Open Adoption and Post-Adoption Birth Family Contact: A Comparison of Non-Relative Foster and Private Adoptions

Monica Faulkner & Elissa E. Madden

a University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA
b University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas, USA

Published online: 26 Mar 2012.

To cite this article: Monica Faulkner & Elissa E. Madden (2012) Open Adoption and Post-Adoption Birth Family Contact: A Comparison of Non-Relative Foster and Private Adoptions, Adoption Quarterly, 15:1, 35-56, DOI: 10.1080/10926755.2012.661333

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10926755.2012.661333
Open Adoption and Post-Adoption Birth Family Contact: A Comparison of Non-Relative Foster and Private Adoptions

MONICA FAULKNER  
University of Texas at Austin, Austin, Texas, USA

ELISSA E. MADDEN  
University of Texas at Arlington, Arlington, Texas, USA

This study used data from the National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP) to compare post-adoption contact in families with non-relative private domestic and foster care adoptions. This study is the first to use a nationally representative sample to examine and compare the extent of post-adoption contact in both private and foster adoptions. The results suggest that children adopted from foster care were less likely to experience post-adoption contact with their birth families than children adopted privately despite the fact that they were more likely to have lived with their birth families.

KEYWORDS adoption, open adoption, foster care, private adoption, National Survey of Adoptive Parents

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, approximately 1.8 million children in the United States are adopted (Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). The majority of adoptions are domestic adoptions with families either adopting privately or from the United States foster care system (Vandivere et al., 2009). While open adoption has become increasingly common, until recently, the practice was primarily contained to private domestic adoptions. In recent years, efforts have been made to understand and promote the use of open adoption, as there is some evidence that the practice may benefit all members of the adoption triad (Ayers-Lopez, Henney, McRoy, Hanna, & Grotevant, 2008; Neil, 2007a; Siegel, 2003). However,
research regarding the benefits of open adoption has largely focused on private adoption. Few studies have examined the frequency of this practice within the context of adoptions of children from the foster care system (Berry, Dyllah, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Frasch, Brooks, & Barth, 2000).

Unlike private adoptions, adoptions from foster care generally involve older children who have had contact with their birth families prior to entering the foster care system (Frasch et al., 2000; Wolfgram, 2008). Although most children in foster care have experienced some form of abuse or neglect while in the care of their birth families, children in foster care often express a desire to return to their birth parents (Chapman, Wall, & Barth, 2004). Some children in the foster care system, particularly those who are older or adolescents, are reluctant to consider adoption due to fears that they will lose ties to their birth families once they are adopted (Wright, Flynn, & Welch, 2007). Yet, there is some evidence that open adoption arrangements can help minimize further loss for children in foster care by ensuring that they will be able to maintain contact with their birth families (Maynard, 2005). This knowledge can ease the child’s transition to an adoptive home and help alleviate his or her fears about losing ties to their birth families (Riggs, 2007; Silverstein & Roszia, 1999; Wright et al., 2007).

To date, little research has been done to examine how much post-adoption contact occurs between adoptive and birth families and whether the type of contact differs based on the type of adoption (Crea & Barth, 2009). This study used data from the National Survey of Adoptive Parents (NSAP) to compare post-adoption contact in open, non-relative adoptions from foster care and private agencies. NSAP is the first nationally representative sample of adoptive families in the United States and thus provides a unique opportunity to compare random samples of both private and foster care adoptions.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Open Adoption**

Open adoption refers to preplacement contact and sharing of information, as well as contact and information sharing that occurs after the adoption has been finalized (Berry, 1993a). Contact can occur prior to the adoption or after the adoption is finalized and can vary in terms of the circumstances in which it is initiated as well as the parties that are involved (Berry, 1993a; Frasch et al., 2000; McRoy, Grotevant, Ayers-Lopez, & Henney, 2007). The parties most often include the child’s adoptive parents and the child’s birth parents but may also include the adopted child and other birth or adoptive relatives. In addition, the type and level of contact between parties may vary according to needs and wishes of those involved (Frasch et al., 2000; McRoy et al., 2007). Types of contact can range from in-person contact with the birth
Open Adoption and Post-Adoption Contact

37

parents to limited contact with only an exchange of pictures, letters, and gifts (Frasch et al., 2000; Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005). While the type and frequency of contact can be determined after the child’s adoption is finalized, in many cases, prospective adoptive families and birth parents mediate or negotiate an agreement privately prior to the adoption that allows the birth parents some form of contact with the child and/or the adoptive parents after the adoption is finalized (Maynard, 2005). Unlike traditional, closed adoptions that involve termination of all contact between parties, open adoption arrangements allow adoptive parents, and sometimes the adopted child, the opportunity to initiate and maintain communication with the child's birth family by means of direct or indirect contact. Direct contact may include face-to-face visits, e-mails, or phone conversations, while indirect contact typically means the relay of information between parties through the adoption agency or another neutral party.

