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Outcomes for Adolescents within Their Adoptive Kinship Networks[†]

By Harold D. Grotevant, Yvette V. Perry, and Ruth G. McRoy[‡]

Since ancient times, adoption has made it possible for children who cannot be raised by their biological parents to grow up in nurturing environments. Around the world and across historical time, most adoptions have been handled informally within children's extended families. When parents were unable to provide appropriate care, they would be assisted by grandparents, siblings, or other members of the community. More recently, Western countries have established legal processes by which the parenting rights and responsibilities of a child's birth parents are legally terminated and transferred to other adults who would raise the child. In 1851, Massachusetts enacted a model adoption law that provided for the legal severance of the relationship between child and birth parents.[1] Other states established similar laws, and by 1929 all states in the United States had adoption statutes in place. "The enactment of the Massachusetts Adoption Act marked a watershed in the history of Anglo-American family and society. Instead of defining the parent-child relationships exclusively in terms of blood kinship, it encouraged adoptive parents to build a family by assuming the responsibility and emotional outlook of natural parents."[2]

There is much we do not know about factors contributing to successful adoptions, especially when success is defined in terms of the development of healthy, resilient children who become productive adult members of society. A large body of research has examined adjustment outcomes for children from adoptive families.[3] Virtually all this research was conducted with families experiencing confidential adoptions, in which there is no contact and no identifying information shared between birth and adoptive families. However, in recent years adoption practice has changed, making it possible for the legal transfer of parental rights to occur while retaining contact and communication between members of the child's birth and adoptive families.

There are currently four major types of adoptions in the United States, and issues about contact among members of the child's adoptive family and birth family (which we call the adoptive kinship network) vary among

‡ Harold D. Grotevant, PhD, is a Distinguished University Teaching Professor of Family Social Science at the University of Minnesota. His research focuses on parent-adolescent relationships, especially in adoptive families, and on identity development in adolescents and young adults. His work has resulted in over 100 articles as well as several books, including *Openness in Adoption: Connecting Families of Birth and Adoption* (with Ruth McRoy, 1998). Yvette V. Perry is a PhD student, Department of Family Social Science, University of Minnesota. She has served as a research assistant on the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP). Ruth G. McRoy, PhD, is a Ruby Lee Piester Centennial Professor in Services to Children and Families and is the associate dean for research and director of the Center for Social Work Research, University of Texas at Austin. She has written extensively on adoption.

1. Carp, 1998.

2. Carp, 1998, p. 12.

3. For reviews, see Haugaard, 1998; Ingersoll, 1997; Peters, Atkins, & McKay, 1999.

them. Openness refers to this continuum of contact and communication among members of the adoptive kinship network. The continuum ranges from confidential (no contact and no identifying information shared) to mediated (communication occurs but is conveyed without identifying information through a third party, such as an adoption agency) to fully disclosed (communication and contact occur directly between parties). These openness categories describe contact at any particular point in time. However, the level of openness (confidential, mediated, fully disclosed) or intensity of the contact (frequency, degree of disclosure) may vary over a family's life course.

One type of adoption is of healthy U.S. infants and young children, voluntarily placed by their birth mothers. Within this type of adoption, there is a trend toward fewer confidential adoptions and more fully disclosed adoptions.[4] A second type includes kinship adoptions, in which children are adopted by other members of their birth families. Related to this are children adopted by a stepparent following remarriage of one of their biological parents. A third type consists of special needs adoptions, which include an array of children, most of whom are placed involuntarily because their birth parents' rights have been terminated through court proceedings. Contact in special needs adoptions is currently a topic of great interest because of the growing number of children in this category.[5] Practitioners and researchers are exploring innovative arrangements that allow children to maintain contact with kin. The final category includes children adopted from other countries. The number of internationally adopted children in the United States has risen dramatically over the past decade, and in most of these placements, adoptive families have either little or no identifying information about their children's birth parents.[6] Contact between adoptive and birth family members is rare. Each of these types

of adoptions presents unique challenges in terms of openness issues. Only the first category mentioned previously (voluntary placements) will be explored in this chapter, but the issues and conclusions explored here may have relevance to the other adoption situations.

Issues about contact in adoption have become increasingly more complex. The movement toward greater openness has been stimulated by adoption professionals and members of the adoptive kinship network who believe that such contact would be beneficial for the mental health and identity development of adopted children and for the well-being of birth parents. The Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP), led by Grotevant and McRoy, was developed to examine these issues empirically with a sample of children placed as infants. This chapter summarizes and discusses the findings and policy implications of this longitudinal study of variations in openness in adoption, exploring the features and dynamics of this changing adoption practice.

One type of adoption arrangement is not "best" for all adoptive kinship networks, and, further, within a kinship network, what works well for one party at one point in time may not be the best for other parties.

The overarching purposes of the MTARP are (a) to understand the dynamics of adoptive kinship networks in which the connection between members of the adoptive family and birth family vary in level of openness, (b) to investigate the development of adjustment in adolescents who have grown up with varying openness arrangements, (c) to examine outcomes for birth mothers who placed children for adoption 12 to 20 years earlier, and (d) to examine the changing role played by adoption agencies.

