



University of
Massachusetts
Amherst

Psychological Presence of Adult Adoptees: Exploring Birth Mother Perspectives

Item Type	event;event
Authors	Battalen, Addie Wyman;Sellers, Christina;Cashen, Krystal K.;McRoy, Ruth G.;Grotevant, Harold
DOI	https://doi.org/10.7275/R5RX999V
Download date	2026-04-10 16:35:49
Link to Item	https://hdl.handle.net/20.500.14394/43026



Psychological Presence of Adult Adoptees: Exploring Birth Mother Perspectives

Addie Wyman Battalen¹, LICSW; Christina M. Sellers¹, LCSW; Krystal Cashen², MA; Ruth G. McRoy¹, PhD; Harold D. Grotevant², PhD

¹Boston College School of Social Work, ²University of Massachusetts-Amherst



Background and Purpose

- Previous research has examined the birth mother’s perspective on the adopted child’s psychological presence (e.g. Fravel et al., 2000) and found that psychological presence is associated with birth mother’s satisfaction with the adoption arrangement.
- Little research, however, has examined how psychological presence evolves over time, as the adopted child reaches adulthood.
- In addition, families are increasingly incorporating technology as a form of communication and little is known regarding the impact of tech mediated contact as a form of communication between birth mothers and adoptees, and how this form of communication may influence the psychological presence of the adoptee from the birth mothers’ perspective.

Objectives/Research Question

This exploratory study sought to extend earlier research by investigating how these same families look today, over 30 years post-placement, with the following research questions:

- 1) Is the adopted child, now adult (YA), on the birth mother’s heart or mind differently according to level of adoption openness? If so, what is the nature of the adopted persons psychological presence in her life in different levels of openness? How does it manifest itself?
- 2) Among those with contact, how does the role of technology influence the adopted persons psychological presence in the birth mothers life?
- 3) What role does tech-mediated communication play in regards to levels of psychological presence and satisfaction with the adoption arrangement?
- 4) What role, if any, does gender of the adoptee play in regards to levels of psychological presence and satisfaction with the adoption arrangement?

Methodology

Procedures

- Adoptive families and birth mothers were recruited from private adoption agencies around the country to participate in the longitudinal (1984-2016) Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP). All adoptions were voluntary, inracial, infant placements with varying levels of openness arrangements (confidential, mediated, and fully disclosed). All birth mothers reported having at least some degree of openness within the adoption during Wave 4.

- The present study includes Wave 4 data (30 years post-placement) with 34 birth mothers ($M_{age} = 48$) and utilizes interview and survey data.

Measures

- Adoption openness arrangement, psychological presence, degree, and valance were measured by scales developed by earlier work with MTARP data by Fravel et al. (1996; 2000) and thematic coding.
- Traditional direct contact was categorized as in-person visits, telephone calls, and writing letters. Tech-mediated contact included communication through social media, such as via Facebook.

Preliminary Results

- In-depth qualitative coding revealed that adopted children continue to be psychologically present in their birth mother’s lives, even 30 years post-placement. As time has progressed, the nature of adoptive kinship family dynamics continues to evolve over time
- Degree of psychological presence was highest among those who were involved with fully disclosed adoptions
- The majority of birth mothers are incorporating texting and Facebook into their communication with the adopted child (now adult)

Indicators of psychological presence

Coding of 10 indicators helped identify how components of psychological presence fit into the bigger picture of the life of the birth mother.

Indicator 5 (*Role*) was evidenced in this comment by a birth mother in a fully open adoption:

“I think what that’s done for me has allowed me to see that blood is not necessarily what makes a family ... I really feel like [adoptive parents] are such a big part of my family too, and their youngest son is part of my family, and they’re absolutely part of my immediate family, but, you know, they’re, they’re definitely not a blood relation, and I think when I talk to people about my relationship with [YA] and his family, and, you know, I sort of clarify with them that [adoptive parents] are his parents. I’m his birth parent. I think the person who cleans up your barf [laughs] is your parent, and it’s interesting sort of seeing the reaction I get from people sometimes because I’m very open about my situation. I have a picture of [adoptive parents] on my desk at work. You know, people say, do you have kids, and I say, yes, I have, I have a child, but it’s a little bit of a different situation. I mean at parties, at work, whatever, I’m always very open about him. .”

Indicator 3 (*Emotion*) includes the emotional response a birth mother may feel about the adopted child (YA), as evidenced by the following comment:

“As a mother, the first time that I woke up and all three of them [parented children and YA] were in the same room, I’m telling you I thought (unintelligible) was going to blow up it was like oh my gosh they’re all three here. It’s just too big, it’s way too big”.

