

How adopters' and foster carers' perceptions of 'family' affect communicative openness in post-adoption contact interactions

Adoption & Fostering

2021, Vol. 45(4) 430–441

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DOI: 10.1177/03085759211060715

journals.sagepub.com/home/aaf



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Abstract

This article explores the constructions of communicative openness following adoption. Data from three waves of interviews with six adoptive mothers and four foster carers were collected, transcribed verbatim and analysed in keeping with a social constructivist grounded theory methodology. The results show that the way 'family' is constructed can both facilitate and impede communicative openness. Those who hold a fluid, child-centred concept of family, are willing to

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construct it as different and can accept the ebb and flow of family membership intuitively and view such openness as a natural part of caring for children. Those with a more traditional, nuclear construction of family may associate adoption with fear, a sense of biological related competition and the need to control the uncontrollable, all of which act as barriers to communicative openness. The study demonstrates that communicative openness is person and context sensitive and emphasises the need to think creatively and flexibly about the very nature of family.

Keywords

Communicative openness, construction of family, adoption, adoptive parents, foster carers, parenting

Introduction

Post-adoption birth family contact is now common practice (Neil, et al., 2011; McSherry, Fargas Malet and Weatherall, 2013; Siegel and Smith, 2012). For Brodzinsky (2005) it represents a form of structural openness based on the ‘type, frequency, duration and type of birth relative’ involved. Such contact has been encouraged by growing evidence that staying in touch with her or his birth family supports the developmental needs of the adopted child (Neil and Howe, 2004), the formation of a ‘healthy identity’ (Triseliotis, 1973) and the construction of a ‘new kinship network’ where the child is at the centre surrounded by both the adoptive and birth family (Grotevant, 2009).

However, Brodzinsky (2005: 149) has argued that it is ‘communicative’ rather than structural openness that is critical for ‘healthy psychological adjustment’ in adopted children. This is a complex construct that has been defined as ‘the attitude and behaviours of adoptive parents regarding talking and thinking about adoption’ which ‘reflects general beliefs, attitudes, expectations, emotions and behavioural inclinations relating to adoption’ (Brodzinsky, 2005: 149). Neil (2007) suggests that communicative openness encompasses five key elements: (1) communication with the adopted child about adoption; (2) comfort with, and promotion of, a dual connection; (3) empathy for the adopted child; (4) attitudes towards communication with the birth family; and (5) empathy for the birth family.

Several researchers have argued that it is beneficial to the whole adoptive triad – adopted child, adopted parent and birth relatives (Baran and Pannor, 1993; Berge, et al., 2006; Chapman, et al., 1986; Wrobel, et al., 1996; Wrobel, et al., 1998). For example, the Institute for Research and Innovation in Social Services (IRISS, 2015) and The Care Inquiry (2013) both comment on the importance of positive relational approaches for adoptive children, with references to a ‘golden-threaded relationship’ that ‘places at its heart, the quality and continuity of relationships, and that promotes and enhances the ability of those who are important to children – caregivers and others – to provide the care and support they need’ (The Care Inquiry, 2013: 8). But while contact can offer an opportunity for strengthening this ‘golden thread’, it can also pose a challenge to the adoptive triad and supporting systems (Neil, 2002; Smith and Logan, 2004).

It is unclear how many adoptive families maintain birth family contact arrangements across the adoptive life cycle; estimates range from 7% (Thoburn, 2004) to over 75% (Lowe, et al., 1999; McSherry, et al., 2008). In addition, little is known about what these

arrangements look like or what impact different ones have on children's developmental outcomes. MacDonald (2017a) found that adoptive parents viewed contact as a 'perceived potential threat' and worried that it would undermine the 'validity and legitimacy' of their identity as permanent parents in the child's eye, and that many adoptive parents assume that contact arrangements are non-negotiable. Yet despite this, a significant number of adopters remain committed to post-adoption contact as part of their desire to promote the lifelong well-being of their adopted child. It has been suggested that meaningful and satisfying contact is facilitated through the communicative openness of adoptive parents (Neil, 2009) and in doing so 'openness breeds openness' (Hawkins, et al., 2007: 134).

