

PERCEPTIONS OF ADVANTAGES, DISADVANTAGES AND LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF THE OPEN ADOPTION PROCESS ON YOUNG ADULT ADOPTEES

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ABSTRACT: *Open adoption is a relatively recent practice. Early on, most adoptions were confidential and there was no contact or sharing of information between the biological family and the adoptive family. More recently, open adoptions have emerged as a common form. They are characterized by open access to information and contact between the biological and adoptive families. There has been little work done on the long-term effects of open adoption on adoptees. Interviews were conducted with individuals involved in open adoption (social workers, adoptive parents, and adoptees) in order to investigate the long-term effects. Findings indicate open adoption is an attractive option, primarily because of information sharing.*

Open Adoption

Adoption is the taking of a child into one's family through legal means and raise as one's own. The rationales for adoption are numerous. Either the birth mother or both birth parents relinquish their child for adoption because they may not have the emotional or financial support to raise a child. If a child were born in an impoverished environment, it would be more difficult for that child to experience a high quality of life, at least not until he or she is no longer dependent on the parents. On the other hand, adoptive parents are generally older and have more financial resources than birth parents. In addition, adoptive parents must go through a screening process, which necessitates an enriching environment for the adoptee. Adoptive parents can benefit emotionally in various ways. These are only a few of the more obvious reasons for adoption (Berry, 1993; Fessler 2006). Initially, this gives the child an advantage and the potential for a more enriching environment. The longer term consequences of this familial fix are more obscure.

Adoption has been a central issue in the disciplines of social work and clinical psychology for several decades and much research has been done on its numerous aspects and impacts. Prior to the 1980s, confidential adoptions were the norm (Melina & Roszia, 1993; Baumann, 1997). A confidential adoption is one in which birth parents have absolutely no contact with the adoptive parents or the adopted child. Birth records were sealed indefinitely and it was deemed illegal for adoptees to access their birth records.

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The long-term effects of confidential adoptions were unknown for many decades, but research findings informed by theories of psychological attachment, separation and loss by Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and grief theory by Kübler-Ross (1969) contributed to reconsideration of confidential adoptions. Indeed, a major drawback of confidential adoptions is the fact that many adoptees had a very strong urge to meet or know about their biological parents. The child does in fact grieve over the loss of the biological parents (Demick and Wapner 1988). The most significant drawbacks were clearly identified from the perspectives of the adoptive children (Berry 1991). It was very common for adopted children to have low self-esteem, primarily because they felt abandoned by their biological parents (Kirk 1997). Many adoptees had difficulty throughout their lifetimes forming new relationships and trusting other individuals (Reitz 1999). The most consistent findings of the effect of closed adoption on adoptees suggest that confidential adoptions have negative impacts on all members of the triad or adoption triangle, including the birth parents, adoptive parents, and adoptee. (Brodzinsky, Smith & Brodzinsky, 1998; Hajal & Rosenberg, 1991; Melina & Roszia, 1993; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor 1978). With this new information, many adoption professionals began to wonder if the negative long-term effects of confidential adoptions actually outweighed the benefits (Melina & Roszia, 1993). This paved the way for the emergence of a new form of adoption.

The adoption process began to evolve slowly in the early 1970s into what is now known as open adoption. This was propelled by the enactment of various forms of adoption legislation such as P.L. 96-272, 1980 Adoption Assistance Act, and reinforced by P.L. 105-89, 1997 Adoption and Safe Family Act (Reitz, 1999). Open adoption was also bolstered by recognition of the triad. This classification was introduced in 1978 (Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor 1978). This identification of the three members of the adoption process was extremely significant to the evolution of adoption in the United States. It facilitated the idea that the adoption process is not a one-time event in an individual's life, but a developmental process and ongoing life event for all members of the adoption triad (Kirk, 1997; Reitz, 1999). However, the evolution from confidential adoption to open adoption was slowed because professionals were skeptical of the possible outcomes, citing a lack of supporting research (Demick, 2007; Silber & Dorner, 1990).

