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Adoption-Related Topic Avoidance: The Role of Structure and Communication Processes in Adoptive Families

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Adoptive Family Communication Processes: The Role of Openness, Age at Adoption and Disclosure

Introduction

- ❖ The first source an adopted child may turn to for information about their adoption is their adoptive parents. However, the nature of how and when this information is disclosed or avoided may hinder an adoptee's search for answers about his/her heritage.
- ❖ As children adopted at older ages are more likely to be involved in more complex adoption situations such as transnational or foster care (Harwood, Feng, & Yu, 2013), it is unclear how these family structures affect adoption-related communication processes between the adoptee and their parents.

Aim of Present Study

- ❖ As previous findings have shown, unique challenges exist within adoptive families regarding adoption communication processes. In an attempt to better understand these processes, the following hypotheses guide the present study:
- ❖ **Hypothesis 1:** Later age at adoption and age at disclosure will be associated with higher levels of openness.
- ❖ **Hypothesis 2:** Openness will mediate the relationship between age at adoption, disclosure, and adoption-related topic avoidance.

Descriptive Statistics N = 183

Sample Characteristics	N	M, (SD), or %
<i>Adoptee Physical Characteristics</i>		
Gender		
Male	71	43%
Female	96	58%
Race/Ethnicity		
Asian	29	17%
Black	3	2%
Hispanic	7	4%
White	119	71%
Other	1	6%
<i>Characteristics of Adoption</i>		
Adoption Type		
Domestic	88	48%
Transnational	45	25%
Foster Care	8	4%
Stepparent	34	19%
Kinship	2	1%
Surrogate	2	1%
ART	1	<1%
Age at Adoption in Years	183	2.3 (4.1)
Age at Disclosure in Years	179	5.7 (4.2)
Level of Openness		
Closed	124	69%
Semi-Open	20	11%
Open	36	20%

Correlation Matrix of Study Variables

	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Mother Avoidance	-				
2. Father Avoidance	.55*	-			
3. Adoption Age	.44*	-.03	-		
4. Disclosure Age	.44*	.05	.65*	-	
5. Openness	.29*	.09	.39*	.34*	-

Note: *Significant at $p < .05$

Method

- ❖ The initial data were collected using an online, web-based survey instrument, the Adoptees' Topic Avoidance Questionnaire (ATAQ) (Baltimore, 2010).
- ❖ The survey was comprised of five sections and included 37 Likert-type and nine dichotomous (yes-no) rating scale questions, 14 open-ended text boxes, and 13 demographic questions for a total of 59 closed-ended responses and 14 open-ended responses.

