Psychological Presence of Adult Adoptees: Exploring Birth Mother Perspectives

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Background and Purpose

- Previous research has examined the birth mother's perspective on the adopted child's psychological presence (e.g. Fravel et al., 2000) and found that psychological presence is associated with birth mother's satisfaction with the adoption arrangement.

- Little research, however, has examined how psychological presence evolves over time, as the adopted child reaches adulthood.

- In addition, families are increasingly incorporating technology as a form of communication and little is known regarding the impact of tech mediated contact as a form of communication between birth mothers and adoptees, and how this form of communication may influence the psychological presence of the adoptee from the birth mothers' perspective.

Objectives/Research Question

This exploratory study sought to extend earlier research by investigating how these same families look today, over 30 years post-placement, with the following research questions:

1) Is the adopted child, now adult (YA), on the birth mother's heart or mind differently according to level of adoption openness? If so, what is the nature of the adopted persons psychological presence in her life in different levels of openness? How does it manifest itself?
2) Among those with contact, how does the role of technology influence the adopted persons psychological presence in the birth mothers life?
3) What role does tech-mediated communication play in regards to levels of psychological presence and satisfaction with the adoption arrangement?
4) What role, if any, does gender of the adoptee play in regards to levels of psychological presence and satisfaction with the adoption arrangement?

Methodology

Procedures

- Adoptive families and birth mothers were recruited from private adoption agencies around the country to participate in the longitudinal (1984-2016) Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP). All adoptions were voluntary, inracial, infant placements with varying levels of openness arrangements (confidential, mediated, and fully disclosed). All birth mothers reported having at least some degree of openness within the adoption during Wave 4.

- The present study includes Wave 4 data (30 years post-placement) with 34 birth mothers (M_{age} = 48) and utilizes interview and survey data.

Measures

- Adoption openness arrangement, psychological presence, degree, and valance were measured by scales developed by earlier work with MTARP data by Fravel et al. (1996; 2000) and thematic coding.
- Traditional direct contact was categorized as in-person visits, telephone calls, and writing letters. Tech-mediated contact included communication through social media, such as via Facebook.

Preliminary Results

- In-depth qualitative coding revealed that adopted children continue to be psychologically present in their birth mother's lives, even 30 years post-placement. As time has progressed, the nature of adoptive kinship family dynamics continues to evolve over time
- Degree of psychological presence was highest among those who were involved with fully disclosed adoptions
- The majority of birth mothers are incorporating texting and Facebook into their communication with the adopted child (now adult)
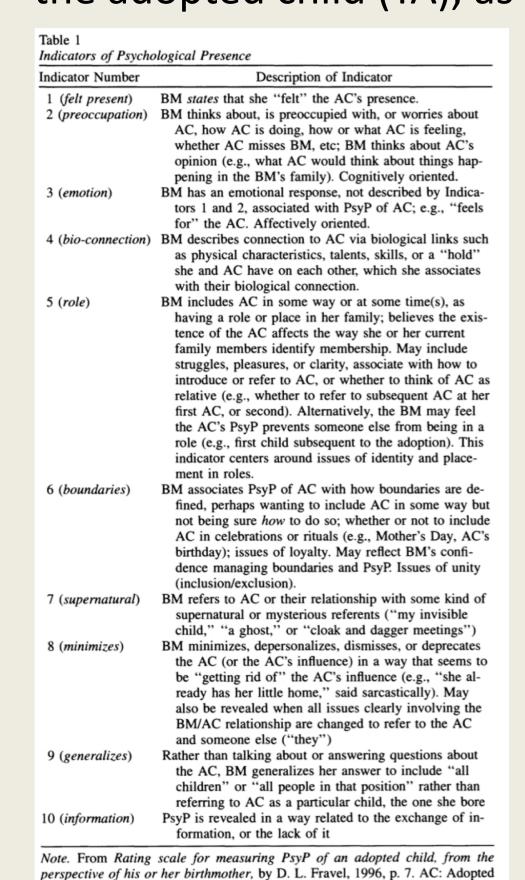
Indicators of psychological presence

Coding of 10 indicators helped identify how components of psychological presence fit into the bigger picture of the life of the birth mother.
Indicator 5 (*Role*) was evidenced in this comment by a birth mother in a fully open adoption:

> "*I think what that's done for me has allowed me to see that blood is not necessarily what makes a family … I really feel like [adoptive parents] are such a big part of my family too, and their youngest son is part of my family, and they're absolutely part of my immediate family, but, you know, they're, they're definitely not a blood relation, and I think when I talk to people about my relationship with [YA] and his family, and, you know, I sort of clarify with them that [adoptive parents] are his parents. I'm his birth parent. I think the person who cleans up your barf [laughs] is your parent, and it's interesting sort of seeing the reaction I get from people sometimes because I'm very open about my situation. I have a picture of [adoptive parents] on my desk at work. You know, people say, do you have kids, and I say, yes, I have, I have a child, but it's a little bit of a different situation. I mean at parties, at work, whatever, I'm always very open about him. .*"

Indicator 3 (*Emotion*) includes the emotional response a birth mother may feel about the adopted child (YA), as evidenced by the following comment:
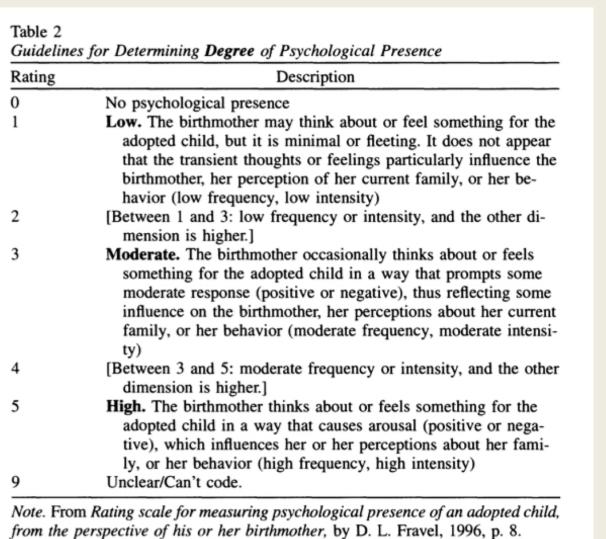
> "*As a mother, the first time that I woke up and all three of them [parented children and YA] were in the same room, I'm telling you I thought (unintelligible) was going to blow up it was like oh my gosh they're all three here. It's just too big, it's way too big*".

Results, cont.

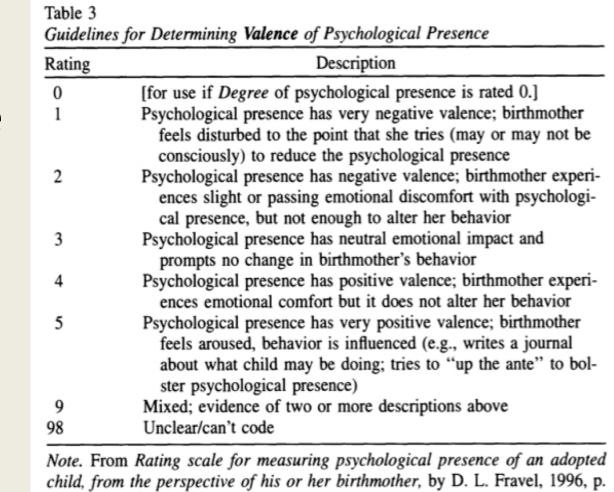### Degree of psychological presence
The depth of psychological presence was determined by coders. An example of a low degree (*1*) of psychological presence is illustrated in this comment by a birth mother in a fully open adoption:

> "*I gave birth to her but I don't really, I mean when I answer how many kids do you have, I tell people two. I don't tell people 3... so I guess that would answer it like as far as it's just a clear separation.*"

Valence of psychological presence
The level of valence was examined to determine the feelings of positivity and negativity felt by the birth mothers. Valence was mostly high (13/21) among our sample, especially among fully disclosed adoptions and less so with families in which there had been prior contact but was not currently (1/21).

Discussion

These findings provide new perspectives on the under-studied population of birth mothers, by providing insight into experiences and psychological presence within the kinship network throughout the lifespan.

Our results show that birth mothers experience a range of psychological presence for their child, even when contact may not be current. The increase in technology and forms of social media to supplement traditional forms of contact contribute to involvement in each other's lives.

These findings reiterate the importance of viewing adoption as a lifelong process, for all members involved, including birth mothers.

Implications for Practitioners

- Practitioners should be aware of tech-mediated contact as a potential source of contact that can impact psychological presence and in some cases, increase satisfaction with adoption arrangements.
- Policy-makers should consider the implications of these findings as funding is allocated for mental health services. Special consideration should be give for members of the adoptive kinship networks over time, specifically birth mothers as levels of contact may evolve over time.
- Future research should explore adoptee's perspectives to examine congruency and the impact psychological presence has on adoptees.