Adoptive Kinship Networks: Relationships for Life
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So - How did you get into studying adoption??
So - What brought you to UMass??
Created through the generosity of adoptive parents, Andrew and Virginia Rudd, who wanted to improve the lives of adoptive families and their children through research.

Mission
Mission

...to advance knowledge about the psychology of adoption through original research

Mission

...to mentor the next generation of adoption-competent researchers
Mission

...to engage with community partners to incubate, implement, and evaluate innovative programs that have potential for broad impact.

Mission

...to provide evidence-based knowledge to inform adoption practice and policy at agency, state, federal, and international levels.
Mission

...to create an adoption-friendly campus at UMass Amherst.

Undergraduate Courses
Research Lab Opportunities
Parent Group for Faculty & Staff
AMP – Adoption Mentoring Partnership
ASAP – Adopted Student Advisory Panel
Foster Youth Advisory Group
TODAY’S PRESENTATION

- Adoption in U.S. context
- Presentation based on our 30-year longitudinal study of openness in adoption
  - How do relationships between adoptive & birth family members change over time?
  - How do some thrive while others get off track?
  - What happens when adoptees come of age and take over contact?
  - How can professionals help?

ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

- Population 327.2 million
- 1,527,000 adopted children under age 18
- 50 states which prize their autonomy
- Adoption law is considered part of family law, which varies from state to state
Characteristics of the 442,995 Children in U.S. Foster Care System (9/30/2017)

- Avg. age 8.4 years; 52% Males; 56% non-white
- In care an average of 20.1 months
- 123,437 children are awaiting adoption
- Numbers in care and awaiting adoption have been rising over past 5 years

CURRENT U.S. ADOPTIONS PER YR

- Domestic Infant: 14,000
- International: 4,058
- Child Welfare: 59,430

Sources: AFCARS; U.S. Department of State; Child Welfare Information Gateway—updated 2019
Does not include stepparent adoptions.
MOVING FROM AN OLD PARADIGM...

Adoption is a legal process:
Parenting rights and responsibilities are legally transferred from birth parents to adoptive parent(s)

Child is “subtracted” from one family and “added” to another

...TOWARD A NEW PARADIGM

The Adoptive Kinship Network is a permanent connection—through the child—between the birth and adoptive families.

The child has psychological membership in both families, even if the birth and adoptive family members never meet.
CONTACT TRENDS IN THE U.S.

- 55% of private agency infant adoptions now include direct contact, 40% involve mediated contact, and only about 5% are totally closed
- Contact in child welfare adoptions is increasing. When not possible with birth parents, it often includes birth siblings and grandparents
- Contact in international adoptions is on the rise for certain countries of origin

IN A TYPICAL DOMESTIC INFANT OPEN ADOPTION

- Birth parent(s) selects the adoptive family with agency assistance
- Direct contact between birth family and adoptive family members
- Post Adoption Contact Agreement may be signed -- legally binding in some states, including Massachusetts
- Day-to-day dynamics are worked out by the participants with little professional support
...Nevertheless, adoptive parents are the legal parents and have all legal parenting rights and responsibilities.

**OPEN ADOPTION CONTACTS MAY...**

- Include meetings, phone calls, social media (Facebook etc.); exchange of pictures, gifts, letters, e-mails, etc.
- Involve a variety of people
- Vary in frequency, as those involved decide for themselves how often
- Have verbal or written agreements that vary in flexibility, legal enforceability
- **WILL** change over time, as participants and circumstances change.
INITIAL CONCERNS ABOUT OPENNESS

Adopted children: confusion, leading to problems with self-esteem, identity, and mental health

Adoptive parents: fear intrusion, lack entitlement to feel like “real” parents

Birth parents: continual unresolved grief, inability to adjust to changed role

ADDED CONCERNS ABOUT CONTACT: CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM ADOPTION

Adopted children: safety risks, consequences for mental health

Adoptive parents: fear of intrusion and for safety of child and family

Birth parents: feelings of anger, shame, guilt; differing reactions within extended family; birth parent(s) dealing with mental illness or substance abuse
OUR RESEARCH FOCUS: DOMESTIC INFANT ADOPTIONS

LONGITUDINAL STUDY DESIGN

  Middle childhood (ages 4-12; mean 7.8 yrs)

Wave 2: 1996 – 2000
  Adolescence (ages 12-20; mean 15.6 yrs)

  Emerging adulthood (ages 21-30; mean 25 yrs)

Wave 4: 2012 – 2015
  Young adulthood (ages 25-35 mean 31 yrs)
CONTACT at WI (c. 1987)

Confidential adoptions 32.6%
Stopped mediated        8.9%
Ongoing mediated        27.4%
Fully disclosed         31.1%

N=190 adoptive families
Grotevant & McRoy, 1998

TRAJECTORIES OVER TIME

No contact 41.6%
Stopped contact 13.7%
Limited contact 26.3%
Extended contact 18.4%

