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Contact Between Birth and Adoptive Families During the First Year Post-Placement: Perspectives of Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parents

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Abstract

Despite growing visibility of lesbian- and gay-parent adoption, only one qualitative study has examined birth family contact among adoptive families with lesbian and gay parents (Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, & Downing, 2011). We studied adoptive parents' (34 lesbian, 32 gay, and 37 heterosexual; $N = 103$ families) perspectives of birth family contact across the first year post-placement. Using questionnaire and interview data, we found few differences in openness dynamics by parental sexual orientation. Most reported some birth mother contact, most had legally finalized their adoption, and few described plans to withhold information from children. We discuss implications for clinical practice, policy, and research.

Keywords

adoption; adoptive parents birth family contact; lesbian and gay; openness

Openness in adoption has become increasingly common, representing a drastic shift from the early twentieth century, when sealed birth certificates and closed adoptions were prevailing practices in the US (Grotevant, 2012; Siegel, 2012). By the 1960s, a growing number of adoptees and birth parents had disclosed stories about how secrecy surrounding adoption had been harmful in their lives, such as adoptees not having access to genealogical or genetic information (Siegel, 2012). During the 1980s and 1990s, the practice of openness in adoption steadily increased. Currently, as many as 95% of agencies with infant adoption programs offer options for openness arrangements (Siegel & Smith, 2012). At least 68% of parents who adopted via private domestic agencies in the US report contact with birth families, according to the 2007 National Survey of Adoptive Parents (Bramlett & Radel, 2010). While a growing body of research has examined openness in adoption over the last 30 years, very few studies have explored dynamics of birth family contact among adoptive

families with lesbian and gay (LG) parents as compared to those with heterosexual parents. As openness in adoption is more common and many LG adoptive parents are directly chosen by the birth parents (in the context of domestic, private, infant adoptions; Goldberg, 2012), research about birth family contact among adoptive families with LG and heterosexual parents is needed. Thus, the purpose of this exploratory study was to examine adoptive parents' perspectives of birth family contact across the first year post-placement utilizing a diverse sample of LG and heterosexual adoptive parents.

Openness in Adoption

Adoption openness occurs on a continuum, varying from closed or confidential where no identifying information is shared, to fully disclosed where birth and adoptive family members share identifying information and can contact one another directly. *Contact* involves any post-placement communication among birth and adoptive families, and may or may not include the sharing of identifying information such as last names and home addresses. Contact can be initiated by either adoptive or birth family members, and is sometimes mediated by a social worker or adoption agency personnel. Contact varies in type, frequency, and intensity, ranging in the amount of information shared and the number of involved family members (Grotevant, 2012). Research on openness arrangements among birth and adoptive families demonstrates that no single approach characterizes openness or is successful for all; nor do openness arrangements remain static or stable over time (Grotevant, 2012). Many factors affect the evolution and dynamics of contact, as well as the consequences of birth family contact for parents and children.

As scholars, practitioners, and other professionals increasingly understand the potential for openness to benefit all members of the adoption triad, greater openness in the adoption process has been emphasized, and truly "closed" adoptions have become increasingly rare (Grotevant, 2012; Wolfgram, 2008). The literature clearly indicates that options for openness are associated with positive results for members of the adoptive kinship network that includes both adoptive and birth family members (McRoy, Grotevant, Ayers-Lopez, & Henney, 2007; Siegel, 2012). Adoptive parents' satisfaction with birth relative contact (regardless of the amount of contact taking place) has been linked to adoptive parents' feelings of control over the relationship (Dunbar et al., 2006), and another potential benefit of openness appears to be that adoptive parents express less fear of birth parents reclaiming their child in open adoptions as compared to closed adoptions (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994). Thus, research evidence points to satisfaction among those involved in more open adoption arrangements, even in the most complex of cases, where difficult life circumstances face birth family members, such as homelessness, domestic violence, or substance use (Logan, 2010; Siegel, 2012).

Despite evidence of positive effects for those involved in ongoing birth family contact, openness in adoption remains a source of controversy in the US and a source of concern among adoptive families. For instance, adoptive parents have reported concerns that contact might confuse the child or hinder the process of settling into their adoptive family, as well as worries that contact may undermine their sense of entitlement as parents to their child (Goldberg et al., 2011; Jones & Hackett, 2012). In instances where abuse and neglect

occurred in children's previous placements (often for children adopted via foster care), adoptive parents commonly report fears of exposing their child to further harm (Jones & Hackett, 2012).

Lesbian and Gay Adoptive Parents

Like openness in adoption, adoption by LG adults is controversial in the US, in part as a result of questions surrounding children's optimal development in homes that do not include one mother and one father. Reflecting this controversy, same-sex couples are not permitted to adopt in all states (e.g., same-sex couples are barred from adopting in Mississippi and Utah) (Appell, 2011). Regardless, the number of LG adults who have adopted children in the last 10 years has increased (Gates, 2011). Whereas 10% of same-sex couples were raising adopted children in 2000 (according to U.S. Census 2000 data), this number rose to 19% in 2009 (using the 2009 American Community Survey; Gates, 2011). Many more LG adults, without children, desire to adopt (Riskind & Patterson, 2010).

