

Do Adoptive Families Avoid Discussing Search and Reunion?

INTRODUCTION

Adoptive families' communicative openness (Neil, 2009) results in enhanced family well-being (Brodzinsky & Palacios, 2005) and children's positive adoptive identity development (Le Mare & Audet, 2011). However, not all adoptive families openly discuss certain adoption-related topics (Jones & Hackett, 2007), despite reports that many adoptees are curious about their adoption and meeting birth family members (Wrobel & Neil, 2009).

Topic avoidance, an individual's decision to not discuss certain topics with another person (Dailey & Palomares, 2004), has been studied in many family and relationship types. Individuals avoid discussing certain topics for a variety of reasons, such as to avoid conflict and to protect oneself (Golish & Caughlin, 2002), to develop bonds (Knobloch & Carpenter-Theune, 2004), to preserve relationships (Caughlin & Afifi, 2004), and to protect others (Afifi, Caughlin, & Afifi, 2007). Studies have also documented gender differences related to topic avoidance and family types; males typically report more topic avoidance with their parents than do females, and children report engaging in more topic avoidance with stepparents than with biologically-related parents (Golish & Caughlin, 2002; Paul & Berger, 2008). Because topic avoidance has been underexplored in adoptive families, a new, web-based survey was created and employed to examine the following research questions.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

RQ1: Do adopted adult college students engage in topic avoidance with their adoptive parents concerning searching for, or meeting, any member of their birth family?

RQ2: If adopted adult college students engage in topic avoidance with their adoptive parents, what, if any, differences exist between adopted adults' gender and adoption type with their levels of topic avoidance concerning searching for, or meeting, any birth family member?

RQ3: If adopted adult college students engage in topic avoidance with their adoptive parents, what are the reasons for not discussing certain topics with their adoptive parents?

METHODS AND ANALYSES

Data were derived from the web-based survey instrument e-mailed to all adult college students enrolled at a midwestern university. Because many types of adoptions exist, any individual who self-identified as having been adopted was invited to complete the survey.

Participants rated their perceived frequency of topic avoidance concerning searching for and meeting any birth family member with their adoptive mother and adoptive father. A 0-6 scale was used (6 = *not applicable*, 5 = *never had an adoptive mother/father*, 4 = *always avoided*, 3 = *frequently avoided*, 2 = *sometimes avoided*, 1 = *rarely avoided*, and 0 = *never avoided*) to assess any topic avoidance across their lifespan. A 0-4 scale was used (4 = *completely disagree*, 3 = *generally disagree*, 2 = *generally agree*, 1 = *completely agree*, and 0 = *not applicable*) to assess participants' levels of agreement for reasons they ever avoided discussing an adoption-related topic with their parents. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics and a one-way ANOVA.