Although the evolution began in the 1970s with the rise of several groups including the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association (ALMA), open adoptions did not occur in most states until the 1980s. Today, many private adoption agencies and all public ones encourage or even require prospective parents to have some openness in their adoptions. This marks a continuing trend of open adoption over confidential adoption (Siegel, 2003). It is now agreed that open adoption, as does confidential adoption, presents both advantages and disadvantages to all members of the adoption triad. Open adoption seemed to be a possible solution to the problem that children may have trouble forming their identity if they are not presented with information about their biological parents. Open adoption helps children avoid some of the emotional problems they may face later in life; including confusion (Baldauf 1998; Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Rompf 1993; Silber & Dorner, 1990).

McLean (1998) claimed that although the adoption process does not always run smoothly, adoptions are actually destigmatized by openness.

Although open adoption emerged as a hypothetically better solution to the problems associated with confidential adoptions there were still perceived disadvantages. The original assumptions of opponents of open adoption were that the child would have problems forming identity if there were two sets of parents present (Forbes, 1995). Professionals wondered if adopted children would be confused that they had two sets of parents. In addition, there was a societal belief that the adoptees should be thankful for their redemption from the stigma of being born out of wedlock and therefore, the idea that adoptees may have an interest in their genealogy was not seriously considered (Reitz, 1999). Baldauf (1998) described the common emotional volatility, often expressed by adoptive parents as a roller coaster of emotions, experienced prior to and during the open adoption process. Lastly, it is important to note that many of these disadvantages are simply assumptions that have no empirical basis.

Many professionals now believe that some of these views are anachronisms and in some cases completely non-existent. Despite initial apprehension expressed by adoptive parents, research has found that face-to-face contact with the birth parents often replaces abstract ideas and fears with concrete information (Melina & Roszia 1993; Siegel 1993). Research also suggests that the open adoption process is clearly in the best interest of the child (Etter, 1993; Gross, 1993; McLean, 1998; Siegel, 1993, 2003).

In sum, there are major advantages that open adoption has over confidential adoption. However, the information regarding the adoptee has been compiled during the child's early years. Although a good bit of research has been done on the effects of adoption on the birth parents and the adoptive parents, little has been done on the effects on the adoptee, namely, the adult adoptee. Much more research is required to conclude that open adoption is in the best interest of the adoptee throughout his or her life. Most of the research has not focused on adult adoptees because the majority of open adoptees are not old enough to give mature accounts of their experiences. The current study is designed to investigate some of the effects of open adoption with an emphasis on the long-term effects on the adoptee (Kahan, 2006; Reitz 1999). Specifically it addresses the respondents' perceptions of the effects of level of contact on adoptees, the negative and positive effects of open adoption on adoptees and their suggestions for future open adoption.

Methodology

Interview Guide

An interview guide was developed from prior literature on open adoption. The guide was utilized to extract basic demographic information, as well as, their changing feelings/fears regarding the process at various points, interaction with relatives, possible long-term effects on the adult adoptee, contact trends with the biological family

throughout the adoption process, comparison of closed versus open adoption, satisfaction with the process, regrets, and adoptee's relationship with biological parents and extended family. Although the same interview guide was used for all twenty-two participants taking part in the study, the questions were slightly modified to suit each respondent.

Prospective Adoptive Parent Panels

Although no birth mothers were interviewed, one of the authors was granted the opportunity to sit in on three separate panels. Each panel composed of adoptees, birth mothers, and adoptive parents and facilitated by two social workers at a local private adoption agency spoke openly about their experiences with open adoption in front of four to six prospective adoptive couples. Prospective adoptive couples, in the early stages of being educated about the option of open adoption, asked questions. The sessions lasted from two and a half to three hours. While no direct quotes from panel participants were used observations were integrated throughout the findings.

