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

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



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Boston College**



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?**

MTARP Participants: Wave 1 (1987 – 1992)

- **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

Participants: Wave 2 (1996-2000)

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

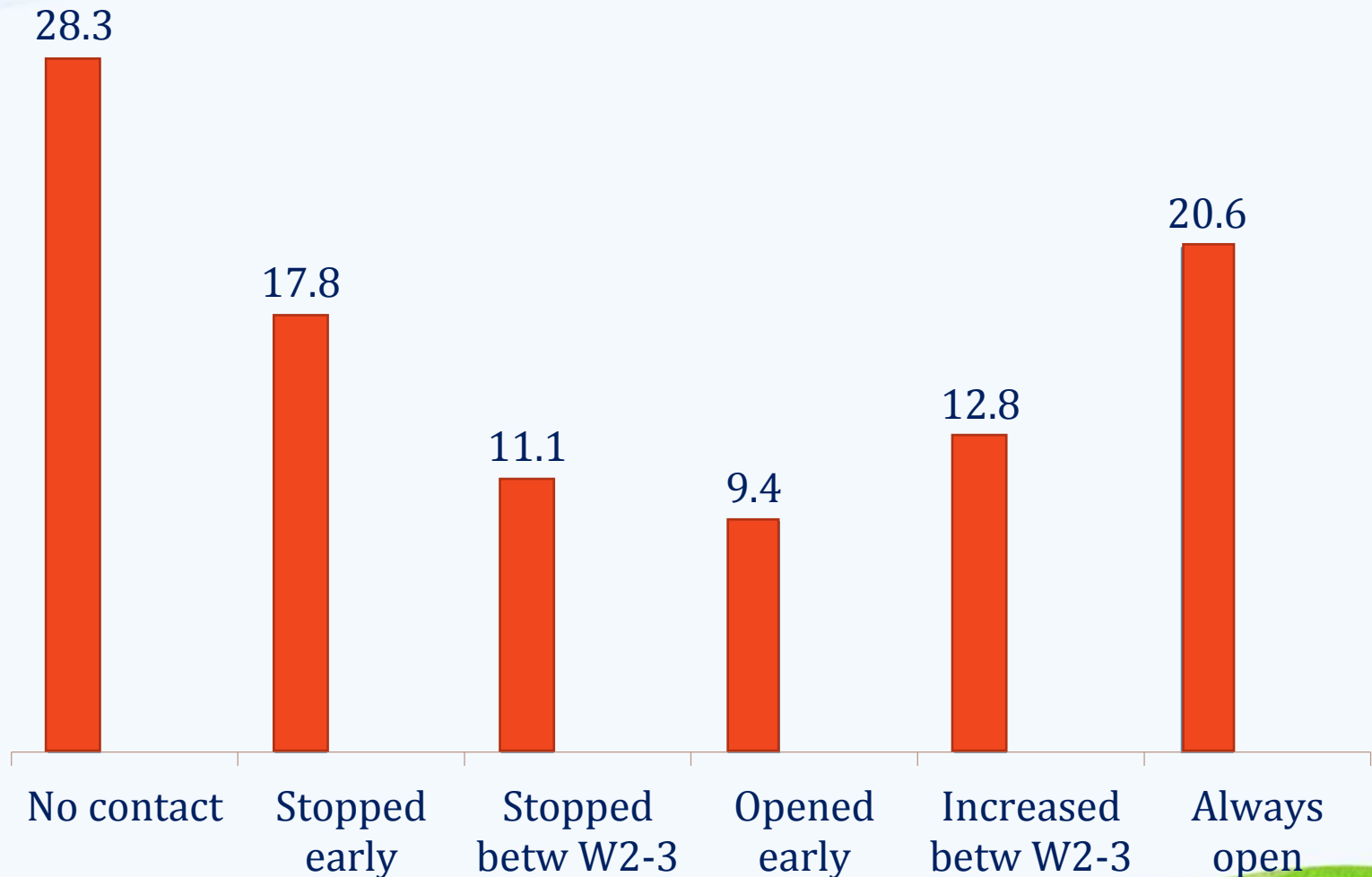
**Hal Grotevant,
UMass Amherst**



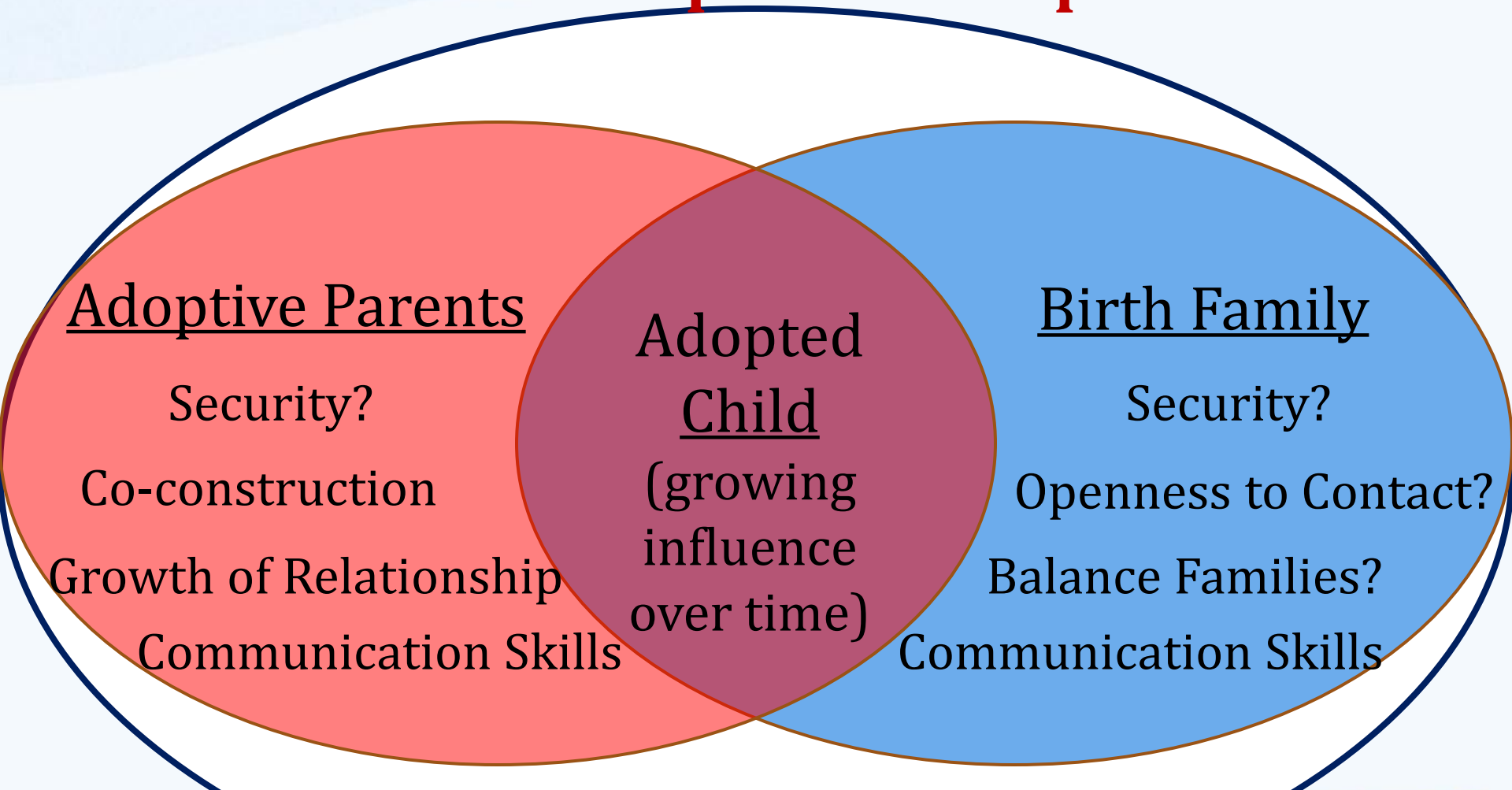
**Contact Arrangements of
Adoptive and Birth Families**

