Open Adoption: Adoptive Parents' Reactions Two Decades Later

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Unlike in the past, most adoption agencies today offer birth parents and adoptive parents the opportunity to share identifying information and have contact with each other. To understand the impacts of different open adoption arrangements, a qualitative descriptive study using a snowball sample of 44 adoptive parents throughout New England began in 1988. Every seven years these parents who adopted infants in open adoptions have participated in tape-recorded interviews to explore their evolving reactions to their open adoption experiences. This article reports the results of in-depth interviews with these parents now that their children have reached young adulthood. This longitudinal research illuminates how open adoptions change over the course of childhood and adolescence, parents' feelings about open adoption, challenges that emerge in their relationships with their children's birth families, how those challenges are managed and viewed, and parents' advice for others living with open adoption and for clinical social work practice and policy. Findings reveal that regardless of the type of openness, these adoptive parents generally feel positive about knowing the birth parents and having contact with them, are comfortable with open adoption, and see it serving the child's best interests.

KEY WORDS: *adoptive parents; open adoption; reactions*

The past 30 years have seen major changes in infant adoption practices. Parents who adopted children born between 1940 and the early 1980s in the United States grew up in a world in which adoption agencies and the general public strongly believed that maintaining absolute secrecy and cutting off all connection with the child's birth family were essential for protecting the child's emotional well-being (Carp, 1998; Herman, 2008). By the 1960s, however, some adult adoptees and birth parents stepped forth from their shadows of shame to decry publicly that the secrets and cutoffs designed to protect them had instead harmed them. Although some people continued to argue in favor of traditional confidential adoption practices, a large literature detailing the deleterious impacts of secrecy and cutoffs in adoption developed (Hollinger, Baran, Pannor, Appell, & Modell, 2004; Rosenberg & Groze, 1997). As a result, by the 1970s some agencies began to experiment with offering expectant biological parents who were considering adoption the opportunity to meet their baby's prospective adoptive parents. Some agencies, which until then held total control over deciding who would adopt which infant, also began to offer biological parents the opportunity to choose their child's adoptive parents from the agency's waiting list (Smith & Siegel, 2012).

Today, although some remain skeptical about the feasibility of open adoption (Brown, Ryan, & Pushkal, 2008), adoptions in which biological and adoptive parents exchange identifying information and have some form of contact with each other are the norm (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). Some agencies offer only open adoption, based on the view that secrecy and cutoffs in adoption are not in a child's best interests. This is a sea change from the days when confidential adoption was the only option available and biological and adoptive parents had no choice but to accept total secrecy, anonymity, and separation, regardless of whether this was what they wanted for themselves or their child. Today's open adoptions vary widely. Some involve minimal disclosure of identifying information exchanged through an intermediary (typically an agency or attorney). Others include full disclosure of all identifying information and ongoing contact via face-to-face visits (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). The array of options between these two ends of the continuum is vast, and an evolving literature on open

adoption describes the many different forms open adoptions may take (Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003; Sotiropoulos, 2008; Wrobel & Neil, 2009).

These changes in adoption practices have paralleled changes in the larger society. Single parenthood has lost much of its former stigma, and children born outside of marriage are no longer labeled "bastards" or "illegitimate" (Collins, 2009). In addition, science has amply demonstrated the lifesaving importance of knowing one's genetic heritage to prevent and cure diseases. Social workers and other helping professionals have moved toward a less controlling, more collaborative, collegial, strengths-based, empowerment approach in their work with consumers of their services (Saleebey, 2013).

In 1988, the author began an unprecedented longitudinal study of adoptive parents in open adoption (Siegel, 1993). The vacuum in research at the time left the claimed merits and disadvantages of open adoption hotly debated. Given the newness and complex, evolving nature of the open adoption phenomenon, the need arose for qualitative descriptive research to explore how adoptive parents experienced open adoption over the course of their children's infancy, childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood.

