The Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project:
Navigating Contact from Childhood into Young Adulthood

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MTARP History, Background, and Sample
Legal Background of Openness in Adoption in the United States

- Ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome:
  - adoption was an open, informal exchange
  - provided an additional parental relationship for the child, rather than a substitute relationship

- In 1851, first U.S. adoption law passed in Massachusetts
  - adoption permanently severed relationship between child and birth parents
Changing State Laws

• By 1917, Minnesota passed law barring public inspection of adoption records

• By 1950, most states had sealed record laws
  • Secrecy was believed to be best for the birth mother, child and adoptive parents
Movement toward Openness in Infant Adoptions

• Movement toward openness started in private agency placements and independent adoptions

• Contributors to changing practices
  • Birthparents and adopted persons returning to the agency seeking background information/challenged secrecy
  • Fewer babies to place
    • Reliable contraception & abortion
    • Decreased stigma associated with parenting outside marriage
    • Changing types of adoption
Changing Forms of Contact

• Any type of communication between members of the adoptive and birth family after placement—could be exchange of cards, letters, pictures, gifts, emails, phone calls or face-to-face visits.

  • Could be direct or could be mediated by a third party

  • May or may not involve sharing of identifying information such as names and addresses
Background of Study
Mid-1980’s
Overarching Research Questions

- What are the links between contact arrangements (structure and process) and psychosocial outcomes for adopted persons, adoptive parents, & birth parents, considered over time from placement to 30 years later?

- How are relationships managed within adoptive kinship networks over time?

• **190 adoptive couples**: mostly white, middle to upper middle class; mean age 40 years; most adopted because of infertility

• **171 adopted children**: ages 4 – 12 (M=7.8 yrs); 81 females; infant placements; no transracial, international, or special needs placements

• **169 birthmothers**: 93% white, ages 14-36 at placement (M=19.3 years); all voluntary placements – wanted a better future for her child

Approx. 8 years after Wave 1

- At least one member in 177 of 190 original families – seen in their homes across the U.S.
- 173 adoptive mothers & 163 adoptive fathers
- 156 adopted adolescents (ages 11-20; M=15.6 yrs)
- 127 birthmothers (ages 29-54; M=35.4 yrs)
Participants: Wave 3 (2005-2008)

Approx. 9 years after Wave 2

• 169 young adult adoptees
  (52% males; ages 21-30; mean 25.0 yrs)
• 103 close relationship partners
• 151 adoptive mothers
• 134 adoptive fathers
• Birth mothers were not assessed at Wave 3
Participants: Wave 4 (2012 – ongoing)

Birth mothers (N = 19 and counting)

- Age range: mid 40s to mid 50s
- Most have completed BA
- Most married and have parented an average of 2 children

Young Adult Adoptees (N = 68 and counting)

- Age range: mid 20s to mid 30s
- 92% have completed some post-secondary work, 34% have completed some post-graduate work
- 77% in a committed relationship; 57% married, 43% have from 1 to 5 children
Hal Grotevant, UMass Amherst

Contact Arrangements of Adoptive and Birth Families
Contact Pathway Groups (%): Waves 1 – 3
Placement thru emerging adulthood

- No contact: 28.3%
- Stopped early: 17.8%
- Stopped between W2-3: 11.1%
- Opened early: 9.4%
- Increased between W2-3: 12.8%
- Always open: 20.6%
Emotional Distance Regulation: Managing Contact in the Adoptive Kinship Network

Adoptive Parents
- Security?
- Co-construction
- Growth of Relationship
- Communication Skills

Adopted Child
- (growing influence over time)

Birth Family
- Security?
- Openness to Contact?
- Balance Families?
- Communication Skills

Forging Relationships in the Absence of Clear Societal Norms
Satisfaction with Contact Arrangements

• Variability in satisfaction with arrangements
• Satisfied / dissatisfied for different reasons
• Dissatisfaction typically involves desire for more contact
• More openness generally linked to greater satisfaction
• Satisfaction is more strongly related to young adult outcomes than is actual amount of contact
• Satisfaction appears to be about meaning-making
What does it take to make contact work?

- Shift in thinking from nuclear family to adoptive kinship network
- Valuing of child’s dual connection to birth and adoptive parents
- Engaged participation across birth and adoptive sides of the network
- Flexibility in day-to-day logistics
- Excellent communication skills
- Commitment to the relationship – in the best interest of the child
Birth Mothers’ Views and Experiences with Contact
Birth Mother Feelings about Face-to Face Contact at Wave 2  (N=51)

At W2, 51 birth mothers had met the adoptive parents and 48 birth mothers had met the adopted youth

• A majority of the birth mothers felt positively about their meetings with the adoptive parents (57%), with approximately one third (31%) having mixed feelings.