The chapter begins with a description of the study's conceptual framework. It then describes the participants and methods and briefly presents the project's major conclusions on several

4. Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003; Henney, Onken, McRoy, & Grotevant, 1998.

5. McRoy, 1999; Neil, 2003; Smith & Howard, 1999.

6. Gunnar, Bruce, & Grotevant, 2000.

key issues: openness arrangements, adolescent curiosity and searching, adolescent psychological adjustment, and adoptive identity development. The primary focus of this chapter is on the adopted children and adolescents.[7] The second part of the chapter discusses some of the broad challenges of applying adoption research to policy and practice and outlines some specific policy and practice implications of MTARP findings.

The study

Grotevant, McRoy, and colleagues have been following 190 adoptive families and 169 birth mothers since the mid-1980s, when adoption agencies began offering options that included contact between members of the child's families of adoption and birth. These changes in policy and practice were considered radical and experimental at the time. Although they remain controversial in some circles, adoption practice involving domestically placed children has clearly moved toward more openness.[8] The project is unique because it has studied changing family relationships within the context of changing social policies and practices.

The project is guided by an ecological framework that is both developmental and systemic in its focus.[9] The framework acknowledges the developing personalities, motivations, and skills that individuals bring to their interactions within their adoptive kinship networks. It illuminates the individuals' transactions with others across time and the interdependencies in their relationships. It also highlights their connections with individuals in their proximal environments, such as friends; their embeddedness in activity settings, such as school, work, and organizations; and the influences of broader contexts, which include culture, history, and the social forces influencing adoption practice and policy. Individual outcomes relating to adjustment are viewed along a continuum, ranging from successful adaptation at one end to psychopathology at the other.

Each of the families in the project adopted a child in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Families and birth mothers were first interviewed between 1987 and 1992 and again between 1996 and 2000. Grotevant and colleagues at the Minnesota site have followed the adopted children and their adoptive parents.[10] McRoy and colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin have followed the children's birth mothers.[11] In addition, staff from private adoption agencies around the United States were interviewed at three points in time: 1987–89 (N = 31 agencies), 1992–93 (N = 34), and 1999 (N = 29). They provided information about their experiences with openness and other adoption practices, enabling us to look at historical changes in adoption practice as they were occurring.[12]

Wave 1: 1987–92

Adoptive families and birth mothers were recruited for the study through 35 adoption agencies located across the United States. Families were sought in which there was at least one adopted child (the "target child") between the ages of 4 and 12 at the time of the interview who was adopted through an agency before his or her first birthday; in which the adoption was not transracial, international, or "special needs"; and in which both adoptive parents were married to each other. Transracial, international, and special needs adoptions were intentionally not included in the study so that the clearest possible conclusions about openness could be drawn without having to consider the additional complexities inherent in these other adoption arrangements. Simultaneously, birth mothers were sought who made adoption plans for children placed with these families. Participants in the study were located in 23 different states from all regions of the United States.

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7. Readers interested in further information on outcomes for birth mothers should consult Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, and Bryant (1997) and Fravel, McRoy, and Grotevant (2000); further information about changing agency practices may be found in Henney et al. (1998, 2003).

8. Henney et al., 2003.

9. Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998; Grotevant, 1998.

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10. Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Grotevant, Ross, Marchel, & McRoy, 1999.

11. Christian et al., 1997; Fravel et al., 2000.

12. Henney et al., 1998, 2003.

Each participating agency was asked to select all children who met the criteria outlined previously and then to sample randomly among them within levels of openness until they located a set number of families and birth mothers willing to be interviewed. A few families and birth mothers were recruited through advertisements in newspapers and periodicals. Wave 1 data were collected between 1987 and 1992. Although this sample is not a fully random one, participants were specifically not recruited on the basis of their success with adoption or their having an interesting story to tell, which is often a problem in volunteer samples.

At wave 1, the study's participants included 720 individuals: both parents in 190 adoptive families, at least one adopted child in 171 of the families, and 169 birth mothers. The vast majority of adoptive parents were Caucasian, Protestant, and middle to upper-middle class. Of the 190 adoptive couples interviewed, 185 were Caucasian, 3 were Latino, 1 was African American, and 1 was Latino and Caucasian. Virtually all adoptive parents in the study had adopted because of infertility. The average level of education was 16.2 years for adoptive fathers and 15.1 for adoptive mothers. Adoptive fathers ranged in age from 32 to 53 years (mean = 40.7) and adoptive mothers from 31 to 50 (mean = 39.1). Of the 171 participating adopted children, 90 were male, and 81 were female; their ages ranged from 4 to 12 (mean = 7.8 years). The sample was limited to infant placements in order to remove one possible source of variation in adoption outcomes. The mean age of placement was 4 weeks (range: immediately after birth to 44 weeks). Ninety percent of the children were placed by 9 weeks; all but three children were placed in the .rst half year of life. Because of this restricted range, age of placement was not an important contributing factor to outcomes in this study and will not be discussed further. Adoptive families were interviewed in their homes in one session that lasted three to four hours. The session included separate interviews with each parent and with the target adopted child, administration of several questionnaires, and a joint couples interview with the adoptive parents.