The shift to increased post-adoption contact between adoptive parents and birth parents was precipitated by a growing concern among child welfare and mental health professionals regarding the effect of traditional, closed adoptions on the health and well-being of adopted children (Frasch et al., 2000). Over time, open adoption has gained support among professionals and scholars, as many feel that the practice provides adopted children with a greater sense of personal identity and can help them accept the permanence of their adoption (Turkington & Taylor, 2009). While many individuals feel that open adoption arrangements have been a positive change for the children and families involved, acceptance has taken time. Early opponents of open adoptions suggested that it posed potential negative repercussions for children, adoptive parents, and the children’s birth families (Grotevant, 2000; Wolfram, 2008). Initially, concern was expressed that children might not fully understand whom their “real parents” were and that they might experience problems related to their self-identity, attachment security, and overall adjustment (Grotevant, 2000; Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985). For children in foster care who have been abused or neglected, some scholars questioned the wisdom of subjecting children to ongoing contact with those who have caused them harm (Neil, 2007b). Concerns related to the children’s adoptive parents were also noted. Those opposed to open adoption arrangements argued that continued contact between the adopted children and their birth families could hinder attachment and bonding between the children and the adoptive families (Berry, 1993b). Furthermore, it was suggested that adoptive parents might be wary of potential intrusion by the child’s birth family and that adoptive parents might feel inhibited or less secure in their ability to act as the child’s parents (Berry, 1993b; Grotevant, 2000; Kraft et al., 1985). Concerns cited about the child’s birth family focused on birth mothers in particular. Critics predicted that the child’s birth mother would have difficulty addressing the grief and loss she experienced as a
result of the adoption should the birth mother continue to maintain contact with the child (Berry, 1993b; Grotevant, 2000; Kraft et al., 1985).

Advocates of open adoption argued that contact between children and their birth families is beneficial for children, as it can help them reconcile pieces of their identity and better understand their heritage (Ayers-Lopez, Wallace, Naik, Chanmugam, & McRoy, 2007; Berry et al., 1998). In addition, some scholars maintain that contact can help youth, particularly older youth, understand and accept their birth family’s limitations and give them “permission” to attach and to become fully integrated into their adoptive family (Silverstein & Roszia, 1999). This holds particularly true for youth who have been maltreated by their birth family, as they may feel ambivalence about why they were adopted and may desire to retain some connection with their birth family. Proponents of open adoption suggest that adoptive parents may benefit from contact with the child’s birth family by having access to more-in-depth information about their child’s medical and mental health histories (Silber & Dorner, 1990). In addition, open adoption arrangements may allow adoptive parents to feel increased security in their role as the child’s parent because they have the “consent” of the birth parents to parent the child (Dorner, 1998). Regarding birth families, there is some evidence that birth parents who maintain contact with their child are more likely to resolve feelings of loss and display acceptance of the adoption (Cushman, Kalmuss, & Namerow, 1997; Neil, 2007a). This acceptance appears to be particularly true when the adoptive parents initiate the contact with the birth family (Neil, 2007b).

Research on Open Adoption

Prior research on open adoption has focused on the benefits and risks for birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children (e.g., Berry, 1993b; Berry et al., 1998; Sobol, Daly, & Kelloway, 2000), adoptive and birth families’ satisfaction with open adoption arrangements (e.g., Barth & Berry, 1988; Etter, 1993; Gross, 1993; McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988), as well as adoptive and birth parents’ feelings and comfort with the practice (e.g., Belbas, 1987; Berry, 1993a; Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994; Lee & Twaiite, 1997). Studies examining birth and adoptive parents’ attitudes and concerns have shown that greater levels of openness in adoption may actually increase adoptive parents’ feelings of comfort with the adoption and feelings of entitlement to the child (Belbas, 1987; McRoy et al., 1988; Siegal, 2003). Other studies have shown that contact between the birth and adoptive parents results in a more empathic and positive outlook of the child’s birth family by the adoptive parents and better grief resolution for birth mothers (Christian, McRoy, Grotevant, & Bryant, 1997; Grotevant & McRoy, 1997; Neil, 2003). More recent studies on open adoption have focused on understand-
ing the long-term implications of post-adoption contact on birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted children (e.g., Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008; Ge et al., 2008; Henny, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003; Neil, 2007b; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Siegal, 2003). The findings of these studies have largely dispelled prior concerns and suggest that open adoption arrangements can result in a satisfying experience for those involved.

Research on Open Adoption and Foster Care

Although empirical research on open adoption practices within public adoption is limited, child welfare professionals have begun to recognize the role that open adoption arrangements can play in adoptions of children from the foster care system (Frasch et al., 2000). Studies comparing the use of open adoption agreements among private, independent, international, and public agency adoptions have shown that the practice is far more common among independent and private agency adoptions.

