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# Maintaining Open Adoption Relationships: Practitioner Insights on Adoptive Parents' Regulation of Adoption Kinship Networks

Colleen Warner Colaner & Kristina M. Scharp

*The present study explores practitioner perceptions of and observations about the adoptive parent, birth parent, and adoptee interactions that regulate open adoption relationships. Grounded in family systems theory, practitioner interviews (N = 19) were analyzed to understand the degree to which open adoption shapes the family system as well as the opportunities, challenges, and considerations experienced by individuals in open adoption. Findings reveal that open adoption relationships consist of numerous complex relationships. This complexity generates significant opportunities for connection. At the same time, the complexity of the system generates challenges. Social networking provides costs and rewards that require consideration on an individual basis. Findings offer implications for the utility of family systems theory in illuminating diverse family construction as well as open adoption communication research.*

*Keywords:* adoptive parents; diverse families; family systems theory; open adoption

Open adoptions are now the norm in domestic infant adoption, meaning that adoptive families have various degrees of knowledge of and interaction with the birth parents (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Scholars have uncovered numerous benefits to maintaining open adoptions, such as identity clarity for adoptees, increased closure for birth mothers, and additional information about the child's background for adoptive

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Colleen Warner Colaner (PhD, University of Nebraska) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Missouri. Kristina M. Scharp (PhD, University of Iowa) is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Languages, Philosophy, and Communication Studies at Utah State University. Correspondence to: Colleen Warner Colaner, Department of Communication, University of Missouri, 212 Switzer, Columbia, MO 65211, USA. E-mail: [colanerc@missouri.edu](mailto:colanerc@missouri.edu)

parents (Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013). However, adoptive parents are increasingly challenged to manage the birth-parent relationship in ways that sustain the viability of the adoptive family yet meaningfully include the birth parent (Galvin & Colaner, 2013). Maintaining these complex relationships requires considerable communication skill (Grotevant, 2009).

Every open adoption arrangement differs with regard to reasons for placement and the personalities and preferences of the individuals involved (Grotevant et al., 2008). Given such variation, there is not a “one-size-fits-all” approach to open adoption arrangements (Atwood, 2007). Rather, adoptive and birth families decide together what type of contact is best based on the idiosyncratic features of the adoption placement. Individuals in open adoptions are “relationship pioneers” who enact their relationship through trial and error in the absence of relational templates (Grotevant, 2009, p. 311).

Adoption practitioners, including adoption agency directors, social workers, and adoption counselors, can offer important insight into this complex family relationship. Practitioners have a broad range of experiences as an adoption facilitator in numerous experiences with various members of the adoption triad. These experiences offer practitioners a *systems* view of open adoptions. *Family systems theory* provides a useful framework for understanding complex relationship networks, such as those created via open adoption. A systems perspective calls attention to “the holistic nature of interaction patterns as opposed to attending to individual family members” (Galvin, Dickson, & Marrow, 2006, p. 310). Given the complexity of open adoption relationships, attending to a systems-level view of open adoption relationships can shed light onto the important regulative behaviors that sustain these relationships.

The purpose of the present study is to explore practitioner perceptions of and observations about how adoptive parents, birth parents, and children interact to regulate the open adoption relationship. Toward this end, it is necessary to first discuss open adoption practices, to then describe family systems theory, and finally to explore the relational implications of joining birth and adoptive families into a larger kinship network.

## Understanding Open Adoption

Open adoption relationships are a relatively new relational form. Historically, adoptions were shrouded in secrecy and stigma (Galvin & Colaner, 2013). Birth parents were unknown to the adoptive family, and adoptees were often not told that they were adopted (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Eventually, practitioners began to understand the harm generated by such secrecy for adoptees’ identity work and birth parents’ grief resolution, and practitioners moved to increase transparency in adoption placements and ongoing conversations (Berry, 1993).

