adoptive parents in this study described the supportive services of an on-going Social Worker as being extremely helpful and one which had been of great assistance to them in coping with the various stresses involved in this type of adoption.

C. Relationship with Biological Parent

1. Question: When did you first have contact with the biological mother and or father of your child? Also, describe the relationship you and the biological mother and or father developed during the pregnancy.

Three of the adoptive couples had contact with the biological mother prior to the birth of the child. Only one couple was able to meet the biological father and this individual still maintains contact with them. The couples met these mothers ranging from three weeks to several months prior to the child's birth.

All described the relationship with the biological mother as being very positive:

"The chemistry between us and (biological mother) was almost instant. We exchanged information about each other and our families. At the end of our (first) visit, she asked us to be present at the child's birth."

"We began having monthly phone contact and began to feel like a sister to her...grew very close and talked openly about trust that was developing between our two families."

One of the couples who have two adopted children (both open) met the first biological mother at the time of delivery as she was two months early due to a mistake in calculating the child's birth date. Agreements made with this biological mom were therefore informal due to these circumstances. Their second child's adoption was done with the assistance of an agency and agreements and counseling with the biological mother began during her pregnancy.

2. Question: What agreements were made with the biological mother and or father regarding open adoption during the pregnancy? Were these agreements made informally or was there a more formal agreement made?

All five couples indicated that agreements to have openness in the placement were made during the pregnancy. This was with the exception of two of the placements which were not arranged until after the birth of the child.

Two of the couples had formal written agreements with the biological mothers and the others oral agreements which were less formal in nature and centered around their shared belief that open adoption was important for the child. These oral agreements were left open ended by the adoptive parents who indicated to the biological mothers' that while they were committed to openness in the adoption, they would need to make decisions as to the extent and nature of the contact based on the need of the child and that this contact may change based on the needs of their child at any particular time in his/her life.

"(Child's name) was born three weeks after the initial meetings. I was on Christmas vacation, so was able to meet with (biological mom's name) several times for lunch/shopping, before (child's name) birth, we also spoke on the phone almost daily. We had rented a mobile phone so we could stay available in case (biological mom's name) went into labor, and had given her that phone number. Ultimately labor was induced. When that date was decided, (biological mom's name) asked us to stay the night at her home so we could all check into the hospital at 6:00 a.m. the next morning. At this point, it felt like a very natural step in our relationship and we gladly accepted her invitation."

3. Question: Was this relationship with the biological mother and or father a positive experience? Please explain.

All of the adoptive couples indicated that they had and presently maintain good relations with the biological mothers.

"I believe open adoption gave (biological mother's name) a great deal of peace about her decision. It was an important step in getting to know each other before the baby came."

". . .very much so. Our extended families also got involved and we see (biological mother's name) family as extension of our family. . . .feel that all parties are acting in the best interest of our child."

Two of the adoptive couples indicated that they have met other extended family members as well and have been invited, along with the adopted children to the biological mother's weddings.

4. Question: What was the nature of your contact with the birth mother and/or father at the time your child was born?

All five couples indicated a positive relationship with the biological mother following the birth of the child. One couple lived three states away from the state where the baby was born.

"We waited for two days after the birth of the child to go to (where the baby was born). My parents went with us and were nervous about our baby's mom changing her mind. We didn't feel that way though and felt at peace with the situation-we never worried about baby's mom changing her mind and she didn't"

"Our baby's birth mom delivery went well and we were right at her bedside. She had instructed the delivery nurse to allow me to hold the baby first (such a selfless, powerful act). We stayed until we knew all was well, then felt she needed time to herself. She called us the next morning and said we need to come and help feed the baby. We (figuratively) flew on the one hour trip down the highway!"

5. Question: Describe your relationship with the biological mother and/or father after the birth of your child.

The adoptive couples all indicate positive feelings about their relations with the biological mothers of their children with the exception of one couple who indicated that the biological parents are not always happy with the restrictions put on the amount of contact, however even in this case the adoptive parents indicate that in their case the relationship with the biological parents remains positive.