Sample

A total of six families, with adoptees, who are currently adults, over the age of sixteen, who went through the open adoption process, were interviewed. Contact information was provided by a local private adoption agency in South Louisiana. Of the six families, five of them had two children who went through an adoption. It is important to note that in some cases, one of the adoptees in a household was either not old enough (under 16) to be interviewed or went through a confidential adoption. Therefore, not all adoptees of the families mentioned above could be interviewed. However, at least one adoptee from each family was interviewed. Adoptive parents were also encouraged to speak about their adoption experiences and perceptions of the effects of open adoption on their adopted children. Four of the six families were interviewed in their homes. Because of proximity issues, the other two families were contacted and interviewed via email. A total of ten adoptive parents were interviewed. Six of the adoptive parents were adoptive mothers and four were adoptive fathers. Of the eight adult adoptees interviewed, four are male and four are female. The mean age of the adoptees was 18.4 years and the ages range from sixteen to twenty-one. In addition to the adopted families, four professional social workers were interviewed at adoption agencies throughout the state of Louisiana.

There is much variation in the term open adoption. It includes arrangements such as restricted open adoption, semi-open adoption, fully open adoption, and continuing open adoption (Demick and Wapner 1988; Reitz, 1999). A restricted open adoption is one in which the adoptive and birth families share information indirectly, usually through an adoption agency. A semi-open adoption is one in which the birth family and the adoptive family meet face-to-face, but discontinue the sharing of information. The fully open adoption involves face-to-face contact between the adoptive and birth families along with the sharing of information for some period of time. Finally, a continuing open adoption describes a situation in which the adoptive and birth families

plan and maintain contact over the course of the adoptee's life (Berry, 1991). All of the adoptees in this research were involved in continuing open adoptions.

Findings

All adult adoptees interviewed were white, middle to upper-middle class, and either Catholic or Protestant. Five of the eight adoptees were still in high school and active in sports, clubs, and in some cases part-time jobs. Three of the remaining adoptees were college students with part-time jobs.

The literature indicates there is much variability in how much contact the adoption triad maintains. Another interesting question is what type of relationship the adoptee has with his birth parents. This is an important question because it may help discover if the past assumption that children will be confused about having two sets of parents is founded on fact. When asked to describe their relationship with their birth parents, adoptees varied from "acquaintance" to "big brother." More specifically, two adoptees felt that their relationship with their birth mother was like that of an acquaintance. Two adoptees felt that their relationships with their birth mother were similar to friendships. Four of the adoptees felt that their relationships with their birth mother were similar to relatives. One of the adoptees, that had face-to-face contact with his birth father, described their relationship as brothers.

Perceptions of Effects of Level of Openness on Adoptee

Most respondents felt that the adoptee benefited from high levels of contact with the birth parents. Seven of the eight adoptees interviewed explained they were either content with the amount of openness in their open adoption or wished for more openness with their birth parents. The other adoptee explained that his adoption could not be more open than it already is. In fact, this adoption is characterized by high face-to-face contact. Seven of the eight also claimed they were satisfied with their open adoption.

When asked how they perceived the effects of the level of contact on their adopted child, five adoptive parents indicated that they felt serious reservations prior to the open adoption process. Others explained that although there was no serious apprehension felt, there was a general concern for the future of the child and the family situation. In addition, all four social workers agreed that there is a general apprehension felt on the part of the adoptive parents.

I didn't want it. My understanding of it at the time was that you have the adoption and everybody moves on. I didn't even know that (open adoption) even existed. Before the adoption, I was focused on what we were going for. The thought of the birth parents wasn't even on my mind. [PI, Adoptive Father]

However, when asked if they thought their children were better off with an open adoption as opposed to a confidential adoption, answers were overwhelmingly in favor of open adoption.

