

Key Findings

The Minnesota/Texas Adoption Project (MTARP) was launched in order to contribute to our understanding of relationships and developmental outcomes for children in adoptive kinship networks that vary in degree of contact between the child's birth relatives and adoptive family members. Although much is known about traditional family environments that lead to healthy outcomes for children and youth, we lack adequate scientific understanding of the basic processes in complex families, including adoptive and birth families, and how they are connected to psychological and social outcomes. Research on adoptive and birth families is important because adoption touches many lives: almost two-thirds of Americans have personal experience with adoption through their own family or close friends.

This document highlights our key findings to date. "Wave 1" refers to data collected when the children in the study were between the ages of 4 – 12; "Wave 2" refers to data collected 8 years after Wave 1, when the target children were adolescents, ages 12 - 20. This section first addresses variations in openness arrangements and relationships within the adoptive kinship network. In our sample of 190 adoptive families and 169 birthmothers, what kind of adoption arrangements did we find, and how did they work? Second, it focuses on individual outcomes for adopted children and adolescents, adoptive parents, and birth mothers by looking at issues such as adjustment, self-esteem, and identity. For complete information about any of the findings, please refer to the specific publications cited.

Relationships within the Adoptive Kinship Network

Openness Arrangements

Our initial conceptualization of openness, based on existing literature and discussions with staff at adoption agencies, posited three levels of openness: confidential (or closed), mediated (or semi-open or indirect), and fully disclosed (McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988). We soon found that these categories did not fully describe the experiences of our participants. Within confidential adoptions, there were cases in which updated information was sent to the adoption agency for inclusion in the child's file. These updates were not necessarily intended for immediate transmission to the other party and could either have been sent once or a number of times. In most of these cases, either the birthmother or the adoptive parents sent information such as an annual letter on the child's birthday. In both mediated and fully disclosed adoptions, there were some cases in which contact was ongoing, some for whom contact had stopped and others for whom contact was temporarily paused.

Our categorization of openness took these nuances into account. In addition, there were large variations in the intensity of contact (frequency, personal nature of the contact - e.g., a picture is more personal than a purchased gift); type of contact (e.g., letter, picture, gift, phone call, e-mail, visit); or participants' satisfaction. Although these

variations were not registered in our openness categories, more detailed qualitative analyses have explored these factors (e.g., Dunbar, van Dulmen, Ayers-Lopez, Berge, Christian, Fitzgerald, Gossman, Henney, Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2000; Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, in press).

Children's Inclusion in Openness

At Wave 1, comparison of parents' and children's reports of openness revealed important gaps between parents' participation in open arrangements and their inclusion of the adopted child in the communication. Almost half the children in mediated adoptions were excluded from contact their adoptive parents were having with their birthmother, but most of these children were not aware of their being excluded. Most of the children in fully disclosed adoptions were included in meetings with birthparents and were aware of the arrangements (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998).

At Wave 1, adoptive mothers and birth mothers arranged most of the fully disclosed contact; adoptive fathers had little primary responsibility for arranging contact. As the adopted children got older, the birthmother and adoptive parents reported that the adolescents had assumed responsibility for arranging or requesting contact or would be taking responsibility for contact in the future (Dunbar, van Dulmen, et al. 2000).

Changes in Openness from Middle Childhood to Adolescence

Before the first wave of data collection, changes in openness arrangements had occurred since placement. For example, Almost 2/3 of the adoptions that were considered fully disclosed at Wave 1 began as mediated (51%) or confidential (15%). In many of these cases, trust and mutual respect were gradually established between the adoptive parents and birthmother, until they made the decision to share identifying information (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998).

In the period of time between Waves 1 and 2, the pattern of stability in openness was similar for adoptive families and birthmothers. (Data are presented separately for adoptive families and birthmothers because our data set includes some adoptive families for whom we do not have birthmother data and vice versa.) The majority of cases remained within the same openness level (71.2% of adoptive families and 78.7% of birthmothers). Smaller, and roughly equal, proportions increased in openness level (14.7% of adoptive families and 10.2% of birthmothers) or decreased in openness (14.1% of adoptive families and 11.0% of birthmothers.) Relatively few fully disclosed cases stopped contact between Waves 1 and 2 (13.2% of adoptive families and no birthmothers). Among adoptive families with ongoing mediated adoptions, almost equal numbers continued in this category (N = 18), stopped contact (N = 17), and increased to fully disclosed (N = 15). Among birthmothers, 21 continued, 14 stopped contact, and 9 increased to fully disclosed. The majority of cases that were classified as confidential at Wave 1 continued as confidential at Wave 2 (89.5% of adoptive families and 91.2% of birthmothers). Despite the relative stability in openness level, especially in the

confidential and fully disclosed categories, many birthmothers and adoptive families experienced changes in frequency, type of contact, or persons involved.