While there is a growing literature on LG adults who adopt children (e.g., Erich, Leung, & Kindle, 2005; Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011), many questions about their adoption experiences remain, particularly those concerning openness in adoption. Little research exists to assist adoption professionals as they guide prospective adoptive LG parents through the adoption process, or to facilitate the decisions being made every day about what family placements and openness arrangements are best suited for children awaiting adoption. As openness in adoption becomes more commonplace, and as many LG adults are adopting, research on patterns of openness in adoption and their outcomes for family members is needed.

Only one study, a qualitative investigation, has directly examined experiences of openness in adoption among adoptive families headed by 15 lesbian, 15 gay, and 15 heterosexual couples (Goldberg et al., 2011). Interview data revealed contrasting feelings among heterosexual and LG parents such that (1) heterosexual parents often perceived open adoption as the only option, as few agencies offered closed adoptions, and (2) LG parents often reported feeling positively about openness, as this allowed for open disclosure of, rather than concealment of, their sexual orientation throughout the adoption process. Also, participants' attitudes about openness varied over time (from pre-placement to three-four months post-placement), and changes in attitudes were attributed to a variety of factors such as perceived birth parent characteristics (such as birth mother substance use) and the perceived nature of the birth parent relationship. Overall, although some participants reported tensions with birth parents over time, most reported satisfying relationships (Goldberg et al., 2011).

Goldberg et al. (2011) qualitatively examined same- and other-sex adoptive couples' experiences with adoption openness at one time point (immediately post placement). We build on this work in this study to investigate openness dynamics using a longer time frame, a larger sample size, and both quantitative and qualitative methods. We explored several variables related to birth family contact, such as adoptive parents' satisfaction with birth family contact and plans for withholding information from children, as these variables have

been addressed in some prior studies of openness in adoption, but never in a sample including LG adoptive parents.

Understudied Issues in Adoption Research

Adopted children's experiences and perspectives of birth family contact have been examined more often than those of the adoptive parents (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988). However, some studies, such as those reviewed earlier, have addressed adoptive parents' attitudes about and satisfaction with contact with birth family and relationship dynamics between adoptive and birth parents in open adoption arrangements (McRoy et al., 1988; Siegel, 1993, 2003, 2008; Sykes, 2001). A number of understudied issues remain surrounding adoptive parents' perspectives about openness, such as the role of parents' gender in shaping experiences of birth family contact, legal finalization of adoption and its association with families' openness arrangements, and plans and reasons for withholding sensitive information from children about birth family contact and adoption. We draw from several different theoretical frameworks in approaching these questions about the role of parent sexual orientation and gender, legal issues, and secrecy in open adoption arrangements.

Families of choice

Among LG communities, the notion of "families of choice" has been popularized to describe the social support that LG individuals may find from friends and others in their community, particularly when families of origin are not supportive (Westin, 1991). Thus, it is possible that LG adults may be more likely than heterosexual adults reject some of these heteronormative cultural ideals of families determined by biological relatedness and the emphasis on nuclear family. Furthermore, given that same-sex couples are aware that they cannot biologically procreate a child without other assistance (e.g., use of alternative reproductive technologies), theories about families of choice (Westin, 1991) and rejection of heteronormative cultural ideals suggest that LG, rather than heterosexual, adoptive parents might be more open to birth family contact. LG adoptive parents may be particularly likely to develop and maintain the types of creative and nontraditional family relationships that are involved with having contact with their child's birth family. Notably, theories about the importance of families of choice not defined by biological connection could be useful in explaining differences in motivations to adopt children among LG and heterosexual parents. For instance, LG parents have more often described adoption as a "first choice" route to parenthood and are less likely to place importance on having a biological relationship with their child, as compared with heterosexual parents who more often report infertility challenges as their primary motivation for adopting (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Richardson, 2009; Tyebjee, 2003).

Disclosure versus secrecy, and dealing with stigma

Theories of "coming out", or disclosure of one's sexual orientation, contend that greater openness about one's sexual identity is a key component of healthy self development for sexual minorities (Legate, Ryan, & Weinstein, 2012; Ragins, 2004). The benefits of openness and honesty about one's sexual orientation may extend into the adoption process;

indeed, Goldberg et al. (2011) found that LG adults pursuing adoption strongly desired to be honest about their sexual identity and relationship status in the adoption process. A desire for honesty and openness also appears to be a motivation for pursuing open adoption specifically, among LG parents (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007). Thus, theories about the importance of coming out and disclosing one's sexual identity suggest that LG adoptive parents might be especially likely to value openness with their child about their adoption and birth family.

Emotional distance regulation

Grotevant (2009) proposed that, underlying the dynamics of contact between birth and adoptive families, is the process of emotional distance regulation. Differences in each individual's comfort level must be managed in engaging in new relationships within the adoptive kinship network via a dynamic process involving connection and separation over time. Grotevant suggested that successful relationships in such complex family situations depend on flexibility, communication skills, and commitment. While these skills can be learned and supported, there may also be circumstances in which one or more persons involved may not be able or willing to participate in contact. Similar dynamics would be expected between the child's birth relatives and LG adoptive parents, yet emotional distance regulation has not been examined among a sample of adoptive families with LG parents. Thus, of interest is, how or in what ways does parental sexual orientation impact adoptive parents' perceptions of relationships with birth families? Ultimately, how LG adoptive parents feel about contact with their child's birth relatives may contribute to parents' satisfaction with openness arrangements, as is suggested by prior work (Ge et al., 2008; Grotevant et al., 2007).