The birth mothers ranged in age from 14 to 36 years (mean = 19.3) when their children were born and from 21 to 43 (mean = 27.1) at the time of the first interview. The average number of years of education they had attained was 13.5. Most were Caucasian (92.9%), with four Latina, two Native American, one African American, one Asian American, and four who did not indicate ethnicity. At the time of the first interview, half the birth mothers were married. Birth mothers were interviewed in their home, at the agency, or by telephone. They also completed several questionnaires.[13]

Wave 2: 1996–2000

Participants were interviewed again approximately 8 years after their first interview. They included the parents and target adopted adolescent from 177 adoptive families: 173 adoptive mothers, 162 adoptive fathers, and 156 adopted adolescents (75 boys and 81 girls). The adopted adolescents ranged in age from 11 to 20 years (mean = 15.7). At wave 2, data are also available on 88 siblings (68 adopted, 20 nonadopted) and 127 birth mothers. Almost all adoptive parents who participated in wave 2 were still married, with the following exceptions: five adoptive mothers and three adoptive fathers were divorced, one adoptive mother and two adoptive fathers were separated, and one adoptive father and one adoptive mother were widowed. Adoptive families were once again seen in their homes during a single session that typically lasted four to five hours. The session included individual interviews with each parent and the target adopted child, administration of several questionnaires, and administration of a family interaction task. Some family members were interviewed by telephone when it was impossible to gather everyone together for the home visit (e.g., living out of the United States, adolescent away at college, and so on). The average age of the birth mothers at wave 2 was 35.4 years (ranging from 29 to 54). They reported an average of 14.2 years of education (range: 10 to 20 years). Almost 75 percent of the birth

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13. For further details about the wave 1 sample and .ndings, see Grotevant and McRoy (1997, 1998).

mothers were parenting at least one biological child. Birth mothers were interviewed by telephone.

Key findings

Openness arrangements

Our initial conceptualization of openness, based primarily on the existing literature and discussions with participating agency personnel, posited three levels of openness: confidential, mediated (or semiopen), and fully disclosed.[14] We soon found that these categories did not adequately describe the experiences of our participants. Within the group of confidential adoptions, there were cases in which updated information was sent to the adoption agency for inclusion in the child's .le. The information was not necessarily intended for transmission to the other party and could have been sent either once or a number of times. In most of these cases, either the birth mother or the adoptive parents sent information, such as an annual letter on the child's birthday. Within the categories of mediated and fully disclosed adoptions, in addition to cases in which the contact was ongoing, there were some for whom the contact had definitely stopped and others for whom the contact was temporarily paused. Our ultimate categorization of level of openness took these nuances into account. In addition, within each type of openness involving contact, there could be large variations in the intensity of contact (frequency, personal nature of the contact—e.g., a picture is more personal than a purchased gift), type of contact (e.g., letter, picture, gift, phone call, e-mail, visit), or participants' satisfaction. Although these variations were not registered in our openness categorization system, more detailed qualitative analyses have explored these factors.[15]

Description of arrangements in families with fully disclosed adoptions

The sample included 46 families whose adoptions involved direct or indirect contact at wave

14. McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988.

15. Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, in press; Dunbar et al., 2000.

2 and had continuously had contact—some since placement and others since the children were very young. (Most were in ongoing fully disclosed relationships.) The data from this group provide a profile of the nature and diversity of contact arrangements experienced by families with open adoptions. Family members had contact with a variety of birth family members. The adopted adolescents mentioned having contact with their birth mother (100%), birth grandmother (70.4%), birth sibling(s) (61.3%), birth grandfather (52.2%), the birth mother's spouse or partner (47.8%), and their birth father (29.5%). The pattern of contact for the child's adoptive parents was similar: the most contact was with the child's birth mother,

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Our data suggest that such a conclusion of a "one size fits all" approach is not warranted.

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an intermediate amount was with members of the birth mother's family, and the least was with the birth father. The type of contact included photos (93.5%), letters (91.3%), phone calls (87.0%), gifts (87.0%), face-to-face meetings (78.3%), and extended visits (54.3%). The frequency of contact varied across networks, but almost all reported contact among kinship network members more than twice a year.

We asked the adoptive mothers to describe the type of role the birth mother played in their child's life. The most common category mentioned was kin (such as aunt—40%). Other categories mentioned were nonkin (such as friend—16.7%), "birth parent role" (10.0%), parent (such as "other mother"—10.0%), "no role" (6.7%), role associated with actions or activities (6.7%), and other (10.0%). Most adoptive mothers indicated that the predominant way in which contacts were arranged was mutually between the adoptive parents and birth family (67.4%), whereas adoptive family members initiated primarily in 15.2 percent of networks, birth family members initiated primarily in 10.9 percent of networks, and the respondent couldn't tell in 6.5 percent of cases.