Contact Pathway Groups (%): Waves 1 – 3

Placement thru emerging adulthood



Emotional Distance Regulation: Managing Contact in the Adoptive Kinship Network



Forging Relationships in the Absence of Clear Societal Norms

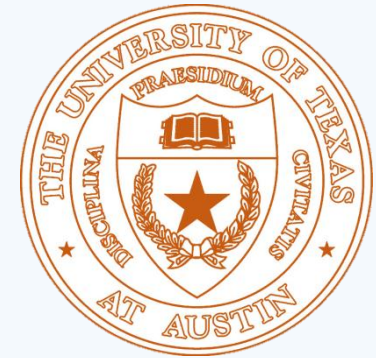
Satisfaction with Contact Arrangements

- 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**

**Susan Ayers-Lopez,
University of Texas
at Austin**



**Birth Mothers' Views and Experiences
with Contact**

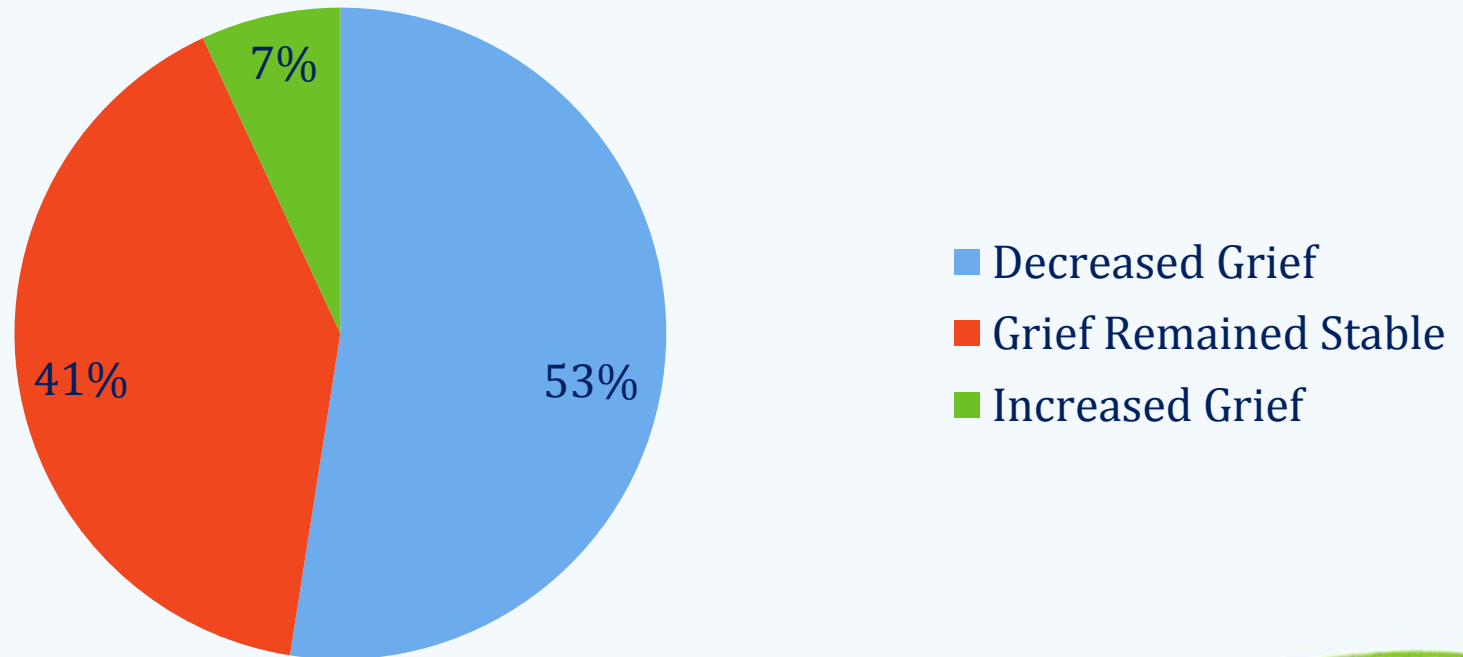
Birth Mother Feelings about Face-to Face Contact at Wave 2 (N=51)