Grotevant, Wrobel, Fiorenzo, Lo, McRoy, 2019
PARTICIPANTS

▪ **190 adoptive couples**: mostly white, middle to upper middle class; mean age 40 years at Wave 1

▪ **1 target child per family**: followed from middle childhood to young adulthood; approx. half females; infant placements (average=4 weeks); no transracial, international, or special needs

▪ **169 birth mothers**: 93% white, ages 14-36 at placement (M=19.3 years); all voluntary placements, wanted a better future for child

THANKS TO OUR RESEARCH TEAM

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NAVIGATING CONTACT BETWEEN ADOPTIVE AND BIRTH FAMILY MEMBERS OVER TIME
PLACEMENT TO MIDDLE CHILDHOOD

Figuring Out the Relationship Dance

What are the adoptive parents thinking?

• Do they acknowledge the child’s dual connection?

• What does it mean for them to be in a relationship with the child’s other mother?
**NO CONTACT**

one adoptive mother’s view

“My job is to protect my daughter and do what is best for her and give her the most stable, normal life there is.... My goal is that she would never feel any different or think of herself any differently than Joey [older biological son]. This gives a level of normalcy, stability, unity, and cohesiveness that I am very quick to defend and very protective over.

”

**FREQUENT CONTACT**

another adoptive mother’s view

“To me, when you’re going into adoption you have to be willing to accept the fact that the biological parents are in the picture, and if they’re not in the picture you wouldn’t have a child. That’s just the bottom line, and to recognize that, and that they have rights too -- to know their child is alive and well and healthy and being taken care of.

”
What are the birth parents thinking?

- Have they accepted the finality of the placement?

- How might their sense of loss, anger, shame, and/or guilt influence their positioning?

- What does it mean for them to be in a relationship with the child’s other mother?

Regulating Emotional Distance
COMFORT ZONE OF INTERACTION

- Individuals have "range of tolerance for separation and connection—a comfort zone." (Farley)
- In an adoptive kinship network, differences in comfort contribute to a dynamic process of connection and separation over time.
- Adoption often pulls adults out of their comfort zone.

(Grotevant—2009)

“We used to write daily and call each other weekly, in the beginning. When the children were real little, it was tremendous intensity. And I think as our birth mother became more secure in herself and went on to finish college, her need to see them once a week or once a month became less and less. And you know, she feels more comfortable with us, we feel more comfortable with her, and we just know that we always have access. You just take it one day at a time. If you want it to work, you’ll work at it. We feel it’s healthy and want it to work because of our children.” (adoptive mother)
FEAR OF RECLAIMING

Comparing closed, mediated, and fully disclosed adoptions – least fear of reclaiming was in fully disclosed

DIVERGING CONTACT NEEDS

• Adoptive parents initially want to establish “their family” boundaries -- gradually become more confident and more open

• Birth parents initially feel “one down” – may feel insecure – some continue to have their own problems. Some gradually move on, some establish new relationships, some find it too painful to have much contact
BENEFITS OF CONTACT

• Children know the truth
• Access to ongoing health information
• Larger family circle of love and caring
• Adoption and contact can be normalized from an early age

ADOLESCENCE

I don’t want to be different …
Teenage years

• Want to feel “normal” from a “normal family” and NOT DIFFERENT.
• Busy time – FRIENDS, school, activities
• Becoming independent while remaining connected to family
• Parental sensitivity needed – teen years can be difficult, even in the best of circumstances

Where does adoption fit in to life?

We asked MTARP adolescents...

*Please rank the following areas in terms of their importance to you:*

• occupational future
• friendships
• religion / spirituality / morality
• my health
• family in the future
• adoption
Note: Rank 1 = most important; Rank 6 = least important

Two important adoption connections with teens

- Main thing teens want to understand is WHY?

- Family events (especially graduations, weddings, holidays) require consideration of Who is invited? Who is considered to be family? What are their roles to be?
Uncomfortable Meetings

I: And where did the meeting take place?
R: At the mall ... I think it was a pizza place and we were just eating.
I: And was that an arranged meeting or did you just run into her?
R: It was an arranged.
I: OK. And what happened at that meeting?
R: Well, we talked and I felt really uncomfortable.
I: What do you think made you feel uncomfortable?
R: I don’t know, she cried, and she was hugging me, it was just weird.
I: More than you’d like to have it?
R: Yeah.
Challenges with Letter Exchanges

I: How do you feel about receiving or not receiving letters?

R: I have no problem receiving them - it’s sending them that I have a problem with because I don’t know what to say. ...

I don’t know what she expects me to say. I don’t know the impression I’m giving from the letter because I know the impression I’m trying to give, but is not always there - cause it’s a letter and you don’t get to hear the sound of your voice.

Inconsistency and Broken Promises

I: If you could ask your birthparents any 3 questions, what would they be?