When all changes were taken into account (including openness level and changes in the type of contact, frequency of contact, or persons involved), 90% of the birthmothers experienced some change during the 8 year period. Reasons for change were many (Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2004). Mediated adoptions, those featuring indirect contact through an intermediary at the adoption agency, posed special challenges in communication because they required the ongoing presence of a reliable staff person at the agency to keep the communication flowing in a timely manner.

When there were decreases in openness in adoptive kinship networks, the birthmothers and adoptive parents tended to have incongruent accounts regarding who initiated discontinuation of contact and divergent understandings about why contact stopped (Dunbar, van Dulmen, et al., 2000).

Managing Contact

The management of contact in open adoptions involves a complex dance in which the roles and needs of the participants change over time, affecting the kinship network as a whole (Grotevant, McRoy, & van Dulmen, 1998). There is no uniform pattern for open adoptions. Adoptive kinship networks have contact by different means, among different people, at varying rates, and with varying degrees of interest. Successful relationships in such complex family situations hinge on participants' flexibility, communication skills, and commitment to the relationships.

Members of adoptive kinship networks involved in ongoing contact found that their relationships were dynamic and had to be re-negotiated over time. Early in the adoption, meetings were especially important for the birthmothers, who were very concerned about whether they had made the right decision, whether her child was safe, and whether the adoptive parents were good people. After a while, birthmothers' interest in contact sometimes waned, especially as they were assured that their child was thriving. With the passage of time, many birthmothers became involved in new romantic relationships, sometimes taking attention away from the adoptive relationships. According to the adoptive parents, the ability of birthmothers to provide information when requested was not always in tune with the timing of the request (Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 2003). Adoptive parents tended to become more interested in contact as they became more secure in their role as parents. As the children grew older and understood the meaning of adoption (see Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984), their questions tended to put pressure on the adoptive parents to seek more information or contact (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1998, 1999).

Satisfaction with Contact

At Wave 1, children's satisfaction with contact did not differ by level of openness. However, by Wave 2, adolescents who had contact with birthmothers reported

higher degrees of satisfaction with their level of adoption openness and with the intensity of their contact with birthmother than did adolescents who had no contact. In general, satisfaction with adoption openness was lower during middle adolescence (ages 14-16) than during early (ages 12-13) or late adolescence (ages 17-20) (Mendenhall et al, 2004).

Adolescents varied in their reasons for being satisfied or not satisfied with having contact or not having contact (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, in press-2006). Adolescents having contact and expressing satisfaction with the contact (45.5% of the sample) stated that the contact provided an opportunity for a relationship to emerge that would provide additional support for them. They also expressed positive affect toward their birth mother, felt that the contact helped them better understand who they were, and made them interested in having contact with other members of their birth family, such as siblings. Adolescents having contact but not expressing satisfaction (16.3% of the sample) typically wanted more intensity in the relationship than they currently had, but they were not able to bring it about. They felt that they could have good relationships with both adoptive and birth parents, and that they did not have to choose one over the other. Adolescents not having contact and satisfied with the lack of contact (17.1%) felt that adoption was not an important part of their lives. They did not feel that it was necessary to have contact, sometimes expressing concern that contact might be a bad experience for them. They felt they were better off where they were (in their adoptive families) than they would have been if raised by their birth parents. Finally, adolescents not having contact but dissatisfied with the lack of contact (21.1%) sometimes desired contact but were unable to bring it about. Some had negative feelings toward their birth mother or assumed that she had not made an effort to have contact. Some worried that their adoptive parents or birth mother might feel bad about their pursuing contact.

