Who Prefers Open and Who Prefers Closed Adoption: Perspectives of Emerging Adult Adoptees

Krystal K. Cashen, Domique K. Altamari, Harold D. Grotevant
University of Massachusetts Amherst, Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences

Introduction

- Given historical traditions of secrecy associated with adoption practices, the introduction of open adoption practices generated controversy in the field (Grotevant & McRoy, 1997).
- Research suggests that satisfaction with contact is more important for adoptees than whether or not the adoptee has contact with birth parents (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013).
- It is therefore important to understand which individuals and families may be more satisfied.

Study Aim

Further our understanding of who prefers open adoption arrangements and who prefers closed adoption arrangements by examining case studies of emerging adult adoptees who advocate for either arrangement type.

Participants

- Participants selected from larger longitudinal study about openness in adoption (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013).
- All participants had been adopted as infants through private domestic adoption into same-race families.
- At Wave 3 of data collection, when participants were an average of 25 years old, participants were interviewed about various aspects of their adoption.
  - Aspects discussed included their adoption story, contact with birth parents, relationship with adoptive parents, and communication about adoption.
  - Previous work examined participants responses to the question “If you were giving advice about adoption practice to people running adoption agencies, what would you tell them?” (Cashen & Grotevant, 2017).
- Individuals whose responses advocated for either open (n = 17) or closed adoption (n = 7) were selected for inclusion in the present study.

Open Adoption

Profile 1. Satisfying, ongoing relationships with birthparents and birth families (n = 10)

“We’ve [Birth mother and adoptee] gotten to be great friends. You know, it’s like family. I mean, I don’t really draw a line saying, you know, I’m closer to my adoptive family than I am to my birth family. You know, it’s just one big family for me.” (man, 25 years old, current contact with birth mother)

Growing up my adopted mom always asked me to stop what I was doing so she could take a picture of me and send it to my birth mom...As for the contact. We have tons of it. It was always through a social worker until I was 6 but after 6/7 years old we took it on our selves and it has just blossomed from there.” (woman, 22 years old, current contact with birth mother)

Profile 2. Desired strong relationship but either had no current contact or had contact but wanted more (n = 7)

“I love [Birth mother] even though I have never met her. Not because I was placed but for the reason that I know she has to be like me and I can’t wait to talk to her about what she likes and what she doesn’t but because I guarantee that we are a lot a like” (woman, 22 years old, previous contact with birth mother that has stopped)

“I wish my birthmother would have tried to be closer to me instead of just my mom. She acts like my mom is her mom, because my mom is older and her mom passed away a long time ago.” (woman, 23 years old, current contact with birth mother)

Closed Adoption

Profile 1. Did not have strong desire for contact with birth family/made peace with having no contact (n = 3)

“I really don’t wish to find anything out. I feel like everything I need, I’ve already got. And just to find that out, I think it’d just stir up stuff, you know. I don’t like feeling angry. And maybe I would find something out that might make me angry.” (man, 25 years old, no contact)

“Um, I would say it would be about wanting to see a picture of my birthmom. And she [Adoptive mother] said that, you know, that would be it would be a lot of trouble to go and try to find that. I don’t know that I would want to meet her, per se, face-to-face because I don’t know if I could handle all the emotions. I don’t have—I don’t deal with emotions all that well. But I would like to see a picture.” (woman, 24 years old, no contact)

Profile 2. Believed contact should be avoided until the adopted child was mature enough to handle a relationship with their birthparents (n = 3)

“I think an open adoption would be stressful and confusing to a child and teenager. I can only imagine dealing with the emotions that come up since I met my birth family when I was a kid or going through puberty. Boundaries are very important and they are hard to set up as a child or a parent of a child whether adoptive or birth, so a closed adoption would be the easiest way to set up those boundaries and allow the child to develop into a person who can set up their own.” (woman, 23 years old, current contact with birth mother)

“It’s good to have a no information disclosure [sic] for both parties because I believe a child meeting it’s birthmother before they are developed could case some severe strife for the family. But still leave contact avenues open for each party, especially in the event that both want to meet some day in the future.” (man, 27 years old, current contact with birth mother)

Coding Process

- A qualitative approach was used to develop descriptive profiles of individuals who advocated for either open or closed adoption.
- To develop profiles, we first read through each participant’s interview transcript and took note of key themes.
- Patterns within themes were then used to develop profiles separately for those who advocated for open adoption and those who advocated for closed adoption.
- After profiles were developed, the first two authors independently coded each case to match one of the profiles.
- In cases of disagreement, the case was discussed and a consensus was reached using the profile descriptions as guidance.

Discussion

- Emerging adult adoptees have varying views on whether open or closed adoptions is preferable.
- These views may be influenced by both their own experiences with and desire for contact with birth parents.
- Participants own adoption arrangement did not necessarily correspond with the type of arrangement they were advocating for.
- Results provide further evidence that openness may not be “one size fits all.”

Selected References