R: Well, I’d ask my dad why he did that..... Because I called him on the phone and he said, “All right, I’ll give you a call tomorrow.” And he never did. I’d ask him why he did that. Why my mom doesn’t call anymore and never writes to me really.
Contact Faded Away

I: If you had 3 questions that you could ask your birthparents, what would they be? ...
R: Why don’t you spend more time with me? Am I very important in your life? If you ever met me, would you still remember me or forget me?
I: Is that your birthfather that you’d direct that to or your birthmother, also?
R: Both.

Extra Relational Work for Extended Contact

“It’s just been, like such an awesome experience...and like hard, I guess, at times... You always have to, you know, consider everyone else’s feelings, too.”

(Adopted adolescent, Wave 2)
What Does It Take to Make Contact Work?

- Adult commitment; keeping promises
- Sensitivity to preferences of child
- Realization that teen years can be tough even in the best of cases
- Contact may make teens feel different and “not normal” – may not understand importance until later

Emerging Adulthood

Time of identity exploration but also some uncertainty
Emerging Adulthood...

• Roughly ages 18 into late 20s

• Higher education or training, entry into work and family commitments, busy time

• Both adoptive identity and ethnic / racial identity become important

Emerging Adulthood & Adoption

• Main questions are about medical and health background information, even if there is contact

• Intersects with plans for getting married and having children
No Contact

Desire for Health and Medical History Only

“I would like to have a little more medical history. I’m just more curious more than anything, especially now that I have a child… I’m not quite sure I’m ready to involve her [my birth mother] in my life with my child”

(Adopted emerging adult, Wave 3)

Stopped Contact

Contact Fading Out or Ending

“The communication just stopped… I am guessing she [her birth mother] moved. Or she got too busy with three kids… I don't have time to think about where she is, or should I contact her”

(Adopted emerging adult, Wave 3)
Stopped Contact

**Contact Not Working Out**

“My [adoptive] mother felt like she [my birth mother] was intruding, and I believe she felt threatened.... The only reason I am not pursuing a relationship with [my birth mother] right now is out of respect for the mother that raised me.”

*(Adopted emerging adult, Wave 3)*

Limited Contact

**Keeping Contact Limited**

“I wish I had more contact with her [my birth mother] and her family, but I understand that they have their lives and I have my life.”

*(Adopted emerging adult, Wave 3)*
Limited Contact

Challenges in Negotiating Increased Contact

“She is trying too hard…I wanted to find her to say thank you for giving me life…I was glad to meet her but I am not ready to make her a part of the family.” *She continues by conveying her frustration with unforeseen difficulties in managing contact:* “I wanted to find her. And I had good reasons for it. I just wish that someone could have helped me to know what might possibly happen after I found her and helped me work through it.”

*(Adopted emerging adult, Wave 3)*

Adoptive Kinship Network Dynamics

- Adoptive parents typically step back and let young person decide how to continue contact

- At the same time, adoptees’ partner may have influence over contact

- As children come into family, what about adoptive and birth grandparents? – How are they to be involved in the life of their grandchild?
YOUNG ADULTHOOD

Getting established and settling down...

Young Adulthood

- Late 20s to mid 30s – getting established in work and family, becoming parents
- Many young adults continue to rely on parents for emotional and material support well into their 30s
- Better able to reflect on histories and integrate good / bad, accept and forgive
What is the most important thing you would like to tell us about your being adopted?

I feel loved by my birth mother who made the decision to give me and my brother up for adoption because she couldn’t give us the life she wanted, and loved by adoptive parents because they chose us for life.

It means that I have a flexible and unique definition of family. It is not determined by blood. It consists of those around me who love and support me. They make me a better person.
Adoption honestly doesn’t affect my day to day life - when it comes up, I’m not embarrassed to tell anyone – it does make me feel different, but not in a bad way. I’d consider it to be more of a unique and special quality about myself.

I love both sets of parents and am glad to have been a part of both families. Now that I am married I have 3 families.
REMARKABLE INSIGHTS

“
I feel adoption has given me a lot. A complete sense of perspective that not a lot of children and young adults, or adults have for that matter. It has allowed me to be completely accepting of others’ families, and be able to see issues within families that I wouldn't have normally been aware of or really even cared about. …I like the view point it gives me.
"

(age 27)

ONGOING CONTACT
Birth Mother’s View at W4

“People say, do you have kids, and I say, yes, I have a child, but it’s a little bit of a different situation. I mean at parties, at work, whatever, I’m always very open about him, and he and his parents and his sister and his grandma and his aunts and uncles are absolutely a part of my family. So I think, I think it has expanded my definition of family, which is a wonderful thing.”
5 TOUCHPOINTS FOR PRACTICE

• Reframe family in terms of child’s dual connection to birth & adoptive family
• Commitment to the relationship because it is in the best interests of the child
• Emphasize need for adults to work together:
  – Effective communication
  – Flexibility in day-to-day arrangements
  – Keeping commitments & being consistent
• Listen carefully to the adopted child
• Provide ongoing support when needed by birth or adoptive family members

Thank you for your interest!

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