Yes, there is no question about [our child being better off having experienced an open adoption]. If [our child] has any questions, they can be easily answered. It's just comfortable. I think it's easier. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

Absolutely. It completes [our child]. She has no doubt of who she is. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

Yes, I do believe that the child is better off as long as contact [with birth mother] is maintained. [PI, Adoptive Father].

Much better off. So many answers for [our child]. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

Yes, his birth family has been a gift to all of us. In our case, it has also been a blessing for our oldest [child], who knows that a birth mother doesn't place her child for adoption for lack of love. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

In this last quotation, it is interesting to note that the oldest child went through a confidential adoption and the younger sibling went through an open adoption. The open adoption has not only been very positive for the child of the open adoption, but also for the older sibling as well. This family felt that the older sibling has a better understanding of the adoption process because he has been involved with his sibling's open adoption.

While initially adoptive parents indicated anxiety about the impact of the level of contact in their open adoption process on the adoptee, the general findings indicate that the fears of problems were bigger than the problems experienced.

Nothing negative, but sometimes I get asked a lot of questions. I don't know of anything negative. [PI, Adoptee].

Indeed, adoptive parents thought it would be beneficial for their adopted child to have more contact with extended family.

I remember trying to encourage our daughter to contact the birth grandparents more frequently, but I remember her saying that she knew she should, but that they really were like strangers and...she didn't know how to develop a relationship with them. I remember wishing they would have had that opportunity earlier...realizing how much they wanted it and missed out on her growing up years. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

In summary, most of the adoptive parents either wanted more or were content with openness with the birth parents. Many of the adoptive parents want their children to develop and maintain relationships with members of the biological extended family. In many cases, adoptees had an open relationship with members of their biological extended families, but many did not. This suggests that adoptive parents realized the importance of their children maintaining relationships with their biological families.

Perceptions of Negative Effects

One negative impact on the open adoptee, that is not a problem with closed adoptions, is that adoptees witness the difficulty their birth mother may have with the process.

It has been a very difficult experience for my birth mother, because of the grief and loss that she has gone through. [PI, Adoptee].

Witnessing the grief of the birth mother is difficult for the adoptee. In closed adoptions the adoptee may wonder if the birth mother grieves but will not be a direct witness. Another negative effect on the adoptee was revealed when we asked how the adoptive parents dealt with the attitudes of their families when the possibility of an open adoption arose. When asked what their families thought and said about the open adoption prior to the actual process, most of the adoptive parents remember many negative emotions.

Are you nuts? [PI, Adoptive Mother].

Not a very wise decision. [PI, Adoptive Father].

My father was like 'are you crazy?' 'What if she wants the baby back?' [Our parents] were scared for us. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

In many cases, the family members' reactions to the open adoption process represent a significant disadvantage to the adoptive parents and adoptee, at least initially. However, while many of the family members were apprehensive, most of the family members came to embrace the open adoption.

Finally, probably the most negative effect of open adoption from the perspective of the adoptee is the possibility for the biological parents to make contact with the adoptee at one point in his or her life, and then suddenly stop contact. For one of the adoptive families interviewed, two children were adopted but only one of them was interviewed. However, throughout the interview, the adoptive parents alluded to the other adoptee's experience, which was remarkably different from his sibling's. When asked the question of whether the adoptive parents feared that there were any negative long-term effects on their adopted children the adoptive mother of this particular family explained that:

For our [first adopted child], I have not noticed any [negative long-term effects] and we have a very open relationship. It has been very negative for our [second adopted child], who learned his birth parents reunited after his relinquishment and had another child the next year and kept her...double rejection. He had letters and presents from age 2 and then the birth mother stopped and never explained why...another rejection. He really went through a hard time with the grief and needed to see a counselor in the middle school grades. He (age 18) still struggles with rejection and has attempted to locate both birth parents this past year and has been unsuccessful. Many unanswered questions. [PI, Adoptive mother].

These quotes suggest that open adoption has the potential to leave an adoptee with feelings of neglect and rejection. It is possible that because there was once contact with the birth family, the loss of contact represents a more traumatic event than an adoptee never meeting his or her birth family.