During the adoptees' childhood and early adolescence, the adoptive mother played the primary role in managing contact with birth family members. As time went on, the responsibility for contact tended to shift from adoptive mother and birth mother to adopted child and birth mother. In general, adoptive fathers were less involved than mothers in this process across time.[16]

Satisfaction with contact

High percentages of respondents having ongoing contact reported that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with the level of openness they were experiencing with the child's birth mother: 83.7 percent of the adopted adolescents, 93.5 percent of the adoptive mothers, and 84.8 percent of the adoptive fathers. The teens reported that they hoped their contact with the birth mother either stayed the same (55.8%) or increased (41.9%) in the future. Only one adolescent (2.3%) hoped it would decrease.

Considering the sample as a whole, adolescents who had contact with birth mothers reported higher degrees of satisfaction with their level of adoption openness and with the intensity of their contact with birth mother than did adolescents who had no contact. Satisfaction with adoption openness was lower during middle adolescence (ages 14 to 16) than during early or late adolescence.[17] Birth mothers' satisfaction with openness also varied as a function of openness. Those in fully disclosed arrangements at wave 2 were more satisfied with their arrangements than were those in confidential or mediated arrangements.[18]

Detailed analyses of interviews were conducted for satisfaction with contact for adolescents who both had and did not have contact with their birth mother.[19] Adolescents who had contact with their birth mothers and who were satisfied with the level of contact noted that

contact (a) provided an opportunity for a relationship to emerge that would provide additional support for them, (b) felt that the contact helped them better understand who they are, and (c) made them interested in having contact with other members of their birth family. Adolescents who had contact with their birth mothers but were not satisfied with the level of contact they were having typically wanted more intensity in the relationship than they currently had, but they were not able to bring about this change. It was also clear that the adolescents in this group could want a deeper relationship with their birth mother while also being content with their adoptive families; they did not feel they were having to choose one family over another.

Although agency staff might want to match birth mothers and adoptive parents by their openness preferences at the time of placement, no one can predict what the parties' preferences will be in the future.

Adolescents who had had no contact with their birth mothers and were not satisfied about it typically had negative feelings toward their birth mother and assumed she had not made efforts to search for them. Their own efforts at searching had typically been unsuccessful. Finally, adolescents who were satisfied with having no contact typically felt that adoption was not an important aspect of their lives. They felt it was not necessary to have contact and feared that it might be a bad experience for them. They viewed adoption as a blessing and felt that they were better off where they were than had they been raised by their birth parents.

Changes in openness over time

Even before the first wave of data collection, a number of changes in openness had occurred since placement. Almost two-thirds of the fully disclosed adoptions did not begin that way: 51 percent began as mediated and 15 percent as confidential adoptions. In many of these cases,

16. Dunbar et al., 2000.

17. Berge et al., in press; Mendenhall et al., 2004.

18. McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, Henney, Christian, & Gossman, 2001.

19. Berge et al., in press; Mendenhall et al., 2004.

trust and mutual respect were gradually established between the adoptive parents and birth mother until they made the decision to share identifying information.[20]

The overall pattern of stability in major openness level is similar for both adoptive families and birth mothers. (Data are presented separately for adoptive families and birth mothers because our data set includes some adoptive families for whom we do not have birth mother data and vice versa.) The majority of cases remained within the same major openness level from wave 1 to wave 2 (71.2% of adoptive families and 78.7% of birth mothers). Smaller, and roughly equal, proportions increased in openness level (14.7% of adoptive families and 10.2% of birth mothers) or decreased in openness (14.1% of adoptive families and 11.0% of birth mothers). Relatively few fully disclosed cases stopped contact between waves 1 and 2 (13.2% of adoptive families and no birth mothers). Among adoptive families with ongoing mediated adoptions, almost equal numbers continued in this category (18), stopped contact (17), and increased to fully disclosed (15). Among birth mothers, 21 continued, 14 stopped contact, and 9 increased to fully disclosed. The majority of cases that were classified as confidential at wave 1 continued as confidential at wave 2 (89.5% of adoptive families and 91.2% of birth mothers).

When there were decreases in openness in adoptive kinship networks, the birth mothers and adoptive parents tended to have incongruent accounts regarding who initiated discontinuation of contact and divergent understandings about why contact stopped.[21] Adoptive parents were more satisfied when birth mothers respected their family's boundaries and let the adoptive family initiate most of the contact.

Members of adoptive kinship networks involved in ongoing contact found that their relationships were dynamic and had to be renegotiated over time. Early in the adoption, meetings were especially important for the birth mothers,

who were very concerned about whether they had made the right decision, whether their child was safe, and whether the adoptive parents were good people. After a while, birth mothers' interest in contact sometimes waned, especially as they were assured that their child was thriving. With the passage of time, many birth mothers became involved in new romantic relationships, sometimes taking attention away from the adoptive relationships. According to the adoptive parents, the ability of birth mothers to provide information when requested was not always in tune with the timing of the request.[22] Adoptive parents tended to become more interested in contact as they became more secure in their role as parents. As the children grew older and understood the meaning of adoption (see Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984), their questions tended to put pressure on the adoptive parents to seek more information or contact.[23]

Thus, the maintenance of open adoptions is a complex dance in which the roles and needs of the participants change over time, affecting the kinship network as a whole.[24] There is no uniform pattern for open adoptions—kinship networks have contact by different means, among different people, at varying rates, and with varying degrees of interest. Successful relationships in such complex family situations hinge on participants' flexibility, communication skills, and commitment to the relationships.

