Birth Family Contact among Sexually Diverse Adoptive Families: Types of Contact and Perceptions of Open Adoptions

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Introduction

- For every family involved in an open adoption, openness looks different; some have frequent contact with birth families, while others do not. Farr and Goldberg (2014) found that email was the typical type of contact and in-person visits were the least in a sample including gay, lesbian, and heterosexual couples.
- As of 2007, 68% of adoptive parents (in private adoptions) have contact with their child's birth family (Farr & Goldberg, 2014).
- Adoptive families tend to have contact more often with the birth mother than with the birth father (Farr et al., 2014).
- Some studies report that having more contact leads to positive perceptions of the birth family (Faulkner & Madden, 2012). It also leads to more satisfaction about their openness arrangement (Farr et al., 2014).
- This study will focus on open birth family contact among adoptive families diverse in parental sexual orientation. Questions explored include: Who is involved in the contact? What kind and how frequent is contact? How do adoptive parents feel about the birth family?
- Contact could range from letters to in-person visits. Social media (e.g., Facebook, Skype) was predicted to be the most common format for contact. It was expected that most adoptive parents will feel positively about the birth mother, grandparents, and siblings and more neutral about the birth father.

Method

- The Contemporary Adoptive Families Study (CAFS) involved recruiting 106 two-parent families (headed by lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples) for Wave 1 through five private domestic U.S. adoption agencies. For Wave 2, the same families were invited to participate.
- For questions relevant to this study, parent interviews were transcribed and coded by trained research assistants.
- A sample of 41 families from Wave 2 was selected based on specific criteria, including having (had) direct contact (i.e., not mediated through the adoption agency) with at least one birth family member after their child's birth, and the contact had to be reciprocal among the birth family member(s) and the adoptive parents.
- Coding for emotions toward birth family was done by examining parents' interview responses. If they mentioned love and described the birth family member as being a part of their family, emotions were categorized as very positive. If the parent only had matter-of-fact statements about the individual, this was categorized as neutral. If there were both positive and negative comments which balanced each other out, this was also neutral. Very negative feelings were reserved for those birth family members with whom adoptive parents did not want to have contact (for themselves or their child).

Table 1. *Adoptive Family Contact with Birth Family Members*

Variable	Yes: Have contact	No: Do not have contact
Birth mother	90.0	10.0
Birth grandparents	42.9	57.1
Birth siblings	38.6	61.4
Birth father	25.7	74.3

Table 2. *Frequency of Different Forms of Contact*

Variable	Frequency of meetings (Rarely)	Frequency of email (Rarely)	Frequency of letters (Rarely)	Frequency of Facebook (Never)	Frequency of social media (Never)	Frequency of pictures (Rarely)	Frequency of phone (Other)
Birth mother	67.8%	43.3%	61.5%	38.2%	63.2%	39.5%	48.5%
Birth grand parents	67.9%	50.0%***	66.7%	81.8%	100.0%	36.4%~	37.5%
Birth sister	86.7%	100.0%	100.0%	87.5%	100.0%	50.0%~	--------
Birth brother	57.9%	50.0%***	--------	88.9%	100.0%	33.3%	33.3%~~
Birth father	73.3%	42.9%***	60.0%	77.8%	100.0%	28.6%*	50.0%**

Note: *Tied with Sometimes and Other, **Tied with Rarely, *** Tied with Other, ~Tied with Sometimes, ~~Tied with Never and Rarely

Table 3. *Emotional Perceptions of Birth Family Members*

Variable	Very Negative	Negative	Neutral	Positive	Very Positive
Birth mother	1.4%	17.1%	35.7%	25.7%	20.0%
Birth grandparents	------	3.0%	36.4%	36.4%	24.2%
Birth sister	------	------	80.0%	20.0%	-------
Birth brother	------	-------	58.3%	12.5%	29.2%
Birth father	1.5%	10.3%	70.6%	13.2%	4.4%

Results

- As expected, the results in Table 1 showed that 90% of the families had contact with the birth mother, which was the highest among all birth family members.
- Table 2 shows that most families reported "rarely" (about every few years or less than yearly) for frequency of all types of contact.
- Contrary to our hypothesis, most adoptive parents said that they never had any type of social media contact with the birth family.
- In Table 3, most emotions toward birth family were neutral, but for birth grandparents, neutral and positive were tied. This was similar to our hypothesis.

Discussion

- Overall, this study showed that in open adoptions, adoptive parents are more likely to be in contact with the birth mother, but there are families who see many birth family members, e.g., "*[child]'s birth family holds a yearly week long family reunion campout and we attend that campout…and the family…all bring campers to the campsite and they set us up with a camper and we spend like from Thursday to Sunday hanging out with them... there are probably anywhere from 30 to 60 cousins, tons of aunts and uncles.*"
- Some families tended to have great amounts of contact: "*Our most frequent communication is through Facebook…or emails. We do get together, probably not as often as we should, but…I would guess we average about four to six times a year…she's [birth mother] been in [child]'s graduation from preschool, we do dinners, we go on hikes. We had a backpacking trip last summer that [birth mom] went with us on.*"
- Other families do not have as much consistent contact, which may be experienced negatively: "*When [birth mother]disappeared and [child] was experiencing very significant stress because [birth mother] had disappeared*".
- One parent views open adoption as a positive experience and has positive feelings towards the birth mother: "*It's not like she'll [birth mother] contact us every month but the quality when she does contact us is the same as the day we met her…[she is] very committed and focused and we all love each other very deeply.*"
- One adoptive father had negative feelings around openness: "*I'm not really a Facebook guy but my wife does it and the birth parents have sometimes gotten [child] a gift and every year they give [adoptive mother] flowers on Mother's Day. They've never given me so much as a card on Father's Day. I try not to take it personally, but it does actually hurt a little bit.*"
- Overall, the adoptive parents had contact with mostly the birth mother, but also with other members. They mostly had less than yearly contact with every form of contact and preferred to not have social media contact. Most of the emotions were neutral, but they seemed to be on the side of positive more than negative. This suggests that contact with the birth family can lead to better emotional perceptions and relationships for all the people involved.

Selected References

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