

TO SEARCH OR NOT TO SEARCH: EXAMINING FACTORS THAT AFFECT ADOPTEES'
DECISION TO SEEK OUT THEIR BIRTH PARENTS

By

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PREVIEW

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PREVIEW

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of searching for birth parents by adoptees has been explored over the last few decades, however, limited attention has been paid to the factors that influence adoptees to search or not to search. The limited established literature on this topic has shown that the outcomes of adoptees developing or attempting to develop relationships with their birth parents are more often negative. As such, it would be helpful to better understand the underlying factors (e.g., demographic factors, attitude towards adoption, attachment style, relationship with adoptive parents) that might motivate an adoptee to search vs not search for their birth parents.

Participants (N=328) completed an online survey including the Measure of Attachment Questionnaire (MAQ), the Parental Bonding Inventory (PBI) and the Adoption Dynamic Questionnaire (ADQ). Two-way ANOVAs and linear regression were used to examine whether gender, age of finding out one is adopted, being of a different ethnic background from adoptive parents, secure attachment, perceived care of adoptive parents and attitude towards adoption had any effect on the choice to search for one's birth parents or not. As hypothesized, it was found that adoptees are more likely to search for their birth parents if they are of a different ethnic background than their adoptive parents, are more preoccupied with their own adoption, and score lower on perceived care of adoptive parents. Contrary to the hypotheses, searchers also score higher on secure attachment and lower on positive affect towards adoption. An interaction effect was found between gender and search group when looking at scores on the MAQ, PBI and ADQ subscales. These findings have important implications for future research on adoptees and for counselors working with this population and what leads to the choice to search for birth parents or not.

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PREVIEW

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Historical Context and Current Study

Adoption is the legal process of creating or transferring parent-child rights and responsibilities from a child's birth parents to the adult(s) who will raise the child (Shuman & Behrman, 1993). Contemporary adoption practice has been closely associated with changes in laws, which reflect the needs of individuals and society. Adoption practice has changed dramatically since the 1970s (Grotevant & McRoy, 2009) and adoption is now characterized by greater diversity (Wilson, 2004). Adoption affects six out of ten people in the United States, directly or indirectly (Person et al., 2007).

The "modern" adoption era is commonly considered to have begun with the passage of the 1851 Massachusetts Act to Provide for the Adoption of Children (Samuels, 2000). The passage of formal legislation codifying adoption regulations put the United States considerably ahead of other Western industrial nations; France did not pass adoption legislation until 1923, with the British Isles following between 1926 and 1952. The Adoption of Children Act set several important precedents that are still in place today, including stipulating that the adoption need be in the best interest of the child (Carp, 1998). Significantly, the legislation explicitly gave legal judges the responsibility to evaluate the qualifications of potential adoptive parents. The law also required written consent of the birth parents and dissolved all legal ties between them and the child. However, American adoption laws were seldom relied on in their infancy, as adoption litigation was costly and seen as embarrassing for parties who wanted to keep adoption private.

Despite limited initial application of the laws, numerous nongovernmental charitable organizations dedicated to the protection of children arose in the decades following the passage of the Adoption of Children Act. Additionally, the federal government became increasingly involved in child protection, culminating with President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's signing of the Social Security Act in 1935, providing millions of dollars in aid to dependent children and poor families. Before Social Security was created, there was little incentive for families to legalize adoptions (Carp, 1998).

Adoption increased dramatically during World War II and in the postwar era. Adoptions tripled between 1937 and 1945 and then doubled again by 1955, largely due to two underlying societal impetuses (Samuels, 2000). First, illegitimate births increased significantly during this period, from around 130,000 children in 1948 to over 200,000 in 1958. At the same time, demand for adoptable children grew as a result of the "Baby Boom's" rising marriage rates; the related rise in childless couples - and stigmas associated with this situation - saw record numbers seek adoption. Medical advances also allowed doctors to diagnose infertility earlier, leading couples seeking children to consider adoption more often and more quickly.