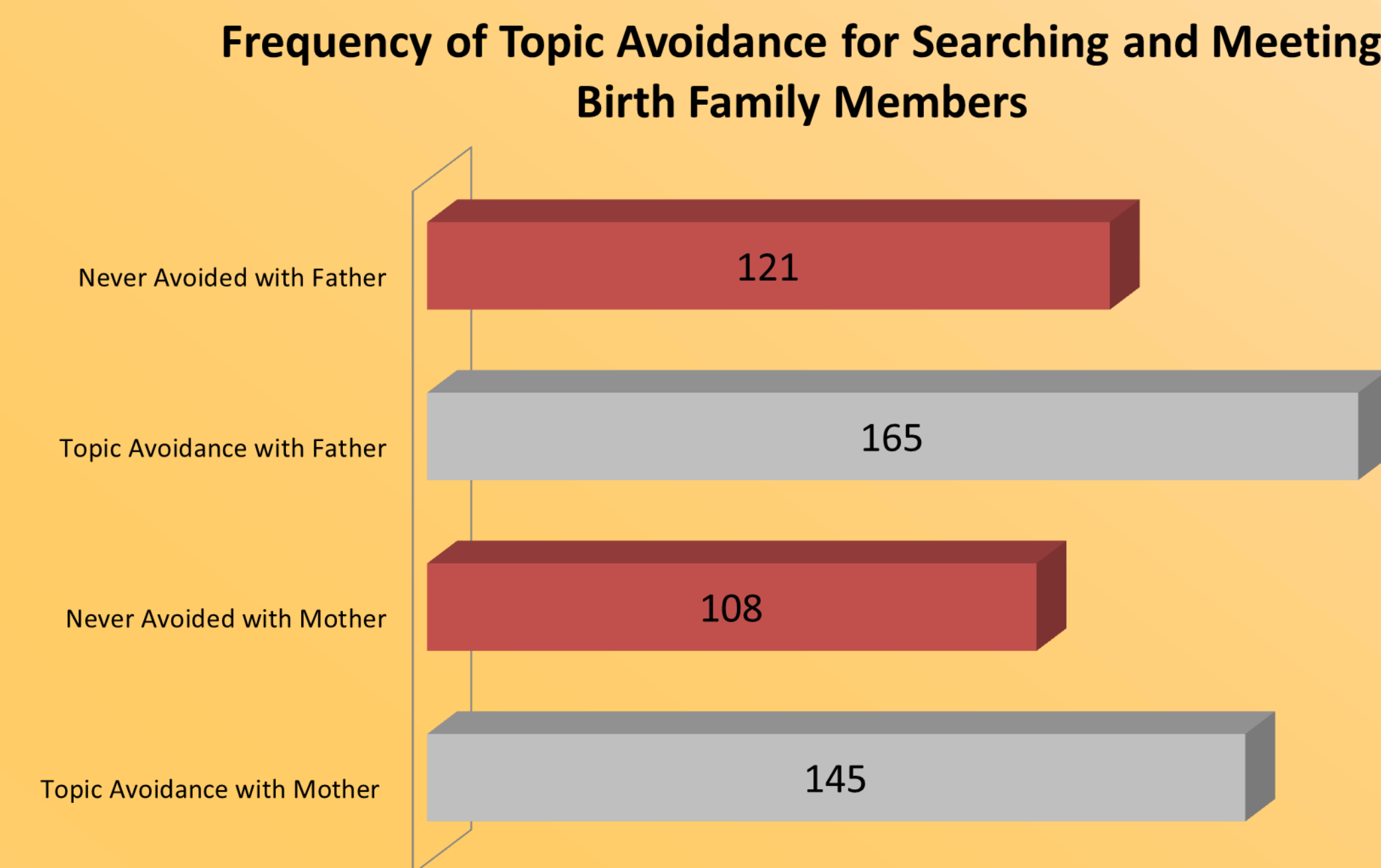
PARTICIPANTS

Demographic Data (N = 175) for Adoption Type, Ethnicity, Gender, Age, and Family Type