One understudied area in research regarding dynamics of openness in adoption, and related to emotional distance regulation, is adoptive parents' decisions to withhold information from their children about their adoption and the reasons for such withholding. For example, even when there is ongoing contact with birth family, adoptive parents may decide to withhold sensitive information about the circumstances of their child's adoption if they feel their children are too young to handle or understand the information (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, & Friedrich, 1996). Wrobel et al. (1996) investigated whether there were differences in outcomes for 190 adoptees (who were seven years old, on average) based on whether their adoptive parents were currently withholding some form of applicable contact, such as letters, pictures, or meetings, with birth family members or not. While withholding information was statistically unrelated to children's overall sense of self-worth, children whose adoptive parents had withheld information from them were more curious about their birth parents. Specific reasons for withholding, however, were not examined beyond the presence of siblings. More research about why adoptive parents decide to withhold information would shed light on how such decisions impact family dynamics, birth family contact, and child and parent outcomes.

Some research points to negative consequences of withholding information from children about their adoption, or denying them opportunities for contact and information sharing with birth family, warranting further exploration of which parents withhold information, and

why. Siegel (2012), for example, reported that children who are denied experiences of birth family contact often feel excluded, alienated, angry, and/or frustrated. With contact, adopted children have the possibility of substantial relationships with their birth relatives and direct access to family history and genetic information, providing a foundation for adoptees' identity as an adopted person (Siegel, 2012).

Thus, in sum, despite growing acceptance of openness in adoption (Siegel, 2012), increasing numbers of LG adoptive parents (Gates, 2011), and an expanding body of research about contact between birth and adoptive families (Grotevant, 2012), few studies have focused on attitudes toward or patterns of openness in adoptive families headed by LG parents (e.g., Goldberg et al., 2011). Children with same-sex parents as compared with those with heterosexual parents may be more likely to know they are adopted (as same-sex couples cannot have biological children together), and thus, LG adoptive parents may be less likely to withhold information from their children. No research, however, has explored such questions.

The Current Study

We examined four research questions: 1. What type and level of contact do adoptive families with LG and heterosexual parents have with birth mothers during the first year post-placement, and what are the predictors of such contact? 2. How positive are parents' perceptions of contact with birth mothers across the first year post-placement? 3. What information, if any, do adoptive parents withhold (or plan to withhold) from their children? Moreover, in what ways (if any) would openness arrangements and/or family type be associated with withholding information? 4. What is the role of legal adoption (finalization) in influencing contact and adoptive parents' feelings about it? Specifically, is adoption finalization associated with greater birth family contact and more positive feelings about it? For each of our four research questions, we explored whether results differed by family type (lesbian, gay, and heterosexual).

Given increasing trends toward openness in adoption, we hypothesized that a majority of families, regardless of family type, would have contact with birth mothers at three months and one year post-placement. However, we expected substantial individual variation in the frequency and type of contact at each time point and over time, regardless of family type (defined in this study as families headed by lesbian, gay, or heterosexual parents). We included child gender and race, as well as reported birth mother substance use, as predictor variables that might also be associated with birth family contact at both time points, based on prior research (Freeark et al., 2005; Goldberg et al., 2011; Grotevant et al., 2007). We also hypothesized that the level of contact at our two time points would be significantly associated with each other such that greater birth family contact at three months post-placement would predict greater birth family contact after one year, consistent with earlier research (Crea & Barth, 2009). Based on previous literature (Goldberg et al., 2011; Grotevant, 2012), we hypothesized that most adoptive parents would report positive perceptions of contact with birth mothers. We expected that adoptive parents' feelings about contact would be associated across time points (at three months and one year post-placement), regardless of parental sexual orientation.

We expected some variation among adoptive parents in plans for withholding sensitive information from their children, but hypothesized that the majority would not plan to withhold. That is, inasmuch as these are families who were likely to have options for openness and contact with their child's birth families, we expected infrequent plans to withhold information among adoptive parents. We hypothesized that families with greater openness and more frequent birth family contact would be less likely to report plans for withholding information than those with less or no birth family contact, based on previous literature (Wrobel et al., 1996).

No research to our knowledge has addressed the role of legal finalization, or when one or both parents become the legal adoptive parents of their child, in adoptive parents' perceptions of and decisions about birth family contact. The requirements of finalization differ across states (e.g., some states allow for periods of time during which birth parents could change their mind about relinquishing their parental rights), and, thus, the overall length of time that occurs before finalization may vary among adoptive families. Research has shown that when the process of finalization is lengthier than expected, particularly among families who foster to adopt, adoptive parents often express discouragement (Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, & Richardson, 2012; Kramer & Houston, 1998; McDonald, Propp, & Murphy, 2001). Moreover, issues about legal finalization of adoption may be particularly salient among LG parents, who may face legal and practical barriers to becoming adoptive parents (Appell, 2011). Many LG prospective parents report encountering stigma and discrimination during the adoption process (e.g., from adoption agency professionals who are undereducated about parenting by sexual minority adults as well as policies and laws governing adoption by same-sex couples; Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Downs & James, 2006; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007; Matthews & Cramer, 2006; Ryan & Whitlock, 2007; Ryan, 2000). Thus, LG parents could be particularly motivated to legally finalize their child's adoption as a result of societal stigma about LG people and their families. No studies to date, however, have examined how legal finalization of adoption relates to adoptive families' openness arrangements. We hypothesized that the majority of adoptive families would have completed the finalization of their child's adoption by one year post-placement. We expected that adoption finalization would be related to participants' reports of greater confidence and security in their role as parents, based on several studies demonstrating the stress and frustration that adoptive parents face when the legal finalization process is delayed (Goldberg et al., 2012; Kramer & Houston, 1998; McDonald et al., 2001). Thus, we expected that adoptive families who reported finalizing the adoption of their child, regardless of the timing, would be more likely to have birth family contact, and would report more positive perceptions of birth family contact.