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

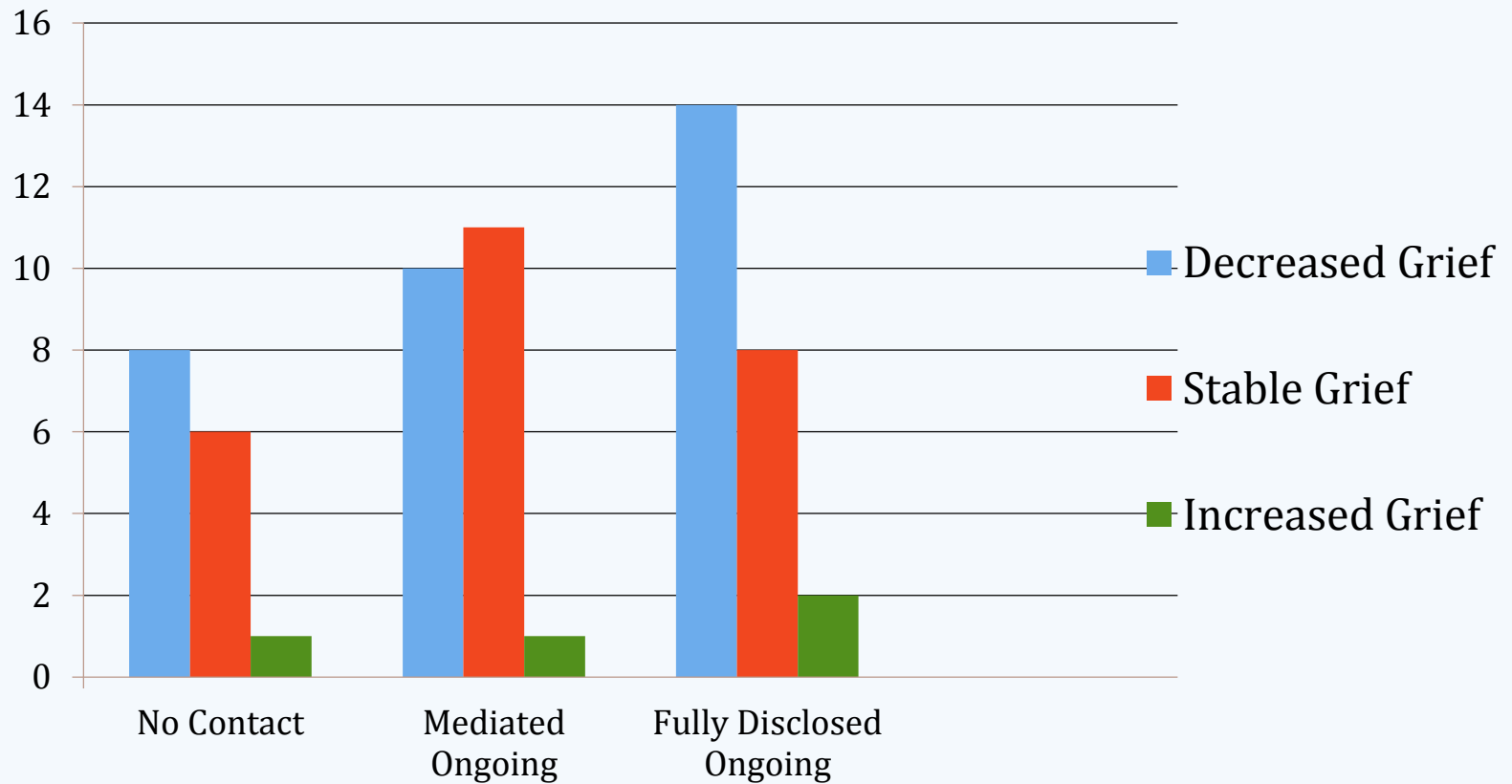
- A majority of the birth mothers felt positively about their meetings with the adoptive parents (57%), with approximately one third (31%) having mixed feelings.
- Birthmother feelings about meetings with the adopted youth were a little more complex. Approximately half felt purely positively, while the 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



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 logo for Bethel University, featuring the text "BETHEL UNIVERSITY" in white serif font on a black rectangular background. Below the black background is a solid blue horizontal bar.

BETHEL
UNIVERSITY

The Adoption Curiosity Pathway
for Adopted Young Adults

A decorative graphic at the bottom of the slide consisting of several overlapping, rounded hills in various shades of green, ranging from light to dark.