Over time and in light of research pertaining to the negative outcomes associated with secrecy, open adoption emerged in earnest around the early 1990s. Open adoption occurs when there is purposeful contact between adoptive parents, birth

families, and adoptees (McRoy, Grotevant, Ayers-Lopez, & Henney, 2007). Such contact can vary in scope and intensity, ranging from the exchange of limited information via letters to prolonged face-to-face visits (Grotevant et al., 2008). Currently, approximately 95% of domestic infant adoption placements involve some level of birth-parent contact (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Research over the past 30 years has shed significant light on the positive outcomes of open adoption. Adoptees can learn desired details on their birth, reasons for placement in the adoptive family, and a source of knowledge for personal attributes, proclivities, and health information (Grotevant, 2000; Scharp & Steuber, 2014). Adoptive parents are generally more satisfied with their level of contact than individuals in closed adoptions (Grotevant et al., 2013). Birth parents involved in open adoptions express satisfaction with their placement decision and benefit from receiving updates on the child's well-being and development (McRoy et al., 2007). Across the board, the benefits of open adoption are clear.

Despite the benefits of open adoption, however, open adoption arrangements are complex, idiosyncratic relational configurations. Individuals in open adoptions have to decide on a case-by-case basis how much contact is best for whom (Atwood, 2007). The nature of the contact often changes over time in response to developmental stages (McRoy et al., 2007). Individuals in mutually satisfying open adoption relationships rely upon boundary management, flexibility, tolerance for ambiguity, and emotional distance regulation to maintain a positive, child-centered connection (Grotevant, 2009).

Clearly, communication is central to the open adoption relationship. Galvin (2014) argues that all families bear a discursive burden, but more so when the family form departs from the traditional nuclear biological family. Given their considerable complexity and variation, open adoption relationships in particular are created and sustained through communication. To date, however, the bulk of open adoption research has focused on the *structure* of open adoption configurations (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2008) as well as the *outcomes* of birth-parent contact (e.g., Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzalez, 2011). An increasing number of communication scholars are turning attention to adoption research; however, this research typically focuses on closed adoption (Colaner & Kranstuber, 2010; Kranstuber & Kellas, 2011), adoption reunion (Scharp, 2013; Scharp & Steuber, 2014), international adoption (Docan-Morgan, 2011; Suter, 2008), and foster adoption (Suter, Baxter, Seurer, & Thomas, 2014). Some communication research has emerged on open adoption, but this work tends to focus on societal discourses of adoption (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, & Scharp, 2012; Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, & Scharp, 2014). Thus, despite a robust literature on adoption communication (Suter, 2014), we know very little about the communication that creates and sustains open adoptions. Given the highly discourse-dependent nature of these relationships, more is needed to illuminate the communication processes at work in open adoption (Galvin & Colaner, 2013). The current study answers this call by utilizing family systems theory to examine the interactive patterns that adoption practitioners observe in open adoption family systems.

## A SYSTEMS PERSPECTIVE ON COMPLEX FAMILY STRUCTURES

Family systems theory (FST) acknowledges the myriad ways individual family members interact to create and maintain a larger family system (White & Klein, 2002). A systems perspective emphasizes the *interdependence* of family members, noting that changes to one part of the system influence the whole system. Thus, disruption to one or two members of the family tends to impact all family members. *Wholeness* highlights that emergent properties characterizing each individual member ultimately represent an entire family. Families operate in myriad ways, suggesting that there might be more than one path to achieve a desired goal, a concept known as *equifinality*.

Families engage in *patterns/regularities*, such as communication rules, to make their lives predictable and manageable. FST points to a dynamic interplay of these patterns, referred to as *interactive complexity*. Galvin et al. (2006) note that “interaction patterns trump cause/effect analysis” (p. 313), such that patterns culminate in cyclical interplay. For example, blaming one family member is unproductive given the fact that all members play a part in creating problematic patterns. A family systems perspective acknowledges family interaction with surrounding environments, thus regulating *openness* with the outside world. *Complex relationships* emerge due to different combinations of subrelationships, which create alliances and coalitions to alleviate conflict or to establish predictable interaction patterns. More complex family forms have greater potential for interpersonal subsystems.

## A FAMILY SYSTEMS APPROACH TO OPEN ADOPTION RELATIONSHIPS

Considerable potential exists for FST to expand our understanding of open adoption relationships. Open adoption requires that the nuclear adoptive family system expand to include members of the birth family (Grotevant, 2000). Adoptive parents, then, must regulate the boundary around the nuclear adoptive family to allow birth parents access to the adopted child. At the same time, adoptive parents must maintain the centrality of the adoptive-parent relationship, given that the adoptive parents hold the role as legal guardians and parental figures (Grotevant, 2009). This complex relationship might take numerous forms, as suggested by FST’s notion of equifinality. Considerable potential exists for relationship subsystems within the kinship network, thus creating numerous complex relationships. Adoptive and birth families are entered into and regulated within this system through communication patterns.