Lastly, we expected that LG adoptive parents would be more likely than heterosexual adoptive parents to have contact with birth mothers over the first year post-placement, based on qualitative findings from a similar sample indicating more positive feelings about openness in adoption among LG than heterosexual adoptive parents (Goldberg et al., 2011). Similarly, we expected that LG parents would have more positive perceptions of contact with birth mothers than heterosexual participants across the first year post-placement. We did not expect significant differences in legal finalization of adoption, as legal finalization

would be important to all families, regardless of parental sexual orientation, and nor did we expect differences in plans to withhold information from children as a function of parental sexual orientation.

Method

The current exploratory study sought to expand understanding of openness dynamics in adoptive families with LG parents, by building upon the study by Goldberg et al. (2011).

Participants

Participants included 103 adoptive families (34 lesbian mothers, 32 gay fathers, and 37 heterosexual mothers, all of whom were in committed relationships) who had options for openness arrangements at the time of placement of their children (all of whom were placed with their adoptive families at less than one week of age, on average). Lesbian mothers were defined as women who were in same-sex relationships; gay fathers were men in same-sex relationships. Families represented a wide range of geographic regions: $n = 44$ (41%) in the Northeast/Mid-Atlantic US, $n = 9$ (9%) in the Central US, $n = 16$ (15%) in the Southern US, and $n = 37$ (35%) along the West Coast of the US.

Procedure

The researchers collected the data reported here as part of a larger study on lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parent families' transition to adoptive parenthood. To be eligible, participants had to be in a committed relationship, adopting their first child, becoming parents for the first time, and awaiting placement of their child (in the pre-adoption period). Furthermore, the current sample included those families who had completed a domestic infant adoption with some options for openness in adoption. To recruit the sample for the overall project, the researchers contacted over 30 adoption agencies throughout the US who were willing to collaborate in recruiting for this study. Directors or staff from these adoption agencies then provided information about the study and an invitation to participate to clients who had not yet adopted but who were in the process of adopting their first child. The researchers made particular effort to contact agencies in states with high percentages of same-sex couples (identified using U.S. Census data; Gates & Ost, 2004). Heterosexual and LG participants were recruited via these adoption agencies to ensure similarity in geographic location and other demographic characteristics across the sample. As some LG couples may not choose to disclose their sexual orientation in working with their adoption agency, several national LG organizations also helped with recruitment. After receiving information about the study from their adoption agency or LG organization, prospective participants contacted the researchers for details about participation.

Participation involved a semi-structured telephone interview and the completion of a questionnaire packet while in the pre-adoption period. Three to four months after being placed with their child, participants took part in a second telephone interview and completed a follow-up questionnaire packet. At one year post-placement, participants completed another packet of questionnaires. Participants were interviewed about their adoption experiences by trained research personnel (the second author, who was the principal

investigator of the study, or a graduate research assistant) for about one to one-and-one-half hours. Before conducting interviews, graduate research assistants were trained by reading the interview protocol thoroughly several times, observing a phone interview by a trained graduate research assistant peer or the second author, completing a mock interview, and receiving feedback on the mock interview they conducted from the second author or a trained peer. Researchers assigned each participant a pseudonym and transcribed each interview. Data were collected between the years 2005 and 2011. This study was approved by the Institutional Review Board of [BLINDED].

Measures

Each of the following variables described were drawn from the interviews with adoptive parents. For the current study, we designate the three month post-placement follow-up as Time 1 (T1). The one-year post-placement follow-up is designated as Time 2 (T2).

Meeting and feelings about the birth mother, T1—At T1, participants were asked about whether they had met the birth mother (Yes/No). Participants were also asked about their feelings toward the birth mother/birth parents. Their responses were coded into the following categories: 1 = *Mostly positive*, 2 = *Mixed (some positive, some negative)*, 3 = *Mostly negative*.

Contact with birth families, T1—Participants reported their current level of birth family contact with the following choices: 1 = *No contact*, 2 = *Letters/calls*, 3 = *Occasional visits*, 4 = *Regular visits*, 5 = *Occasional visits and letters/calls*, and 6 = *Regular visits and letters/calls*. Similar to the work of other researchers examining openness arrangements (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2007), *occasional* indicated that contact that was approximately once a year or less and *regular* indicated ongoing visits or contact multiple times a year (or more).

Satisfaction with birth family contact, T1—To assess satisfaction with birth family contact, parents reported on how satisfied they were with anticipated or future contact on a Likert scale similar to other studies of satisfaction with birth family contact (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2007), from 1 = *Very satisfied* to 5 = *Very dissatisfied*.