Three studies that have compared the use of open adoption arrangements by adoption type utilized data from the California Long-Range Adoption Study (CLAS), a longitudinal study designed to evaluate a variety of issues related to adoption and adoptive families. Berry (1993a) evaluated wave one data from 1,268 adoptive parents (1,307 adoptions) to assess openness approximately 2 years post-adoption. The sample included relative and non-relative foster care adoptions (44%), private agency adoptions (12%), independent adoptions (20%), and district office adoptions (24%). In evaluating adoptive families’ post-adoption contact with birth families, Berry (1993a) found that foster care adoptions were disproportionately closed compared to other types of adoption. Adoptive parents with open adoption arrangements reported being satisfied with the level of contact they experienced with their child’s birth family; however, families who adopted from foster care indicated higher levels of discomfort with open adoption arrangements than parents who adopted through private agencies. Berry suggested that this finding was likely reflective of large number of foster-adoptive families who care for children while waiting for parental rights to be terminated. Berry’s analysis also indicated that the two most important predictors of comfort with open adoption among families who had post-placement contact were (1) whether the adoptive parents planned for contact and (2) an absence of maltreatment in the child’s history.

Frasch et al. (2000) later used three waves of CLAS data collected between 1988 and 1997 to evaluate the type and frequency of open adoption arrangements among a sample of children adopted from foster care (n = 231). Forty percent of the families in the study reported, per their agreement, that they had no contact with their child’s birth family. Only a quarter (25%) of the families reported that, per their open adoption agreement, they
had maintained some form of consistent contact with their child’s birth family since the adoption was finalized. In contrast, the remaining third (35%) of families reported changes in their arrangement over time, with some families reporting that contact was initiated after there was previously none or ending contact after it was initiated. Given that two-thirds of the families remained consistent in their arrangements for either a closed or open adoption, Frasch et al. noted that the findings underscore the importance of choices that adoptive and birth families make before the adoption is finalized. Regardless of whether the adoption was open or closed, a majority of the adoptive parents reported that they were satisfied with their adoption experience.

More recently, Crea and Barth (2009) used four waves of CLAS data collected between 1988 and 2004 to examine indicators of open adoption arrangements among 469 adopted children 14 years post-adoption. The study sample included foster care adoptions (29%), independent adoptions (47%), and adoptions facilitated through private agencies (11%). Consistent with the findings of earlier studies that utilized CLAS data, children in closed adoptions were more likely to have been adopted through foster care than through a private agency. Furthermore, the findings suggest that children adopted from the foster care system were 85% less likely to have an open adoption arrangement than independent adoptions.

In summary, this article uses a nationally representative sample of adoptions to provide a better understanding of how contact in non-relative foster care open adoptions may differ from contact in non-relative private open adoptions. The primary research question addressed in this study is: In open adoptions, does the type of adoption (foster care or private) impact the likelihood of post-adoption contact? In addition to examining post-adoption contact in general, this study examined variations in the type of contact between the adoptive parents, the adopted child, and the child’s birth family members.

METHODOLOGY

Data

We used data from NSAP. The survey was sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and conducted by the Centers for Disease Control. The survey is the first to provide nationally representative information on adoption in the United States and on the pre-adoption and post-adoption experiences of adoptive families. NSAP was conducted in 2007 and 2008 as an add-on module of the 2007 National Survey of Children’s Health (NSCH), a nationally representative telephone survey of households with children 17 years of age and younger. NSCH respondents who identified as adoptive parents of children who met the following criteria were asked to participate in NSAP: (1) the adoption had been finalized; (2) no biological parents of the child resided in the home; and (3) the responding adoptive

Downloaded by [24.130.220.61] at 15:32 26 July 2013
parent spoke English. However, it should be noted that in instances in which
more than one child younger than 17 was living in the home, only one child
was randomly selected as the focal child for the interview. Respondents who
elected to participate in NSAP were asked a series of questions regarding the
characteristics of the parent(s) and the focus child, the type of adoption, cir-
cumstances surrounding the adoption, parent and child well-being, contact
with birth families, and pre- and post-adoption services received. Additional
information on the sample design of NSAP can be found in Bramlett et al.
(2010) and Bramlett and Radel (2010).

Study Sample

NSAP includes data from 2,089 children aged 17 years and younger who were
adopted via the United States foster care system, private domestic adoption
(referred to hereafter as “private” adoption), or international adoption. As
mentioned, only one child was selected as the focal child for each family.

As this study compares post-adoption contact in families with non-
relative private and foster care adoptions, the data analyzed were limited
to children who were adopted through private adoption or the foster care
system. Thus, 545 children who were adopted through international adoption
were excluded from this study. A total of 483 children whose parents
indicated they were biologically related to the child and one child who had
missing data were also excluded from this study. Respondents were asked
an additional question regarding the presence of a pre-adoption agreement
(written or verbal) to provide information to any of the child’s birth family
member(s). An additional 229 respondents who indicated that they knew
their child before the adoption were also excluded from this study. Thirteen
participants had missing data for the question regarding open adoptions.
These participants were also removed from the study sample, resulting in a
final analytic sample that included 819 children adopted through private or
foster care adoptions who were not related to or known by their adoptive
parents prior to the adoption.

