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# Privacy and Confidentiality in Adoption Research: Perspectives from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project

Albert Lo, Harold Grotevant, & Ruth McRoy



## Introduction

- There is currently a focus in adoption research on the processes that influence adoption-related adjustment (Palacios & Brodzinsky, 2011).
- To examine these processes, it is necessary to study the adoption network as a whole. This may include adoptive families and birth families.
- Research with all types of families introduces a number of ethical considerations (Margolin et al., 2005)
- There may be unique privacy and confidentiality concerns when working with families in the adoption network.
- The purpose of the current study is to outline privacy and confidentiality issues that arise when working with the adoption network.
- We also provide examples of how to address these issues using procedures from the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project.

## MTARP

- Longitudinal study of the effects of openness in adoption.
- Recruitment for the study began during the mid-1980s.
- Participants include adopted children, adoptive mothers, adoptive fathers, and birth mothers.
- All children were domestically adopted during infancy.
- Data were collected during visits to the participants' homes (Waves 1 and 2) and using internet technology (Waves 3 and 4).
- Data included multiple self-report measures as well as qualitative interviews with all participants.

## Phase 1: Recruitment

### Privacy Concerns During Recruitment

- Adoption may be a sensitive topic for adoptive families and birth families.
- Adoptive families and birth families may be wary of researchers due to adoption-related stigma (Wegar, 1997; 2000).
- Adoptive parents may be unwilling to discuss the adoption or acknowledge that their family is different from biological families (Kirk, 1984).
- Members of the birth parent's family may not be aware of the birth parent's history with adoption (Henney et al., 2007).

## Phase 1: Recruitment (cont.)

### Recruitment Procedures from MTARP

- Researchers collaborated with agency staff members who were familiar with the adoptive families and birth mothers. Staff members were tasked with initially contacting the participants.
- Messages were not left on the birth mother's home answering machine in case other family members did not know of the adoption.
- The adoptive family and the birth mother were not told of each other's participation.
- Birth mothers gave researchers specific instructions for follow-up contact.

## Phase 2: Data Collection

### Importance of Confidentiality Across the Adoption Network

- Adoptive parents may purposely keep adoption-related information from the adopted child (Wrobel et al., 1998).
- Adopted children may have contact with the birth family outside of the adoptive parent's knowledge.
- Certain information may harm the relationship between the birth family and the adoptive family if confidentiality is breached. For example, birth mothers may express no interest in reuniting with the adopted child (Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008).
- Birth parents and adoptive parents may tell researchers about conflicts that they had with the other party (Dunbar et al., 2006).
- Members of the adoption network may blame the adoption agency for any dissatisfaction with the adoption (Berge et al., 2006).

### Data Collection Procedures from MTARP

- The researcher's role was to learn from the participants and not to intervene in their lives.
- Consent forms ensured confidentiality and outlined any limitations to confidentiality.
- Researchers were required to read and sign confidentiality statements annually.
- Interviews took place in private areas of the participant's home.
- Prior to interviews with the child, researchers reviewed the child's knowledge of the adoption with the adoptive parents.
- Researchers only provided de-identified and general reports to the agencies.

## Phase 3: Publication

### Confidentiality Challenges During Publication

- Adoption studies often utilize qualitative methods in order to capture individual adoption experiences.
- Adoption experiences may be so unique that participants are identifiable even when names are disguised.
- Participants may also give detailed information about other members of the adoption network.

### Strategies used by MTARP

- During the initial consent procedures, participants were told that they would not be identifiable in any publications.
- Researchers disguised features and used composite cases.
- Particularly identifiable cases were not included in publications.

## Discussion

- The current study examined privacy and confidentiality in the context of within-race domestic adoptions.
- More contemporary forms of adoption (such as transracial adoptions, international adoptions, and adoptions by same-sex couples) may have additional ethical considerations.
- Advancements in reproductive technologies may also introduce new ethical concerns by further expanding the adoption network.
- Adoption researchers should be constantly aware of privacy and confidentiality challenges as adoption policies and practices continue to evolve.

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