Preferences about future contact, T1—Participants were asked in the interview, “What are your preferences for future contact?”. Participant responses were then coded according to the following categories: 1 = *I would like more contact than we are having right now*, 2 = *I would like less contact than we are having right now*, and 3 = *The amount of contact is just right*.

Birth parent drug/alcohol use, T1—Participants were asked about whether the birth mother had used drugs or alcohol during her pregnancy (Yes/No/Don't Know).

Contact with birth families, T2—One year post-placement, which we designate as Time 2 (T2), participants were asked about their current contact arrangements with the birth family, selecting from the following options: 1 = *No contact between birth and adoptive families*, 2 = *Non-identifying exchange of photos and letters*, 3 = *Non-identifying face-to-*

face meetings, 4 = Identifying information exchanged, or 5 = Placement included formal plan for ongoing contact. Parents also specifically reported the number of times they had had birth family contact by mail, phone, email, face-to-face, and through other means over the past year.

Plans to withhold information and adoption finalization, T2—At T2, parents described whether they had any plans to withhold sensitive information from their children about their adoption (Yes/No). For those who responded yes, participants explained their reasons for planning to withhold information about the adoption from their child. Lastly, participants reported whether the adoption had been legally finalized (Yes/No).

Data Analytic Plan

To address the study aims, descriptive analyses were first conducted for all variables at both time points. Next, to assess whether openness dynamics differed as a function of parental sexual orientation, family type (lesbian, gay, or heterosexual) was tested as a predictor variable with all other variables regarding openness arrangements, contact with birth family, plans to withhold information, and adoption finalization as outcome variables (using ANOVA or chi-square tests, depending on whether the outcome variables were continuous or categorical). We also tested child gender and race, birth mother substance use, plans to withhold information, and finalization as predictor variables of birth family contact, as many of these factors have been found to be influential to levels of birth family contact in previous studies.

Results

Demographic Characteristics

The majority of participants had completed domestic private infant adoptions ($n = 98$; 95%), while $n = 5$ (5%) participants had completed domestic public adoptions (foster-to-adopt placements). Parents were predominantly White ($n = 96$, 93%); others were Latino, African American, Multiracial or another racial/ethnic group. Children were more racially diverse than their parents: $n = 43$ were White (42%), $n = 35$ were Biracial/Multiethnic (34%), $n = 14$ were Latino/Hispanic (13%), and $n = 11$ were Black/African American (11%). Most parents were well-educated ($n = 90$, 88% had a college or graduate degree). The median family income was \$120,000 ($M = \$143,000$; $SD = \$96,000$). Family income differed significantly by family type, with gay men ($M = \$180,000$; $SD = \$124,000$) reporting a higher family income than lesbian women ($M = \$122,000$; $SD = \$63,000$), $F(2, 100) = 3.71$, $p = .028$.

We ran Chi-square tests to analyze whether any differences existed among family types in child gender, child race, parent race, educational attainment, and type of adoption completed; there were no differences among family types as a function of these variables. We conducted ANOVA tests to determine whether there were differences by family type in children's age at adoptive placement. Although children had been placed with their families at less than one week old on average ($M = .53$ weeks, $SD = 1.43$ weeks), there was a significant difference by family type, $F(2, 100) = 3.14$, $p = .048$. Children had been placed

significantly earlier with gay fathers ($M = .05$ weeks, $SD = .16$ weeks) than with lesbian mothers ($M = .91$ weeks, $SD = 1.84$ weeks).

Descriptive Findings for Contact with Birth Family (Three Months Post-Placement; T1)

In reference to our first research question about contact with birth family, most adoptive families ($n = 80$; 79.2%) had met the birth mother at the first post-placement interview – that is, three months post-placement (T1). Family type was a marginally significant predictor of contact, $\chi^2(2, N = 101) = 4.75, p = .093$, whereby lesbian parents were less likely to have met the birth mother than gay fathers and heterosexual mothers (67% of lesbian participants, 84% of gay male participants, and 86% of heterosexual participants had met the birth mother). Participants were more likely to have contact with birth mothers at T1 if there had been no substance use during pregnancy, $\chi^2(2, N = 98) = 17.04, p = .030$. In addition, the level of contact was greater if the adopted child was a girl versus a boy, $t(96) = 2.02, p = .046$. There were no differences in the level of contact at T1 as a function of child race.

Descriptive Findings for Contact with Birth Family (One Year Post-Placement; T2)

After one year, only seven families (6.8%) had no contact and also had no plans for future contact; the rest had shared identifying information ($n = 18$ families; 17.5%), had non-identifying contact (photos, letters, etc.; $n = 23$; 22.3%), had visited in-person ($n = 6$; 5.8%), or had formal plans for future contact (46 families; 44.7%). (Please note that these types of contact were mutually exclusive as described here, and data were missing from $n = 3$ families; 3%.) Chi-square analysis showed no differences in contact by family type. Regarding type of contact in the past year, families reported an average of 1.94 ($SD = 4.07$) face-to-face contacts, 4.46 ($SD = 6.76$) phone calls, 11.74 ($SD = 22.23$) emails, 3.07 ($SD = 4.08$) contacts by mail, and .39 ($SD = 2.11$) other contacts. Thus, email was the most frequent type of contact and face-to-face meetings were the rarest form of contact. ANOVAs revealed that no type of contact varied by family type, except phone calls, $F(2, 97) = 3.46, p = .035$; gay fathers reported the most ($M = 6.97$; $SD = 7.97$), while lesbian mothers reported 3.02 ($SD = 7.48$), and heterosexual mothers reported 3.49 ($SD = 4.00$). Thus, on average, gay fathers were reporting phone calls approximately every other month, whereas for lesbian and heterosexual mothers, calls appeared to be occurring only about every three months. Child gender and race were not significantly associated with level or type of contact at T2. Whether birth mothers had reportedly used substances during pregnancy was marginally significant in predicting less contact at T2, $\chi^2(2, N = 96) = 18.17, p = .052$. As hypothesized, families' openness arrangements were characterized by greater contact with birth families at T2 if they had met the birth mother by T1, $r(98) = .31, p = .002$, and if they had greater contact with birth family at three months post-placement, $r(95) = .21, p = .038$.