Of the 127 birthmothers who were interviewed at Wave 2, about half were adolescents at the time of placement and half were adults. Birthmothers who were older at the time of placement were more likely to be satisfied with their current openness arrangements at Wave 2. At Wave 2, birthmothers who were older at placement also felt closer to the child's adoptive mother than did birthmothers who were younger at placement. Most birthmothers reported feeling positive or very positive about their relationship with the child's adoptive mother and father and were satisfied or very satisfied with these relationships. At the same time, the majority of the birthmothers indicated that they had at least some concern about whether their contact or potential contact interfered with the adopted youth or adoptive family functioning. Almost 20% were "very concerned" about this issue. These "very concerned" birthmothers were experiencing significantly more life stresses than the norm (McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, Henney, Christian, & Gossman, 2001).

By Wave 2, birthmothers in fully disclosed adoptions were significantly more satisfied with their role in relationship to the adopted youth than those in confidential and mediated stopped arrangements. Birthmothers who were more satisfied with their role in relation to the adopted youth also reported more satisfaction with their relationship with the child's adoptive mother and adoptive father. Birthmothers who are more satisfied

with the role of the adopted youth in their lives were also more satisfied with their relationship with the adoptive mother, adoptive father, and adopted youth. Birthmothers who were more satisfied with their openness arrangements were also more satisfied with their role in relation to the adopted youth and adoptive parents and are more satisfied with the role of the adopted youth in their lives. Birthmothers in adoptions characterized by stable contact felt significantly more clear in their roles than those characterized by increasing contact.

The majority of birthmothers (78.7%) remained in the same major openness category from Wave 1 to Wave 2. Birthmothers who experienced no change in major openness level expressed more satisfaction with openness than did those who experienced a major increase or decrease, likely because of the disruptive effect of such major changes. Satisfaction at Wave 2 was related to openness level: birthmothers in fully disclosed adoptions expressed more satisfaction than did birthmothers in confidential or mediated arrangements.

Adoptive parents were more satisfied when birthmothers respected their family's boundaries and let the adoptive family initiate most of the contact (Dunbar, van Dulmen, et al, 2000).

Communication

Communication about adoption within the family is a process that unfolds over time, with adoptive parents initially taking the lead and with their adopted children playing an increasingly important role as they move toward and through adolescence. Distinctive phases of the family communication process can be discerned: the first, in which adoptive parents provide their children unsolicited information; the second, in which parents respond to their children's curiosity by answering or withholding information; and the third, in which children take control of finding their own information. Each phase plays a unique role in the family's evolving narrative about the adoption, provides opportunities for meaning-making about the adoption, and provides a context in which the adoptive parent-child relationship is strengthened or weakened (Wrobel et al, 2003).

Boundary Ambiguity

Relationships between the adoptive family and birthmother have also been examined through the lens of boundary ambiguity, which is said to exacerbate family stress because of family members' inability to determine who is inside and who is outside the family system (Boss, 1988). Boundary ambiguity occurs when a family member is physically absent but psychologically present, or vice versa. Fravel (1995) examined the psychological presence of the birthmother in the adoptive family system, and found that boundary ambiguity is almost inevitable in adoptive families but that it manifests itself differently by level of openness. Management of the psychological presence of the birthmother may also vary according to both level of openness and some personality

characteristics and relationship tendencies of the adoptive parents such as tolerance for ambiguity (Fravel, Grotevant, Boss, & McRoy, 1993; Fravel, 1995).

Birthmothers' interviews were examined to determine the degree to which they felt the psychological presence of the child they had placed for adoption. There was a significant relationship between degree of psychological presence and adoption openness arrangements. The highest levels of psychological presence occurred in fully-disclosed adoptions, followed by ongoing mediated, and confidential (Fravel et al, 2000).

At Wave 2, birthmothers in mediated stopped adoptions had a significantly lower degree of psychological presence than birthmothers in ongoing mediated adoptions or fully disclosed adoptions. Self-report results indicated that, on average, the adopted youth was psychologically present to the birthmother about once a month. Birthmothers in confidential adoptions had significantly lower frequency of psychological presence than did birthmothers in ongoing mediated adoptions and fully-disclosed adoptions; and birthmothers in mediated stopped adoptions had significantly lower frequency of psychological presence than those in ongoing mediated or fully-disclosed adoptions. Birthmothers in confidential adoptions had significantly lower intensity of psychological presence than birthmothers in fully disclosed adoptions.