### *Importance of Adoption Practitioners’ Standpoint*

Adoption practitioners play a “crucial role in the lives of birthparents, adoptive parents, and adopted persons. The decisions, actions, and choices of an adoption agency have ramifications for the emotional and physical well-being of each person involved in an adoption, before and long after placement” (Henny, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003, p. 43). Thus, it is imperative to solicit the perspectives of the practitioners who coordinate open adoption placements.

Adoption practitioners have a standpoint that offers them a unique perspective on open adoption. Because they are a neutral party interacting with all members of the adoption triad, they are able to report on numerous perspectives. Adoption practitioners witness birth parents' experiences with grief and desire for additional information (Henney et al., 2003). Practitioners also work closely with adoptive parents over iterations of the approval and matching process, ultimately leading to an adoption placement. Additionally, birth and adoptive parents are more likely to be open and direct with adoption practitioners than with one another. Direct interaction between birth and adoptive parents tends to be constrained as they regulate emotional distance, trust, and levels of comfort with one another (Grotevant et al., 2013). However, birth and adoptive parents are able to be more straightforward with adoption practitioners, given that adoption practitioners are able to approach the relationships with less emotion and more objectivity. Importantly, agencies report that they "see the adopted child as their primary client" (Henney et al., 2003, p. 42), meaning that they create policies, practices, and services to meet the short- and long-term needs of the adopted child. Thus, adoption practitioners have a systems-level view of open adoption relationships. This perspective is based on the longitudinal experience of working with many individuals in open adoptions, in contrast to the synchronic perspective of an adoptive or birth parent in a particular open adoption. Important to a systems perspective, practitioners have a "bird's-eye view" of the kinship network.

In light of the prominence of adoption openness (Atwood, 2007), the drastic changes that have resulted from this shift in domestic adoption practice (Galvin & Colaner, 2013), and the discourse-dependent nature of this relationship (Galvin, 2006b), it is important to examine how adoptive and birth families are interacting to create and maintain their kinship network. Given the important role of adoption agencies in the adoption process (Henney et al., 2003) as well as the systems-level view adoption practitioners have as a result of work with all members of the adoption triad, adoption practitioners are able to speak to the way in which open adoption shapes the family system. Thus, the following research question is offered:

RQ1: How do adoption practitioners perceive open adoption relationships to shape the family system?

Given the broad perspective of the agency practitioners, the present study now turns to the opportunities they have to provide practical advice to adoptive parents who are in the open adoption process. As argued, there is no "one-size-fits-all" way to negotiate a successful open adoption. Indeed, even the practice of openness has radically changed over the last three decades, and practitioners have seen a variety of new options offered to adoptive parents (Henney, Onken, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 1998). For example, instead of bearing the sole responsibility for placing the adoptive child, adoption practitioners now share this responsibility with birth parents, which adds another layer of complexity to the open adoption process. With options evolving and new challenges to consider, it is no surprise adoptive parents and birth parents have to engage in a series of trial-and-error negotiations before finding the right relationship mix for everyone in the triad (Grotevant et al., 2011).

With this in mind, adoption practitioners can provide important insights surrounding how adoptive families can communicate to facilitate a successful open relationship. Practitioners can illuminate the entailments of open adoption (e.g., opportunities, challenges, and considerations) that can help adoptive parents negotiate the complex process without proscribing a set model. Thus, it is important to provide practical observations about what has worked and has become problematic for other families in the past. Doing so can illuminate positive communication patterns and mitigate potential pitfalls. Toward this end, the following research question is offered:

RQ2: What are the communicative (a) opportunities, (b) challenges, and (c) considerations that adoption practitioners identify for adoptive parents in open adoptions?

## **METHOD**

### *Procedure*

Upon IRB approval, adoption agencies and adoption service organizations (e.g., adoption-specific therapy offices, adoption education groups) from a Midwest state ( $N = 30$ ) were contacted directly by e-mail and asked to complete an interview about open adoption relationships; 19 groups agreed to participate (63% response rate). Groups were located through Internet searches, Yellow Page listings, and referrals from participating agencies and organizations. To qualify for participation, individuals had to be 18 years or older, be employed by an adoption agency/service and work with all three members of the adoption triad (adoptee, adoptive parents, and birth parents). Sixteen (84.21%) were interviewed face-to-face; the remaining three interviews (15.79%) took place over the phone. Interview times ranged from 28 to 69 minutes, with a mean time of 49 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim by a professional. Transcriptions were checked against the audio for accuracy. All names and identifying information were changed to protect participant confidentiality.