Adoptive Parents' Feelings about Contact (Three Months Post-Placement; T1)

To address our second research question about adoptive parents' perceptions about birth family contact, parents were asked at T1 about their feelings toward birth mothers, and whether they were mostly positive, mostly negative, or mixed/ambivalent. Parents described their feelings to be an average of 1.31 ($SD = .54$), closer to 1 = *Mostly positive* but between this and 2 = *Mixed/ambivalent*. At this time point, parents were also asked how satisfied they

were with anticipated or future contact. Parents reported a mean satisfaction level of 1.77 ($SD = 1.02$), between 1 = *Very satisfied* and 2 = *Somewhat satisfied*. Thus, on average, parents felt mostly positive toward the birth mother and were satisfied with contact at three months post-placement.

Further, we found that the majority of the sample preferred the current amount of contact or wanted more. Across the sample, $n = 63$ (66%) said the amount of current contact was “just right,” while $n = 24$ (25%) wanted more contact. Only $n = 8$ (9%) wanted less future contact. (Data were missing from $n = 8$ families regarding the desired level of future contact.) Chi-square analyses indicated no significant differences by family type with regard to adoptive parents’ feelings toward birth mothers, satisfaction with contact, or preferences about future contact. Contrary to expectations, adoptive parents’ reports of satisfaction with contact and their feelings toward the birth mother at T1 were statistically unrelated to the level of contact at T2.

Withholding Sensitive Information (One Year Post-Placement; T2)

As per our third research question, there were 23 families (23.2% of the sample) with plans to withhold sensitive information about the adoption from their child at one year post-placement. The majority ($n = 76$; 76.8%), however, did not plan to withhold any information. (Data were missing from $n = 4$ families.) Results did not differ by family type. Reasons for withholding information from children included negative circumstances surrounding the pregnancy or birth of the child (e.g., rape, failed abortion, unknown birth father) or the birth mother’s life (e.g., homelessness, violence, drug use, or suicide), and wanting to ensure that the child was ready and the information shared would be developmentally appropriate (see Table 1).

The Role of Finalization in Contact (One Year Post-Placement; T2)

Regarding our fourth research question about adoption finalization, by one year, 87% of adoptions had been legally finalized (i.e., both members of the couple were the legal adoptive parents of their child). (Data were missing from $n = 2$ families regarding finalization.) More gay male parents (32 of 32) and heterosexual parents (32 of 37) had finalized the adoption than lesbian mothers (24 of 32), $\chi^2(2, N = 101) = 8.94, p = .011$. Child gender, child race, and type of adoption were not associated with whether adoptions had been finalized by one year. Whether adoptions had been finalized was related to birth family contact at T1 (3 months post-placement) but not at T2 (one year post-placement). Families who had finalized their adoption, compared to those who had not, at one year post-placement, more frequently reported future plans for ongoing birth family contact at three months post-placement, $\chi^2(4, N = 100) = 15.58, p = .004$. However, there were no statistical differences in types of birth family contact at one year post-placement based on whether or not adoptions had been finalized.

Discussion

This exploratory study is pioneering in being among the first to explore openness in adoption among LG and heterosexual adoptive parent families (Goldberg et al., 2011).

Results showed that most adoptive parents, regardless of sexual orientation, had contact with birth mothers, had positive feelings toward birth mothers, and were satisfied with contact. The results are consistent with earlier research indicating that satisfaction with contact is often higher among adoptive families with ongoing birth family contact (Crea & Barth, 2009; McRoy et al., 2007), and extends the results for the first time among a group of LG and heterosexual adoptive parents.

A majority of adoptive parents had met the birth mother by three months post-placement, and adoptive parents reported a variety of forms of birth family contact in the last year, which is consistent with increasing trends in the US toward openness arrangements between birth and adoptive families. As expected, earlier contact predicted greater contact at one year post-placement. However, adoptive parents' satisfaction with contact and reported feelings about birth mothers at three months post-placement were not related to the amount of birth family contact after one year. Perhaps adoptive parents' feelings about birth family contact are more variable the first year post-placement. The current sample of adoptive parents were not only new to parenting, but were also experiencing emotional distance regulation in navigating decisions about adoption openness for the first time (Grotevant, 2009). As data were collected relatively soon after adoptive placement, future longitudinal work would be help to address the role of satisfaction with contact and feelings toward birth mothers in influencing birth family contact.