The adoptive parent respondents in that longitudinal study have now lived in open adoptions for over 20 years. They were first interviewed when the children they adopted in open adoptions were under age 2. They were interviewed again 7 years later and a third time when their children were adolescents. Now that the infants in that study are young adults, the adoptive parents can reflect on what it was like to raise a child from infancy in an open adoption. Few longitudinal studies have been done examining open adoption (Berry, Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998); hence, this study is an important contribution to knowledge about open adoption's impacts from the adoptive parent's point of view. As there is no central repository of information to identify the population of people living with open adoption, no representative random sample can be drawn, making it crucial that different studies using different samples be conducted so that patterns, if any, across samples and studies can be explored and practice

and policy implications drawn from a sound empirical base.

The study used a life cycle perspective (Austrian, 2008; McGoldrick, Carter, & Garcia-Preto, 2010). People's views of their lives evolve over time as a result of changing social, economic, and political conditions; relationships; personal maturation; and accumulated life experiences. Individual and family unit developmental tasks and issues intersect at any moment in time. Hence, parents of young adult children face predictable adjustments such as renegotiating family roles, launching and letting go, and finding purpose beyond parenthood. At the same time, their young adult children face typical challenges such as consolidating their identity and establishing a new equilibrium as an adult member of their family. Renegotiating family connections is a key part of this process. As identity and family connection are unique issues for adoptees and their parents (Melina & Roszia, 1993), it is important to explore empirically how parents of young adult children raised in open adoption view the experience as they move through the life cycle. Longitudinal research provides a unique opportunity to do this.

The findings from the first three phases of the study showed that the adoptive parents were pleased with the openness in their infants' adoptions regardless of where the level of openness fell on the continuum (phase 1; Siegel, 1993), and they remained positive about open adoption during their children's latency years (phase 2; Siegel, 2003) and adolescence (phase 3; Siegel, 2008). The findings at each phase highlighted the many different open adoption arrangements and the many changes that occurred in the type, frequency, and participants in any one open adoption over time. The phase 2 and 3 findings also illuminated challenges, discomforts, and disappointments that arose in the adoptive family's relationships with birth family members. As many significant changes take place in anyone's life from adolescence to young adulthood, it made sense to ask the adoptive parents again how they felt about open adoption. As they looked back on the experience, how well, if at all, did open adoption serve them, their children, and their families? How, if at all, did it affect their relationship with their child? Exploring these issues is the purpose of this article.

The young adult adoptees were also asked to describe their open adoption experiences; those findings are reported elsewhere (Siegel, 2012). Interviews with parents and adult children were conducted separately, and in some cases an adult child but not his or her parent or a parent but not his or her child participated in the research; because the two samples are slightly different, the findings must be reported in separate articles. More important, to protect confidentiality, comparisons between the two samples cannot be presented.

METHOD

A snowball sampling method was used to develop the initial sample of 44 parents in 22 couples throughout New England in 1988. All of the respondents had adopted domestically. Only one adoption was through the public child welfare agency; the others were through private agencies, attorneys, or independent adoption facilitators. At phase 4, the subject of this article, in 2010 those respondents who could be located were invited to be reinterviewed by phone or face-to-face. The author/researcher conducted, audiotaped, and transcribed all interviews. Two independent coders analyzed each transcript, doing first- and second-level coding and seeking to identify patterns and themes across the interviews (Creswell, 2009). The coding rule was to content analyze each interview question separately, even when a coder felt that an answer was relevant to a different question. Thus, interrater reliability was high and discrepancies readily resolved through discussion that produced agreement. To enhance reliability and validity, and to ensure that potentially identifying information was disguised to the respondents' satisfaction, a prepublication research report was shared with each respondent for feedback.

The phase 4 interviews used a structured interview guide that followed the format and content of the interview guides used for the first three phases of the study. Phase 4 respondents were asked 20 open-ended questions designed to describe their open adoption experiences and their reactions to them. Among the questions were the following:

- In what ways, if any, have the type and amount of openness in the adoption changed in the years since our last interview?