One adoptive mother described the following which she felt was indicative of their relationship with the biological mother:

"We (biological and adoptive mother) were together in a mall with the baby and a woman was admiring the baby. The woman innocently enough asked who the mother of the baby was. (Biological mother's name) and I looked at each

other and (biological mother's name) didn't miss a beat-pointed at me and declared "she is". We giggled knowingly and a little nervously but I (adoptive mom) could also feel the "cement" of our relationship, all around hardening. This incident is not atypical of the validation (biological mother) has given us from day one.

7. Question: What were your feelings as you went through this process of assuming care of your child?

The adoptive parents described feelings of "joy", "fear", "hope", "anticipation", "happiness", "joy".

8. Question: What was the nature of your discussion and agreements made with the biological mother and or father regarding openness after the birth of your child?

Three of the couples who had agency counseling regarding the adoption, reported that specific discussions regarding the nature of the openness resulted in the details being worked out prior to the birth of the child and discussions about contact after the birth of the child were not necessary.

9. Question: What is the nature and frequency of contact between the biological parent(s) and your child?

Adoptive parents in this study reported a variety of ways in which biological parents are allowed to remain in contact with their children.

One family allows only cards, letters etc. in the way of contact on birthdays and at Christmas. This contact goes both ways and the adoptive parents also send impromptu letters, pictures if something is noteworthy.

The other families all allow personal visits by the biological moms with the children but to varying degrees. One family allows the biological mom to visit at their home on a yearly basis and the care of the child is entirely hers during this visitation.

"(Child's name) sees her mother on a yearly basis as she (birth mother) lives several states away. When she comes to visit she stays for at least two weeks and during this time assumes all of the care for (child's name). . . .she (child) would always know of her birth mother and can call her at any time." (reference to contact at other times of the year)

Other adoptive parents are allowing visitation with the child but always in the presence of the adoptive parents.

One couple indicated that they initially allowed the biological mother of the child to come to the house on demand but found the following:

"We began to feel like baby-sitters for the child. We discussed this with the birth mother and she backed off. She still sees the child but on a less frequent basis."

All of the adoptive parents indicated that they controlled the frequency of contact between the biological parents and children.

D. Adoptive Parents Present Level of Satisfaction with the Open Adoption

1. Question: Is there any difference between what was initially agreed upon and your present arrangement in this open adoption?

All of the adoptive couples indicate that there is a difference between what was originally agreed upon and the present arrangement. Two of the couples reported that they have decreased the amount of contact with the biological parents. The other adoptive parents initially had limited contact with the biological mother but have gradually allowed for an increase in the amount of contact.

"It's become more open as time has gone on-now feels that we're family with hers. (Child's name) feels lucky because not every adopted child get to know their other mother."

Another couple indicate that:

"Our initial decision was to only allow pictures and yearly cards etc. but now it's much more open."

A third couple stated:

"As we have become more comfortable and there is more trust with (biological mother's name) we are considering more openness, however we haven't had a request from her for more contact, but she knows she can talk to us about this if she should desire."

2. Question: How satisfied are you with the present arrangement?

All of the adoptive parents indicate that they are satisfied with the present arrangements.

"We are very satisfied-feel that both sides are working for the best interests of the childre and are selflessly not becoming jealous of each other."

All of the adoptive parents state that they feel open adoption is important for the benefit of their child and also that key to their satisfaction is their ability to control the extent of contact as per the needs of their child. All of the adoptive parents indicate that it is clearly understood with the biological parents that all control in this regard rests with the adoptive parent.

3. Question: What are the positive aspects of this arrangement from our perspective? What are the negatives?

The adoptive parents all indicate that the biggest advantage of the open adoption is that there are no secrets in their life as there would be with a closed adoption. Everything is out in the open.