As adoption increased, adoption agencies became tasked with selecting the "best" possible parent matches for adoptees. Adoption was seen as a positive solution for young birth parents, their unplanned infants, and couples struggling to conceive during most of the 20th century in the U.S. (Miller et. al, 2001). Historically, when an adoption occurred, the practice of permanently severing the relationship between the child and his or her birth parents was emphasized (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998), and secrecy was the way to accomplish that goal. Confidentiality gradually became an integral part of adoption to protect adoptive family relationships, shielding children from stigma, minimizing potential questions from strangers, and

discouraging adoptive family members from thinking of themselves as an adoptive family. This also solidified earlier efforts by professionals to maintain secrecy in the adoption process in order to protect the adoption process, to maintain the privacy of single mothers, and to continue the expansion and professionalization of social work (Carp, 1992, 1994, 1995). Secrecy was further enhanced by a policy of closed and sealed records, through which adoption agencies matched physical appearance, interests, intelligence, personality, or other traits of adoptive parents with the anticipated characteristics of their baby (Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000; Grotevant & McRoy, 2009). An additional reason for birth parent-adoptive child separation involved the advent of psychoanalytic theory. For example, Freud's Oedipus complex was cited as a justification for denying birthmothers access to case records. In early psychoanalytic theory the mothers were depicted as ranging from neurotic to psychotic; according to Freud, they became pregnant in order to escape into a fantasy life (Wiley, 2017).

Domestic adoption in the United States reached its peak around 1970. In the following decades adoption - and the social action and policy changes associated with adoption - decreased greatly. One reason for this shift was the approval of the birth control pill in 1960, which greatly reduced the number of unwanted pregnancies (Samuels, 2000). The women's rights movement in the 1960s also made single motherhood more socially acceptable. These changes were reinforced by the legalization of abortion in 1973. As a result of legal abortion and greater acceptance of single mothers, adoption by non-family members has become even rarer in the past several decades. Since the late 1980s, approximately 125,000 children have been adopted annually in the United States, an annual decline of over 50,000 from 1970 levels (Wiley, 2017).

While absolute adoption levels are down, adoption is more visible now than in the past as a result of children adopted across national, cultural and racial borders. Demographic changes

since the 1970s have seen the number of white American children remain in decline. However, between 1990 and 2005, annual adoptions of foreign-born children more than tripled, from 7,000 to 23,000, and now represent around 17% of all adoptions in the United States. Families who adopt tend to be more racially diverse, better educated, and more affluent when compared to families in general. Data substantiating these findings have only been available since 2000, when “Adopted son/daughter” was included as a Census category for the first time in US history.

Adoptees began publicly questioning the sealing of adoption records in the 1950s. In 1955, Jean Paton, a social worker and adoptee, searched for and found her birth mother at the age of 47. She began a campaign to provide other adoptees with access to their histories stating, “in the soul of every orphan is an eternal flame of hope for reunion and reconciliation with those he has lost through private or public disaster” (Sorosky, et al., 1989, p.39). Florence Fisher founded the Adoptee’s Liberty Movement Association in 1971, following a twenty-year search for her birth mother. The ALMA has consistently aided adoptees since its inception, providing assistance in the search for birth parents and advocating for an end to the practice of sealing adoption records and for allowing adoptees access to records upon reaching adulthood.

Historical changes in the practice of adoption and other cultural shifts have led to more adoptees seeking out their birth parents. While searching for ones birth parents has become more common, there is limited research on the underlying factors and motivation for why adoptees choose to search or not. This study seeks to illuminate some of the differences between searchers and non-searchers to better understand what motivates adoptees or deters them from searching. This is an important piece that is missing in the current research and could also help counselors better understand this population.

Practice of Adoption

Adoption involves three sets of participants collectively known as the adoption kinship network (AKN) and is now thought of as a lifelong process rather than a single act. The AKN is made up of the adoptee, the birth family and the adoptive family. Black et al. (2016) identify three primary types of adoption involving non-family members. The first path is the adoption of a child through foster care, involving children who have been removed from their birth families by the state. The second is domestic private adoption through an agency or directly from the birth parents. Children adopted by domestic private adoptions are usually infants (American Adoptions, 2015). The third method is international adoption, usually coordinated through an agency that will help navigate the legal process.

The adoption of children occurs in all societies around the world, but effective, consistent collection and maintenance of adoption-related data remains challenging. In the United States, in particular, there has never been one, comprehensive national data collection bank to monitor, assess, and track all adoption activity (Biafora, et al., 2007). Since 1975, when the National Center for Social Statistics was discontinued, accurate and current adoption statistics have been difficult to obtain (Grotevant & Kohler, 1999). Census 2000 was the first decennial census to collect data on the type of relationship between the householder and their child, whether biological, step or adoptive. According to the 2010 Census, of the 64.8 million children under the age of 18, 1.5 million (two percent) were adopted. Although the Census is the principal source of data on adopted children and their families on a national level, it has a number of shortcomings in terms of adoption data specificity. For example, the 2010 Census did not specify whether adoption was of a relative or a non-relative, or whether the child was adopted through a public agency, a private agency, or independently (Kreider & Lofquist, 2014). As a result,

children who were adopted by their stepparents, those adopted by their biological grandparents or other relatives, and those adopted by other people to whom they were not biologically related, were not distinguishable in the data. In 2007, the breakdown of adopted children in the United States was 677,000 (38 percent) private, domestic adoptions, 661,000 (37 percent) from foster care and 440,000 (25 percent) international adoptions. As suggested above, adoption is more complex to conceptualize and measure than is often assumed (Fan et al, 2002). In order to avoid confusion about adoption for this study, the adoptee is defined as one who is legally adopted by a non-family member and who did not live with either birth parent after the adoption.