The Adoption Curiosity Pathway



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

THE ADOPTION CURIOUSITY PATHWAY

Adoption
Information
Gap

Barriers and Facilitators

Adoption
Related
Curiosity

Information
Seeking



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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

Sincere Thanks to our Recent Funding Partners and our Research Participants



WILLIAM T. GRANT FOUNDATION
Supporting research to improve the lives of young people



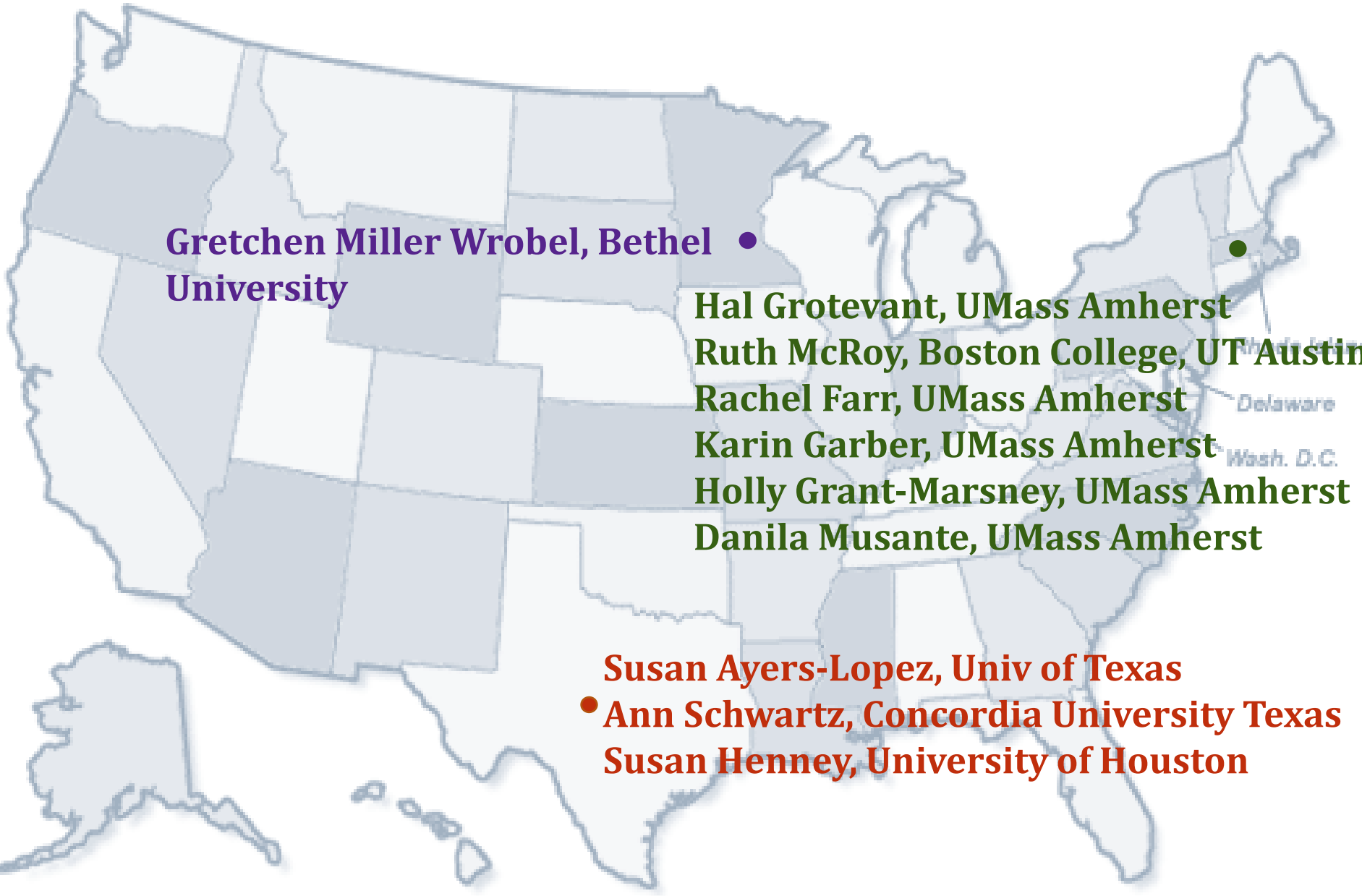
*Ofc of Population Affairs
US Dept of Health &
Human Services*

The Rudd
Adoption Research Program
at the University of Massachusetts Amherst

Current Key Collaborators



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Danila Musante, UMass Amherst

Susan Ayers-Lopez, Univ of Texas
Ann Schwartz, Concordia University Texas
Susan Henney, University of Houston

Thank You for Your Interest!

For further information,
please visit our project website:

<http://psych.umass.edu/adoption/>

...and take a handout about our project for
future reference



**Questions
&
Discussion**