Variables

The independent variable of interest in this study was type of adoption. After excluding international cases, a dichotomous variable for the type of
adoption was created to identify whether the adoption was private or foster
care (private = 0 and foster care = 1).

The dependent variables in the analysis included variations of contact
between the birth family and adoptive family. The primary dependent vari-
able was birth family contact. Respondents were asked whether, since the
adoption, either the adoptive parents or the child had ever had contact with
the birth family (no = 0 and yes = 1). While analyzing this variable helps to
answer basic questions about whether post-adoption contact occurred, there
may be differences in the type of contact that occurred. Thus, additional dependent variables were included to look more specifically at differences in types of contact.

Respondents who indicated that they had contact with the birth family were asked additional questions about the specific types of contact between the birth family and adoptive family. These types of contact included: (1) contact between the adoptive parents and birth family, (2) contact between the child and the birth parents, (3) contact between the child and the birth siblings, and (4) contact between the child and other relatives. Variables for each type of contact were created to indicate whether the contact had or had not ever occurred (no = 0 and yes = 1).

Multiple control variables were included in the analysis. The control variables included whether there was any type of agreement regarding post-adoption contact between the birth and adoptive families (no = 0 and yes = 1), whether the agreement was verbal or written (verbal = 0 and written = 1), whether the child lived with the birth family prior to the adoption (no = 0 and yes = 1), whether the adoption was transracial (no = 0 and yes = 1), whether the adoptive parent felt the child had likely been exposed to physical abuse, sexual abuse, emotional abuse, neglect and/or prenatal drug use prior to the adoption (no = 0 and yes = 1), the child’s age at the time of the adoption (continuous), and the child’s age at the time of NSAP data collection. Because the actual ages of the children were not available in the NSAP public use data file, the child’s age at the time of the data collection was categorized into four categories: infant/toddler (birth to 2 years old), preschool age (3 to 4 years old), middle childhood (5 to 12 years old), and adolescence (13 through 17 years old). These variables were dichotomized with “1” indicating that the child was in the age group and “0” indicating the child was not in the age group.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this analysis was to compare non-relative private and foster care adoptions with respect to the likelihood of post-adoption contact with the child’s birth family after the adoption finalized. Descriptive statistics were calculated. Chi-square tests were used to compare differences between foster care and private adoption characteristics for all variables except the child’s age at the time of adoption. Because the child’s age at adoption was used as a continuous variable, independent sample t-tests were used to evaluate differences in post-adoption contact between foster care adoptions and private adoptions. Logistic regression analysis was used to explore the relationship between type of adoption (private or foster care) and birth family contact. Five logistic regression analyses were completed using each of the dependent variables. Two models were run for each dependent variable.
The first model included the dependent variable, birth family contact, and the independent variable, type of adoption, in order to determine whether an overall relationship existed between the two variables. The second model in each analysis included the type of adoption and all of the control variables to determine whether the relationship between the type of adoption and birth family contact existed when other possible explanatory variables were included in the analysis.

Given the complex sampling design of NSAP, weights were generated by NSAP researchers to ensure that children in NSAP appropriately represented the full population of adopted children in the United States. In order for the results of our analysis to be nationally representative of children adopted from foster care and private agencies, weighted analyses were conducted.

RESULTS

The results of the data analysis yielded significant findings regarding post-adoption contact. We begin by presenting a description of the study sample, followed by the results from each regression analysis based on the type of contact examined in that analysis.

Descriptive Summary

Weighted estimates for family, child, and adoption characteristics are displayed in Table 1. The study included adopted children whose parents indicated they had an agreement for post-adoption contact but were not related to or acquainted with their child prior to the adoption ($n = 819$). Of these children, roughly half were adopted from foster care ($n = 411$) and half were adopted privately ($n = 408$). A significant difference was noted between children who were adopted from foster care and those who were adopted privately with respect to agreements for post-adoption contact ($\chi^2 = 31.78; p \leq .001$). Approximately one-third (32%) of children who were adopted from foster care had an agreement for post-adoption contact compared to 67% of children who were adopted privately. Although the families of children in both groups reported having some form of agreement for post-adoption contact, a significantly lower percentage of children adopted from foster care had written agreements for post-adoption contact compared to children adopted privately ($\chi^2 = 31.78; p = .01$). Of the 411 children adopted from foster care, 16% had written agreements, while slightly more than one-third (35%) of children adopted privately had written agreements.

Types of contact between birth families and adoptive families varied based on the type of adoption. Overall, families who adopted through the foster care system experienced significantly less contact with the child’s birth
family than families who adopted privately ($\chi^2 = 67.70; p \leq .001$). Thirty-nine percent of children’s families who adopted from foster care reported that they had some form of post-adoption contact with the child’s birth family compared to 68% of private adoptions. When examining contact specifically between the adoptive parents and the child’s birth family, significant differences were noted between the two groups. Fewer than a quarter (21%) of children adopted from foster care had parents who reported contact with the birth family. In contrast, half (50%) of children adopted privately had adoptive parents who indicated that they had contact with the child’s birth family.