The arrangement between birth parents and adoptive families following legal adoption falls on a continuum of openness (Grotevant, 2000). On one end is the closed or confidential adoption characterized by no contact and no identifying information exchanged between birth families and adoptive families. Next is semi-open or mediated adoptions between families whereby a lawyer or agency mediates contact between the birth family and adoptive family. Finally, open adoptions involve direct interaction for sharing information between birth and adoptive parents. There are varying types of open adoptions, and the degree to which information is shared can vary accordingly.

By 1950, most states in the U.S. had passed laws denying adoptees access to identifying information about their birth parents, and birth parents access to information about their biological child once he or she was placed for adoption (Benson et al, 1994). As a result of this legislation, original birth certificates are sealed and new birth certificates with the names of the adoptive parents are issued. These measures were intended largely as protections of the stability of adoptive families. Specifically, legislators and adoption practitioners believed that sealing original birth certificates was in the best interests of the members of the AKN (Curtis & Pearson,

2010). Adoptees and adoptive parents were meant to be protected from any interference from birth parents or other persons associated with the adoptees' life prior to adoption. Additionally, in keeping with mid-century social perceptions, it was assumed that issuing a new birth certificate with the adoptive parents' names would protect the adoptee from being stigmatized as being in any way less legitimate than a birth child.

However well-intentioned these measures might have been, they were overly weighted towards complying with modern social norms and did little to account for the rights of adoptees who might want to meet their birth families. Further, they prevented birth parents from receiving information about their biological child's wellbeing or from meeting them after they had legally surrendered their parental rights. These scenarios are in fact more common than was appreciated at the time of the passage of such legislation. Some researchers have reported that between 30% and 65% of adopted adolescents want to search for their birth parents (Benson et al., 1994; Stein & Hoopes, 1985) and about 55% of adopted adults are actively searching for their birth parents (Sobol & Cardiff, 1983). A 1984 survey estimated that about 500,000 adopted persons were searching for, or had contacted, their birth parents. According to statistics from England, at least 50% of those who were adopted and who have access to their original birth certificates have searched for a birth relative at some point of their lives, and more than half of those who search wanted to meet a birth relative. These searches by adoptees have been influenced by legal changes, which have gradually provided more transparency around their birth records (Muller & Perry, 2001).

Adoption Research: General

Palacios and Brodzinsky (2010) reviewed the trends in adoption research and noted three major themes within the subject. The first is overrepresentation of adoptees in clinical settings,

next is recovery following adversity and third is underlying factors in adoption adjustment. A review done by Wiley in 2017 identified additional trends in adoption research. Wiley identified four additional themes in adoption research: openness in adoption, microaggressions, LGBTQ adoptive families and navigating racial differences.

Grotevant and Kohler (1999) suggested several different types of characteristics in adoptions. The first type is distinguished by the adoptive family system. Some adoptions occur within biological relationships when a stepparent legally adopts the biological child of his or her new spouse, or relatives formally or informally adopt nieces or nephews, siblings, or grandchildren. The second type differs by characteristics of adopted children. Adopted children vary in age of placement or in racial, ethnic, or national origin from their adoptive parents. Adopted children also differ by whether they have been exposed to risks for long-term physical or mental abuse, whether they have information about their birth parents, and whether they are adopted with or without siblings. The last characteristic by which adoptions differ is adoptive parents' circumstances (e.g., single parent or gay and lesbian couples). This study will be focused exclusively on adoptions by non-family members.

Müller and Perry (2001) established three theoretical models of search motivation: searching as a normative process, searching in the context of sociocultural norms that surround adoption and family life in general, and searching that is motivated by psychopathology. The authors cautioned that these theoretical models are not mutually exclusive and may overlap. Certain prevalent sociocultural norms reflect overt and covert values that may undermine adoption. Adoptees may search for their biological families because society tends to value blood relations and often stigmatizes adoption as being less legitimate than blood familial ties (Fisher, 2003; Palacios, 2009). These values may exaggerate adoptees' common experience of being

different from their adoptive family and therefore strengthen their desire to connect with their birth family. Müller and Perry point out that this may be stronger for adoptees who have visible racial differences from their adoptive family.