Currently, there is no real understanding of the mechanisms and interactional processes that support adoptive parents in their willingness to pursue post-adoption contact with birth families (MacDonald, 2017b). So, given its importance, whether structural or communicative, research that clarifies what helps everybody in the adoption process with regard to birth family contact is useful. This study seeks to address this question by investigating how the concept of communicative openness is played out and how meanings evolve among those experiencing post-adoption contacts.

Methodology

The study adopted a social constructionist grounded theory methodological approach (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) with the aim of developing an explanatory theory of what 'communicative openness' means to those involved in post-adoption contact interactions.

Participants

Our starting point was the adoptive parents as they facilitate and shape both birth family contact post-adoption and the child's connection to two families. Six adoptive mothers took part.

Data collection and analysis

To extend the conceptual understanding of communicative openness, three waves of data collection were completed. In keeping with a social constructivist grounded theory position, initial, focused, axial and theoretical coding formed the analysis.

Initial interviews were conducted individually with the six adoptive mothers. These focused on contact as a gateway to the more abstract concept of communicative openness. Codes relating to such openness, identified in the first wave, were then further explored with data from the initial interviews informing the collection of information from four of the participants. The interviews were then analysed in tandem on an individual basis in keeping with the constant comparison method of grounded theory. As all the adoptive mothers demonstrated high levels of communicative openness with regard to foster carers, it was decided to extend the study by further interviews with four female foster carers.

The initial, focused and axial coding procedures of grounded theory were applied to the information gathered and eight significant categories emerged. Four of them supported communicative openness: construction of family; foster carers as valuable and non-threatening; siblings as a potentially meaningful connection; and emotional bridge between past, present and future. Four acted as a barrier: fear; competition; need to control the controllable; and internal conflict. Construction of family was identified as an overarching

factor influencing engagement in communicative openness as it underpinned and helped to explain the presence of the remaining seven categories.

Results

How family is constructed influences communicative openness

This overarching category captures the way in which ‘family’ is perceived and the extent to which it is predisposed to communicative openness. It thus contextualises the remaining seven categories. Two contrasting perceptions are significant for determining what happens.

Nuclear family. For those such as Emma who ‘come into adoption because of infertility’, the socially constructed conceptualisation of family based on biological connectedness is challenged. Adoptive parents have to navigate an unfamiliar way ‘to do family’ without a clear frame of reference and which incorporates ‘others’, such as birth family and/or foster family. The child remains emotionally connected and genetically linked to another family and may identify as ‘the girl (or boy) with three mummies’ (Becca, adoptive mother). Adoption and engaging in communicative openness therefore challenge the defining features of the nuclear family. As a result, adopters may reluctantly accept that the child will have two mothers because ‘that’s part of the deal’ (Anna, adoptive mother) but resist incorporating additional relatives, such as birth grandparents into the construction of family. As Anna comments: ‘I think it’s fair enough that Sarah [birth mum] has contact but it’s not for her mother to have contact. That’s not been mandated by anybody.’

This study found that adoptive parents act in ways to ‘manage’ birth family which, in turn, impedes their communicative openness. However, an openness to incorporating foster carers into the nuclear family was far more common: ‘... they’re [foster carers and foster family] kind of like an extended group of aunties and uncles’ (Cathy, adoptive mother).

Child-centred family. The foster carers interviewed showed a much more fluid and child-centred conceptualisation of family, as well as an openness to blended families and a life-long commitment to their foster children. There was an intuitive and welcoming incorporation of genetically unrelated members: ‘My brother and sister-in-law and my other brother all buy my [foster] children presents at Christmas ... They’ve all [fostered children] become part of that family’ (Gloria, foster carer).