In summary, there are clearly several significant disadvantages of the open adoption process that may impact the adoptee. They may feel guilty about the biological mother's

pain (Blanton & Deschner 1990). The adoptee may also be impacted by pre-adoption fears of the adoptive parents and negative attitudes of their family members. In addition, if the birth mother discontinues contact the adoptee is negatively impacted.

Perceptions of Positive Effects

As indicated in the literature, birth families often use adoption as a way to gain a better future for their children. One advantage to open adoption over closed adoption is that adoptees may appreciate the fact that they were adopted by a family with more resources than their birth family. When adoptees know the financial and educational background of their birth families were strained, they can more readily see the advantages of being adopted by a family with more resources.

None of my family members graduated high school. It makes me wonder if I was still living there, would I graduate high school? [PI, Adoptee].

Indeed, when asked to compare their perceptions of the impact on the adoptee of open versus closed adoptions the adoptees and adoptive parents all gave strong positive reactions to open adoption. All four social workers agreed.

There is absolutely no doubt about this. A child in an open adoption is much better off than one in closed adoption! If done properly, open adoption is always done for the long term best interest of the child, not the adults. [PI, Social Worker].

Children who go through open adoptions may have a higher self-esteem than those who go through a closed adoption, in the long run. They are able to live life knowing. [PI, Social Worker].

With open adoption you have more children viewing it [being an adoptee] as no big deal. [PI, Social Worker].

All of the social workers interviewed agreed that most open adoptees, they work with or have encountered, felt confident and were satisfied with the open adoption process.

Most children in open adoptions are dismayed when they learn that all adopted children do not know their birth families- and will quickly tell you that they are glad that did not happen to them. [PI, Social Worker].

Similarly, when asked to identify some of the advantages and disadvantages of open adoption from their perspective, adoptees most often concurred with the social workers.

There are no advantages of closed adoption over an open adoption. [PI, Adoptee].

With open adoption you know where you come from, your heritage and other stuff like that. With closed adoption, I wouldn't really know that much because there would have been no contact. I haven't experienced any disadvantages. [PI, Adoptee].

I think it's good because I am able to find out things about my birth parents and siblings. [PI, Adoptee],

One disadvantage of open adoption is that the parents may not be able to answer every question. But they have more answers than someone in a closed adoption. [PI, Adoptee].

Another point made was that while all of the participants agreed that the open adoption process should be geared toward the needs of the adoptee, all suggested that this is idealistic and often not reality. For instance, some respondents explained that some members of the adoption triad may get side-tracked by their own wants and needs and forget that the primary goal of the adoption process is to protect the well-being of the adoptee. One social worker in particular explained that:

Adoption is about finding families for children who need them. It is not about finding babies for people who want them. [PI, Social Worker].

The Biological Father

The lack of contact with the biological father, which is aside from the issue of open adoption, kept reemerging throughout this research. Indeed, the most often mentioned negative aspect of contact was not enough openness, especially with regard to the father.

I just wonder what my father would be like. I don't think it will affect me greatly, but there will always be regret. Other than that there are no negative long-term effects. [PI, Adoptee].

I like how it is now. But maybe I could get some direct letters from [my birth father]. But that would be about it. [PI, Adoptee].

I want to know what [my biological father] looks like and what he is doing. [PI, Adoptee].

Not being able to know your birth father [could be a disadvantage of open adoption]. [PI, Adoptee].

Interestingly, many of the adoptive fathers suggested that one disadvantage of their own personal experience with open adoption revolved heavily around the fact that their child had no contact with his or her biological father. Also, when asked to compare the advantages and disadvantages of open versus closed adoptions adoptees again mentioned not being able to meet their birth father.

Not being able to meet your birth father [may be a disadvantage]. [PI, Adoptee]

However, this is also a disadvantage of closed adoptions. Perhaps having contact with birth mothers makes the birth fathers absence that much more salient for the adoptee.