Adolescent curiosity and searching

An important aspect of this work is that we have brought forward the voices of the children and adolescents who have participated. For example, adolescents' interviews have contributed to understanding of the process of searching for birth parents.[25] This analysis included all adolescents in the study who did not have ongoing direct contact with their birth mother (N = 93). These adolescents were divided into four groups on the basis of their interview re-

20. Grotevant & McRoy, 1998.

21. Dunbar et al., 2000.

22. Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 2003.

23. Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1998, 1999.

24. Grotevant, McRoy, & van Dulmen, 1998.

25. For details, see Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004.

sponses: (a) those who said they would definitely not search or left open a very small possibility that they might search (34.4%), (b) those who said they might search in the future (24.7%), (c) those who would definitely search in the future (28.0%), and (d) those who had already embarked on a search (12.9%). Older adolescents (ages 17 to 20) who experienced some openness in their adoption (such as mediated contact) and were the least satisfied with their level of openness were most likely to search. Importantly, search behavior was not related to family functioning[26] or adolescent problem behavior (on the Achenbach Youth Self-Report [YSR] or Child Behavior Checklist [CBCL]), contradicting reports in the literature that adoptees searched for their birth parents because of unsatisfactory relationships with their adoptive parents or their own psychopathology.[27] Consequently, we view decision making about searching as part of the normative developmental process for adolescent and young adult adoptees. This does not mean that every adoptee will search, but it does mean that they will need to consider the decision to search as part of the process of their development. The following quote, from an adolescent in a mediated adoption, illustrates how curiosity about birth parents and a strong desire to meet them does not negate the adolescent's positive views about her adoptive family:

I want to see what it's like. I want to see them. I want to meet them. I want to see what it's like to have a little brother. I think after I have contacted them once, I thought I'd talk to them more frequently. You know, I mean, I'd never ditch the family I have now for them.

The planned wave 3 will provide the opportunity to examine whether and how these young adults implement their intentions to search as well as how their birth parents and adoptive parents respond to this process.

Adolescent psychological adjustment

At wave 1, variations in adjustment among adopted children were linked to relationships within their adoptive families as well as to the quality of the connections across the adoptive kinship network in which they were members. There was no relation between level of openness and the children's socioemotional adjustment as measured by the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory.[28] Subsequent analyses focused on family process predictors of adjustment, including acknowledgment of difference, compatibility, parents' sense of entitlement, and parenting competence. In these analyses, the strongest predictor of problematic adjustment outcomes (internalizing and externalizing) during middle childhood (wave 1) was the parent's perception of the child's incompatibility with the family.[29] At wave 2, relationships were examined between adjustment outcomes and five patterns of change in compatibility (continuously high, continuously moderate, continuously low, increasing, and decreasing). Higher degrees of perceived compatibility maintained longitudinally from middle childhood to adolescence were associated with higher degrees of psychosocial engagement (defined as adolescents' active use of inner resources to interact positively with others in family, peer, and community contexts), greater attachment to parents, and lower incidence of problem behavior. The results were similar for male and female adolescents and regardless of whether compatibility change patterns were derived from mothers' or fathers' perceptions.[30]

Detailed qualitative analyses of the interviews from a subset of adoptive kinship networks who were experiencing contact between the adoptive family and birth mother and who had complete wave 1 data on adoptive parents and birth mother revealed an important construct on which the networks in the study varied. Collaboration in relationships was found to be an emergent property of the adop-

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26. As measured by the Family Assessment Device—Epstein, Baldwin, & Bishop, 1983.

27. Wrobel et al., 2004.

28. Grotevant & McRoy, 1998.

29. Ross, 1995.

30. Grotevant, Wrobel, van Dulmen, & McRoy, 2001.

tive kinship network, characterized by the ability of the child's adoptive and birth parents to work together effectively on behalf of the child's well-being. It involves collaborative control over the way in which contact is handled and is based on mutual respect, empathy, and valuing of the relationship.[31] Collaboration was rated on a 10-point scale, and ratings were correlated with children's scores (at wave 1) on socioemotional development (from the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory). Spearman rank order correlations suggested that higher ratings on collaboration were associated with lower scores for the children on indicators of problematic adjustment.

At wave 2, the YSR[32], CBCL[33], and Brief Symptom Inventory (BSI)[34] were used to assess adjustment of the adolescent adoptees in the study. Adjustment scores for the MTARP adolescents did not differ significantly from gender-specific norms on the YSR or CBCL (mother or father report). The MTARP males scored significantly better (i.e., fewer symptoms) than the norm group on the BSI. Overall, we ran 42 comparisons of adjustment scores against normative scores. Only three of 42 yielded statistically significant differences, and two of them were in the direction of the MTARP adolescents being better adjusted than the norm groups. Most of the nonsignificant differences were in the direction of the MTARP youth being better adjusted than the national norms. Our data provide no evidence that this sample of adolescent adoptees is less well adjusted than other youth on which the measures were normed. Analyses examining adjustment outcomes by openness level are in progress.