- Now that your child is an adult, how, if at all, has that affected contact [with the birth family]?
- Who initiates contact? How? How often?
- What, if any, challenges or bumps in the road have occurred in your relationship with the birth family? How have you coped with those challenges?
- Looking back, how, if at all, has openness affected your child?
- How do you feel about the openness in the adoption?
- How is the open adoption working out for you now?
- What was or is your relationship with the birth family like?
- How, if at all, have your feelings changed over time? What accounts for those changes?
- What, if any, are your current fears, anxieties, and unanswered questions about the adoption being open?
- What advice do you have for adoptive parents, birth parents, social workers, and others involved in open adoption?

RESULTS

Participants

Over the 22 years of the study, inevitably some sample mortality occurred because of moves out of the United States ($n = 3$ parents), mail returned as undeliverable ($n = 6$), lack of response to the researcher's invitation to participate in the next phase ($n = 7$), death ($n = 3$), and explicit refusal of the opportunity to participate ($n = 3$, who said there was too much going on in their lives at the time to participate in an interview). As a result, at phase 4 there were 22 respondents from 17 households. In short, half of the original sample was available at phase 4. Sixteen respondents were interviewed face-to-face, eight of these as couples. The other six chose to be interviewed by phone. Twelve of the 22 respondents at phase 4 had divorced the spouse to whom they were married at phase 1. Half of the respondents were female. Three respondents had remarried, and one of them was redivorced. Respondents were white, ranged in age from 52 to 75 years, and had adopted a total of 19 children in open adoptions, eight of whom were biracial (white and either

Asian, Hispanic, Native American, or African American).

Changes in Openness Since Phase 3

Each open adoption was unique with regard to who, since phase 3, participated in the contact with the birth family and how often and what type of contact occurred. Nineteen of the 22 respondents reported having had postadoption visits with the birth family over the life of the adoption; 10 reported visits in the past six years. The type of openness in each adoption tended to fluctuate. A typical response to the question about how much and what kind of contact had occurred in the past six years came from a father who said, "It's fluctuated in terms of the frequency of being in touch or seeing each other…. No one decides how much contact to have. It just happens fluidly and informally. It's organic."

The open adoptions with the least fluctuation were those that had the least contact to begin with; for example, the adoptive mother of a 21-year-old son continued to send an annual holiday greeting card to the birth family although there had not been a response for the past 18 years. Another family, however, had seen considerable fluctuation in the past six years. The adoptive mother invited her 15-year-old daughter's birth mother to live with them for a few months. Things went smoothly until the birth mother stopped taking her psychotropic medications and developed disruptive behaviors; she was asked to leave. The adoptive mother made many efforts to stay in touch with the birth mother by mail after that, but she did not respond, so contact was with other people connected to the birth family.

Other adoptions moved from the most minimal contact to considerable contact. For instance, one adoptive family that had only exchanged letters and pictures for 21 years went to visit the birth mother's and birth father's entire families. Other adoptions, in contrast, had a fairly sustained pattern of contact over time via Facebook, e-mail, text messages, phone calls, or visits. In short, the array of variations was considerable.

Responses to the question "Now that your child is an adult, how, if at all, has that affected contact?" made it clear that often the responsibility for maintaining a connection with the birth family moved from the adoptive parents to the adult children. However, in three families, when the adult child did not care to interact with the birth family, the adoptive parent did so; in one case, the parents said this was out of compassion for the birth parent, in a second case they said it was because the birth mother and adoptive father had their own long-standing friendship independent of the child, and in a third the parents said it was because the adult child said he preferred it that way.

How Feelings about Open Adoption Changed over Time

Given the range of changes in open adoption arrangements, parents were also asked, "How, if at all, have your feelings about open adoption changed over time? What accounts for those changes?" All but one respondent (a divorced and remarried father) reported feeling positive toward open adoption. Three parents reported feeling more comfortable than ever with open adoption; the rest expressed the same unambivalent endorsement they had expressed at phases 1, 2, and 3. Examples of responses include the following:

> "I'm more comfortable now than I was at the beginning."
> "Initially there was some anxiety. Over time, that went away. No big deal. My initial anxiety was this person knows us, knows where we live. But as time goes on, it's just not an issue."
> "If anything, I'm probably more deeply judgmental and disapproving of closed adoption. I believe open adoption is enriching."