While the difference was not always statistically significant, children adopted from the foster care system generally experienced less post-adoption contact with their birth families than children adopted privately. Children adopted from foster care had significantly less contact with their birth parents ($\chi^2 = 23.55; p = .008$). Of those children adopted from foster care, only 22% had contact with their birth parents, while 37% of children adopted through private agencies had contact with their birth parents. A smaller proportion of children had contact with birth siblings and other birth relatives. Only 19% of children adopted from foster care and 21% of children adopted from private agencies had contact with birth siblings ($\chi^2 = 0.88; p = .61$). Additionally,
only 13% of children adopted from foster care and 22% of children adopted privately experienced post-adoption contact with other birth family relatives \( (\chi^2 = 9.56; p = .06) \).

Children adopted through foster care were significantly older at the time of the adoption than children adopted privately \( (t = 1.831; p \leq .001) \). The mean age at adoption for children adopted from foster care was 3.68, while the mean age for children adopted from private agencies was 1.51. At the time of NSAP data collection, a majority of the children in both groups were either in middle childhood or adolescence (foster care: 89%; private: 82%). A significant difference was observed in the proportion of infants and toddlers among the two groups (foster care: 3%; private: 9%; \( \chi^2 = 16.69; p \leq .001 \)); however, no other significant differences were noted in children’s ages at the time of data collection.

Significantly more children adopted from foster care (43%) lived with their birth families prior to their adoption than children adopted privately (10%; \( \chi^2 = 114.94; p \leq .001 \)). Children adopted from foster care also had significantly higher rates of likely abuse and neglect prior to the adoption. Of the children adopted from foster care, 40% likely experienced physical abuse, 22% likely experienced sexual abuse, 49% likely experienced neglect, and 42% likely experienced emotional abuse. In contrast, among children adopted privately, only 7% likely experienced physical abuse, 3% likely experienced sexual abuse, 7% likely experienced neglect, and 7% likely experienced emotional abuse. High rates of likely prenatal drug exposure were reported by parents who adopted from foster care as well as by parents who adopted through private agencies. Likely prenatal drug exposure was significantly higher among adoptions from foster care than among private adoptions (foster care: 63%; private: 37%; \( \chi^2 = 55.77; p \leq .001 \)).

Rates of transracial adoption were similar for families adopting from foster care and families adopting privately. The term transracial adoption refers to adoptions in which the adoptive parent (in a single-parent family) or parents (in a two-parent family) reported being of a different race, ethnicity, or culture than the adopted child. Approximately 36% of families adopting from foster care were transracial compared to 28% of private adoptions. However, the difference was not statistically significant.

Finally, no significant differences were noted with regard to the children’s gender among the two groups \( (\chi^2 = .270; p = .770) \). Roughly 50% of children adopted from foster care were female compared to 48% of children adopted through private adoption.

Any Contact With Birth Family

Results from the logistic regression analyses demonstrated some differences in post-adoption contact between private and foster care open adoptions.
M. Faulkner and E. E. Madden (see Table 2). The primary analysis examined the differences between foster care and private adoptions with regard to any post-adoption contact between the birth and foster families. Prior to the inclusion of the control variables, families adopting from foster care had a 69% decrease in odds of having had any contact with the birth family (Wald $\chi^2 = 19.84; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 0.31; 95\% \text{ CI} [0.18–0.51]$). After the control variables were included in the analysis, families completing adoptions from foster care had a 75% decrease in odds of having had post-adoption contact (Wald $\chi^2 = 69.14; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 0.25; 95\% \text{ CI} [0.13–0.48]$). Families of children who had agreements for contact had over five times increased odds of having had contact with the birth family after the adoption (Wald $\chi^2 = 20.76; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 5.22; 95\% \text{ CI} [2.57–10.63]$). Additionally, families of children who had lived with their families prior to the adoption had more than four times the odds of having had post-adoption contact occur with the child’s birth family (Wald $\chi^2 = 1.57; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 4.18; 95\% \text{ CI} [1.96–11.88]$). Finally, families of children who likely experienced physical abuse prior to the adoption had 67% decreased odds of having had any contact with the child’s birth family (Wald $\chi^2 = 3.39; p \leq .10; \text{OR} = 0.36; 95\% \text{ CI} [0.12–1.07]$).

Four additional regression analyses were completed to examine variations in the types of post-adoption contact. These types of contact included (1) contact between the adoptive parents and any birth family member, (2) contact between the child and birth parents, (3) contact between the child and birth siblings, and (4) contact between the child and other birth family relatives.