One adoptive mother (Florence) differed from the others and mirrored the foster carers by holding a fluid and child-centred construction of family. Adoption was considered as an equal to having a biological child:

... it’s always been something that we said we would do down the line, fostering or adopting ... we were sort of going down the route of having our own kids first and then maybe think about that [fostering and adoption] later, but it just happened at the right time with Maya, so we just went ahead with it.

Her construction of family and ability to engage in communicative openness was shaped by her early life and family experiences:

My wee brother is adopted ... he has contact with his birth dad so it's kinda just been, not normal, but something we've always dealt with, so [birth family] is not something that's ever caused an issue or anything.

Consequently, birth family and contact were not viewed as obstacles to family life.

Within these two perceptions of family life seven factors supported and impeded communicative openness.

Factors that support communicative openness

Foster carers as valuable and non-threatening. The interviews revealed that adoptive parents are not against communicative openness *per se* or anti-contact; they clearly integrate foster carers into their family life and do not feel threatened by them. Foster carers offer adoptive parents what they perceive as a safe form of communicative openness. The adopters therefore act in ways to maintain their child's relationship with their foster carer. In the words of Cathy (adoptive mother):

We keep in touch and a couple times a year she [foster carer] comes up to us or we go down to her ... and it was lovely for us that we knew these people [foster family], so we could interact in the conversations [with the children] about these people ... It's working for us.

Like Emma, quoted below, adoptive parents also intuitively empathise with the importance that their children place on foster carers:

We would have kept the contact much more frequently in the beginning because it was important for Lydia because she was grieving the loss and she couldn't understand why she was removed from that family.

When considering Neil's (2007) five key elements of communicative openness, these findings suggest that adoptive parents apply it specifically to foster carers. They intuitively communicate with their child about their foster carer and family, promote with comfort their child's dual connection to the foster family, empathise with their adopted child, are open to communicating with the foster family and empathise with them.

Siblings as a potentially meaningful connection. This category highlights that the majority of adoptive parents were also open to facilitating their child's relationship with siblings.

To quote Anna again:

... to me in some way that [relationship with sibling] could be of more value in the long run than, you know, contact with the birth mother you know. Because they will have that shared experience [of being adopted].

It was also explained that comfort with this relationship evolves over time: 'I feel like we have a relationship now and I feel it's like seeing old friends' (Emma). However, for one adoptive parent (Cathy), mistrust towards birth siblings impeded her ability to engage in communicative openness:

... One of the contacts we went to ... we discovered the [birth siblings] had mobile phones which they shouldn't have had, and they were taking lots of photographs and showing photographs to mummy [birth mother] and posting them everywhere and they turned up on social media ... so we can't trust them.

As a result of this mistrust, contact became more formal:

We go somewhere where we can sit round the table. So that the kids aren't all off running and playing ... because we are very, not very, but conscious of keeping them safe.

Emotional bridge between past, present and future. This category highlights the important role foster carers play in supporting the adoptive triad comprising birth parents, adoptive parents and adopted child. The foster carers held positive attitudes towards communicating with both adoptive and birth parents, as illustrated in Gayle's comment:

When I'm sitting having a coffee with her [adoptive mother] I'm boosting her up because I feel somebody needed to do it to me [when I was caring for the child] and there was nobody.

... and I feel she needs to be told that she's doing a good job because it's so difficult.

Foster carer Islay's extract shows the initiative taken to reach out sensitively and open a line of communication with birth parents in what is potentially a difficult situation:

The first day I go to contact I always have a book ... and I would sort of write 'Hi, my name is Islay. I'm Fred Blogs's new carer ... If there's anything you want to ask me about Fred just write it in the book and I'll reply ...

In addition to providing practical and emotional support to birth and adoptive parents, foster carers often play an important role in a child's future. In recognition that children may not have memories of their early life but will have questions later on, they routinely document a child's life while in their care which can inform a later narrative.