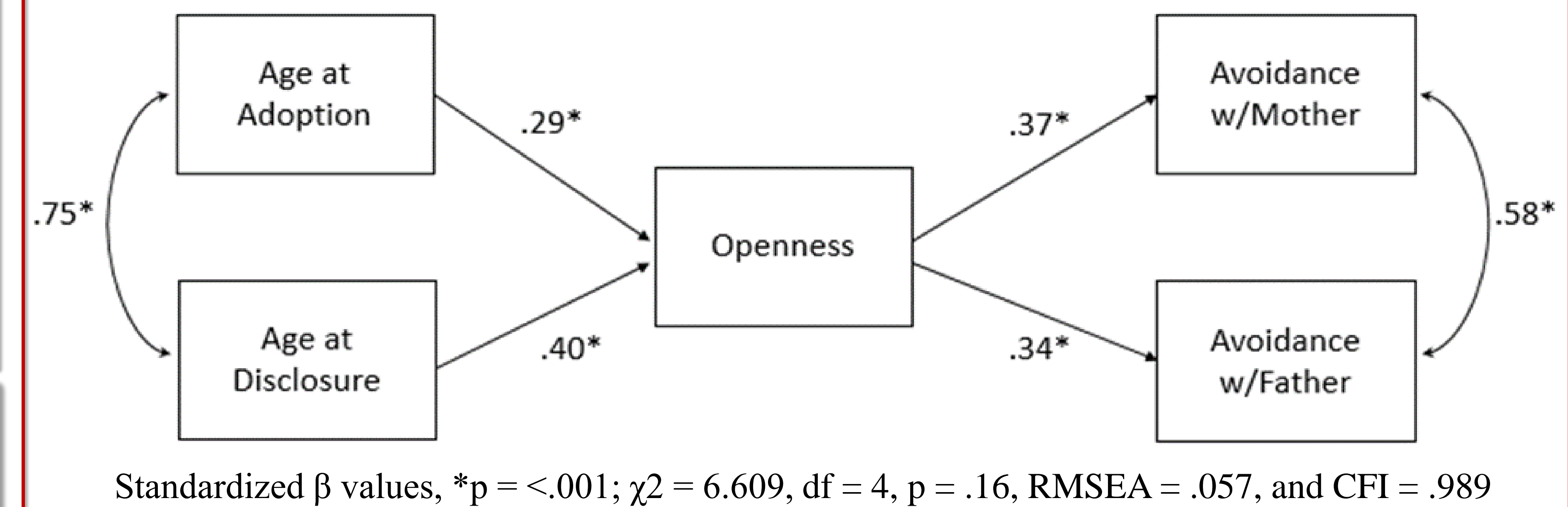
Measures

- ❖ **Age at Adoption and Age at Disclosure.** Responses were converted to total months for analysis.
- ❖ **Level of Openness.**
 - ❖ **Closed** (absolutely no contact);
 - ❖ **Semi-open** (all contact handled by a third party);
 - ❖ **Open** (at least yearly contact).
- ❖ **Level of Topic Avoidance with Mother and Father.** Respondents rated ten items on a seven-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*Never Avoided*) to 5 (*Always Avoided*). Missing responses, *I never had an adoptive mother/father*, and *Not Applicable* were each coded as missing.
 - ❖ All ten items were averaged to create an overall variable of topic avoidance for both mothers (Cronbach's $\alpha = .98$) and fathers (Cronbach's $\alpha = .99$).

Results

- ❖ Mplus Version 7.31 was used to estimate the model with full information maximum likelihood (FIML) (Duncan, Duncan, & Strycker, 2013).
- ❖ The results indicate age at adoption and age at disclosure are very similar in predicting levels of openness. **As adoptees were adopted later and told of their adoption later, levels of openness increased.**
- ❖ Openness was found to mediate the relationship between age at adoption, age at disclosure, and adoption-related topic avoidance. However, unexpectedly, **adoptees who reported semi-open or open adoptions also report higher levels of adoption-related topic avoidance.**

Mediation Model



Indirect Effects of Mediation Paths with Bootstrap Estimation

Avoidance w/Mothers	β	SE	p	C.I., 95%, Lower, Upper	
Age at Adoption	.075**	.026	.004	.021	.187
Age at Disclosure	.102*	.048	.031	.024	.236
Avoidance w/Fathers	β	SE	p	C.I., 95%, Lower, Upper	
Age at Adoption	.093**	.034	.006	.023	.238
Age at Disclosure	.127*	.062	.040	.024	.259

Note: *Coefficients significant at $p < .05$, **significant at $p < .01$

Implications and Discussion

- ❖ **Adoption-Competent Mental Health Providers**
 - ❖ Adoptive families utilize outpatient mental health services two to five more often than non-adoptive families (Keyes, Sharma, Elkins, Iacono, & McGue, 2008).
 - ❖ One study of 485 adoptive parents (87%) and adopted persons (9%) (Atkinson, Gonet, Freundlich, & Riley, 2013) found that **out of the 81% who had seen a mental health professional, just under 25% reported they felt their mental health professional was adoption-competent.**
 - ❖ Weir, Fife, Whiting, and Blazewick (2008) found **only 4% to 16.3% of 224 clinical graduate programs offered specific coursework in adoption.**
 - ❖ The Center on Adoption Support and Education (C.A.S.E.) identified 14 factors that constitute adoption-competent education (Brodzinsky, 2013).
 - ❖ C.A.S.E. was awarded the contract with ACF to develop a National Competency Mental Health Training Initiative (C.A.S.E, 2016).
- ❖ **Access to Birth Records**
 - ❖ Today, the majority of **birthparents want to know about their children**, and support access to original birth certificates (OBCs) (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013; Smith, 2006).
 - ❖ Furthermore, obtaining OBCs gives adoptees a solid foundation from which to initiate a search for birth parents and can provide a more complete picture of their personal histories and family heritage (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2013; Parker, Hill, & Feast, 2013).