

# **The Role of Siblings in Adoptive Family Dynamics: Adoption Communication, Adoptive Identity, and Developmental Outcomes**

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# Introduction

- As role models and social partners, siblings affect one another's development throughout life (McHale et al., 2012).
- Sibling relationships are often the longest lasting family relationship (Noller, 2005).
- Positive sibling dynamics can act as buffers; negative ones can accentuate difficult family dynamics (Brody, 1998, 2004).
- Within adoptive families, negative sibling relationships could be exacerbated by discrepancies in biological relatedness or in birth family contact (Berge et al., 2006)
- Few studies have addressed adopted sibling dynamics.

# Sibling Relationships & Outcomes

- Growing interest in studying sibling relationships (e.g., Brody, 1998, 2004; Cicirelli, 2005; Matthews, 2005; McHale et al., 2012; Noller, 2005; White, 2001)
- Studying the influence of sibling relationships in the absence of biological connections is a compelling area for further study.
- Studies of individual adjustment: externalizing and internalizing behaviors; substance use (adolescence and emerging adulthood)
  - Importance of sibling similarity and closeness (e.g., Hicks, Foster, Iacono, & McGue, 2013; Samek, McGue, Keyes, & Iacono, 2014).

# Openness in Adoption

- Open adoption arrangements vary greatly in type, frequency, directness of contact, and family members involved.
- How openness in adoption influences has been studied (e.g., Grotevant, 2012; Siegel, 2012). In families with multiple adopted children, the adoptive kinship network is expanded.
- Of interest is how siblings may uniquely contribute to adoptees' experiences of birth family contact over time, via processes of *emotional distance regulation* (Grotevant, 2009).

# Adopted Siblings and Openness

- Berge et al. (2006) explored birth family contact during adolescence among 29 adopted sibling pairs ( $N = 58$ ).
- Adolescents in “**dual contact**” sibling sets (vs. “**mixed contact**”) reported fewer conversations about their adoption with their family or close friends.
- Dual contact siblings: “fewer secrets or unanswered questions”, while adolescents in mixed contact pairs expressed a greater need to talk about adoption with family and friends. They also reported a strong desire to connect with their own birth families, particularly birth siblings.

# Research Questions

- (1) Have there been changes in the level of birth family contact for the target adoptee and their sibling?
- (2) How are adopted siblings' perceptions of and experiences with their own adoption related to target adoptees' behavioral adjustment?
- (3) How does sibling involvement in conversations, information sharing, and connections with birth family influence target adoptees' behavioral adjustment as well as perceptions of their adoption experience?

# Method: Participants

- 190 adoptive families
  - Recruited through 35 adoption agencies in 23 states
  - Domestic, infant adoptions (all same-race placements)
  - Participants: predominantly White, Protestant, and middle to upper-middle class
  - Adoptions varied from completely confidential (closed) to fully disclosed (open)

(Grotevant & McRoy, 1998)

# Method: Participants, Waves 2 and 3

## Wave 2 ( $N = 156$ adolescent adoptees):

- $M_{age} = 16$  years, range = 11-20 years
- Data from 88 siblings (68 adopted)
- 29 adopted sibling pairs (Berge et al., 2006)

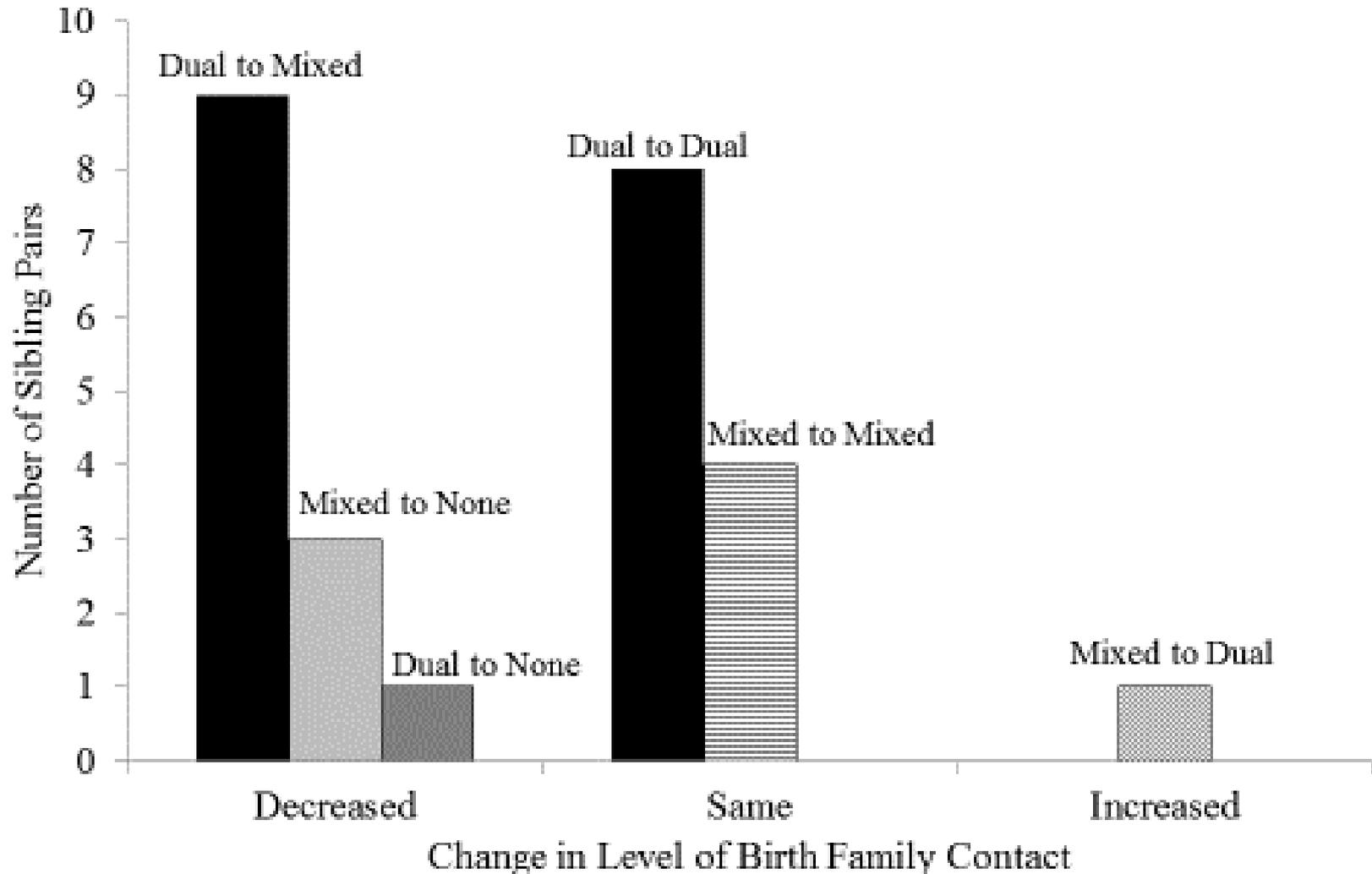
## Wave 3 ( $N = 167$ emerging adult adoptees)