"The positive aspects include just knowing who the birth mom is-we'll be able to answer questions for our child and we hope the birth mom will also be able to answer any questions that we cannot. We also find (biological mother's name) presence in our life to be very enriching, aside from the fact that we share such a special bond."

". . .feel that both sides are respectful of the other and willing to compromise for the benefit of the child, however all control rests with us."

"We're doing this for the benefit of (child's name) and have not seen any disadvantages to this arrangement-we have never been threatened by their knowing each other."

One couple, who indicate they are very satisfied with the level of openness however, stated that they sometimes fear that their child may experience some confusion with the degree of openness in this placement. It should be noted that this same couple have also increased the visitation between the biological mother and their child in spite of these feelings.

"I feel we'll need to be very perceptive as to when and how to answer questions and address issues."

Again, all of the adoptive parents relate that their control in this arrangement is key to their continued feelings of positive satisfaction with open adoption.

4. How do you feel your child has coped with this arrangement? Have there been any negatives which have been needed to be dealt with? What are the negatives for your child, from your perspective?

All of the participants indicated that they felt their children were coping well with the open adoption.

"We definitely feel our relationship has been enhanced by this arrangement. It has not always been a smooth course but overall we are happy with the way it has turned out."

Two of the couples indicated that since their children were still toddlers, it would be difficult to assess their feelings in this stage of their development. However, they feel that:

"it will be best for the children to know their family of origin and for there to not be any secrets and for this reason our relationship with our child has been enhanced."

"The openness is just another facet of our family life but has not had an adverse affect on the children, in fact it has created an atmosphere of openness and honesty which is definitely conducive to our parent/child relationship.

Two of the couples indicated that their children have had to cope with issues such as the birth mom giving birth to another child and also rivalry with other adopted siblings in terms of the amount of material goods they each receive from their respective birth mothers.

"we feel it is important for (child's name) to understand now that things are not always fair in this life and the importance of material goods is not significant in that while his birth mother doesn't send him expensive things, she does continue to share her love and concern for him and for his well-being."

5. Question: What are your present feelings about open adoption? Has there been any significant change since you first initiated the process for this adoption?

All of the adoptive couples in this study continue to feel positive about open adoption.

"We feel very good about it-more openness now than originally planned. Knowing their birth parents should be a natural part of an adoptive child's life."

"We feel it's a good idea if all involved can get along well."

". . .feel it is the only way to go with adoption as it is emotionally healthier for the children involved."

The majority of the adoptive parents now have more openness than was originally planned and feel more comfortable with this arrangement than they ever thought they could feel at this point.

6. Question: Do you feel that it has enhanced your relationship with your child? What has been the effect of this adoptive arrangement on your relationship both positively and negatively.

All of the adoptive couples involved indicated that they feel that open adoption has enhanced their relationship with their child.

"The openness is just another fact of our family life with no adverse effect on the child. . .it has created an atmosphere of openness and honesty which is definitely conducive to our parent child relationship."

"...definitely enhanced. We feel it will be best for the child to know her family or origin and that there not be any secrets.

With the exception of one couple who fear that the openness may create some confusion for their child, none of the adoptive couples expressed any negative feelings about the effect of open adoption on their relationship with their child. In fact, most of the couples indicated that the atmosphere of openness was conducive to their relationship with their child.

7. Question: Would you choose to do an open adoption again? Also, what changes would you make in the process in light of your current insight?

All of the couples involved indicated they would choose an open adoption again.

"We would choose open adoption again but very cautiously. ..."

"...secrets are not good-have met other adopted children who wish they had the opportunity to know their biological family but are afraid of hurting their adoptive parents."

