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Deborah H. Siegel
Rhode Island College, dsiegel@ric.edu

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Recommended Citation
Siegel, Deborah H., "Open Adoption of Infants: Adoptive Parents' Feelings Seven Years Later" (2003). Faculty Publications. Paper 226.
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Open Adoption of Infants: Adoptive Parents’ Perceptions of Advantages and Disadvantages

Deborah H. Siegel

As the frequency of open adoptions of infants increases, furious debate continues between those who argue that open adoption is a grave mistake and those who assert that it is a long-overdue innovation. This article defines open adoption, summarizes the open adoption controversy, and presents a qualitative descriptive study of adoptive parents’ reactions to the recent open adoptions of their infants. Findings indicate overwhelmingly positive feelings about open adoption and some issues and concerns unique to the open adoption experience. The article concludes that social workers involved in adoptions should move from their traditional stance in directing and defining the birthparent–adoptive parent relationship to one that facilitates greater individualization and self-determination among the members of the adoption triad.
As a result of these trends, many social workers in adoption slowly realized that practices they had long held to be “compassionate and humane” were “perceived as cold and coercive” (Churchman, 1986, p. 11; see also Silber & Dorner, 1989). Open adoption emerged as an effort to alleviate some of the problems inherent in traditional closed adoption practices (Bradbury & Marsh, 1988).

What Is Open Adoption?

The term open adoption refers to a continuum of options that enables birthparents and adoptive parents to have information about and communicate with one another before or after placement of the child or at both times. Some adoptions have minimal openness; for example, the two sets of parents never meet, talk with each other, or share last names, but before the birth they exchange letters and photographs through an intermediary. Other adoptions are quite open; for example, before placement the two sets of parents meet, exchange complete names and addresses, go together to physicians’ appointments during the pregnancy, or perhaps even live with each other, and they continue visits throughout the adoptee’s childhood. Between these two ends of the continuum lie numerous alternative arrangements. In essence, in open adoption the exchange of information may occur before or after placement or both, either by letter (with or without photographs) or telephone calls or in face-to-face meetings. The number of permutations is virtually limitless. The nature of the openness tends to be dictated by an agency’s policy or by the beliefs and wishes of the intermediaries (such as social workers, medical personnel, or attorneys) and parents who are involved in a particular adoption (Watson, 1988).

An essential feature of open adoption, regardless of the extent of the openness, is that the birthparents legally relinquish all parental claims and rights to the child. The adoptive parents are the legal parents. Thus, open adoption is legally distinct from foster care (Borgman, 1982; Byrd, 1988).

Proponents of traditional closed adoption continue to claim that openness will cause “destructive relationships and loyalty conflicts” (Derdeyn, 1979, p. 215), interfere with the adoptive parents’ bonding with the child, lead the birthparents to intrude on the adoptive family (Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985b), exacerbate the adoptee’s uncertainty about his or her identity (Austin, 1979; Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell, Woods, Schmidt, & Tucker, 1985; Zeilinguer, 1979), and interfere with the birthparents’ grief work (Byrd, 1988; Kraft, Palombo, Woods, Mitchell, & Schmidt, 1985a).

As an increasing number of agencies offer the option of open adoption, earnest debate continues over whether open adoption is a long-overdue innovation or a grave mistake.

Unfortunately, little empirical research has been conducted on the advantages and disadvantages of open adoption (Belbax, 1987; McRoy & Grotevant, 1987; McRoy, Grotevant, & Ayers-Lopez, 1991; McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988). As Curtis (1986) concluded, “Because infants cannot speak for themselves and because no empirical evidence is available regarding the consequences of open versus closed adoption, arguments... remain abstract and value laden” (p. 442). Proponents and opponents of open adoption continue to make conflicting claims about whether openness facilitates or impedes birthparents’ grieving, enhances or obstructs adoptees’ identity formation, and promotes or inhibits adoptive parents’ abilities to raise their children.

