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# Birthmothers as Grandmothers: Examining forms of post adoption contact & relationship quality with placed children & grandchildren

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## INTRODUCTION

- Open adoptions have steadily grown (Henney, et al. 2003) in the US with 95% of infant adoptions including some degree of openness (Evan B. Donaldson Report, 2012).
- Birthmothers have varying degrees of contact with their placed child, the child's adoptive family, and their birth child's children (their grandchildren).
- Recognizing how important the grandparent role can be (Qu et al, 2011), it is critical to explore this relationship in adoptive families who have open adoptions, in situations in which birthmothers are now birthgrandmothers.
- Parents often serve as "gatekeepers" between the grandchild and grandparent (Mueller & Elder, 2003). Given nuanced shifts in power within adoptive families, it is important to examine if the adult adoptee's role as gatekeeper is similar to that in non-adoptive families and understand how adult adoptees facilitate their birthmother in their child's life.



## OBJECTIVES/RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Given the dearth of literature on birthgrandmothers, the following research questions were developed:

- 1) How are birthmothers viewing themselves in their new role of birthgrandmother?
- 2) Which family member seems to "drive" the type and amount of contact between birthgrandmothers and their placed (now adult) children and their birthgrandchildren?
- 3) What does that communication look like?

## STUDY & METHODS

Historical Context of MTARP:

- Data comes from the MTARP Study, a longitudinal (1986-2016) mixed methods study examining the impact of openness in adoption on adopted children, birthmothers, and adoptive parents.
- Nationwide sample of married adoptive couples with a child (4-12 years old at the initial interview), adopted during infancy through a private adoption agency
- Wave one: 169 birthmothers, 190 adoptive parents, & 170 adopted children
- Adoptions were voluntary, inracial placements with varied levels of openness and contact between birth and adoptive families.



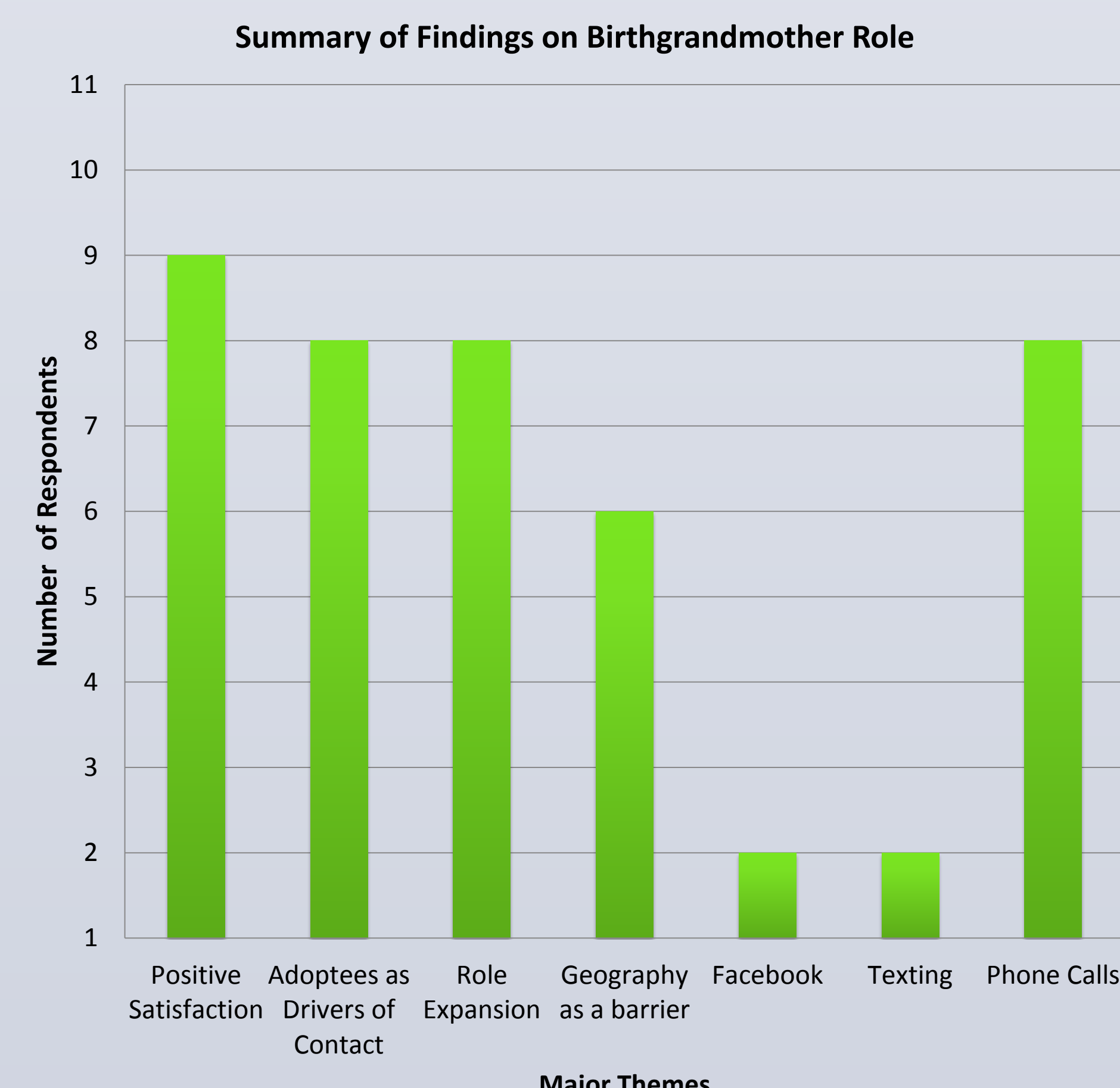
Present Study:

- Wave 4 birthmother data was used (N=34)
- Birthmothers ( $M_{age} = 48.71$ ) reporting a relationship with their adopted adult children and their grandchildren (0-5 years) were chosen for intensive case study analyses.
- Interview transcripts (N=11) were double-coded (acceptable reliability at .90 agreement) & consensus reached through discussion of ratings to resolve disagreements. Interrater reliability was monitored throughout the process.

## RESULTS

- 82% percent of birthmothers interviewed reported feelings of positive satisfaction about their role as birthgrandmothers, including participation in holidays and everyday activities
- 73% percent of adult adoptees (25-35 years old), now parents, are the main drivers of contact between their birthmothers and their children
- 73% of birthgrandmothers perceived their role within the family as expanding from solely birthmother to including birthgrandmother
- 55% percent of birthmothers reported geography as a barrier to their relationship with their grandchild(ren)
- Technology, such as Facebook (18%), texting (18%), and phone calls (73%) helped to ease that barrier and was beneficial in maintaining and enhancing the long-distance relationship

*"I want that baby just a little closer so I can hold him!"*



*"As they get older I would hope we could have direct contact rather than through their mom and dad"*

## DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

While research on biologically created families has examined drivers of contact between grandmothers and their grandchildren, and others have examined contact between adopted youth and their birthmothers, this study examines the unique relationships between birthgrandmothers who have contact with their birthgrandchildren. Through in-depth analysis of these relationships, new information is gleaned on the intergenerational experience of having openness in adoption. Clinicians who serve families involved in adoption need to be prepared for service delivery within intergenerational adoption kinship networks and incorporate this family evolution into their practice. More research is needed on longitudinal outcomes of these emerging of these adoption and birth family constellations should be conducted.

*"It is the second dimension of this birth family thing...now I'm a birth grandma. And the adoptive parents, not only do they share their children with me, but they are sharing their grandchildren with me...And so when people give up their kids and they just think it stops there...It can be generational."*



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