Regardless, inasmuch as openness has been found to be beneficial to all members of the adoption triad (adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents; Grotevant, 2012; Siegel, 2012), we anticipate that our results, which indicate some level of ongoing contact between adoptive and birth families across the first year post-placement, suggest positive outcomes for all those in the adoptive kinship network over time. Given that most adoptive parents reported birth family contact and were satisfied with it, it is also likely that birth family members and adoptees will also experience positive effects.

Importantly, the results reflected few differences by family type, such that birth family contact, as well as plans to withhold information from adopted children, were not any more or less likely among LG and heterosexual adoptive parent families. This may suggest that all adoptive parents, regardless of sexual orientation, navigate dynamics of openness in adoption in similar ways, rather than suggesting different influences on LG adoptive parents compared with heterosexual parents in making decisions about birth family contact. Also, somewhat in contrast to previous literature (e.g., Grotevant et al., 1994), there were no differences between adoptive mothers and fathers regarding attitudes toward birth mothers among LG parents. Also, LG parents did not appear to have greater birth family contact or fewer plans to withhold information than did heterosexual parents. Therefore, contrary to our hypothesis (based on empirical literature and theories highlighting the unique experiences of LG individuals), LG parents did not demonstrate greater openness as compared with heterosexual parents (Legate et al., 2012; Ragins, 2004).

One factor that was associated with less birth mother contact among all families was the birth mother's use of drugs or alcohol during pregnancy. Goldberg et al. (2011) found that in some cases, LG and heterosexual adoptive parents who had less contact with the birth

mother than they expected or hoped attributed this to her substance use. Perhaps adoptive parents have a difficult time relating to or developing a strong relationship with birth parents whom they see as having made choices that negatively affect the health and development of their children (Jones & Hackett, 2012; Logan, 2010). Future qualitative work can explicitly probe for this possibility.

As openness in adoption has become increasingly the rule rather than the exception (Grotevant, 2012), it may be that heterosexual and LG parents were similarly likely to be open with their children about their adoption and willing to involve birth family members in their child's life, at least early on in the relationship. This finding contrasts with previous literature elucidating some differences as a function of parent gender (Freeark et al., 2005). Indeed, regardless of sexual orientation, the vast majority of families in this study had met the birth mother and had some form of ongoing or planned contact.

Moreover, child race was not significantly associated with any variables of birth family contact across the first year post-placement, indicating that the type of birth family contact and adoptive parents' feelings about it were not related to whether they had adopted a child of color. It is important to note that the majority of adoptive parents were White, so it is unclear whether these dynamics would differ among adoptive parents of color. Future research should seek to recruit a more diverse sample of adoptive parents that will allow exploration of this issue.

Consistent with our expectations, the great majority of adoptive parents also reported no plans to withhold adoption information from their children. Further, those who reported plans to withhold had strong rationales for doing so, such as considering the developmental appropriateness of sharing difficult information with their children. It is important that future research investigates further how parents make decisions about withholding information from their adopted children, and what their consequences are for children's and family outcomes.

There were a few significant differences by family type with regard to level and type of contact post-placement. At three months post-placement, there was a trend toward significance suggesting differences among family groups in the level of birth family contact. Heterosexual and gay male parent families were more likely to have contact than lesbian parent families at the initial post-placement time point, which may be related to how birth parents chose the adoptive parents and how adoptive parents differentially perceive contact with birth parents. In their qualitative study, Goldberg et al. (2011) noted that gay fathers often found it easier to form relationships with birth parents than the two other family groups. In fact, gay fathers may be more likely to be chosen by birth mothers, as men are perceived to be less challenging than women to work with adoptive parents (Goldberg, 2012). Perhaps birth mothers are seeking to avoid possible jealousy or competition in selecting adoptive families headed by gay fathers are opposed to those with lesbian mothers in which there are two women with whom they must navigate relationships (Goldberg, 2012). By one year post-placement, however, there were no differences by family type in openness arrangements; the only significant difference in birth family contact was with regard to one type of contact: namely, gay fathers had had more contact with birth family in

the form of phone calls in the past year than had lesbian mothers or heterosexual parents. Therefore, in contrast to theories of families of choice suggesting that LG parents might have been particularly likely to have contact with birth parents, families appeared more similar than different overall in terms of birth family contact over the first year post-adoptive placement as a function of parental sexual orientation.

At three months post-placement, contact was more likely if adoptive families had a female versus a male child, but this discrepancy based on child gender disappeared by one year post-placement. Perhaps the initial difference in contact reflected different motivations among adoptive parents as a result of their child's gender. From a young age, girls are socialized more so than boys to emphasize the importance of relationships (Patterson & Hastings, 2007). Thus, adoptive parents may have focused their attention early on to involving their daughters in birth family contact. Alternatively, birth mothers may be more interested in developing relationships with girls early on; but the current results cannot speak to this. Considering the perspectives of birth mothers, in addition to those of adoptive parents, would be beneficial to elucidate any gender-related motivations in contact between birth and adoptive families.

It is interesting and important to note that adoptive parents' earlier contact with birth mothers may have played some role in the likelihood of adoption finalization at one year, in that all gay male parents had legally finalized their adoptions at one year, and gay fathers also reported the greatest number of phone calls with the birth mother. As lesbian parents were somewhat less likely to have contact at three months post-placement than heterosexual and gay parents; lesbian parents were also less likely than heterosexual and gay parents to have finalized their adoption after the first year. More research examining predictors and consequences of the timing of finalization among diverse adoptive couples would be beneficial, as this is the first study to date to address the role of legal adoption finalization in relation to birth family contact.