Interviews were conducted using a flexible interview protocol in order to allow adoption practitioners to describe experience with open adoption in their own words. Practitioners were first asked to describe generally their work with open adoption. Interviews then targeted specific family interactions, namely adoptive and birth interactions with one another as well as adoptive and birth parents' interactions with the adoptee. Participants were then asked to describe the benefits and challenges of open adoption.

### *Participants*

Participants were employed at a licensed adoption agency ( $n = 17$ ), an adoption education company ( $n = 1$ ), or an adoption mental health service ( $n = 1$ ) at the time of the interview. Five men (26.32%) and 12 women (63.16%) participated. Although race was not used as a sampling criterion, all of the participants were Caucasian. The majority of participants were a director/owner of the adoption agency/service ( $n = 16$ , 84.21%); the remaining 3 were adoption social workers (15.79%).

### Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive-deductive-inductive cycle (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Initially, data were analyzed inductively, in which the data were assessed for general patterns. In doing so, family systems theory (FST) emerged as an exploratory device useful for making sense of the data. Thus, a FST framework was utilized “to serve as a heuristic for better understanding the meaning making at play” (Manning & Kunkel, 2014a, p. 436). In this way, FST was a theoretical lens useful for making sense of the data (Manning & Kunkel, 2014b), and the analysis transitioned into a deductive phase.

In this deductive phase of the analysis, data were coded with the FST framework serving as a sensitizing lens (Baxter & Braithwaite, 2006). Specifically, elements of FST (e.g., equifinality, openness) were assigned to relevant portions of the data, creating categories based on distinct aspects of FST. The coding categories were considered in turn, and data assigned to each category were assessed for subcategories when relevant. This deductive analysis provided results to answer RQ1, which asked how open adoption relationships shaped the family system.

Next, the analysis transitioned back to inductive analysis to account for portions of the interview transcripts that did not fit into the FST framework. The thematic analysis procedure outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) was used to analyze the remaining data to provide results to answer RQ2, which asked about the opportunities, challenges, and considerations afforded by open adoption. This thematic analysis began when we read and reread the remaining data in order to familiarize ourselves with the practitioners’ accounts. The second step requiring that we identify coding categories was accomplished by systematically discerning behaviors, observations, recommendations that spoke to RQ2. Third, we combined these coding categories to generate larger systems of meaning (i.e., themes). We then reviewed those themes before defining and labeling them.

Strauss and Corbin (1998) define saturation as the point “when no new categories or relevant themes are emerging” (p. 148). Saturation was reached by the sixth interview; however, all responses were analyzed for validation purposes. In concert with other rigorous qualitative communication studies (Baxter et al., 2014; Suter et al., 2014), we employed four interrelated verification procedures: (a) investigator triangulation, (b) negative case analysis, (c) audit trail, and (d) exemplar identification (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Specifically, we engaged in investigator triangulation via peer debriefing, a type of investigation where both authors independently conduct analysis and confer to work through the findings. In the present study, both authors found similar themes and discussed the best way to represent and label them to capture the practitioners’ accounts. Next, we accomplished negative case analysis by making sure the themes accounted for 100% of the data (Kidder, 1981), incorporating all themes regardless of their prevalence. We also kept an audit trail that detailed notes when particular codes emerged and decisions on combining codes to form themes. Finally, we selected evocative exemplars to illustrate each theme for both research questions.

## RESULTS

In the present study, we sought to understand practitioner perceptions of how adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees interact to regulate the open adoption relationship. Guided by family systems theory, RQ1 examined how open adoption shapes the family system. This deductive analysis laid the groundwork for inductive thematic analysis in RQ2, which examined the opportunities, challenges, and considerations stemming from open adoption relationships. Together, these findings illuminate the communication practices witnessed by practitioners that create and sustain the complex relational webs of the adoptive parents, birth parents, and adoptees involved in open adoptions. In this section, we present findings related to each research question, beginning with RQ1.