In Islay's words:

I would always, when a baby is moving on, I would always write up in a book just sort of Fred Blogs arrived to me, was born on 26th April and arrived to me on the 28th ...

Additionally, foster carers instinctively promote and facilitate present-day and future communicative openness. As Gloria commented, 'I'd like to think if he [child] wanted to talk to me, I'd be on the end of the phone.'

Factors that act as a barrier to communicative openness

Fear. Fear was identified as a major barrier to communicative openness. The fragility of family life was not only felt by adoptive mothers but also social workers. In the words of adoptive mother Debbie: '... contact for me was quite stark [in the beginning] because they [social workers] were quite worried that they [birth parents] would have tried to take her again.'

Fear emerged as the driving force behind how adoptive parents and professionals ultimately engaged in contact arrangements, with secrecy, mistrust towards birth family and a preoccupation with safety. To quote Debbie again: 'It's agreed she'll [birth mum] be there 15 minutes before we arrive so she doesn't see us arrive and she doesn't see what we drive.'

Another mother, Emma, described the mindset surrounding birth family contact as akin to a 'spy movie'. Adoptive parents naturally act in ways to safeguard the perceived fragility of family life. 'I don't tell the birth mum too much about our daughter or our life' (Debbie).

One adoptive mother, Anna, described how she moved area following unplanned contact with the child's birth mother:

She walked past us on the street just outside Laura's nursery and I was really quite stressed ... you know, you know that that boundary would be crossed ... we wanted to move anyway but that was part of the issue ... we just felt we wanted to move somewhere more neutral.

Competition. This category illustrates the biological insecurities experienced by adoptive parents participating in this study. A perception of being in competition with birth family is not uncommon.

In the words of Debbie:

I suppose the worry is that when you start contact you start to think, 'Oh, maybe they'd [child] like to be with them [birth parents] ... or maybe when they see them, they'll be drawn to this person.'

Consequently, a resistance to holding birth family in mind outside of contact and communicating with the adopted child about adoption ensues.

As Cathy expressed it:

... like it's not something that we would regularly or routinely talk about. If the children bring it [birth family] up, then we go ahead, we get involved in the conversation, we answer the questions the best we can.

The need to control the controllable. This category consistently emerged throughout the study. Unplanned contact and living in close proximity to birth family were described as a source of stress: 'She was briefly living in the same area as us and that had been quite stressful ... that's not okay, that's too much' (Anna). A physical and emotional distance between adoptive parents and birth family were associated with a greater sense of control. Anna again: 'I guess knowing that she's [birth mother] [living] further away and her focus is elsewhere [new baby] is a relief in many ways.'

Especially interesting in this respect is the experience of Emma who had been an adoptive mother for 10 years. She illustrates that 'the need to control the controllable' can and does change:

You know would I have been comfortable [with birth siblings and contact] from day one? No. But it evolved ... it evolves because it's like any relationship ... and I imagine it will get to the point where, um there will be no need for me to go [to contact with my daughter].

The relationship is therefore complex and multi-layered with Emma realising that she has nothing to fear as she becomes more comfortable with the situation.

These juxtaposing views of communicative openness suggest two main findings. First, it is possible but takes time to evolve and requires purposeful effort. Second, the need for adoptive parents to maintain control and an intolerance of discomfort emerge as barriers to communicative openness.

Internal conflict. The final category encompasses the array of conflicting emotions faced by adoptive mothers. An extract from Debbie's interview illustrates an internal dialogue whereby she confronts and grapples with gratitude, disbelief and compassion, as well as mistrust towards birth parents:

You wouldn't have the child you have if it wasn't for this person having the child. And in the case of Amanda, this person had a chance to have a lovely child and other children and, and actually couldn't take that opportunity. So that's sad for them because I can see the girl that I have, so I feel for her, but I also understand that she would have had a very bad effect on my daughter.