Thus, today most adoption agencies are concerned about the need for research in this area (Groth, Bonnardel, Devis, Martin, & Vousden, 1987). Given the newness of open adoption practices, a longitudinal study to identify the different outcomes of different types of open adoptions is not yet possible. Nevertheless, today’s birthparents and adoptive parents have much to teach social workers about their experiences with openness. Qualitative descriptive research on adoptive parents’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of open adoption can shed light on the open adoption debate. Given the intensity of the debate and the profound ramifications of open adoptions, systematic empirical research is crucial.

Method

Sample

A snowball sample of adoptive parents who had adopted an infant in 1988 or 1989 was generated. This nonprobability sampling technique is commonly accepted as the preferred method for exploratory studies of areas that were not previously investigated empirically (Babbc, 1986; Grinnell, 1988; Sellitz, Wrightman, & Cook, 1981).

To protect the confidentiality of potential respondents, the researcher did not contact them directly. Rather, an open letter inviting prospective participants to contact the researcher was included in newsletters of two New England infertility and adoption-support organizations and was sent by a New England interstate compact official to all parents who had a recent open adoption in his state.

The open letter defined open adoptions as “those in which the birthparent(s) and adoptive parent(s) share
with each other some sort of information about themselves and have some sort of personal contact before and/or after the adoption takes place (perhaps by letter, phone, or face-to-face meetings).” The letter invited the parents “to participate in an interview that’s part of a study about parents’ reactions to open adoption. The purpose of the study is to help other parents, as well as social workers and other professionals in the adoption field, improve the ways open adoptions are handled.” The letter explained that the interview would be tape-recorded in the respondents’ home and that parents would be interviewed jointly as a couple and guaranteed confidentiality.

Data Collection and Analysis

A semistructured interview guide (Gochros, 1988) was developed and then pretested to assess the instrument’s content validity. On the basis of feedback from two social work educators, five adoption professionals, an adoptive mother, and a birthmother, some items were added to the questionnaire and others were revised. The interview asked respondents to describe the nature of their open adoption experiences.

The interviews were conducted in 1989. They lasted from 1 1/2 to four hours, depending on how much the respondents had to say. A written summary of each taped interview was prepared, and the summaries were coded according to customary procedures for the analysis of qualitative data (Van Maanen, 1983; Van Maanen, Dabbs, & Faulkner, 1982). Themes that characterized the respondents’ answers to each question were identified.

Findings

The Sample

Twenty-one adoptive couples were included in the sample. The fathers’ and mothers’ average ages were 39.5 and 37 years, respectively. The parents’ highest level of education ranged from high school dropout (n = 1) to a bachelor’s or master’s degree (n = 15) to a doctorate (n = 3) or doctor of medicine degree (n = 2). The couples had been married an average of eight years. Five had children by birth before adopting and four had adopted two children by the time of the interview.

Five of the open adoptions occurred under agency auspices, but in only two of those adoptions were the babies located by the agencies; the other three were “identified adoptions,” meaning that the adoptive parents located a birthmother themselves and then worked with an agency to obtain other adoption-related services (such as a home study, counseling during the adoption process, and the legally mandated postadoption follow-up). At the time of the interview, the babies ranged in age from six weeks to two years; 13 of the adoptions were finalized. The adoption costs from $500 (n = 1) to $25,000 (n = 2), with a mean of $9,989. The costs typically included the birthmothers’ medical expenses, all legal expenses associated with the adoption, the home study fee, counseling for both the birthmother and adoptive parents, and sometimes travel expenses for the adoptive parents and living expenses for the birthmother.

Openness in the Adoptions

The type and extent of openness of the 24 open adoptions in which the 21 couples had participated varied significantly. By far the least open adoption was one in which an agency located the baby for the adopting couple. There was no preplacement contact between the birthmother and adoptive parents, and postplacement contact was restricted to letters exchanged through the agency, which screened them to ensure that no identifying information was shared. On the other hand, in the most open adoption, the birthparents and adoptive parents discovered each other at church during the pregnancy and visited each other at least monthly before and after the birth.

The openness in the other adoptions in the sample fell somewhere between these two ends of the continuum of contact. The most striking feature of the different arrangements was their diversity. Each adoptive parent–birthparent pair had arranged a form of openness that seemed to make sense to them.

