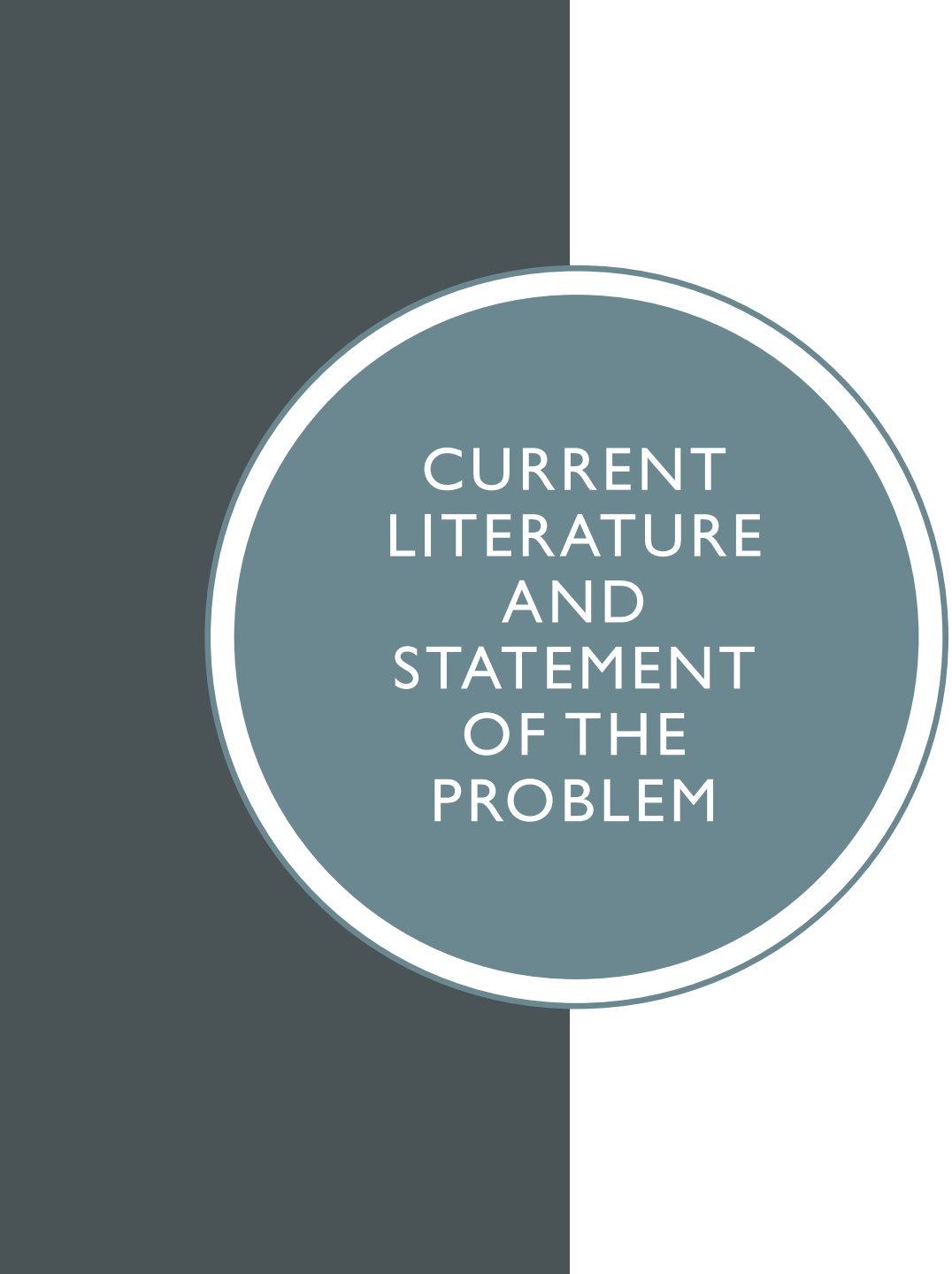


OPEN ADOPTION: AN EXPANSION OF FAMILY

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“I couldn't imagine, just like letting my child go, and not knowing anything about their family or how they were being raised or their life or anything like that, like I couldn't even imagine it. So really the only option for me was open. That way I had some sort of a relationship with [the adoptee] moving forward.” - Ashley (Birth Mother)



CURRENT LITERATURE AND STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

- 95% of adoptions are open adoptions in the U.S. (Siegel & Smith, 2012).
- Adoption may result in lasting emotional effects and open adoption is more complex than closed adoption (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014).
- Sharing open adoption experiences can create realistic expectations for others considering open adoption (Grotevant, 2009).
- The adoption triad benefits psychologically & relationally from openness (Brodzinsky & Smith, 2014).
- Current research focuses on the satisfaction of the adoption triad (Colaner & Scharp, 2016), however, there is a significant lack of research on the communication that takes place within the triad (Grotevant, 2009).
- Adoptive parents lack confidence in their approach to communication within the adoptive kinship network (Grotevant, 2009; Siegel & Smith, 2012).
- Adoptive families feel a sense of ambiguity concerning the birth mother's expectations for openness (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011).

PURPOSE STATEMENT

To gain a better understanding of the relationship between birth mothers and adoptive parents within an open adoption.

To give birth mothers and adoptive parents the opportunity to share their story, focusing on their experiences and their communication.