- $M_{age} = 16$  years, range = 11-20 years
- Sibling data not included
- Reports from 134 adult adoptees included responses about their siblings
- 26 adopted sibling pairs

# Method: Materials & Procedure

- Semi-structured interviews at Waves 2 and 3
  - Frequency of contact: 1 = *never/stopped*; 5 = *often (more than twice a year)*
  - Satisfaction rated: 0 = *very dissatisfied*; 4 = *very satisfied*
  - Affect toward birth parents/adoption: 1 = *none or low*; 5 = *very strong*
  - Sibling involvement in birth family connections (yes/no);  
Wave 2
- Behavioral Adjustment at Waves 2 and 3
  - YSR and ASR; internalizing, externalizing, total
- Adoption Dynamics Questionnaires at Waves 2 and 3
  - Positive affect, negative experiences, preoccupation

# Results: (1) Have there been changes in birth family contact?



# Results: (2) How are siblings' experiences with own adoption related to adjustment?

- When siblings felt positively about own adoption (W2), target adolescent adoptees (W2):
  - fewer negative experiences with their adoption,  $r(51) = -.33, p = .026$
  - fewer externalizing behaviors,  $r(51) = -.36, p = .015$
- Adult adoptees reported fewer externalizing problems (W3) when their siblings (W2):
  - less preoccupied with their own adoption history,  $r(51) = .29, p = .043$
  - more positive affect about their own adoption,  $r(51) = -.31, p = .047$ .

# Results: (3) How does sibling involvement influence adjustment and adoption experiences?

	Adolescent Adoptees (W2)			Emerging Adult Adoptees (W3)		
Variable	Siblings involved at Wave 2 (n = 37)	No siblings involved at Wave 2 (n = 97)	t-test or chi-square	Siblings involved at Wave 2 (n = 37)	No siblings involved at Wave 2 (n = 96)	t-test or chi-square
Externalizing problems	49.33	55.42	2.52*	48.59	51.22	<1
Positive affect toward birth mothers/adoption	3.69	2.48	20.22**	2.85	2.79	11.34*
Contact with birth mothers	3.86	2.48	26.21***	3.65	1.85	19.09**
Satisfaction with contact	3.00	2.60	24.74***	2.56	2.59	<1

# Discussion

- Highlight how siblings are associated with adoptees' outcomes and experiences from adolescence into emerging adulthood.
- General decreases in contact
- Siblings' involvement, and own adoption experiences, were linked with adoptees' more positive feelings about their own birth family and adoption and better behavioral adjustment.
- Importance of open family communication about adoption and birth family contact
- Siblings in adoptive families are vital sources of social support and role models

# Strengths & Limitations

- Among first to emphasize sibling contributions in adoptive families
- Longitudinal; mixed-methods
- Represents only one pathway to adoptive family formation
- Need to know more about underlying mechanisms to sibling influence

# Implications

- Involving siblings in openness arrangements of adopted children
- Understanding “contagion effects” of perceptions and experiences
- Advantages of openness in adoption (contact and communication)

# Conclusion

- Important and dynamic role of sibling relationships to adoptees' development and experiences across the lifespan
- Advocacy for greater openness in adoption
- Siblings can play important supportive role to adoptees!

# Thank you!

- Participating families
- Research collaborators and assistants
- Our funding partners:

# Questions and Discussion

- For more information, please contact:  
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