Post-Adoption Contact from the Birth Mother’s Perspective: What Can We Learn from the Involvement of Important Figures in the Birth Mothers’ Lives?

Susan M. Henney, Ph.D.
Department of Social Sciences
University of Houston-Downtown
Longitudinal Sample

- **Wave 1**
  - 169 birth mothers
  - 4 to 12 years post-placement
  - 21 to 43 years old (mean = 27.1)
  - 2/3 delivered as teenagers
- **Wave 2**
  - 127 birth mothers
  - 12 to 20 years post-placement
  - 29 to 54 years old (mean=35.4)

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<td><strong>Wave 1</strong></td>
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<td>(N=127)</td>
<td>34 (26.8%)</td>
<td>15 (11.8%)</td>
<td>44 (34.6%)</td>
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<td><strong>Wave 2</strong></td>
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<td>(N=127)</td>
<td>31 (24.4%)</td>
<td>29 (22.8%)</td>
<td>23 (18.1%)</td>
<td>44 (34.7%)</td>
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Measures

• Birth Mother Interview
  – Structured interview
    • Individual sections addressing experiences with the birthfather, romantic partner, and parented children
  – Openness checklist
  – Quantitative and qualitative coding
Birth Fathers

• Birth mothers had adopted a more neutral emotional stance regarding the birth father by Wave 2.

• Most of the birth mothers did not have current contact with the birth father.

• If the birth father wants contact, the birth mother may move to prevent it, or if he does not want contact, she may resent it.
“I think I came to an understanding, I guess. I don’t dislike him anymore. I don’t think I’d be very comfortable if I ran into him somewhere. I think it’d probably make me really nervous, but I guess I understand how frightening and overwhelming it must have been. He has this summer romance and then all of a sudden he has a child. I guess I forgave him.”
Romantic Partners

• Of 105 romantic partners, two-thirds were “non-participants,” and only a third were “participants” in contact.

• As expected, as openness level increases, so does the partner’s level of participation in adoption.

• Birth mothers are happy with their partners’ level of participation (whether participating or not participating).
“Occasionally he would say "Have you heard from her?", but he never wanted to go meet them or anything like that. He never participated in any of the contact. It wasn't that he was against it. It was a neutral position. Not for it—not against it.”
Parented Children

• About a third of the birth mothers’ oldest parented children did not know about the adoption.
• Thirty of the birth mothers’ oldest parented children had contact with their sibling placed in adoption.
• Most of the parented children would like to meet or have contact with their sibling.
“She tells other people about it. She explains that she has a sister but that she doesn't live with us because she was adopted. So she understands adoption and is able to explain that to other people. And if she knows anyone that is adopted, then she's able to understand their situation better, too.”
THEMES
Birth Mother as Protector

• Of the adopted child from unwanted relationships (sometimes even with herself)
• Of her parented children’s emotional development
• Of her own relationships with her romantic partner, with the adopted child, and with the adoptive parents
“I am pretty protective of her [the adopted youth]. He, the birth father, does not want to meet her. But if he ever were to say ‘yes’ to a meeting, I might want to be there just to make sure that he didn't hurt her feelings…I would want to protect her.”

“I'm very sure it's affected my parenting with [parented child]. I believe that one way is that I tend to be maybe a little more watchful of Anna's safety than maybe some others are.”
Birth Mother Role

• A theme closely related to the protector concept is how birth mothers use this to create a role.
  
• Parented children: “Guardian” of the child’s developmental sequence.
  
• Romantic partner: “Leader” of openness.
  
• Birth father: “Manager” of birth fathers’ involvement in the adoption.
“There was no need to know when he was little. It would serve no purpose. He's getting ready to go into high school and there's a lot of transition in his life right now. The hormones have kicked in and life is just topsy turvy for him. He hasn't figured out who he is much less who everybody else is around him, so I don't feel that the timing is right. I feel that down the road, definitely we'll need to. But right now, the timing's not right.”
Birth Mother as Gatekeeper

• Perception of self in gatekeeper role between others and the adoptive family.

• Perception of self as conduit, mediator and, if necessary, roadblock to information and contact.
Interviewer asks if the birth father has ever had any contact with the adoptive family]

“No. He doesn't know anything about where [the adopted youth] was adopted or anything. I've never given him the information.”
Birth Mothers’ Satisfaction with Others’ Involvement

• Birth mothers tend to be satisfied with the involvement of their parented children, their romantic partners, and the birth fathers in the adoption.

• Sometimes this means that they are satisfied that the other is involved, sometimes this means they are satisfied that the other is not involved.
“When we see each other and do things, then they will talk to each other. [Birthmother’s parented son] shows him his toy, you know, tells him his 3-year-old thoughts and [adopted youth] listens. It’s almost like they just play together like they’re real brothers.”

“I'm so glad that [birth father] established this contact...I wanted him to call and talk to her or something for so long. I'm so happy that he finally did. It took so long to do it, so I wouldn't change anything right now.”
Others’ Different Desire for Contact

• If they know about the adoption, parented children would like more contact.
• When romantic partners are not involved in the adoption, they do not express a desire to get involved.
• Few birthfathers had contact and most had not expressed an interest in such.
“It hurts me and it bothers me that he’s not interested or anything in [adopted youth] since [adopted youth] is such a big part of my life...It was just another relationship that he didn’t want to contend with. But it bothers me and he makes me uncomfortable in such a way that I don’t even bring [adopted youth] up or talk about him.”
Implications

• There are many similarities among birth mothers in how they think and feel about the adoption, regardless of openness status.

• Interventions and education must be appropriate to the developmental sequence of the adoption.

• Flexibility of thought and action are key abilities in negotiating the post-adoption world.