All of the couples indicated that key to their happiness with the present adoption and a criteria if they were to ever adopt a child again with such an arrangement would be that they maintain the control in the relationship. All of the couples indicated that they felt it is important that they be the judge of what is best for their child and that there are never any guarantees as to what the future holds in terms of contact with the biological family. All indicated that they would need to maintain this control as they are in the best position to decide what is best for their child.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Comparison of Findings to Literature

Etter & Giovanni (1993) found that preadoptive preparation with regard to open adoption was helpful to adoptive parents in exploring their comfort with this relatively new concept in our culture. This preadoptive work resulted in a high level of satisfaction for the families surveyed. The findings in this study indicate however, that in only two of the placements had the families surveyed done this type of preparation prior to the decision to proceed with an open adoption. However, even among the couples who did not have the traditional agency support prior to the placement, there has been extensive support and counseling to all the families in the time since the placement and all of the families described this as being helpful to them.

Berry (1992) found that those adoptive parents who had planned for openness from the beginning of the placement, were the most comfortable with the open adoption. This research would support this claim as all of the adoptive parents had planned this openness from the time of placement and were very satisfied and comfortable with their decision to do so.

While all of the families in this research felt very good about their decision regarding open adoption, the factor which influenced them the most regarding the decision to proceed with open versus closed adoption had to do with their perception that they would be more likely to receive a placement if they consented to an open rather than closed adoption.

"We liked the possibility of a quicker ability to get a child with open adoption than through an agency with closed adoption."

Another couple indicated that:

"We knew very little about open adoption prior to this placement. However, we agreed to open adoption because the birth mother requested that she be allowed to remain in contact plus we live in a relatively small town and would not be able to avoid the biological parents even if we wanted to."

The results of this study would certainly concur with the research of Melina and Roszia (1993) and Silber and Speedlin (1983) regarding the decreasing numbers of children available for adoption and the motivation of adoptive parents to look positively at open adoption as being at least initially influenced by this fact that biological parents were demanding more openness if they were to actually place their child.

The findings of this study concur with the literature with regard to the sense of entitlement adoptive parents feel in relation to the extent of openness in the adoptive placement. The findings of Belbas (1986), McRoy and Grotevant (1988), Meezan and Shireman (1985), Belbas (1987) were that those families with frequent contact between the biological parent and child had fewer fears of the child being taken from them by the biological parent. The responses from the adoptive parents in my study bore this out as well. In other words, those adoptive parents who allowed frequent contact with the biological family felt comfortable with that parent and have few problems in relation to their feelings of security in the placement. One couple described the extent of the openness in that the biological mother of their child comes to their home and spends several weeks with them and in the care of their child. This couple indicated that:

"It is best for (child) to have an open relationship with her birth mother. She will always know her birth mother and can call her at any time."

Another couple indicated that:

"Both birth mother's of our children can see the children at their request-on a casual basis. They are welcome to come to the house at any time."

Adoptive parents who had a sense of control over the frequency of contacts between their children and the biological parents were referred to in the literature as expressing feelings that the openness was helpful to them in their relationship with their children (Berry 1992), (Barth and Berry (1988), The responses of the adoptive parents in my research indicated that their experiences were similar to this. All of these adoptive parents have control over the frequency of contact between their children and biological parents. The extent of contact ranged from the exchange of cards and letters on holidays and birthdays to frequent visitation in-person with the biological parent and in one case the involvement of biological mother in lengthy visitation in the adoptive parents home during which the biological mother assumes all responsibility for the child. This control of the adoptive parent in having the final say on the kind and extent of contact between the biological parent and their child was important to all of the adoptive parents interviewed.

The relationship with the biological mother was a recurring theme in the responses from adoptive parents.

In three of the adoptions, the adoptive parents indicated that they had developed a close relationship with the biological mother and they all felt this was a positive thing for them and for their child. Two of the adoptive parents described feeling that the biological mother had become another family member and had developed a very close relationship with her.

"It's become more open as time has gone on-now feels that we are family with (biological mother) and her family."

"We talked every month (during the pregnancy)-felt like a sister to her".