Contact Between Adoptive Parents and Birth Family
Contact between adoptive parents and the birth family was influenced by the type of adoption. In the first model (without the control variables), adoptive parents completing adoptions through foster care had 72% decreased odds of having had contact with the birth family (Wald $\chi^2 = 21.57; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 0.28; 95\% \text{ CI} [0.16–0.48]$). However, after the control variables were added to the model, the results indicated that adoptive parents who completed adoptions through the foster care system had 76% decreased odds of having had contact with the child’s birth family (Wald $\chi^2 = 15.76; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 0.24; 95\% \text{ CI} [0.12–0.49]$). Adoptive parents with a post-adoption agreement for contact had almost four times the odds of having had that contact occur (Wald $\chi^2 = 16.59; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 3.86; 95\% \text{ CI} [2.02–7.40]$). In addition, parents who adopted a child who lived with his or her birth family prior to the adoption had more than seven times the odds of having had post-adoption contact with their child’s birth family (Wald $\chi^2 = 12.82; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 7.37; 95\% \text{ CI} [2.47–22.00]$).
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE 2 Results From Weighted Logistic Regression Analyses (Odds Ratio Point Estimates Shown; $n = 819$)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Any Contact With Birth Family</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adoption type</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-adoption contact agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Written pre-adoption contact agreement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Abuse or neglect prior to adoption</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neglect</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotional abuse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prenatal drug exposure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adopted child lived with birth family</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transracial adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child age at adoption</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child gender</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child’s age at data collection</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Infant or toddler)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preschool</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle childhood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adolescent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Model $\chi^2$</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$19.84^{***}$</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: National Survey of Adoptive Parents.

*aLikelihood of abuse or neglect prior to adoption as reported by adoptive parents.

$p \leq .05$, $**p \leq .01$, $***p \leq .001$, $^+p \leq .10$. 
Contact Between Child and Birth Parents

Contact between adopted children and the birth parents also appeared to be influenced by the type of adoption. Before adding the control variables, children adopted through public agencies had 53% decreased odds of having post-adoption contact with their birth parents ($\chi^2 = 7.18; p \leq .01; \text{OR} = 0.47; 95\% \text{ CI [0.27–0.82]}$). Following the inclusion of the control variables in the model, the results suggest that children adopted through public agencies had 43% decreased odds of having had post-adoption contact with their birth parents ($\chi^2 = 3.32; p = .069; \text{OR} = 0.57; 95\% \text{ CI [0.31–1.05]}$). Children from families with a post-adoption agreement for contact had more than four times the odds of having had contact with their birth parents ($\chi^2 = 15.59; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 4.08; 95\% \text{ CI [2.03–8.20]}$). Additionally, children who lived with their birth family prior to the adoption had more than twice the odds of having had post-adoption contact with their birth parents ($\chi^2 = 3.76; p \leq .10; \text{OR} = 2.34; 95\% \text{ CI [0.99–5.54]}$).

Contact Between Child and Birth Siblings

Unlike the previously discussed forms of contact, contact between the adopted child and birth siblings was not influenced by the type of adoption ($\chi^2 = 0.26; p = .61; \text{OR} = 0.85; 95\% \text{ CI [0.45–1.59]}$). However, the model was marginally significant after the controls were added and results suggest that children adopted from public agencies had 51% decreased odds of having had contact with birth siblings ($\chi^2 = 3.38; p \leq .10; \text{OR} = 0.49; 95\% \text{ CI [0.23–1.05]}$). As with the previous analyses, children who lived with their birth families prior to adoption had almost five times the odds of having had post-adoption contact with their birth siblings ($\chi^2 = 10.35; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 4.71; 95\% \text{ CI [1.83–12.10]}$). Additionally, children who were adopted at older ages had 28% increased odds of having had contact with birth siblings ($\chi^2 = 3.03; p \leq .10; \text{OR} = 1.28; 95\% \text{ CI [0.99–1.70]}$).

Contact Between Child and Other Birth Relatives

The final logistic regression analysis examined the adopted child’s contact with birth relatives other than parents and siblings. In the first model, adoption type was found to be marginally associated with post-adoption contact between the adopted child and other birth relatives ($\chi^2 = 3.38; p = .07; \text{OR} = 0.56; 95\% \text{ CI [0.30–1.04]}$). After the control variables were added, the model was significant ($\chi^2 = 5.54; p \leq .05; \text{OR} = 0.34; 95\% \text{ CI [0.14–0.84]}$). Adoptions from public agencies had 66% decreased odds of the child having had post-adoption contact with other birth relatives, although much of the significance in this relationship was influenced by whether the child lived with the birth family prior to the adoption. Children who lived with their birth families prior to their adoption had over seven times the
odds of having had post-adoption contact with other birth relatives (Wald $\chi^2 = 19.56; p \leq .001; \text{OR} = 7.58; 95\% \text{ CI [3.09–18.59]})$).

**DISCUSSION**

Open adoption arrangements can take a variety of forms and include different types of contact between the birth family and the adoptive family. Regardless of the form of contact, open adoption arrangements may be beneficial for all members of the adoption triad: children (Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008), adoptive parents (Cambell, Silverman, & Patti, 1991; Siegel, 2003), and birth parents (Neil, 2007a). While open adoption has been discussed and debated for decades, the discussion has largely focused on private adoptions (Frasch et al., 2000). This study provides pertinent information regarding openness in adoption, particularly open adoption arrangements within the context of foster care adoptions.