Researchers have established that searching is a normative process allowing adoptees to answer questions and develop a sense of self. Wrobel and Dillon (2009) found that a high percentage of adopted adolescents were highly or moderately curious about family traits, their birth parents and other family members, and reasons for being placed for adoption. For adoptees, answering such questions could be important for the normative process of identity development. McGinnis et al. (2009) noted that for adoptees, “gaining information about their origins is not [only] a matter of curiosity, but a matter of gaining the raw information needed to fill in the missing pieces of their lives and to derive an integrated sense of self” (p.50). For many adoptees, knowledge about birth parents and family history are critical inputs for the development and understanding of personal stories. Thus, a period of searching - either literally for birth parents or internally for a sense of self - can be seen as a natural and normative process.

Researchers have identified a wide range of explanations for why adoptees might search, including causes related to mental illness and societal issues. Müller and Perry (2001) use the term “psychopathology” to describe extreme mental health issues that motivate searching. Historically, searching for birth families has often been considered a sign of an unsuccessful adoption (Tieman et al., 2008), evidenced by Stein and Hoopes’ (1998) conclusion that searching was related to a mismatch with adoptive parents. Aumend and Barrett (1983) and Sobol and Cardiff (1983) found that searchers espoused more negative self-concepts and attitudes towards adoptive parents. Tieman et al. (2008) conducted a study on international and transracial Dutch adoptees, finding that those who searched had significantly more emotional, behavioral, and

family problems than non-searchers. However, more recent literature has raised questions around the perceived positive correlation between searching and social adjustment. In fact, the majority of searchers in most relatively recent studies are well adjusted (Tieman et al., 2008; Müller and Perry, 2001; Grotevant et al., 2000).

The Minnesota Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP) is a longitudinal study that launched in the mid 1980s to examine developmental outcomes for children growing up in adoptive families with varying levels of contact with birth families. This aimed to examine how AKNs managed contact over time and to examine adjustment outcomes for adoptive parents and birth mothers. This project is the largest of its kind with 720 participants from 23 different states (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Data were collected from adoptive parents, adoptees, and birth mothers. The first wave of data was collected starting in 1984 when the children averaged age 7.8 years. Wave 2 of the project includes data collected between 1996 and 2000. Wave 3 of the project includes data collected between 2005 and 2008. Finally, Wave 4 of the project includes data collected between 2012 and 2014. Some adoptions that started as closed had become open, and some that had initial contact had stopped (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). An overwhelming amount of the research involving adoption uses this database. According to the MTARP website (www.umass.edu/ruddchair/research/mtarp/about-mtarp), over 100 publications have used the MTARP database for their research and 24 theses or dissertations have used the database. While the MTARP sample is large, it is only one sample and therefore could be a limitation in adoption research.

While adoption research and data remain underrepresented in the broader psychological literature, recent improvements have been made. Adoption research was included in the Annual Review of Psychology for the first time in 2014, with a study by Grotevant and McDermott.

Adoptive Identity Development

The adoptee's process of identity development is seen to include a consideration of what it means to be connected to both an adoptive family and a birth family, how and where they belong within each, and how these relationships fit into their understanding of self, family and culture (Grotevant, 1997; Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011). The birth family is considered an entity that should be integrated into an adopted individual's identity and construction of family (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). This integration process has been suggested to be one of the most unique identity tasks of adopted individuals (Brodzinsky, et al., 1992) and to occur often as the adoptees search for and reunite with their birth families (March, 1995).

Adopted individuals may become more aware of their adoptive status as they age. Brodzinsky et al. (1984) suggests from their research findings that children in preschool and earlier are not likely to understand what adoption means in reference to themselves. At age 6, they generally are able to understand between being a biological child and adoption. When the child is between 8 and 11, the concept of adoption is broadened, and they begin to understand the notability and complications of the family situation. It is not until they are in early to middle adolescence before they really seem to conceive that there is a legal transfer of parental rights and responsibilities from biological parents to adoptive parents.

Silin (1996) suggests that adoptees can only understand their adoption stories consistent with their emotional/cognitive development abilities. Brodzinsky (1990) states that until children have reached the developmental stage in which they understand enough to cognitively think about their unknown past and their birth parents that adoptees will not have any basis for understanding adoption-related losses or have behavioral and emotional reactions to the process