Initial Feelings about Open Adoption

All the respondents were asked, “What, if any, were your initial fears, anxieties, and concerns about the adoption being open?” and “How did you initially feel about doing an open adoption?” Only four respondents expressed no initial misgivings. The others expressed a wide range of initial reservations. According to one adoptive mother,

A year or so ago, the idea of a birthmother was so threatening to me. It was just some terrible obstacle between me and getting a baby. At that point, I didn’t want to deal with birthmothers at all. I wanted my own baby. And if I couldn’t have that, I wanted the closest thing I could get to it.

Others felt reluctant to deal with the birthmothers’ pain. Some parents worried that the birthmothers would want their babies back or that the babies would be kidnapped. Others noted that openness seemed scary simply because it was unknown. To them, its unfamiliarity made it seem “weird,” “uncomfortable,” and “awkward.” As one parent put it, “I was terrified.
Isn’t this the craziest thing you’ve ever done in your life?” Several worried that the birthparents would reject them. For example, one parent said, “I felt anxious, apprehensive, because it’s like an audition.”

**Advantages of an Open Adoption**

Despite these initial fears, anxieties, and concerns, at the time of the interview none of the respondents regretted participating in an open adoption. None thought that open adoption had been a mistake or wished that he or she had chosen a closed adoption. The parents identified a wide variety of advantages of open adoption over closed adoption, most of which concerned their own interests.

Many of the respondents indicated that they chose to pursue an open adoption, despite their initial misgivings, because closed adoptions were unavailable. Closed adoption was not an option because the agencies’ waiting lists were too long (from three to 15 years), the parents were ineligible for an agency adoption (because of their age or religion), or the parents could not locate a private, closed adoption through a physician or an attorney.

The parents thought that open adoption gave them some control over which birthparents to work with. This belief served as an antidote to their helplessness and frustration over their infertility and increased their sense of personal efficacy. According to some parents,

> It became clear to us that we were in a great deal of control. You can end a relationship with a birthmother at any point you want. You’re not required to continue. If we felt uncomfortable, we could pull out. If it turns out you just can’t communicate with her [you can seek a birthmother with whom you’re a better fit.]

> . . .

> I can’t imagine someone else making a decision about which child belongs to me.

> . . .

> We don’t like going into things with our eyes closed. I want to make my own decisions with as much information as I can have.

Most of the respondents noted that open adoption helped them prepare for their role as parents and would help them parent more effectively. They thought that contact with the birthparents enabled them to find out about the birthparents’ personalities, medical histories, and health risks during pregnancy. This information was reassuring. One respondent said, “I don’t have to trust that someone else interviewed the birthmother thoroughly and accurately and then reported the information to me reliably.” It also alerted the parents to possible special needs that might require early intervention. Knowing troubling information about the lack of prenatal care or the birthparents’ alcoholism, substance abuse, or genetic risk factors was helpful because the truth is “better than big secrets.”

The dissolution of fantasies was a frequently mentioned theme. As one respondent said, “If you see the person, so much of your projections and fantasies go out the window because there is a concrete relationship. . . . At least you can see the person with whom you’re dealing, and all the cards are on the table.”

The parents also thought that open adoption would enable them to answer more adequately their children’s questions about their origins: Said one respondent, “I have a responsibility to be able to answer reasonable questions that my child asks. Open adoption gives us better tools to parent.” Openness also gave the parents the birthparent’s or birthparents’ explicit permission to be the child’s parent. As one mother put it, “I wanted to be chosen.”

Several parents felt the need to know that the birthmother had chosen adoption freely and willingly because it alleviated their guilt about having someone else’s child and alleviated fears that the birthmother would reappear to reclaim the child later. Finally, some of the parents gained needed reassurance that the birthparents felt good about the decision. It would bother them in a moral sense to know that the birthparents thought that the adoption had been a mistake. One parent explained, “I’m comforted by knowing she’s not in anguish about where this baby is.”