One mother reported feeling "less doctrinaire" as a result of her experiences with open adoption:

> My views about open adoption now are less ideological…. My kids have had less contact than I had thought we would have had with their birth families, and both kids are OK. They never said they needed more. They know if they want more contact, they can have it. I don't need it. But they probably will. And I will support them in that.

A divorced and remarried father was unique in his expression of uncertainty and reservations about the merits of open adoption:

I don't know. What is the right way to do this? At the time, I thought open adoption was the right thing. But maybe it's a burden for a child. Then again, my cousin who grew up in a closed adoption is so angry about it. My kids, who had open adoptions, are not angry about the openness in their adoptions. But they've had so many other issues to deal with, did they need this too? Yes and no.

Anxieties and Unanswered Questions

When asked, "What, if any, are your current fears, anxieties, and unanswered questions about the adoption being open?" seven parents responded, "None." One father said that the only concerns were about the birth father, about whom they knew nothing: "The unknown concerns me." Two adoptive mothers expressed worry about the children the birth mother was parenting: "The birth mother is suffering from mental illness, and the child moves in and out of foster care." Two others wondered if their daughters might feel concerned about their struggling birth mothers: "Will my daughter worry about her birth mother's financial stresses?" "Will my daughter feel pulled to take care of her birth mom?" The other anxieties expressed were not about open adoption; for example, "Will my kids become financially independent?"

Parents' Current Feelings about Open Adoption

Responses to the question "How do you feel about the openness in the adoption?" fell into three categories: (1) open adoption had not been a major issue in the family's life, (2) parents preferred knowing the truth and facts over wondering about the unknown, and (3) open adoption had worked out well for them and their children.

All of the parents reported that open adoption had simply not been a central issue in their family's life: "There's been no drama. It's been great. It's comfortable. I enthusiastically endorse open adoption. There have been many issues in our lives; open adoption is not one of them."

Parents felt that the access to information open adoption provided was important. They commented on their preference for facts over fantasies, the children's right to information about themselves, the usefulness of knowing about genetic vulnerabilities, the comfort of knowing the birth parents were doing all right, the ability to answer the children's questions about their birth parents, and enjoyment of the relationship with the birth parents. The following are examples of responses to the question "How do you feel about the openness in the adoption?":

- "There is certainly no doubt in my mind that open adoption is a good thing, a healthy, supportive, enriching thing. Any adopted kid is going to have a relationship with their birth parents, whether they know the birth parents or not. It'll either be real, or it will be imagined. And kids can imagine terrible things. Reality is safer because you can engage with it."
- "It's a good thing to know that the birth mother has bipolar disorder. At least we have a clue what our son is struggling with. That was very, very, very useful."
- "Having information is reassuring. I can see that the birth parents are doing OK, and that reassures me that my son will also be able to earn a living."
- "It's good that I can answer my kids' questions about their birth families. I don't regret any of the openness. I'm glad I met them, glad I know them."
- "Open adoption is just a fact of our son's life, like other facts in his life. If his birth mother's identity were a secret, that would create other kinds of issues."
- "My relationship with the birth family has been excellent. I really like them, care about them, enjoy seeing them. My husband and I like them more than we like our own families of origin."
- "It totally worked out. The kids are good, feel solid with me as their parent, solid with each other and within themselves. I'd say open adoption is a psychologically healthy thing for the kids. You have to work it out. Everybody has to understand and agree upon their roles, but it provides the opportunity for the kids to have a sense of identity because they want to know where they came from."

Some parents made philosophical comments:

- "Overall, it's such a good thing. It's all about love. The more love, the better."
- "I think the openness has been great. The human condition, not open adoption, is the challenge."