Adoptive parents can empathise with birth relatives but remain guarded towards them. This can be exacerbated when, as in Cathy's case, birth family contact is experienced as non-negotiable: '... but to almost force it upon us, to say well to adopt somebody, before this adoption goes ahead you have to commit to meeting four times a year ...'

The categorisation of the views expressed in the interviews and the identification of significant factors confirm the hypothesis that stimulated the study, namely that a perceived weak locus of internal control with regard to how 'family' is constructed acts as a barrier to communicative openness.

Discussion

This study has sought to show that communicative openness is not a psychologically driven concept. Rather, it reflects a policy, procedural and legislative shift away from 'closed' adoptions and provides a 'gold-standard' framework for understanding and managing interactions that are part of post-adoption contact. There is limited understanding of these mechanisms and interactional processes, but the results of this study suggest that the way that 'family' is constructed can either support or hinder communicative openness. It shows that for those whose construct of family is based on a nuclear model, adoption is considered second best; several of the mothers interviewed explicitly stated that they had only contemplated adoption after a prolonged period of infertility and that it had involved a protracted and intrusive assessment, whereby they had had to 'prove' their suitability and worthiness to parent – a process not experienced by biological parents.

Adoption, therefore, challenges the commonly held belief that family is defined by biological connectedness as this no longer dominates. Instead, adoptive parents must navigate an untravelled path to parenthood with a child who remains emotionally connected to another family. With a sense of difference emerging pre-adoption and a growing desire to parent, it is not surprising that adoptive parents act to safeguard their parental status and the perceived fragility of their family structure. Indeed, in keeping with previous findings (Neil, 2002; Selwyn, 2004; Smith and Logan, 2004), the discussion in the category 'internal conflict' highlighted that many believed that post-adoption birth family contact was non-

negotiable. The perceived weak locus of internal control experienced by the mothers acts as a barrier to Neil's (2007) second (comfort with, and promotion of, a dual connection) and fourth (attitudes towards communication with the birth family) elements of communicative openness.

Although the adoptive parents can and do empathise with birth families (Neil's fifth element of communicative openness), the preoccupation with safety and perceived fragility of family life acts as a barrier to feeling comfortable with and promoting their child's birth family connections (Neil's second element of communicative openness). Contact is perceived as a 'potential threat' for two reasons: many mothers feared that the birth family could steal their child; and birth family involvements exacerbate the insecurities relating to the 'validity and legitimacy' of adoptive parents' sense of parental self. In the category of 'competition', this vulnerability was seen as particularly prominent in the early stages of post-adoption interactions when the reality of parenting and feeling of being a family are at odds. After adoption, the child remains connected to 'others', increasing anxiety and raising parents' fears of being rejected by their child. Consequently, the mothers described purposefully distancing themselves physically and emotionally from birth family, reinforcing the importance of Neil's second element – comfort with, and promotion, of dual connection – and the fact that it limits their engagement with the remaining four. Post-adoption professionals play an important role in these processes as they set the tone for the ways in which adopted parents interact, or rather do not interact, with birth family and so determine the opportunities for communicative openness.

In contrast to the above, the findings demonstrate that a more fluid and child-centred conceptualisation of family offers greater opportunities for communicative openness. The adoptive parent who was different from the other five did not hold a fixed or stereotypical definition of family. Rather, she viewed her child as the central unit irrespective of the family composition. Consequently, there is an openness to 'golden-threaded relationships' (Care Inquiry, 2013) whereby those who are identified as important to children can provide care and support with ease. Her view is probably explained by the fact that she did not explore adoption as a result of infertility but as an equal alternative to having a biological child. Hence, she did not experience a sense of difference, had a stronger locus of internal control, did not feel threatened by the birth family's biological ties to the child and did not act in ways to defend her parental sense of self. In summary, she was able to engage in all five key elements of communicative openness.