Adoptive Grandparents

Karen Schmid (1994) examined relationships between adoptive grandparents and their adult children, as perceived by the adoptive parents. This study focused on the way adoptive parents interpret their parents' reactions to and feelings about adoption in general, and open adoption in particular; how their relationships affect those in the nuclear family; and the consequences of such variations for initiating or maintaining contact between the families by birth and adoption. Most grandparents were little involved in couples' decisions to adopt but were generally supportive. However, many of them were guarded about couples' choice of openness, and adoptive parents had to negotiate these relationships with their parents at the same time they were establishing relational ties with their new child and the child's birthparents.

Outcomes for Individuals in the Adoptive Kinship Network

Adopted Children and Adolescents

Self Esteem

At Wave 1, Harter's Self-Perception Scale for Children, a measure of self-esteem, was administered to all children over the age of 7.5 years. The children as a group scored within the normal range on this scale. Average levels of self-esteem did not differ by level of openness in the children's adoptions (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996).

Adjustment

At Wave 1, variations in adjustment among adopted children were linked to relationships within their adoptive families as well as to the quality of the connections across the adoptive kinship network in which they were members. There was no relation between level of openness and the children's socioemotional adjustment, as measured by the Child Adaptive Behavior Inventory (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Subsequent analyses focused on family process predictors of adjustment, including acknowledgment of difference, compatibility, parents' sense of entitlement, and parenting competence. In these analyses, the strongest predictor of problematic adjustment outcomes (internalizing and externalizing) during middle childhood (Wave 1) was the parent's perception of the child's incompatibility with the family (Ross, 1995)

When children were involved in adoptive kinship networks involving contact with birth family members, child adjustment was related not only to qualities of relationships within the adoptive family but also to *collaboration in relationships* between the adoptive parents and birth family members involved in contact. Collaboration in relationships is an emergent property of the adoptive kinship network, characterized by the ability of the child's adoptive and birthparents to work together effectively on behalf of the child's well-being. It involves collaborative control over the way in which contact is handled and is based on mutual respect, empathy, and valuing of the relationship. Higher degrees of collaboration in the adoptive kinship network were associated with better adjustment during middle childhood (Grotevant, Ross, Marchel, & McRoy, 1999).

Looking longitudinally, we found that higher degrees of perceived compatibility maintained from middle childhood to adolescence were associated with higher degrees of *psychosocial engagement* (defined as adolescents' active use of inner resources to interact positively with others in family, peer, and community contexts) and attachment to parents and lower problem behavior. The results were similar for male and female adolescents and regardless of whether compatibility change patterns were derived from mothers' or fathers' perceptions (Grotevant, Wrobel, van Dulmen, & McRoy, 2001).

On average, our sample of adopted adolescents was no different in levels of adjustment from the national norms developed on a set of well validated measures. In addition, level of openness by itself was not a major predictor of adjustment outcomes at Wave 1 (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998) or Wave 2 (Von Korff, 2004). However, relationship qualities such as collaboration in relationships and perceptual qualities such as perceived compatibility were predictive of adjustment across openness levels.

Curiosity about Birth family and Searching

An important aspect of our work is that we have brought forward the voices of the children and adolescents who have participated. For example, at Wave 1, all children showed curiosity about their birth families; children's own reports about their curiosity about birthparents did not differ by level of openness (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrick, 1996). Adolescents' interviews from Wave 2 have contributed to understanding of the process of searching for birthparents (see Wrobel, Grotevant, and McRoy, 2004, for details). We view decision-making about searching as part of the normative developmental process for adolescent and young adult adoptees. This does not mean that every adoptee will search, but it does mean that they will need to consider the

decision to search as part of the process of their development. Curiosity about birthparents and a strong desire to meet them did not negate adolescents' positive views about their adoptive family.

Identity

Adopted youth are confronted with the challenge of making meaning of their beginnings, which may be unknown, unclear, or otherwise ambiguous. Meaning-making (e.g., Kegan, 1982; Klinger, 1998) involves constructing a story about oneself that attempts to answer many questions: Where did I come from? Who were my parents? Why was I placed for adoption? Do my birthparents think about me now? Do I have siblings? What does adoption mean in my life? This story, or narrative, helps adolescents make sense of the past, understand the self in the present, and project themselves into the future (Grotevant, 1993). Constructing this narrative is about the development of adoptive identity, the evolving answer to the question: "Who am I as an adopted person?" (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000). This is part of the larger process of identity development, which is widely recognized as an important task of adolescence that lays a foundation for adult psychosocial development (Erikson, 1968).