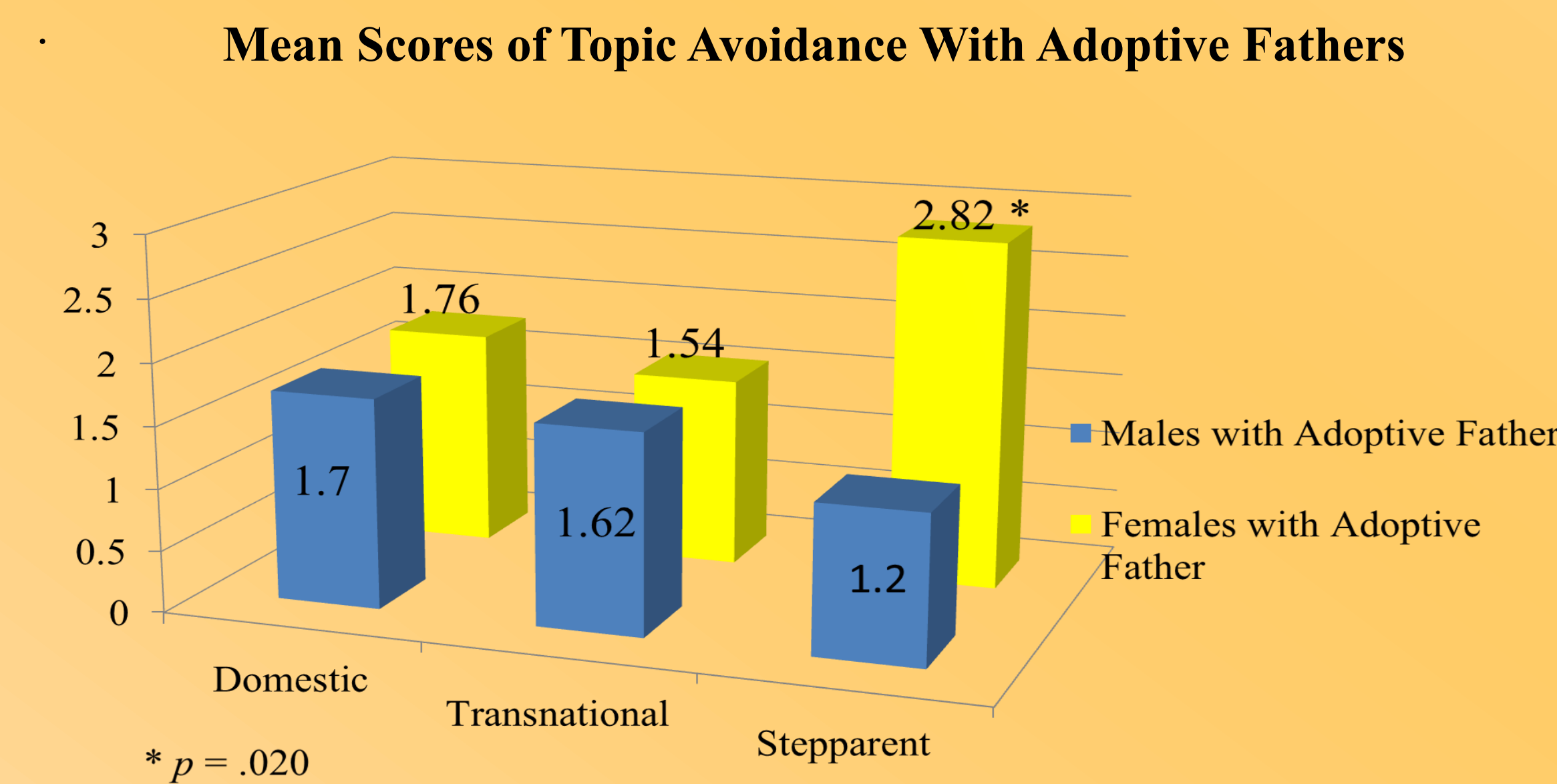
Adoption Type	#	%	Ethnicity	#	%	Gender	#	%	Age	Years	Family Type	#	%
Domestic	84	48	Caucasian	117	71	Male	70	42	Mean	23.80	Two-parent	143	81
Transnational	43	25	Asian	29	17	Female	96	58	Median	21.00	Single	1	1
Foster	8	5	Hispanic-American	7	4	Total	166	100	Range	35	Stepparent	29	16
Stepparent	34	20	African American	3	2	Missing	9	5	Max.	53	Missing	2	2
Surrogate	2	1	Other	10	6	Total	175		Min.	18			
Kin	2	1	Total	166	100								
ART	1	.6	Missing	9	5								
Total	174												
Missing	1	.6											