Adoptive identity development

In addition to dealing with the normative developmental issues of adolescence, adopted youth are confronted with the challenge of making meaning of their beginnings, which may be unknown, unclear, or otherwise ambiguous.

Meaning making[35] involves constructing a story about oneself that attempts to answer many questions: Where did I come from? Who were my parents? Why was I placed for adoption? Do my birth parents think about me now? Do I have siblings? What does adoption mean in my life? This story, or narrative, helps the adolescent to make sense of the past, understand the self in the present, and project himself or herself into the future.[36] Constructing this narrative is about the development of adoptive identity, the evolving answer to the question, Who am I as an adopted person?[37] This is part of the larger process of identity development, which is widely recognized as an important task of adolescence that lays a foundation for adult psychosocial development.[38]

The narrative approach to identity highlights the integration and coherence of the self through the evaluation of the structure, content, and function of the narrative.[39] From this perspective, the adolescent is viewed as creating and recreating a life story that makes meaning of and gives purpose to his or her experience of adoption.

During wave 2, participating adolescents were administered interviews that examined adoptive identity. The interviews were coded for several dimensions. Exploration assessed how deeply an adolescent had considered his or her adoptive identity. High ratings indicated considerable depth in exploration with serious, reflective thinking that showed self-awareness and integration. Salience of adoptive identity indicated the level of importance and prominence of the identity; the degree to which the adoptive identity influenced behaviors, thoughts, decisions, and feelings; and adolescents' ranking of the adoptive identity in relation to five other identity domains. High ratings indicated that the adoptive identity may con-

31. Grotevant et al., 1999.

32. Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1987.

33. Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1983.

34. Derogatis, 1993.

35. Kegan, 1982; Klinger, 1998.

36. Grotevant, 1993.

37. Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000.

38. Erikson, 1968.

39. McAdams, 1987, 1993, 2001; Mishler, 1999.

sume great psychic and emotional energy and may be the identity that is most prominent or a "leading theme" in the adolescent's sense of self. Internal consistency measured the completeness of the content of the narrative; the most consistent narratives showed complexity and detailed elaboration. Flexibility measured the adolescent's ability to view issues as others might see them and to explore new ideas and alternatives. Positive and negative affect were each coded in terms of how the adopted adolescent felt about being adopted and/or having an identity as an adopted person. Higher ratings indicated intense emotions, such as loving or hating.

Adolescents' narratives were categorized into types based on the narrative attributes mentioned previously.[40] A cluster analysis based on the preceding variables revealed four groups of identity narratives. In the first group, unexplored adoptive identity, the adolescent had undertaken little or no exploration, adoption had low salience, and little affect around adoption was expressed. For example, one adolescent stated, "Because I feel like it's over and that I'm happy where I am and I just don't want to mess with that other part." Another noted that "I don't really think about adoption that much so it's just, I probably don't even realize that I am." In the second group, limited identity, adolescents were actively exploring ideas. As one young woman stated, "Sometimes it's important to me and sometimes it isn't." Adolescents in the third group, unsettled identity, had narratives that were coherent and integrated, marked by high exploration of adoptive identity, high salience, and strong negative affect. One adolescent stated, "My mom [adoptive] and I aren't very close and I know that's [adoption] the reason. I mean if, I'm sure if I lived with my real mom we'd be a lot closer, we'd talk about it and that's just hard because all my friends can talk to their moms." Finally, adolescents demonstrating integrated identity had coherent, integrated narratives in which adoptive identity was highly salient and viewed

positively. For example, one teen said, "When I was little I worried I was placed because she didn't want me. Now I know I was placed because she cared enough."

Patterns of adoptive identity differed widely across adolescents, although, in general, more positively resolved patterns were found among older rather than younger adolescents and girls rather than boys.[41] Frequencies of adolescents in the four identity types did not significantly differ as a function of openness level.[42]

The process of adoptive identity development may involve a period of time when adoption issues are particularly salient, involving intense reflection and emotional engagement, perhaps preoccupation on the part of the adolescent.[43] When this occurs, it may be accompanied by the adolescent's temporary emotional withdrawal from the adoptive family. On average, girls' levels of preoccupation (measured by the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire) were higher than boys'.[44] Differences in degree of preoccupation with adoption were not related to the level of openness in the adolescent's adoption. However, differences in preoccupation were related to identity group. Mean scores for preoccupation with adoption were signi.-cantly higher for adolescents in the unsettled and integrated types than for adolescents in the unexamined type.[45] Ongoing work with wave 2 data continues to examine the family predictors of identity types and the relation of identity to adjustment during adolescence. Longitudinal work will allow us to investigate the stability of adoptive identity across the transition from adolescence to young adulthood.

Implications for adoption practice and policy

A primary goal of the MTARP has been to characterize changing family relationships within the context of the changing institution of adop-

40. Dunbar, 2003; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004.

41. Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004.

42. Dunbar, 2003.

43. Dunbar, 2003.

44. Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002.