". . .we know our (biological mother's name) is a very unique individual. . ."

The satisfaction of the adoptive parents in this study was entirely positive.

"we are very satisfied. We feel both sides are working for the best interests of the child and are selflessly not becoming jealous. . ."

"the positive aspect is knowing. . .we'll be able to answer questions for our child and we hope to have (biological mother's name) there to answer question we can't."

All of the adoptive parents interviewed also felt that the open adoption has enhanced their relationship with their child. This concurs with the research of Campbell et. al. (1991). A common theme in this research was a belief by these adoptive parents that their parent/child bond would have been as strong even if the adoption had been closed, however that the relationship has been "enhanced" by the openness and lack of secrets in their family life, which includes the biological mothers.

". . .feel that these child are lucky to have two sets of parents who love and care about them-we feel that our bonding is as secure as a parent child bond can be. The openness is just another facet of this family life. . .it has created an atmosphere of openness and honesty which is definitely conducive to our parent child relationship."

LIMITATIONS

One of the limitations to this study is the obviously small number of families surveyed. Adoption, (even when open) continues to be a sensitive subject and while those families who choose to have a relationship of openness with the biological family are obviously not prone to believing that secrets are productive in their relationship within their family, they many times still do not want to open themselves up for possible scrutiny to people outside the family. Obtaining a sample was difficult for this reason and needs to be taken into consideration with regard to the results. It should also be noted that none of the adopted children of participants in this study had any child protection history.

CONCLUSION

The outcome of this study indicates that open adoption is a positive change in social work practice and that this change in philosophy of family building has resulted in a positive experience for the families in this study. Certainly based on this small sample, one could not make sweeping generalizations about the experiences of the thousands of adoptive families who have adopted a child with an open adoption. Plus, as can be found in the literature in and in this study, families have experienced some problems with relation to this openness. However, the literature and this research would seem to indicate that overall, this type of family building with less secrecy and it's open nature results in more satisfaction for adoptive families and hopefully in turn for their children as well as the biological parents. Some practice considerations are outlined below.

1. The support of a professional in the area of open adoption is crucial. According to Barth and Berry (1988), good postplacement services to adoptive

families begins with good preplacement services. Such outreach to these families must be provided and tailored to meet the individual needs of the adoptive family and should be provided in a respectful manner by the adoption worker. While some of the families in my study did not have this support prior to placement, all of the families received post-adoption counseling and they were enormously grateful for the support following placement. This is such a new area of practice and family building to most of our society, there needs to be guidance and support for families so that adoptive children do not have to bear the consequences of decisions by well-meaning but possibly naive adoptive parents with regard to their right to know of and about their origins. Parent support groups such as those found at the Minneapolis based Resources for Adoptive Parents are enormously helpful to some families and should be encouraged for adoptive families as well.

2. Parents should continue to maintain their attitude of openness regarding their child's biological family throughout the life of their child. The termination of parents rights can guarantee nothing in terms of future biological parent/child contact. Such a conditional termination of parental rights would not be legal. However, the agreements made by the adoptive family with the biological family should be honored. As children grow and family circumstances change there certainly needs to be flexibility on both sides regarding the contact with biological relatives.

3. As new research evolves in the study of open adoption, adoptive families need to be informed of such. The awareness of these findings by adoptive is crucial to enable them to continue to make intelligent decisions regarding openness and to realize the implications for such contact for themselves and their children.

4. In both the literature as well as the adoptions in this survey, the biological father is not dealt with in the placement. Many times this is due to his abandonment of the mother during pregnancy. However, this unknown figure in the child's life may be very real to him or her. Careful consideration needs to be given by the adoptive family to the feelings of the child with regard to this person. He should not be routinely negated, nor should the feelings of the child with regard to this person.

5. Lastly, all parties involved must continue to make any decisions regarding openness with the best interests of the child, not the adults in mind. This child centered focus is crucial in keeping a healthy balance for all involved.

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