Indicator Number	Description of Indicator
1 (gift present)	BM insists that she “gift” the AC’s presence.
2 (preoccupation)	BM thinks about, is preoccupied with, or worries about AC, how AC is doing, how or what AC is feeling, whether AC misses BM, etc. BM thinks about AC’s opinion (e.g., what AC would think about things happening in the BM’s family). Cognitively oriented.
3 (emotion)	BM has an emotional response, not described by Indicators 1 and 2, associated with PpP of AC; e.g., “feels for” the AC. Affectively oriented.
4 (bio-connection)	BM describes connection to AC via biological links such as physical characteristics, talents, skills, or a “bond” she and AC have on each other, which she associates with their biological connection.
5 (role)	BM includes AC in some way or at some time(s), as having a role or place in her family, believes the existence of the AC affects the way she or her current family members identify membership. May include struggles, pleasures, or clarity, associate with how to introduce or refer to AC, or whether to think of AC as relative (e.g., whether to refer to subsequent AC or her first AC, or second). Alternatively, the BM may feel the AC’s PpP prevents someone else from being in a role (e.g., first child subsequent to the adoption). This indicator centers around issues of identity and placement in roles.
6 (boundaries)	BM associates PpP of AC with how boundaries are defined, perhaps wanting to include AC in some way but not being sure how to do so, whether or not to include AC in celebrations or rituals (e.g., Mother’s Day, AC’s birthday); issues of loyalty. May reflect BM’s confidence managing boundaries and PpP issues of unity (inclusion/exclusion).
7 (supernatural)	BM refers to AC or their relationship with some kind of supernatural or mysterious reference (“my invisible child,” “a ghost,” or “cloak and dagger meetings”).
8 (minimizis)	BM minimizes, depersonalizes, dismisses, or deprecates the AC (or the AC’s influence) in a way that seems to be “getting rid of” the AC’s influence (e.g., “she already has her little home,” used sarcastically). May also be revealed when all issues clearly involving the BM/AC relationship are changed to refer to the AC and someone else (“they”).
9 (generalizes)	Rather than talking about or answering questions about the AC, BM generalizes her answer to include “all children” or “all people in that position” rather than referring to AC as a particular child, the one she has PpP is revealed in a way related to the exchange of information, or the lack of it.
10 (information)	

Note. From Rating scale for measuring PpP of an adopted child, from the perspective of his or her birthmother, by D. L. Fravel, 1996, p. 7. AC: Adopted Child; BM: Birthmother; PpP: Psychological Presence.

Results, cont.

Degree of psychological presence

The depth of psychological presence was determined by coders. An example of a low degree (1) of psychological presence is illustrated in this comment by a birth mother in a fully open adoption:

“I gave birth to her but I don’t really, I mean when I answer how many kids do you have, I tell people two. I don’t tell people 3... so I guess that would answer it like as far as it’s just a clear separation.”

Rating	Description
0	No psychological presence
1	Low. The birthmother may think about or feel something for the adopted child, but it is minimal or fleeting. It does not appear that the transient thoughts or feelings particularly influence the birthmother, her perception of her current family, or her behavior (low frequency, low intensity) [Between 1 and 3: low frequency or intensity, and the other dimension is higher.]
2	Moderate. The birthmother occasionally thinks about or feels something for the adopted child in a way that prompts some moderate response (positive or negative), thus reflecting some influence on the birthmother, her perceptions about her current family, or her behavior (moderate frequency, moderate intensity) [Between 3 and 5: moderate frequency or intensity, and the other dimension is higher.]
3	High. The birthmother thinks about or feels something for the adopted child in a way that causes arousal (positive or negative), which influences her or her perceptions about her family, or her behavior (high frequency, high intensity)
9	Unclear/Can’t code

Note. From Rating scale for measuring psychological presence of an adopted child, from the perspective of his or her birthmother, by D. L. Fravel, 1996, p. 8.

Valence of psychological presence

The level of valence was examined to determine the feelings of positivity and negativity felt by the birth mothers. Valence was mostly high (13/21) among our sample, especially among fully disclosed adoptions and less so with families in which there had been prior contact but was not currently (1/21).

Rating	Description
0	[for use if Degree of psychological presence is rated 0.]
1	Psychological presence has very negative valence; birthmother feels disturbed to the point that she tries (may or may not be consciously) to reduce the psychological presence.
2	Psychological presence has negative valence; birthmother experiences slight or passing emotional discomfort with psychological presence, but not enough to alter her behavior
3	Psychological presence has neutral emotional impact and prompts no change in birthmother’s behavior
4	Psychological presence has positive valence; birthmother experiences emotional comfort but it does not alter her behavior
5	Psychological presence has very positive valence; birthmother feels aroused; behavior is influenced (e.g., writes a journal about what child may be doing; tries to “up the ante” to bolster psychological presence)
9	Mixed; evidence of two or more descriptions above
98	Unclear/can’t code

Note. From Rating scale for measuring psychological presence of an adopted child, from the perspective of his or her birthmother, by D. L. Fravel, 1996, p. 11.

Discussion

These findings provide new perspectives on the under-studied population of birth mothers, by providing insight into experiences and psychological presence within the kinship network throughout the lifespan.

Our results show that birth mothers experience a range of psychological presence for their child, even when contact may not be current. The increase in technology and forms of social media to supplement traditional forms of contact contribute to involvement in each other’s lives.

These findings reiterate the importance of viewing adoption as a lifelong process, for all members involved, including birth mothers.

Implications for Practitioners

- Practitioners should be aware of tech-mediated contact as a potential source of contact that can impact psychological presence and in some cases, increase satisfaction with adoption arrangements.
- Policy-makers should consider the implications of these findings as funding is allocated for mental health services. Special consideration should be give for members of the adoptive kinship networks over time, specifically birth mothers as levels of contact may evolve over time.
- Future research should explore adoptee’s perspectives to examine congruency and the impact psychological presence has on adoptees.