45. Dunbar, 2003.

tion in order to better inform adoption practice and policy. We have drawn two consistent general conclusions from this project with implications for practice and policy. First, one type of adoption arrangement is not "best" for all adoptive kinship networks, and, further, within a kinship network, what works well for one party at one point in time may not be the best for other parties.[46] Second, because adoption within the lives of the specific people touched by it is a dynamic process, the patterns of different needs and desires of different kinship members may shift over time.[47] These conclusions introduce complexities that make the historical debates about openness (for or against) appear oversimplified. Nevertheless, in the absence of data, adoption practices have continued to evolve, often without firm grounding in empirical research findings. Now that a critical mass of knowledge is emerging from this and other projects, future changes in practice and policy regarding postadoption contact and other adoption issues should be informed by research findings.

In the next two sections, we discuss examples of specific themes emerging so far from the MTARP relating to the general conclusions stated thus far that have implications for adoption practice and policy. In the concluding section, we highlight the need to strengthen links between research, policy, and practice.

Adoption openness and "one size fits all"

Based on early debates about the desirability and undesirability of fully disclosed or confidential adoptions, adoption practice and policy would seem to benefit from a definitive answer about which type of placement arrangement is "best." However, our data suggest that such a conclusion of a "one size fits all" approach is not warranted. For example, MTARP findings suggest that the development of adoptive identity is quite varied, depending on individuals, families, and aspects of the kinship network. It may be marked by intense positive and/or negative affect, preoccupation, temporary emotional withdrawal from the family, and active exploration of relationships outside the adoptive family.[48] But as the discussion in the previous section suggests, this variation does not appear to be significantly dependent on level of openness.

Openness is not necessarily indicated for every adoption arrangement at all time points in the life span.

Since there are such wide individual differences, professionals who work with parents of more than one adopted child should help them see that their children may not experience identity development in the same way in terms of issues such as timing, intensity of affect, or salience. Similarly, school personnel and clinicians should be acquainted with the diversity of ways in which adoptive identity may be explored. Support groups for adolescents exploring identity issues should be normalized and available. Together with MTARP findings related to the normative nature of search decision making, these findings argue for flexibility that allows information-access policies to be tailored to the differing disclosure and privacy needs of individuals who have been adopted.

In an additional example, the previous discussion about adolescent adjustment reveals that most measures of adjustment were not significantly related to variations in level of openness. Instead, family process variables, such as the adoptive parents' perceptions of child compatibility, appear to have greater implications for adjustment outcomes than openness level per se. We are continuing to explore processes such as empathic understanding, communication, and collaboration in relationships that are related to outcomes for adoptive kinship network members.

Different needs: Patterns over time

Adoptive families are unique in their specific positioning within changing social, legal, and

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46. Grotevant & McRoy, 1998.

47. Grotevant & McRoy, 1997; Grotevant et al., 1998.

48. Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004; Kohler et al., 2002.

historical contexts. The lives of the specific people touched by adoption should also be viewed dynamically—as an ongoing process rather than a discrete time-bound event. The process nature of adoption was evident in the MTARP sample. For example, the maintenance of open adoptions is a complex dance in which the roles and needs of the participants change over time, affecting the kinship network as a whole.[49] There is no uniform pattern for open adoptions—kinship networks have contact by different means, among different people, at varying rates, and with varying degrees of interest. Successful relationships in such complex family situations hinge on participants' flexibility, communication skills, and commitment to the relationships.

One example of an ongoing process with key practice and policy implications is the construct of collaboration in relationships. The MTARP findings suggest that collaboration between a child's adoptive parents and birth parents plays a key role in successful management of contact and predicts positive socioemotional development for the child.[50] We have noted the dynamic nature of relationships among the adults in the child's life, arguing that maintenance of contact after adoption requires a commitment to making ongoing relationships work despite their inherent ups and downs.

These findings imply that, although agency staff might want to match birth mothers and adoptive parents by their openness preferences at the time of placement, no one can predict what the parties' preferences will be in the future. Educational and therapeutic interventions and agency practices based on these findings should be developed for adoptive parents, birth parents, and adopted persons. One of the most important things that practitioners can do is educate adoptive kinship members to expect and prepare for change over the course of the adoption. Even though the major openness levels were largely stable over the eight-year period between waves 1 and 2, changes in the type of contact, frequency of contact, and individuals involved in the contact seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. By providing education, such as in the development of communication skills, agencies may help kinship members handle changes in openness and in relationships and negotiate difficulties that may emerge from these changes. Agency staff should find appropriate ways to assist the contact process and should offer postadoption services in the event that issues surrounding openness arise. These services should be designed to respond to a diversity of needs.

Further, the needs of children themselves—unknowable at placement in the case of infant placements—may also differ. At adolescence, for example, some youth desire contact but do not follow through on this desire for fear they might alienate or offend their adoptive parents. In this case, agency staff could facilitate the process by helping the adoptive parents and adopted child talk about their feelings concerning contact with birth family members. Other adolescents desire no contact with birth family members and are happy with their lives as they are. Agency staff should be aware that desire for contact can be influenced by many factors, including developmental level, understanding of adoption, prior experiences of the child with birth parents, and current circumstances. Therefore, staff should not assume that a present desire not to have contact is problematic (Wrobel et al., 2004). This is a legitimate feeling and indicates that openness is not necessarily indicated for every adoption arrangement at all time points in the life span.