The adoptive family of the one father who expressed ambivalence about whether it had been a good idea for his children to have contact with their birth families had experienced many challenges since the start of the study, including years of unemployment, traumatic brain injury, mental illness, divorce, remarriage, and involvement with protective services and the court, among other issues. Both adopted children were placed in out-of-home care. The father wondered if having contact with the birth families might have added unnecessary complexity to the mix. His ex-wife, however, had no second thoughts about open adoption: "Our kids' problems were not caused by open adoption. If you think open adoption is a problem, trim it back but don't cut it off."

Challenges

Respondents reported a wide array of challenges living with open adoption. As with all adoption, themes included disappointment, pain, hurt, rejection, anger, and boundaries. In some cases, a birth parent's behavior engendered a challenge. For instance, parents from four families noted that the teenage adoptee felt disappointed and hurt when the birth parent did not respond to a letter. One couple reported that the birth mother had told them lies, which led them to wonder if their now-adult son might be hurt if she did not show up if he went to visit her. One couple said that the birth mother's behavior was "mildly inappropriate" during a visit, as she spoke to the adoptee referring to other birth family members as "your cousin" and "your grandma." One couple said that the birth mother had sent her infant son a letter declaring that she regretted her adoption decision and saw it as a mistake; they had never shared this letter with their son and were unsure of how to handle it now that he was an adult. Another mother also expressed dismay over a letter from the birth mother of her teenage daughter:

The birth mother, when she learned about our divorce, wrote our daughter an emotional letter saying that our divorce was distressing, as she had never wanted that for her child. And she signed it "Love, Mom." My daughter wrote back to her that she was fine with the divorce, that she has two very loving homes and parents who are totally there for her, and she addressed the letter, "Dear Sue." It's fortunate that my daughter felt so clear and handled a difficult situation so skillfully.

In the least open adoption in this study, one in which the adoptive and birth parents met and briefly exchanged letters during their children's infancies and then ceased contact, the 18-year-old daughter reconnected with her birth family via Facebook. According to the mother, when her daughter's birth parents subsequently invited themselves to her high school graduation, the daughter told them,

It's not a good idea for you to come to my graduation. There's going to be so much going on, and it's going to be overwhelming. I'm just trying to get independent of my first family. I don't want to start with a new one. Let's stay in touch via phone and Facebook instead.

The birth family did not attend the graduation, but they did exchange a daily text message with the young adult.

In other instances, life circumstances, not a birth parent's behavior, spawned a challenge. For example, two families reported that their sons were distraught over the fact that their birth mothers had given birth to and parented other children after the adoption. Another family shared that their daughter happily accepted the birth mother's invitation to be in her wedding, and when the fiancé called off the wedding, the girl was deeply disappointed. Two families noted that it was challenging that one adopted child in the family had more birth family contact than another had.

One father wondered whether it would hurt or help his daughter if her adoptive parents continued the relationship they had always had with their daughter's birth mother during a time when

their daughter cut off contact between herself and her birth mother. Their daughter had enjoyed lifelong visits with her birth mother and, as a teenager, stopped contact for about a year and a half after her birth mother gave birth to a daughter she was parenting. During the hiatus, the father wondered,

> Am I disloyal to my daughter if I continue my relationship with her birth mother? Or am I holding a space for my daughter to have her feelings if I'm maintaining the connection? So I held it. I had my own relationship with her birth mother and her husband. It is a deep and a genuine connection. I let my daughter know that I was in touch with them, but I didn't bring it up in my daughter's face during the months when she was so angry at her birth mother. The cutoff was healed when my daughter decided that she wanted her birth mother to be at her high school graduation and asked me to make that happen.

A couple reported that their adult son demanded that they have no further contact with his birth mother because he was angry at her; the couple, who appreciated their son's feelings, also felt badly for the birth mother and were reluctant to ignore her phone calls:

> She is, after all, our son's birth mother. Without her, we wouldn't have him in our lives. She has so many problems in her life, and she needs to talk. So sometimes we answer the phone when it's her, but if our son is home, we don't.