**Agreements for Post-Adoption Contact Promote Contact**

Agreements for post-adoption contact increased the likelihood of contact with the child’s birth family. This finding may be explained by the fact that families who are interested in post-adoption contact are more likely to pursue the completion of post-adoption agreements and arrangements for contact. With regard to the type of agreement, it is important to note that families were asked whether there was an agreement for post-adoption contact. However, an agreement could include anything from a formal legal agreement to an implied agreement between families. In fact, only a small number of families had written agreements for post-adoption contact. Written agreements were present in approximately 35% of private adoptions and 16% of adoptions from foster care. Despite the lack of more formal written agreements, post-adoption contact occurred for many of the children in this study.

**Lack of Open Adoption Arrangements in Foster Care Adoptions**

The results suggest that adoptions from foster care were less likely to have a pre-adoption agreement between the families regarding contact. Accordingly, adoptions from foster care were less likely to result in post-adoption contact with the birth families even though foster children were much more likely to have lived with their birth family prior to their adoption.

Nonetheless, the circumstances that contribute to a child’s entry into the foster care system can present a number of issues for birth and adoptive parents that can influence whether post-adoption contact will occur. Adoptions from foster care typically result from the termination of parental rights due to substantiated child maltreatment. As such, more complex issues are present for the adoptive and birth parents. Adoptive parents may experience residual
anger toward the birth family because of prior abuse or neglect that the child may have encountered or because of the birth family’s ongoing instability. Adoptive parents may also feel threatened by preexisting relationships that the child has with birth family members.

In contrast, birth families often have limited knowledge about the adversarial court process and may not have formal supports readily available to help them understand and navigate the legal process (Barsky, 1995). As a result, birth families may not attempt to formally or informally mediate post-adoption contact arrangements. Birth families may also feel guilt and shame for the conditions leading to the child’s entry into care and the subsequent termination (or in some instances relinquishment) of their parental rights. These feelings may prevent them from participating in the child’s life. In many cases, the birth parents’ rights were terminated long before the adoptive family was identified for the child, and thus the child may have lost contact with his or her birth family following termination of parental rights. In instances such as these, it is unlikely that the birth parent would have access to the necessary information needed to advocate for an open adoption agreement with the adoptive family. Such contact would likely only occur if the child welfare agency or judge were to deem contact between the child and the birth parent in the child’s best interest. Additionally, it is possible that some birth families and adoptive families may simply not understand that contact is an option.

Foster Care Adoptions Are Associated With Less Contact

The results suggest that children who have lived with their birth families are more likely to have post-adoption contact with their birth families regardless of the type of adoption. In fact, living with the birth family prior to the adoption appears to be an even stronger predictor of post-adoption contact than an actual agreement (formal or informal) for contact. Even so, foster children were much less likely to have had post-adoption contact despite that they were much more likely to have lived with their families prior to their adoption. Foster children are often adopted at older ages than children adopted through private adoption and therefore are likely to have lived with their families prior to their adoption. In this study, almost 43% of foster children had lived with their birth family prior to the adoption, while fewer than 10% of the children adopted through private adoptions had lived with their birth families prior to the adoption. Children adopted from private agencies are more likely to be adopted as infants and thus are less likely to have ever lived with their birth family (Vandivere et al., 2009).

One explanation for the differences in contact may be due to the experiences children had in their birth families prior to their adoption. Children adopted from foster care had adoptive parents who reported likely past abuse and neglect at much higher levels than children adopted through pri-
Private adoptions. However, the results of this study suggest that likely prior maltreatment was not a significant predictor of post-adoption contact. Another possible explanation for the difference in post-adoption contact may be related to circumstances outside the control of the birth and/or the adoptive parents. Birth families of children in foster care often face more complex issues that prevent them from providing a safe and protective environment for the children. Issues such as incarceration, substance use, domestic violence, or the presence of mental illness may have influenced whether termination of parental rights was pursued. Each of these issues can impact birth parents' ability and desire to maintain contact with their child. Furthermore, if a judicial proceeding or agency mandate had previously limited the contact between the child and birth family, then the adoptive family may feel compelled to honor that arrangement post-adoption.

Differences in post-adoption contact may also be the result of how the adoptive placement for the child was selected, as the selection process for children in foster care differs greatly from how placements are selected for children adopted privately. In private adoptions, both the birth and the adoptive family participate in the selection process. In adoptions from foster care, the state or county assumes the role of legal guardian of the child and therefore is typically the one to select the adoptive family for the child. Birth families do not necessarily have a say in determining where or with whom the child will be placed, nor do they have the necessary leverage to encourage post-adoption contact in the same manner as birth parents in private adoptions. Likewise, adoptive parents who adopt from the foster care system are not always provided the opportunity to meet the child's birth family to develop a relationship and share information about the child's history, the birth family's issues, or plans for future parenting. Because of these limitations, discomfort and distrust between the adoptive and birth families may exist.