### *Family Forests: Numerous and Complex Relationship Webs*

RQ1 asked how adoption practitioners perceived that open adoption relationships shape the family system. The equifinality, openness, and complex relationships aspects of FST emerged in adoption practitioners' reports pertaining to the complex relationship webs that sustain open adoption relationships. Whereas historical approaches to family relationships utilized family tree imagery to illustrate varying degrees of connectedness, these complex relationship configurations blend genetic and legal relationships into a family forest of relationships that are constituted by and maintained with communication.

### *Equifinality*

Adoption practitioners consistently reiterated existing knowledge of the wide variety of configurations that open adoption relationships take. Similar to the notion of equifinality from FST, there are several ways to successfully construct an open adoption relationship. Participants overwhelmingly suggested that no two open adoption relationships are the same. As Brandon indicates, "I've come to the conclusion that there really is no right answer, that every person has their own feeling about what it should be, and then that...really should be the guiding light." Kelsey agrees, "I wouldn't say that [there's an] ideal, I think it's so situational. I don't think there is any ideal level of openness, because it depends on the situation." The configurations that families enact depend on unique circumstances and preferences that create more and less permeable boundaries around the adoptive family; as Ashley explains, "It depends on the adoptive parents, the birth parents, the extenuating circumstances, people's personalities...people's tolerance, people's lifestyles." Open adoptions, then, are as varied as the individuals who enter into them.

### *Openness*

Given the wide variety of configurations, families vary in openness, or the degree to which they integrate the birth family into their nuclear family system. As Sarah explains, openness ranges along a continuum from "letters and pictures once a year to face-to-face

visits once a year to babysitting once a month, or going and staying a week during the summer time with birth family.” Adoption practitioners described scenarios in which birth parents attended the adoptive family’s barbecues, soccer games, graduations, or holiday rituals such as trick-or-treating. Families at the far open end of the continuum encouraged the birth parents to have extended time alone with the adoptee, such as a family described by Carla where the “birth mom truly has an aunt relationship to both the kids in the family. Comes and gets them for weekends...you know, really hangs out with them.” Some families have the child go on vacations with the birth family; as Helen explains, “Jack loves to camp. His parents think anything other than the Ritz is camping, and they do not like it... She lives in [one state], they live in [another state], but...every summer they meet somewhere, and Jack spends the week camping with the [birth] family.” Families with high degrees of birth-parent involvement have a highly open system, allowing space for birth parents to integrate into the adoptive-family subsystem to form a larger adoption kinship network.

### *Complex Relationships*

All family systems contain multiple relationships within the system. Open adoption relationships, however, have more capacity for subrelationships in the family system due to a larger number of individuals and the overlap of some roles. The main dyadic relationships that shape the kinship network were the following: adoptive parent to child, adoptive parent to birth parent, and adoptee relationships with extended birth family members.

*Adoptive Parent Communication with Child.* The adoptive parent constructs an understanding of the adoption for the child. Adoption practitioners encourage parents to initiate this conversation with the child, such as Sarah who noted that many adoptive parents say “My child never talks about adoption, so they don’t have any questions.” Her response to this is the following, “No. They do have questions, they just don’t know how to bring it up themselves, so you as a parent need to do that for your child.” Sarah explains that adoptive parents’ disclosures construct the child’s impression of his or her adoption and birth family:

We teach adoptive couples to...paint the birth parents in a positive light, or share whatever...positive information that they can and kind of leave out the, the negative stuff and kind of let them...kind of create their own idea of how, how they view things... Just so that the child can have at least a positive aspect of how they...view things and not, uh...add negative information... We usually focus on adoptive parents saying, you know, “Your mom and dad loved you that much that they...placed you with us because they...they couldn’t...they couldn’t take care of you at the time.” And so they tell them to kind of...create an environment where they, they see this as a...you know, this was a positive experience.

Adoptees take cues from the adoptive parents about how they should feel about the birth parents, as Dave shares, “Eventually they catch on to the fact, ‘Well, I’m like... my biological mother. And if my adopted family thinks she’s not worthwhile, then there must be something wrong with me.’” As such, adoptive parents set the tone for the open adoption relationship.