RESULTS

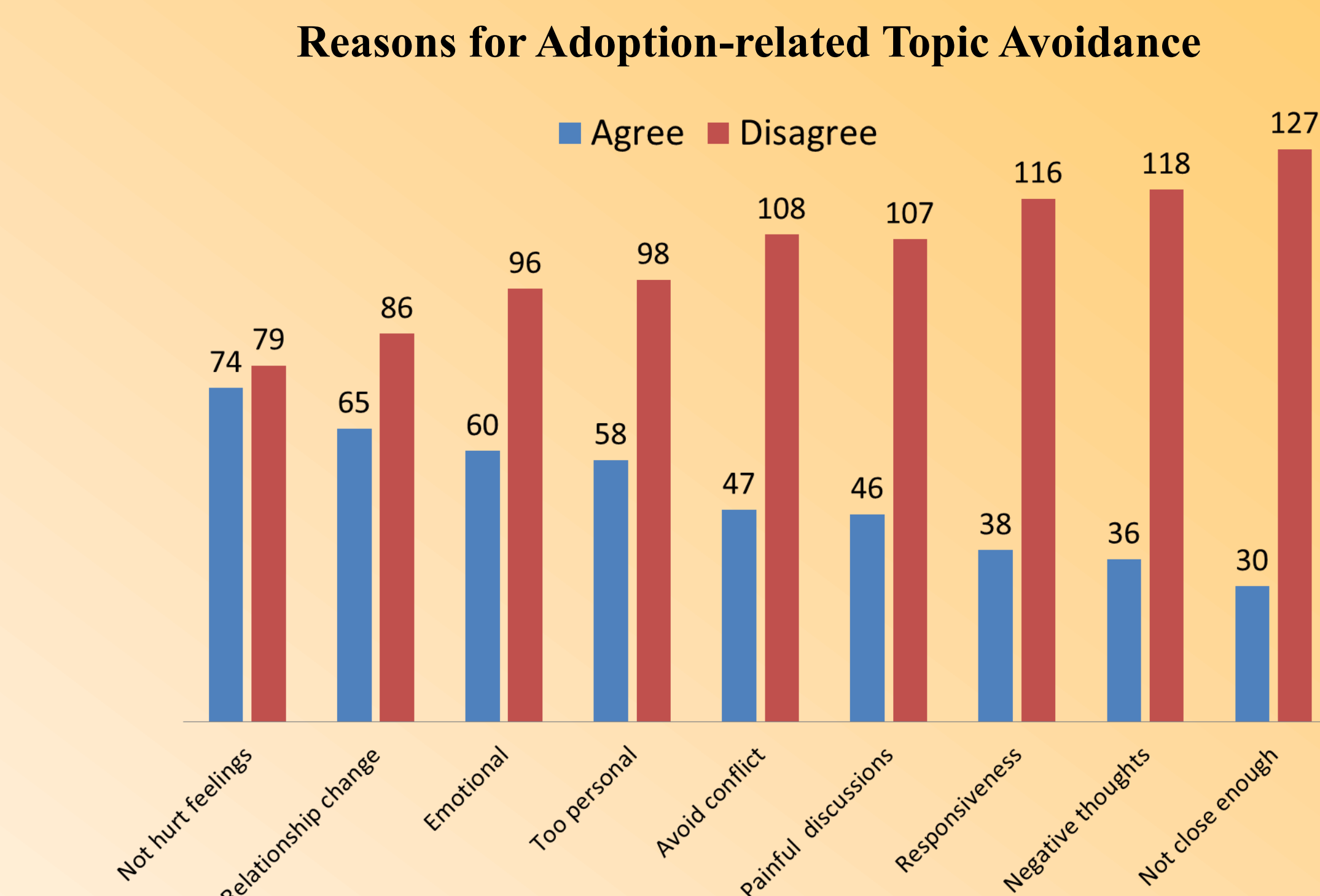
RQ1: More participants reported engaging in topic avoidance with their adoptive parents regarding searching for and meeting birth family members, than those who *never* avoided discussing these topics.



RQ2: A one-way ANOVA elicited only one significant gender by adoption type finding--females avoided discussing searching for and meeting a birth family member significantly more with their stepfather than with all other adoption types ($r_{\text{effect size}} = .27$; 95% CI: .15-.39).



RQ3: Participants' reasons for engaging in topic avoidance with their adoptive parents were more frequently related to (a) not wanting to hurt their parents' feelings, (b) fear of changing their parent-child relationship, and (c) concerns that certain topics may be too emotional or too personal for one or both parties to discuss.



DISCUSSION

The present investigation contributes greatly to adoption and communication research. First, a literature review suggests this is the only study to report adult adoptees' topic avoidance from seven different adoptive family types. Second, analyses of participants' adoption type and gender only elicited one significant difference—females more frequently avoid discussing searching for and meeting any birth family member with their stepfather. Third, many similarities emerged between and within individuals who were reared by at least one person who is not a birth parent. Fourth, these findings deviate from vast amounts of previous literature suggesting that males avoid discussing more topics at a higher frequency with their parents, than do females with their parents. Finally, of noteworthy importance is that numerous adoptees reported that their families do not avoid discussing searching for and meeting their birth family members.

In light of these findings, future research should examine (a) a larger sample of similar participants who were adopted via each of the seven adoption types to determine the generalizability of these findings to other adoptees, (b) factors that may contribute to females' frequency of topic avoidance with their stepfather, (c) communication methods that can be used to facilitate lifelong, adoption-related communications between all adoptees and their adoptive parents, (d) adoptees' gender and adoption type in relation to reasons for topic avoidance, (e) whether or not these occurrences of topic avoidance serve as necessary and positive relational functions within adoptive families, and (f) topic avoidance within the context of the Family Adoption Communication model (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003).

IMPLICATIONS

Because searching for and meeting birth family members are important topics for many adoptees, these participants' perspectives offer key insights for adoptive parents, adoption educators, and those who work with adoptive families. Findings from this investigation can be used to create additional methods for stimulating lifelong parent-child communications that promote adoptive parents' communication of respect to adoptees concerning their adoption, interest in birth family members, adoption-related curiosities, and desires to search for birth family members. Implications derived from this study may decrease topic avoidance within adoptive families and enhance the overall well-being of adoptive family members.

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