• Birthmother feelings about meetings with the adopted youth were a little more complex. Approximately half felt purely positively, while the other half had mixed feelings (47% for both groups).

• Only a few birthmothers had primarily negative feelings about meeting the adoptive parents (8%) and the adopted youth (6%).
Birth Mother Feelings of Grief about the Child’s Adoptive Placement (N=61)

Comparison of Levels of Grief Experienced at Wave 1 and Wave 2

- 53% Decreased Grief
- 41% Grief Remained Stable
- 7% Increased Grief
Birth Mother Grief: Change from Wave 1 to Wave 2 by Contact Arrangements (N=61)
Birth Mother Feelings about Initiating a Search for the Adopted Youth at Wave 2 (N=125)

- At W2, contact arrangements were related to whether or not the birth mother would initiate a search for the adopted youth

- Birth mothers who had direct contact with the adopted youth at W2 were far more likely to initiate a search if contact was lost for any reason (86%) than birthmothers in confidential (36%) and mediated adoptions, both those that were ongoing (35%) and those in which contact had ceased (28%).

- Whether or not the birthmother would search was not related to her age or her marital or parenting status
Birth Mother Feelings about the Adopted Youth Initiating a Search at Wave 2 (N=125)

• Most of the birth mothers felt the adopted youth would initiate a search for them or search if contact was lost (78%)

• The majority of this group felt positively about being found (80%)

• A few felt ambivalent (15%) or neutral (5%)

• None felt negatively
Gretchen Miller Wrobel
Bethel University, St. Paul

The Adoption Curiosity Pathway for Adopted Young Adults
The Adoption Curiosity Pathway

• Focus - emerging adult adoptees from Wave 3
• Age range 21-30; Mean age = 25
• 87 males, 82 females
THE ADOPTION CURIOSITY PATHWAY

Adoption Information Gap

Adoption Related Curiosity

Information Seeking

Barriers and Facilitators
THE ADOPTION CURIOSITY PATHWAY

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Findings

• Formation of an Adoption Information Gap

• Adoption Information Gap Content

• Influence of Barriers and Facilitators on Adoption Related Curiosity and Information Seeking
Ann Schwartz, Concordia University Texas

MTARP Wave 4 Research in Progress
Wave 4 MTARP Follow Up Study: Continuing Work and New Directions

- **AIM 1**: Examine longitudinal experiences with a special focus on:
  - Birth mother outcomes: Grief/loss, birth mother role, agency contact.
  - Young adult outcomes: Emotional health, adoptive identity, and relational well-being.

- **AIM 2**: Analyze contact among members of the adoptive kinship network, especially between birth mothers and young adults.

- **AIM 3**: Explore how new technologies facilitate relationships among members of the adoptive kinship network, especially between birth mothers and young adults.
Wave 4 MTARP Follow Up Study: Preliminary Findings

Birthmothers (N=19):

• Current contact arrangements
  • Varied—identified six patterns
    • 36.8%, always have had contact
  • Openness across the adoptive kinship network

• Current grief and loss
  • Most (68.4%) satisfied/very satisfied placement decision and have no regrets (73.7%)
  • Some (26.3%) ongoing loss.

• Psychological Presence
  • Varies as function of contact arrangement
Wave 4 MTARP Follow Up Study: Preliminary Findings

Birthmothers (N=19):

- Emerging themes from qualitative data
  - Adult status of the young adult changes relationship between the birth mother and him or her, as well as the birth mother’s understanding of the birth mother role.
  - Some birth mothers are using new technologies to search for the young adults, but those who have always had contact with the young adults view tech-mediated communication as simply another form of communication among those in the adoptive kinship network.
Wave 4 MTARP Follow Up Study: Preliminary Findings

Young Adults (N=68):

- Current contact arrangements
  - Four patterns with birth mother—never (37.7%), stopped (8.2%), current but not in-person (8.2%), current in-person (45.9%)
    - Contact with BMO (59%), BFA (26.2%), birth siblings (43.1%) and birth grandparent (37.7%)
  - Satisfaction with current contact and desire for future contact
    - Satisfaction with BMO [range 2-10, M=6.92]
    - Want contact to stay same (31.4%) or start or increase (45.7%) with BMO; 10% happy with no contact; 13% unsure
Wave 4 MTARP Follow Up Study: Preliminary Findings

Young Adults (N=68):

• Nature of contact
  • Contact involves combination of “traditional” and “tech-mediated” modes
    • BMO (4.6 traditional and 3.0 tech-mediated)

• Psychological presence
  • Varies as a function of contact arrangement
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Thank You for Your Interest!

For further information, please visit our project website:

http://psych.umass.edu/adooption/

...and take a handout about our project for future reference
Questions & Discussion