Five advantages for the child were identified. All the parents noted that openness made information about the birthfamilies easily accessible to the children, should the children decide to search for them later in life. Those parents who knew the birthparents’ last names and addresses felt relieved that the information was not controlled by an agency or law, but could be freely handed over to the children when the parents deemed it appropriate. The parents also were pleased that the children would have more adequate information about their biological heritage and about the reasons for the adoption. Two couples said they were glad their children would grow up with access to biological siblings. Others expressed pleasure at knowing that the birthparents would welcome the children if they chose to locate them later on, and three parents noted that the more people who loved their children, the better.

The parents also thought there were advantages for the birthparents. Most stated that it was more humane and compassionate to enable the birthparents to choose the children’s families. As one father put it, open adoption “empowers both sides. Both sides hold
the cards. They're informed and knowledgeable.” Another pointed out that “with open adoption, everyone has a lot more control, except the agency.” One father saw closed adoption as a way of punishing women for being sexually active: “I think closed agency adoptions have basically been another way by which society sought to control women….”

The parents also thought that the birthparents were comforted and reassured by knowing where their babies were and by having periodic updates about the babies’ well-being. As one noted, “It’s more comfortable to know you’ve placed your baby in a home you know, not in a social worker’s arms or an agency, but with two people you’ve gotten to know and trust.”

One adoptive mother was also a birthmother and an adoptee in closed adoptions and another adoptive mother was also an adoptee in a closed adoption. Both believed that participating in an open adoption was a corrective emotional experience for them, a way of symbolically correcting some of the anguish that traditional adoption had caused them. Finally, many of the respondents simply thought that open adoption enabled “a more natural relationship” among all members of the adoption triad.

Disadvantages of an Open Adoption

Although the tone of all the interviews was overwhelmingy and strikingly positive toward open adoption, respondents identified disadvantages. Some parents expressed uncertainty about the long-term impact of open adoption on the adoptees, as in the following comments:

If we’re wimpy about this [postplacement visits] and we play around with these visits and our child gets hurt in that way, then we’ll know when it’s too late to fix, and that’s a big, big concern of mine.

I still have fears about the openness of it. I don’t know how it will affect the baby in the long run. I think it will be better because I think secrets are much worse, I guess.

All the other disadvantages the respondents identified related to themselves, not to the children or birthparents. One adoptive mother of a three-month old expressed acute distress over the fact that shortly after the baby was placed, the birthmother had confided to her the awful discovery that the birth had left her infertile. The adoptive mother felt a strong need for distance from this birthmother’s pain, loss, and regrets, but felt unable to add to the birthmother’s hurt by asking for less frequent telephone contact. She said, “It’s like climbing a mountain blind. I feel there is no road map.”

A mother of an 18-month old recalled that during the baby’s first nine months, she was acutely aware that the baby had come from another woman’s body and felt that it impeded bonding. She stated, “That’s the downside of open adoption for me. Is it going to feel like your baby, or is it going to feel like somebody else’s baby?” Another mother said,

I went through a stage when I looked at the baby and kept saying, “He looks just like his birthmother, he looks just like his birthsister. I wish I had never seen them!” But that doesn’t bother me now. Now it pleases me. It was a reminder of their reality, I guess. But that was the reality.

One couple became extremely close to their teenage birthmother during her pregnancy. They lived for a while with her in her apartment, counseled her through several crises, and wiped her brow during labor. A year after the adoption, they found that she was having trouble letting go of the intimate relationship with them despite previous agreements to do so; she continued occasionally to call them when she was in crisis.

The couple in the sample with the most open adoption also wondered how to set limits on the frequency and type of postplacement contact without hurting feelings. They said, nonetheless, that their ongoing visits “feel great,” and they expressed confidence that they could share their concerns with the birthmother and work out a mutually satisfying accommodation.

All the parents spoke of the uncertainties and emotional upheaval involved in pursuing their adoptions. As one respondent expressed it, “Everyone’s just flying by the seat of their pants. It’s all happy in the end, but boy is it a roller coaster ride.” One adoptive mother, herself an adoptee, felt pressure to be the perfect parent when members of the birthfamily were around. Other couples noted that coping with their families’ and friends’ fantasies and fears was troublesome: “They fill you with all their fears. You not only have your own to deal with.” These couples expressed no current misgivings about the openness in their adoptions, but did find it difficult to cope with anxious others. Two respondents mentioned that if they were in the birthmother’s hometown, they might feel some tension and anxiety over the prospect of accidentally bumping into her.