To benefit those considering open adoption and to assist helping professionals in guiding the adoption triad throughout the process of communication.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the experience of birth mothers and adoptive parents in building a relationship in an open adoption?

What is helpful and/or harmful in the relationship between the birth mother and adoptive parents?

METHODOLOGY

A phenomenological qualitative study

- Data was collected through demographic questionnaires and semi-structured interviews
- 20 semi-structured interviews were conducted. 10 interviews with birth mothers, and 10 interviews with adoptive mothers.
- Interviews were conducted either over the phone or face-to-face in a secure location. All interviews were recorded, with permission, transcribed, and analyzed by each researcher.

DEFINITIONS

- **Open adoption:** “the sharing of information and/or contacts between the adoptive and biological parents of an adopted child, before and/or after the placement of the child, and perhaps continuing for the life of the child” (Berry, 1993, p. 126).
- **Adoption triad:** “consists of birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons” (Baden, Biafora & Javier, 2007), the triad or triangle appears to: demonstrate an equal distance or separation between the three members.
- **Adoptee:** a child who has been adopted by an individual or individuals other than the child’s biological parents.
- **Birth mother:** the mother of a child when the child is born. Specifically: a woman who gave birth to a child who has been adopted.
- **Adoptive parent:** a person who adopts a child of other parents as his or her own child.
- **Post-Placement:** refers to the time frame after the adoption is finalized and when the child is in the care of the adoptive parents (Henry & Pollack, 2009).
- **Pre-Placement:** refers to the time frame prior to the legal finalization of adoption and when the child is in the care of the birth parents (Henry & Pollack, 2009).

FOCUSED AND AXIAL CODES

BIRTH
MOTHER
AXIAL CODES

Strong
Emotions

Grief

Fear

Supressed Emotions

Dichotomy

Peace

Roles

Intentionailty

Authority

Adoptee Centered

BIRTH MOTHER
AXIAL CODES
(CONTINUED)

Perspective
Shift

Pre-Placement

Post-Placement

Before Birth

Knowledge of
the Triad

Choosing
Adoptive Parents

Building
Relationship

Communication

Boundaries

Different Types

Key Factors

Changes Over
Time

ADOPTIVE PARENT AXIAL CODES

Motivation

Knowledge

Adoptee Centered

Impact

Birth Mother's Circumstances

Boundaries

Relationship and
Closeness

Change in Relationship

Birth Grandmother

ADOPTIVE
PARENT
AXIAL
CODES
(CONTINUED)

Attitude Towards
Birth Mother

Awareness

Responsibility

Authority

Approach

Faith

Fears

Relationship
Before Birth



QUOTES

“Because I was adopted through closed adoption and I don't think that children should go through that. I had a really hard time growing up just trying to process not - the not knowing - there was just always not knowing.” -Amelia (Birth Mother)

"Open adoption is so, so, so healing. So healing. And it—people just don't think it is, but I mean, it is. It's—it's just, it's healing." -Anne (Birth Mother)

"After the baby was born, I wanted [the birth mother] to know, while she didn't have the power, the legal power, she has a say and she is important, and she is a family member." -Janet (Adoptive Parent)

"So, I think it was really fear of the unknown, you know, fear of anything. So, it was, you know, 'what is this person going to be like?' And 'what is the relationship going to look like?' Well 'what if this person doesn't really like us?' You know, so that was more about the—more about that, but then once we were matched, much of that subsided because we got to know her." -Natalie (Adoptive Parent)

1. Strong emotions were experienced by both birth mothers and adoptive parents including fear and grief, and in contrast, a sense of peace.
2. Communication and boundaries have a consequential effect on the relationship and may adjust over time – based on each unique situation.
3. Both the birth mother and adoptive parents consistently emphasized their focus on the adoptee's well-being.
4. Birth mothers and adoptive parents establishing a relationship pre-placement can set a foundation that positively impacts their relationship in the years to follow.
5. The majority of participants expressed no regret in choosing an open adoption.



KEY FINDINGS

RECOMMENDATIONS AND DISCUSSION

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PROFESSIONALS

Both birth mothers and adoptive parents desire for more connection with those who had experienced open adoption prior to their own adoption taking place.

Recognize the importance of validating birth mothers' fears, offering assistance to birth mothers in communicating with adoptive families during difficult times and understanding the perspective of the adoptive parents.

Offer more extensive post-placement assistance to both the adoptive parents and the birth mothers, such as post-placement counseling and assistance in navigating any critical changes in the future.

RECOMMENDATIONS
FOR ADOPTIVE
PARENTS

Communication and establishing trust are essential in your relationship with the birth mother.

Set clear expectations and boundaries.

Birth mothers desire to be cared for.

Birth mothers desire time and space to interact with the adoptee in a way that does not feel as if they are being monitored.

Birth mothers experience significant grief and may feel as if they need to hide their emotions from the adoptive family.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR BIRTH MOTHERS

Do not assume that the adoption is closing if the adoptive parents request changes in communication and/or implement boundaries.

It is reasonable and justified to experience grief post-placement.

Recognize that the adoptive parents are not your counselor and utilize outside counseling services (e.g. counseling services provided by the adoption agency).

Find ways to communicate your own expectations/boundaries.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

1

Research focusing on the opinion and experiences of birth fathers in regard to building a relationship in open adoption.

2

Research focusing on birth mothers' and adoptive parents' experiences whose adoptions were open at one point but later closed.

3

Research focusing more specifically on the perspective of adoptive fathers.

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