Regardless, the findings suggest that contact with birth families was in no way hindering of the legal adoption process moving forward. In contrast, contact may have been facilitative in some ways – challenging some adoptive parents' "worst fears" that contact with birth parents will somehow undermine the success and stability of the placement (Goldberg, 2012; Goldberg et al., 2011; Jones & Hackett, 2012). This notion has also been debunked in other studies: birth family contact does not destabilize adoptive couples' sense of entitlement, nor does it increase fears that birth mothers might try to reclaim the child (e.g., Grotevant et al., 1994).

Given trends toward openness and LG-parent adoption, the results have implications for policy and practice. Our results highlight that adoptive families headed by LG and heterosexual parents experience largely similar dynamics of openness in adoption; family type was not a strong predictor of differences in birth family contact across the first year post-placement in our sample. Thus, rather than finding differences as a result of parental sexual orientation, we discovered that the adoptive families in our sample were far more alike than different, which is an important finding that may serve to guide the practices of as

adoption professionals who are making placement decisions daily for the more 100,000 children waiting for permanent families (U.S. Department of Health, 2011).

Policy and practice surrounding LG-parent adoption have largely outpaced the research on this topic, and greater information about the dynamics of post-adoption birth family contact is beneficial to those working to navigate these complex relationships – including members of adoptive families, birth families, and the adoption professionals who work with adoptive and birth families. Results from empirical research may also provide valuable information to prospective adoptive parents who are curious about how openness between birth and adoptive families can be managed post-placement. Future research should elaborate upon the ways in which LG adoptive parent families are both similar to and unique from heterosexual parent adoptive families, which could aid adoption professionals and clinicians in providing services and resources that are sensitive to the needs of adoptive LG parents and their children.

Limitations

While this exploratory study had several strengths and made new contributions to the literature, it is also characterized by several limitations. Regarding the study design, this was a relatively small and homogeneous sample of adoptive parents who were predominantly White and who had mostly completed private, domestic infant adoptions, so the extent to which these results can be generalized is unclear. Greater generalization of the findings would be possible from future research that includes more diverse samples in terms of race and ethnicity and representing different pathways to adoption. Another limitation of the current study was that some variables were based on one-item questions, which did not allow for more complex or nuanced interpretations (e.g., Yes/No question about birth mother substance use). Participants' sexual identity (e.g., lesbian, gay, bisexual, etc.) was not assessed directly; rather, same-sex couple relationship status was used to categorize lesbian and gay parents. Future research should include explicit questions regarding how participants self identify. It also could be beneficial to explore whether discrepancies in legal parenting status among same-sex couples plays a role in influencing birth family contact (since in some states, both members of same-sex couples cannot become the legal adoptive parents). Similarly, obtaining data directly from birth relatives regarding attitudes toward the adoptive parents and parental sexual orientation would be important in assessing contact dynamics between diverse adoptive and birth family systems. We did not have sufficient information from participants to address these questions about discrepancies in legal parenting status or birth relatives' attitudes regarding LG parenting.

Future research exploring openness dynamics among diverse adoptive families headed by LG and heterosexual parents as children get older with a longer-term follow-up study would be informative. For example, future research should explore other types of contact that are increasingly being used in a tech-saturated society, such as text messaging and Skype. Indeed, Siegel (2012) found in her recent study of birth family contact among adult adoptees that all of the respondents currently communicating with birth family members were doing so electronically, via text messaging, email, and Facebook. In addition, as we did not include questions about whether participants had worked with adoption agencies that required or

actively encouraged contact with birth parents, future research could shed light on the degree to which adoption agencies influence the process of ongoing adoptive and birth family contact.

Conclusion

The results of this study contribute to the literature on openness in adoption by including a diverse sample of LG and heterosexual adoptive parents. Given the increasing visibility of LG parent adoption, as well as the relative “newness” of this type of family configuration involving an open adoption between a (typically) heterosexual birth parent and LG adoptive parents, it is important to understand how openness dynamics might manifest themselves over time, and how birth parents’ attitudes about sexual orientation might play into the types of relationships they develop with the adoptive family. Our results provide a first glimpse of contact among LG and heterosexual adoptive parents and birth families is playing out early on in adopted children’s lives. This study provides important new information for researchers exploring issues in adoption and parental sexual orientation, practitioners who work with adoptive families, adoption agencies and other child welfare personnel making decisions about forever homes for children in need of adoption, and policymakers and lawmakers who draft and decide upon bills related to adoption and family law. By tapping the perspectives of adoptive parents early on in their children’s lives about experiences of birth family contact, we gain further understanding about the inner workings of openness dynamics among diverse adoptive families.

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Table 1

Reasons for Adoptive Couples' Plans to Withhold Information from their Child

Reason	Frequency	
	<i>N</i>	%
Will determine as child ages what is developmentally appropriate	3	13
Negative history/life circumstances of birth parents (e.g., drug use, violence, prostitution, homelessness, suicide)	14	60.9
Do not know who birth father is	1	4.3
Child is a product of rape	4	17.4
Birth mother had failed abortion attempt before placement	1	4.3
TOTAL	23	100

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