The narrative approach to identity highlights the integration and coherence of the self through the evaluation of the structure, content, and function of the narrative (e.g., McAdams, 1987, 1993, 2001; Mishler, 1999). From this perspective, the adolescent is viewed as creating and recreating a life story that makes meaning of and gives purpose to his or her experience of adoption.

The process of adoptive identity development may involve a period of time when adoption issues are particularly salient, involving intense reflection and emotional engagement, perhaps preoccupation on the part of the adolescent (Dunbar, 2003). When this occurs, it may be accompanied by the adolescent's temporary emotional withdrawal from the adoptive family. On average, girls' levels of preoccupation (measured by the Adoption Dynamics Questionnaire) were higher than boys' (Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2002). Differences in degree of preoccupation with adoption were not related to the level of openness in the adolescent's adoption.

Adoptive identity, the sense of oneself as an adopted person, emerges during adolescence and is related to qualities of relationships within the adolescent's family. Four distinctive patterns of adoptive identity were apparent during adolescence (Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004).

In the first group, unexplored adoptive identity, the adolescent had undertaken little or no exploration, adoption had low salience, and little affect around adoption was expressed. For example, one adolescent stated, "Because I feel like it's over and that I'm happy where I am and I just don't want to mess with that other part." Another noted that "I don't really think about adoption that much so it's just, I probably don't even realize that I am."

In the second group, limited adoptive identity, adolescents were actively exploring ideas. As one young woman stated, “Sometimes it’s important to me and sometimes it isn’t.”

Adolescents in the third group, unsettled adoptive identity, had narratives that were coherent and integrated, marked by high exploration of adoptive identity, high salience, and strong negative affect. One adolescent stated, “My mom (adoptive) and I aren’t very close and I know that’s (adoption) the reason. I mean if, I’m sure if I lived with my real mom we’d be a lot closer, we’d talk about it and that’s just hard because all my friends can talk to their moms.”

Finally, adolescents demonstrating integrated adoptive identity had coherent, integrated narratives in which adoptive identity was highly salient and viewed positively. For example, one teen said, “When I was little I worried I was placed because she didn’t want me. Now I know I was placed because she cared enough.”

Patterns of adoptive identity differed widely across adolescents, although in general, more positively resolved patterns were found among older rather than younger adolescents and girls rather than boys. Differences in adoptive identity or degree of preoccupation with adoption were not related to the level of openness in the adolescent’s adoption (Dunbar, 2003; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004). However, differences in preoccupation were related to identity group. Preoccupation with adoption was significantly higher for adolescents in the Unsettled and Integrated types than for adolescents in the Unexamined type (Dunbar, 2003).

Birthmothers

Grief Resolution

Birthmothers in stopped mediated adoptions showed the highest degree of unresolved adoption-related grief and loss at Wave 1 (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, 1997). At both Wave 1 and Wave 2, birthmothers in fully disclosed adoptions had lower adoption-related grief and loss than those in confidential adoption. There were no significant differences by openness level associated with birthmother regret about the decision to place. When birthmothers’ level of openness was controlled, as satisfaction with openness increased, birthmothers’ current global level of grief decreased.

Other Relationships

Between the times of the Wave 1 and Wave 2 interviews, 49 birthmothers (39.2%) had contact with the birthfather of the adopted youth. At Wave 2, more birthmothers reported feeling negative or very negative about the birthfather than reported feeling positive or very positive about him; a small number of birthmothers felt neutral or ambivalent.

At Wave 2, most birthmothers indicated that placing a child for adoption had no effect or a consistently positive effect on their relationships with their current romantic partner or spouse. The majority of the birthmothers’ romantic partners were not directly involved in contact with the adoptive family or adopted youth. However, even when

openness level was controlled, birthmothers whose partners had higher levels of participation in the adoption were more satisfied on average than those who had lower levels of participation (McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, Henney, Christian, & Gossman, 2001).

Adjustment and Mental Health

Birthmother mental health, as measured by the Brief Symptom Inventory at Wave 2, was not related to level of openness or frequency of contact.

Adoptive Parents

At Wave 1, when compared to parents in confidential adoptions, those in fully disclosed adoptions generally reported higher levels of acknowledgment of the adoption, more empathy toward the birthparents and child, stronger sense of permanence in the relationship with their child as projected into the future, and less fear that the birthmother might try to reclaim her child. Despite these mean differences, variations within levels of openness were present (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994).

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