Suggestions for Other Adoptees

Finally, both the respondents and social workers were asked to give their opinions on making information about the birth parents available to all children who go through an adoption.

I think that it is very important for information to be available to the adoptee. [PI, Adoptee].

I think all children should have the right to know where and who they came from. The children should be allowed to make that decision. [PI, Adoptee].

It is important to know where they come from and where their mannerisms originate. Their information should be accessible to all the children. [PI, Adoptee].

Yes, the information about the birth parents helps fill in the blanks. [PI, Social Worker].

There were some circumstances identified by participants in which it would not be in the best interest of the adoptee to meet his or her biological parents, especially at a young age.

In some cases there may be big issues that the biological parents are facing that could be detrimental to the child (drug abuse, incarceration, etc.). [PI, Adoptive Mother].

There may be certain circumstances where an open adoption would be harmful to the child (If the birth parents were not competent or criminals). But this is an exception. [PI, Adoptive Mother].

No, I don't think every child would want to have that information. Each child is different and has different personalities and needs. But I think the information should be available. [PI, Adoptee].

It depends. [Some adoptees] may not need to know some things. [PI, Adoptee].

The adoptee ought to have the right or ability and then have a choice of whether to pursue information about the biological parents. There should never be a case in which the parents lie about where the child came from. It is psychologically healthy for them to know who their parents are. [PI, Social Worker].

All of the participants in the study agreed that the child should be allowed access to information regarding his or her birth parents. Many of the participants felt that most children would want to know about their birth parents. All social workers interviewed also agreed that adoptees should have the right to access information about their birth families. However, one social worker pointed out that not all adoptees would have the desire to seek out this information.

Discussion

This study found all adoptive parents, adoptees and four social workers, who witnessed and/or facilitated in numerous open adoptions felt the advantages of open adoption clearly outweigh the disadvantages. The findings of this study are quite consistent with the literature, especially the findings regarding open adoption and the adoptive parents. The most often mentioned positive effect was that the adoptive parents in an open adoption will almost always have more information for the child regarding their adoption than an adoptive parent in a confidential adoption.

One negative effect identified from this study suggests that most adoptive parents do feel some apprehension regarding open adoption prior to the process and prior to contact with the birth parents. In addition, the adoptive parents' extended family's initial fears of the process impact the adoptee and escalate the concerns of the adoptive parents. However, once contact is initiated, the fears of the adoptive parents subside. Because research now recognizes the importance of everyone's feelings on the adoptee this finding is useful in order to reduce the impact on the adoptee. Specifically, adoptive parents knowing their fears are normal can help them cope with their feelings as temporary problems rather than permanent issues (Berry 1993; Demick 2007).

Most participants agreed that in some situations, contact with the biological parents would be negative for the child. However, no participant personally experienced this circumstance. Research should investigate the potential negative drawbacks to contact with parents who may have problems and/or may eventually discontinue contact. It may be that a loss of contact with the birth parents leaves the adoptee with a multitude of negative feelings and emotions. It is important to again note that some of these disadvantages associated with open adoption are also associated with confidential adoptions (Demick & Wapner 1988).

The findings indicated adoptees would like more contact, especially with fathers and extended family. However, although not supported by this study, the literature indicates that the frequency of contact between the adoptee and the birth parents seems to decrease over time in open adoption (Berge, *et al.*, 2006). While not particular to open adoption, respondents most likely answer to the negative effects of open adoption was the adoptee did not have contact with the father. While there was an expectation of interaction in open adoption, there is perhaps is no expectation of interaction in closed adoption.

Future research should continue to examine the long term effects of open adoption on the adoptee. In addition, because the feelings of all parties in the triad impact the adoptee, future research should investigate the impact of open adoption on the birth mother. Finally, researchers should examine the differences in level of satisfaction with open adoption based on level of contact.

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