Parental Contact Varied

Results of this study suggest that the amount of contact between birth and adoptive parents differ based on the type of adoption. In foster care adoptions, both the adoptive parents and the child were likely to be in contact with the birth family: 21% of adoptive parents and 22% of adopted children were in contact with birth families. However, parental contact with birth families was much higher for private adoptions. In the families that completed private adoptions, only 37% of children were in contact with birth parents while 50% of adoptive parents were in contact with birth families. This finding suggests that parents who adopted privately may have preferred to maintain contact with the child's birth family per their pre-adoption agreements rather than facilitating substantive contact between the birth family and adopted child.
Passage of Time Did Not Influence Contact

The child's age at the time of placement with their adoptive family did not impact the likelihood of contact. Additionally, the passage of time was not a significant predictor of more contact. At the time of NSAP, most of these children were in middle childhood or adolescence. Particularly during adolescence, children often explore their own self-identity. As a result of this process, it is reasonable to assume that some children may desire to initiate contact or, in cases where contact already occurs, increase contact with their birth families. However, the results of these analyses suggest that age at the time of the interview did not significantly impact post-adoption contact. In other words, children who may have been adopted as infants but were now adolescents were not more or less likely to have contact with their birth families simply because more time had passed. Rather, post-adoption contact appeared to be determined by agreements made at the time of the adoption.

Limitations

While this study presents compelling evidence regarding post-adoption contact in open adoptions from private agencies and foster care, these findings should be interpreted within the context of the study's limitations. The selection of covariates included in the study was based on secondary data which ultimately limited the range of available variables that could be included. Therefore, the possibility of omitted variable bias exists. For example, NSAP only contains data about the children from the adoptive parents' perspective. Birth families and issues with the birth family such as substance use, family violence, incarceration, and the family's interest in the child were not measured or represented in this data. All of these issues may have influenced the likelihood of post-adoption contact, particularly for children in foster care.

Moreover, there are common limitations related to secondary data analysis in terms of measurement bias and limitations related to the scope of the data collected. Data in NSAP were collected only from adoptive parents. Particularly with older children, contact between birth families and children may occur without the adoptive parents' knowledge. Additionally, reasons for contact and the manner of contact were not collected. Contact in this study could include anything from extensive face-to-face visits with the birth family to periodic letters. Therefore, the complexity of birth and adoptive family contact is not captured within the survey. Additionally, the most consistent predictor of post-adoption contact was whether the child lived with their birth family prior to adoption. Because this variable only indicated whether the child lived with the family prior to the adoption, more specific information is needed regarding the length of time the child lived with the birth family, as well as which birth family members resided in the household at the time. These factors are not captured by NSAP and could reveal more
in-depth information about the relationship between the child’s prior living situation and his or her post-adoption contact. Construction of variables was also limited by the information available in the survey. For instance, the child’s age was coded in NSAP as a categorical variable to ensure the families’ privacy. Additionally, prior abuse history was discussed in terms of parents’ perceptions of whether the abuse was likely to have had occurred, rather than whether abuse actually occurred.

Policy, Practice, and Future Research Directions

McRoy et al. (2007) note that the dialogue about open adoption has shifted from whether contact is “good” or “bad” to more specific questions, such as what type of contact is recommended, under what circumstances children and families benefit from contact, and when is the most appropriate time for contact. These questions are especially pertinent to foster care adoption, as the circumstances surrounding foster care adoption vary greatly from those of private adoptions. Parents who adopt a child from the foster care system must weigh the potential benefits of post-adoption contact while balancing the need to protect the child from the very issues that may have led to the child’s entry into the foster care system.

In addition to these considerations, the circumstances under which open adoption agreements are made in foster care adoption may also vary greatly from private adoption. Adoption from foster care typically only occurs after extensive efforts have been made to reunify the child with his or her birth family. The contentious and adversarial nature of the child welfare and court system frequently results in a problematic dynamic between parties that positions them as opponents. This dynamic can result in breakdowns in communication between parties that can influence adoptive parents’ willingness to facilitate contact with the children’s birth families.

Given that open adoption remains a relatively new concept in foster care adoption, agencies and families may benefit from more concrete guidelines regarding the circumstances under which children and families are most likely to benefit from these arrangements, as well as when contact should be avoided. Future research efforts should work toward identifying and delineating criteria to help agencies and families navigate the decision-making process and help families determine whether post-adoption contact will be beneficial to their children.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that open adoption arrangements and post-adoption contact in adoptions from foster care do exist; however, they occur less frequently than in private adoptions. This study represents the first
data from a nationally representative sample of adopted children and thus fills significant gaps in the literature regarding what happens after adoptions, particularly adoptions from foster care, are finalized. While research has demonstrated that open adoption can be a positive experience for those involved, more information is needed regarding the potential benefits and/or problems with open adoption arrangements in foster care adoptions. Aside from determining best practices in open adoptions from foster care, options for post-adoption contact should be presented to adoptive and birth families when it is determined to be in the best interest of the child. Public child welfare agencies should incorporate practices that facilitate open adoption, provide post-adoption services to facilitate contact, and assist both birth and adoptive families in managing contact.

REFERENCES