Legal and policy initiatives should also be based on longitudinal research rather than myths and suppositions about openness. Legal procedures related to initiating and maintaining openness should provide mechanisms for voluntary agreements, for the ability of agreements to be renegotiated, and for the availability of professionals who can assist kinship networks experiencing difficult transitions. Future policy could also benefit from further research to understand how these processes play out over time.

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49. Grotevant et al., 1998.

50. Grotevant et al., 1999.

Toward stronger links connecting research, policy, and practice

In an ideal world, research, policy, and practice are tightly interwoven. However, in the absence of research (or in the absence of access to it), practice and policy decisions are made on other grounds. In closing, we offer several recommendations to strengthen the links that connect research, policy, and practice.

Much of the existing research on adoptive kinship is problem focused, assuming that adoption presents challenges to overcome and risks to avoid.

First, whenever possible, researchers should engage multiple stakeholders in the formulation of research questions and the interpretation and dissemination of results. Relevant stakeholders for adoption research include members of adoptive kinship networks, clinicians, adoption workers, policymakers, community leaders, advocates, and educators. Involvement of such people in the research process will help ensure that the work is based on a broad understanding of the relevant issues and asks questions that will be useful for the adoption community.

Second, adoption researchers should explore nontraditional approaches that might result in more rapid collection or analysis of data or more rapid dissemination of findings to applicable policymakers. For example, Family Impact Seminars have been used in a number of states to bring research results directly to legislators and their staff members. The work is presented in order for the legislators to understand the potential impact on families of laws and policies that are under consideration.[51]

Third, adoption professionals should find opportunities to respond with research-based information to adoption issues that receive sensationalized treatment in the media. Counter-acting inaccurate media images is critical since 41 percent of Americans report that their main sources of information about adoption are the news, movies, and entertainment programs.[52]

Fourth, new or expanded services are needed to support adoptive kinship networks experiencing open adoptions. For example, preadoption services for prospective adoptive parents should acquaint them with birth parents and their needs. Both birth parents and adoptive parents should have access to supportive counseling about contact around the time of placement, when emotions may be intense. Following placement, ongoing services should be available to help birth family and adoptive family members renegotiate their openness arrangements over time, especially if competing needs or desires are present. In addition, ongoing training is needed for adoption and mental health professionals who work with families experiencing these new forms of adoption.

Finally, adoption researchers should develop long-term connections to policymakers and practitioners in order to respond to proposed legislation that may affect adoptive and birth families. Legislation that influences adoption practice is often proposed and passed with little or no consideration of the empirical research findings on the topic. For example, in 2003, the Texas legislature passed legislation stipulating that if the court finds it in the best interest of the child, the court may provide in a termination order, "terms that allow the biological parent to receive specified information regarding the child, provide written communications to the child, and have limited access to the child." When this openness initiative was proposed, limited (if any) attempts were made to receive input and guidance from adoption scholars who study long-term implications and practice issues associated with postadoption contact.

Much of the existing research on adoptive kinship is problem focused, assuming that adoption presents challenges to overcome and

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51. Bogenschneider, 2002.

52. Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 2002c.

risks to avoid.[53] It emphasizes the negative, such as a higher rate of psychopathology among adoptees, risk of disrupted placements, trauma of searching for birth parents, and difficult interpersonal relationships.[54] It is common for interventions, programs, and policies related to adoption to similarly grow out of a problem-focused perspective. The lens in the adoption field now needs to be widened to address the development of strengths (rather than simply the amelioration of problems) in all members of the adoptive kinship network as well as strategies for maintaining healthy kinship network relationships across time. Our research findings point to positive outcomes and processes, such as psychosocial engagement of adolescents and compatibility in parent–adolescent relationships, needing further investigation. Once more is known about them, implications for practice and policy will become even clearer.

Looking to the future

The institution of adoption has served as "a clarifying lens, a way to discern the arbitrariness of . . . our received truths about family, identity, and kinship".[55] Recent changes in adoption policy and practice, such as increasing openness at placement, changing laws concerning adoptees' access to identifying information and birth certificates, and underground social movements supporting search and reunion, have contributed to adoption's unique dynamic force as both caretaker of and challenger to notions of family.

Further changes in family life on the horizon point to the need to consider the practice and policy implications of this and other such adoption research. In the area of assisted reproductive technology, for example, it is currently possible for children to be conceived from donated sperm or eggs, to be gestated in the uterus of a surrogate, to be born years after being "frozen" as a cryopreserved embryo, and all combinations of these scenarios. Several scholars have pointed to this high-tech family formation as an area with parallels to adoption that might be informed by the lessons of adoption research, policy, and practice.[56] In turn, the application of concepts and issues from adoption to new domains is encouraging reconceptualization of the nature of adoptive kinship itself.[57] The work reported in this chapter and throughout this volume points to the need for adoption researchers to continue to think and work across disciplinary and international boundaries.

Acknowledgments

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53. Grotevant & Kohler, 1999.

54. Haugaard, 1998; Peters et al., 1999; Smith & Howard, 1999.

55. Melosh, 2002, p. 4.

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56. Perry, 2002; Shapiro, Shapiro, & Paret, 2001.

57. Perry, 2003.