Access to information sometimes generated distress. One father reported that his daughter was upset when her birth mother disclosed she had been raped. Two other sets of parents reported that their child received upsetting information from a birth parent; one learned that the birth father had died of alcoholism, and another learned that the birth father had had an accident that left him paraplegic.

A father whose son had had several visits and phone contact with the birth families observed, "Our son has seen that if he'd grown up with either birth parent, he would have been in a very dysfunctional situation." This son felt angry at his birth parents for their inability to be there for him, and as a young adult he refused to interact with them anymore.

Disagreement about the wisdom of contact was a challenge for two families. In one, the divorced adoptive parents disagreed about whether the children's contact with their birth parents should cease. Another family took their depressed teenage daughter to a psychologist who advised them to cut off all contact with the birth mother, as the girl was upset when her birth mother did not respond to e-mail messages. The parents, instead of cutting off contact, reached out to the birth mother to explain that her child needed her to e-mail once a week, whether or not her child responded. The birth mother thanked them for cluing her in and complied with their request.

How Open Adoption Affected Adoptive Family Relationships

In one family, the adoptive parents did not include their daughter in the exchanges of letters with the birth family; when the daughter was 15, she secretly found the file of letters and photocopied some for her own keeping, and when she was 21 she secretly connected with her birth parents via Facebook. Hence, she grew up in an adoption that was open only among the adults. Ultimately, she told her parents that she had initiated contact, and they all visited the biological family together.

Other respondents, when asked, "Looking back, how, if at all, has openness affected your relationship with your child?" noted that open adoption had strengthened family relationships. They commented that it facilitated truthfulness and closeness and helped the child appreciate the reasons for the adoption. One parent remarked, "It made us more honest. Closer. It facilitated intimacy." Four said that it strengthened the parent–child relationship. The following are comments by three parents:

- "It showed my kids I'm here to help them cope with whatever comes along."
- "It allowed me to demonstrate that I can handle it, whatever it is, not just with open adoption, but with life in general. It conveyed

that 'I'm not afraid to talk to you about anything.'"

- "Contact with her birth mom made my daughter more realistic. She could see how mentally ill her birth mother is, how unable she is to take care of her other child. Being able to process that with me made us closer."

Parents' Advice

The final question was, "What advice do you have for adoptive parents, birth parents, social workers, and others involved in open adoption?" Four respondents, noting that every situation is unique, declined to give such advice; a typical response was, "Every case is different, so I'd be reluctant to give advice."

The responses offered by those who gave advice fell into several categories: overcome fear, empower the child, be honest, make changes as needed, maintain boundaries, and seek guidance from adults who are fully informed about open adoption. Examples of comments within these themes included the following:

- "Do not be afraid of open adoption; just do it for the child's sake."
- "Tell the child the truth. Deal with it; don't run away from the truth."
- "Neither force the child to have contact with birth family members nor stand in the way of contact."
- "Let the child decide how much contact to have."
- "Maintain good boundaries."
- "A little geographic distance helps."
- "Change the nature of the contact as the child's needs change."
- "Seek advice as needed from adoption professionals who have knowledge of open adoption issues."
- "Continue to educate yourself about adoption issues as the child ages, not just during the early years."

One person commented, "If you really want a closed adoption and you enter into an open one, there are going to be issues."

On the theme of empowering open adoption participants, one said, "Each family must decide what degree of openness they can honor. The child's needs must be met first, but the adoptive and birth parents' needs also matter." Another added, "Agencies should forward to adoptive parents any information birth parents would like adoptive parents to have. The agency should not be the one to decide what information is appropriate to share."

Several commented on the need for perspective. One remarked, "This is just a part of life. Be open to life and to other people. Roll with the punches." Another said, "It's complicated, no matter how you handle it. The issue is not about adoption. It's about life." A third observed, "When you marry, for better or for worse, you inherit all your spouse's relatives. When you adopt, for better or for worse, you inherit your child's biological relatives. That's how to think about open adoption."