The respondent who expressed the least enthusiasm for open adoption thought that “openness is better for the child.” He had one brief meeting with the birthparents before placement, and his wife had sent the birthmother two letters and some photographs during the first year. He thought that even this was too much contact:
I would just as soon she wasn’t involved ever again. I would prefer the birthmother have as little contact as possible with us until our son is well into his teens. I’m nervous about it completely, actually, because our son’s birthparents are from a completely different social and educational class, and I have a fear in the back of my mind that he’ll want to identify with them.

Despite this list of disadvantages, not one respondent regretted having an open adoption. Although a few experienced painful or troubling issues related to openness, no one thought that openness itself was a mistake. When asked for their current feelings about their open adoptions, the adoptive parents indicated that they felt “very comfortable,” and “right” and added such statements as “I love it, I really do,” “The degree of openness was just right,” and “I have no problem maintaining the contact.”

Discussion

This empirical investigation of adoptive parents’ perceptions of the initial effects of openness on themselves and their infants contributes substantially to the open adoption debate. Clearly, in many situations, open adoption can be a desirable option. Unlike the professionals who have written about open adoption, the parents in this study did not muse about theory; they described their own poignant, emotionally charged experiences. And they have glowing things to say about the advantages of openness. Thus, this study is a beginning rebuttal to claims that open adoption is, across the board, a grave error (Austin, 1979; Kraft, Palombo, Mitchell et al., 1985, 1986; Kraft, Palombo, Woods et al., 1985a, 1985b). It is also possible, however, that some of the parents’ positive feelings about open adoption could be due to cognitive dissonance or to a reaction formation, given that there may have been no traditional alternative available to them.

The parents often noted that the issue of openness was eclipsed by the enormity of four other concerns: coping with infertility; finding a baby; dealing with unresponsive or obstructive social workers, lawyers, and medical personnel; and dealing with the lifelong issues present in all adoptive families. The parents, whatever level of openness they experienced, thought that openness was simply not a matter of much concern.

For five parents (in four couples), however, the openness issue was more central. The father who wanted no postplacement contact with his son’s birthmother resented her ongoing presence in his life (which consisted of a once-a-year exchange of letters), and he feared that his child might identify with her “lower-class background.” These feelings seemed to indicate that the father was not yet comfortable with some adoption realities—that the birthmother existed whether he wanted her to or not and that his child did come from a low-income, poorly educated birthfamily with whom the child might identify.

Similarly, discomfort over infertility and the realities of adoption underpinned the difficulties experienced by the mother who felt so painfully aware of the birthmother’s fertility that bonding with the baby took a while. She said, “I remember thinking, when he was nine months old, ‘Well, now I’ve had him as long as she did. Now I can begin to feel like he’s more mine than hers.’ . . . It was a hangover of feelings of inadequacy due to infertility.” Perhaps spending time with the birthmother during her pregnancy and labor exacerbated these feelings (there was no postplacement contact).

In other instances, it is difficult to separate the disadvantages of open adoption from the disadvantages of any adoption. For example, open adoption may or may not be more of “a roller coaster ride” than may some closed adoptions. Parents in closed adoptions also report looking over their shoulders in supermarkets to see if the birthmothers are there. Many adoptive parents feel pressure to be perfect, fear the birthparents’ rejection or intrusion, and take a while to bond with their babies (Melina, 1986, 1989; Schaffer & Lindstrom, 1989).

Two couples became so intimate with the birthmothers that separating after placement was especially difficult. These couples wanted less frequent phone calls so they could “get on with our lives,” but did not demand it, out of concern for the birthmothers’ feelings. One spouse in each of these couples did, however, believe that over time he or she would be able to talk with the birthmothers about his or her concerns and that the birthmothers would, out of regard for the child, give the adoptive families the distance they needed.