It is this commitment to child centrality that enables foster carers to empathise with and provide emotional and practical support to the child as well as to both the birth and adoptive parents. They hold an open definition of family whereby individual members (none of whom are necessarily genetically related) are acquired as well as lost. Because of this, a child's birth family history and adoptive future are held concurrently in mind. Communicative openness is a natural part of their caring role.

An important finding from this study is that the defining features of the nuclear family can be modified in certain situations and with specific others. Unlike adoptive mothers' interactions with birth parents, which were characterised by fear and biological insecurities, their relationships with foster carers were quite different; they intuitively and proactively engaged with them. Although foster carers do not 'fit' the traditional definition of the nuclear family, the absence of fear and other barriers allows adoptive parents to extend their definition of family to include foster carers, comparable to aunts and uncles. In contrast to their excluding attitudes to birth parents, adoptive parents more readily accepted the possibility that their child would grieve the loss of their foster carer. Because the rigid definition of a nuclear family was relaxed and interactional processes of fear, control and

competition were absent, all of the adoptive parents intuitively, and without professional guidance, were able to engage with foster carers in a manner that included all five of Neil's key elements of communicative openness.

The definition of family to include birth siblings is interesting in that it falls between the contrasting patterns found for birth parents and foster carers. Adoptive parents were generally open to the idea of their children forming meaningful connections with their birth siblings although, unlike the intuitive incorporation of foster carers, it took them longer to feel comfortable with this because brothers and sisters are perceived to be connected to birth parents; as a result, parents naturally moved cautiously.

In summary, the evidence from this study suggests that how family is constructed can both support and impede communicative openness. It is only one of several influences and its construction and application will differ between individuals and contexts. Nevertheless, its overarching role, as identified here, shows that many significant elements flow from it.

Limitations

As the study is small and qualitative, it has several limitations. Selection bias in the recruitment process is possible as it was social workers who first approached potential participants. The small size and homogeneity of the sample – all were white and heterosexual – also limit generalisation. Furthermore, the key concept of communicative openness is complex and likely to be influenced by many factors, not just the construction of family, and further research is needed to clarify this. Finally, the study was conducted in Northern Ireland, which is a relatively small country where unplanned birth family contact is more likely. This may influence adoptive parents' openness to birth family; religious affiliation is also an important part of self-identity and shapes the meaning of family.

Future research and implications for practice

The current findings evidence that the gold standard framework of communicative openness between adoptive and birth parents does not function optimally. Future research may seek to improve this situation by constructing relational specific concepts of communicative openness. In addition, the concept needs testing in more geographical locations and with a wider range of adoptive parents. Future research would also benefit from considering how social workers mediate the communication process.

This study also provides tentative evidence that the emotional relationships formed and experienced by foster carers facilitate communicative openness. If future research replicates the important role that foster carers play in the lives of looked after children, due consideration should be given to increasing their involvement in post-adoption contact arrangements and care planning and including the relationship between communicative openness and varying constructions of family in pre-adoption training.

Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that, for some parents, adoption challenges the socially constructed conceptualisation of family. Those who operationalise a fluid, child-centred idea of family are willing to construct family as different and can accept the ebb and flow of family membership intuitively and view communicative openness as a natural part of caring for children. This is 'the village raising the child' in action. However, for those who hold a

more traditional nuclear construction of family, feelings can include fear, a sense of biological related competition and the need to control the controllable. Engaging in Neil's second element of communicative openness (comfort with, and promotion of, a dual connection) proves difficult and limits engagement with the remaining four auspicious factors: communication with adopted child about adoption; empathy for the adopted child; attitude towards communication with the birth family; and empathy for the birth family. Communicative openness, like the construction of family, is not an absolute. It is person and context sensitive. It is hoped that these findings will generate new thinking and flexible perceptions of 'family' and in doing so create more opportunities for communicative openness in adoption and beyond.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Post-Adoption and Fostering Teams with whom we have had the pleasure of working and, specifically, the social workers who supported participant recruitment, and the adoptive mothers and foster carers who were so willing to share their thoughts, feelings and experiences.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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