DISCUSSION

The findings from this study must be interpreted with caution because of the nonprobability sampling method and inevitable sample mortality over two decades. However, the findings are consistent with the growing body of research on open adoption's outcomes (Berry et al., 1998; Ge et al., 2008; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005; McRoy, Grotevant, Ayers-Lopez, & Henney, 2007) and allay fears about adoptive and birth families knowing and communicating with each other from the child's infancy and beyond. An expansive, inclusive view of the extended family formed by adoption honors a child's need to incorporate both genetic and adoptive kin into a coherent sense of self. Like all families, families formed by open adoption take myriad forms that change over the life course. Respondents in this study were explicit that one size does not fit all. These parents had worked out open adoption arrangements that worked for them, expanding or contracting contact at times, but without severing connections.

These findings suggest that adoption agencies should help families individually tailor their open adoption agreements; agencies should avoid imposing their templates on prospective adoptive parents and expectant biological parents who are considering adoption. The agency's role is not to prescribe a particular type of openness, but rather to educate parents about the benefits of openness

for the child and the vast array of possible open adoption arrangements, help clients decide for themselves what kinds of openness fit their current situations, and then guide them along the open adoption life course when they feel the need for more agency support. This approach reflects social work's empowerment, strengths, and developmental perspectives and honors the principle of self-determination. It requires intensive staff training in the unique dynamics that may emerge in open adoptions. Accessing essential postadoption support services is particularly difficult for families who lack health insurance. Finding skilled, adoption-informed clinicians can be a special challenge for all adoptive families, as the typical clinician has not had extensive master's–level or continuing education in this area. As in any area of specialized practice, worker bias and lack of information can cause harm.

In reporting what it has been like to raise a child from infancy to adulthood in an open adoption, all but one of the 22 adoptive parents in this study continued to support without reservation their child's right to know the birth parents and to have contact with them and information about them. The enthusiasm for openness that these parents reported during their children's infancy was reaffirmed during childhood and adolescence and into young adulthood. This finding is particularly striking because the openness in these adoptions, and the challenges in them, varied so much. No matter what kind of openness they had, no matter what unique challenges they grappled with, they continued to endorse openness. It appears that a commitment to openness for the sake of the child was a key feature in making these open adoptions work. These respondents viewed challenges as inevitable aspects of living and as opportunities to problem solve and recalibrate contact, not end it. They valued human connections instead of cutoffs and facts over secrets; they believed in their children's rights to information about themselves and contact with biological relatives. The respondents' positive experiences living with the consequences of these views indicate that agency practices of keeping adoptive and birth families apart and laws requiring sealed original birth certificates in adoption are archaic anachronisms.

The advice that the parents offered mirrors the literature on factors that make open adoption

relationships successful (Smith & Siegel, 2012), including a shared focus on the adoptee's needs above all else, honesty, self-awareness, communication, flexibility, clear boundaries, and a compassionate, nonjudgmental view. The research base for preadoption education and postadoption support services in open adoption is growing. When working with expectant pregnant couples considering an adoption plan for their child and with prospective adoptive parents, social workers should use the research literature as they help clients address misgivings about openness and plan for it. Clients may find the research comforting and reassuring. The research will also help them anticipate possible bumps in the road along the way and plan for those. Evidence-based practices will enable social workers to help parents make more fully informed choices for themselves about what sort of openness to consider on behalf of the child and how to navigate open adoption challenges as the child grows. An evidence-based training curriculum for agencies to use with parents considering open adoption is now available (Siegel, in press).

Most agencies today offer some sort of openness in adoption, but not all do. Research suggests that traditional confidential adoption is not best practice and does not serve most children's, adoptive families', or birth families' best interests.

Although this study focuses on domestic infant adoption, the findings have implications for practice and policy in intercountry and public child welfare adoptions of older children as well. Open adoption research must explore what enables success in these situations too, as all children share a basic human need for information about themselves and access to biological kin. **SW**

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