Implications for Practice

Although the snowball sample used in this exploratory study may not be representative of the entire population of adoptive parents who have participated in open adoptions, the findings suggest several tentative guidelines for social work practice in adoption:

1. Some degree of openness in adoption can be a viable option. Openness should be offered to every birthparent and prospective adoptive parent as one of the various adoption options to be considered. Agencies should allow and facilitate contact between birthparents and adoptive parents before or after placement or both.
2. A wide array of different types and frequencies of pre-and postplacement contact may work out well, depending on the needs of each birthparent-adoptive parent match. The social worker’s role is to help the parents in each match choose for themselves the arrangement that feels most comfortable to them. Thus, the adoption is shaped by the two sets of parents, not by the professional. Historically, agencies have required birthparents and adoptive parents to follow agency procedures and guidelines regarding contact with each other; relinquishing this control to the two sets of parents may require a major shift for some adoption professionals. This shift will enhance each adoption triad member’s right to self-determination.

3. Contact between birthparents and adoptive parents may arouse particularly uncomfortable feelings in adoptive parents regarding their infertility and the issues of difference that confront every adoptive family. Traditional confidential adoption may allow adoptive parents more opportunity to avoid facing these themes because the birthparents are a less tangible part of the adoptive family’s life. Because successful open adoption requires that adoptive parents be comfortable with the fact that their child has other parents, too, helping them feel comfortable with that reality can be an important part of the social worker’s role. In open adoption, it is particularly important that the social worker enable the adoptive parents to identify and find functional ways of coping with feelings and issues regarding infertility and adoption.

4. It may be wise for each birthparent-adoptive parent match to delineate clearly, in writing, before placement, how often and what form of postplacement contact will occur. Because people’s needs change over time, they should have an agreed-on mechanism for renegotiating their plan. For instance, they may agree that the person who wants a different arrangement will communicate that wish to the social worker, who will then contact the other party to begin formulating a new agreement. Leaving these issues inadequately explored before placement can arouse unnecessary anxieties and produce avoidable misunderstandings later.

5. Social workers who are involved in open adoptions should recognize that open adoptions, like all adoptions, are a lifelong process and that triad members’ feelings about and reactions to openness may evolve over time. Thus, agencies should make ongoing educational, supportive, and counseling services readily available to each member of the adoption triad throughout the life cycle. Social workers should teach birthparents, adoptive parents, and adoptees that in most open adoptions there are predictable developmental phases that require new coping skills; that open adoption is a process, not an event; and that successful open adoption requires empathy and trust from both sets of parents, the ability to identify one’s feelings and needs, and a commitment to place the needs of the child first. Successful open adoptions are based on triad members’ abilities to engage in creative, mature, and responsible problem solving. The social worker’s task is to facilitate the development of these problem-solving skills, rather than to dictate solutions.

6. In some cases, it may be inevitable, and perhaps desirable, that the birthparents and adoptive parents become close during the pregnancy and delivery. This study’s findings indicate that when adoptive parents take on the role of primary nurturer of the birthparents, they may later have difficulties leaving that role. The social worker can be helpful to both sets of parents by serving as a confidant and crisis manager for them. In this way, the adoptive parents may be more free to focus on the major life-adjustment tasks ahead of them, and birthparents may be better protected from feeling rejected and abandoned by the adoptive parents.

Conclusion

Previous research found that a majority of adoptions “were judged unequivocally successful” (Kadushin & Martin, 1988, p. 618). Thus, it may not be surprising that the parents in this study of open adoptions feel good about their adoptions, too. The true test of open adoption will come when adoptees who have been raised in confidential adoptions and in various forms of open adoptions can compare their stories. Even then, carefully controlled research to tease out the effects of open adoption arrangements that are subtly but profoundly different may be elusive.

This study addressed adoptive parents’ feelings during their children’s infancy and early toddlerhood. As the current generation of children of open adoption matures, longitudinal research must be done on what openness in adoption has meant to them and to their
adoptive parents and birthparents. Until more definitive empirical information is available, human services professionals will be wise to show compassion and a willingness to individualize when facilitating adoption plans.

References


Deborah H. Siegel, PhD, ACSW, CISW, is associate professor, School of Social Work, Rhode Island College, Providence, RI 02908. An earlier version of this article was presented at Social Work '90: NASW’s Meeting of the Profession, Boston, November 1990.

Accepted September 21, 1991