*Adoptive-Parent-Birth-Parent Interaction.* Although the adoptive-parent-birth-parent relationship varies considerably, practitioners indicated that there tends to be a lot of positivity in this relationship. Generally, birth parents select the adoptive parents with whom they want to place their child. This process often begins with birth parents examining portfolios compiled by the adoptive parents highlighting the adoptive family's structure, values, and lifestyle. Such portfolios provide an initial sense of connection for many birth mothers, as Sarah explains:

Most families find that they actually like their birth mom a lot. Because they were chosen through, a typical process is that [birth parents] look at portfolios and choose a family, and they find that they have a connection to the adoptive family...the same interests, the same beliefs, the same values. They find that they really like the birth mom a lot, I think most really are surprised at how much they really like her and just really realize how she's just a normal person.

Even without the use of portfolio, however, connection between the birth and adoptive parents unfolds over time, as with any relationship. Helen told a story of a particularly close relationship where, "during the pregnancy, the adoptive father traveled quite a bit, and at one point...the mother and Annie just, they just really got along. Annie spent the night and they had a popcorn party." Often, birth mothers are in a difficult place in their lives, as Carla recounts, "[T]hey usually have low self-esteem, self-worth, you know issues around there, um relationship issues with the father of the baby, I mean there's just a lot of stuff. So the adoptive family, if they take on the role, kind of like an aunt and uncle." Considerable potential exists for closeness between the adoptive and birth parents, but not all relationships develop such closeness. Some families maintain contact in more controlled channels, as Helen explains, "Oftentimes with my younger birth parents, texting is it. Oh, yeah, it's quick, it's easy... A little reassurance when you need it. Um, it's not every day, every week, sometimes not even every month. It's just as, maybe Mother's Day's coming up, and somebody's feeling a little low, or Halloween, what are they gonna be for Halloween, or maybe it's Christmas and you want to get together sometime during the month." Adoptive and birth parents are constructing dyadic relationships within the larger family system in ways that feel most natural to them.

*Extended Birth-Family Relationships.* The complexity of the system expands as relationships move beyond the dyadic level within the adoption triad. As the birth and adoptive family systems merge, various extended members of the families also join the larger network. Adoption practitioners try to engage extended support networks from the beginning; Carla explains that, when pregnant women come to the agency, "We say, 'Who's supporting you, and do they want to come in and meet with us, to?' And so really try to envelop everybody that is a part of that birth parent's...life." Jessica explains that birth relatives are particularly involved with young mothers. Kelsey echoes this sentiment, "[A] lot of our families welcome that. They say...it's another set of grandparents for our kids. Another set of people to love our child." Birth grandparents who are included in the extended family system, however, do so in conjunction with

the extended network of adoptive family. At times, the adoptive and birth grandparents in the extended family network experience tension, as Beth explains, “Like, grandma doesn’t understand why this other grandma’s coming into her home, you know? [It’s] a little territorial.” Adoptive parents construct complex networks including members of the adoptive and birth families. Doing so requires coordination between multiple subsystems to create a unified system centered on the adopted child, which can be challenging.

Adoptees also commonly have birth siblings being raised by the birth family, and maintaining these ties is central to the open adoption experience. Adoptive parents have to explain to the adoptee how they are related to the biological siblings who live with their birth mother, and this prompts questions about why the birth mother chose adoption for one child but not the others. Carla recalled a family in which

The birth mom...has gone on to not make the best choices, and so, she’s really in a different place socioeconomically... and now wants to sort of continue that openness. But her son [who was placed for adoption] doesn’t really understand the life of poverty they live in. I mean, it is very complex. And there was no amount of predicting, or preparing, or whatever we could have done for that. It is navigating, ok, where are my boundaries, and, you know, where should we, you know, and what do I say to my 5-year-old when, when you know, he really wants another brother or sister...Why can’t his birth brother come home with him.

Adoptive parents construct the subsystems for the child, explaining who belongs to which family. Sarah notes that many adoptive parents reference the adopted child’s biological siblings as “sister” or “brother,” even though the siblings address the biological mother they have in common differently; often the adoptees calls the birth mother by the first name whereas the other child use a familial term such as “mom.”

Integrating numerous members from birth families into the adoptive-family system naturally creates complex relationships. Adoptive parents are constructing these complex webs of relationships by dictating who is in and who is out of the family system. Adoptive parents explain the system to their child, “and generally by the age of 3, the kids know whose grandma belongs to who, mommy or daddy, they know their aunts and what cousins belong to what families, um... they usually know the friends, the good friends and what kids belong to that. And if they’re able to know their birth family at the same time, then they’re able to figure out that also. So it’s kind of their normal.” Helen suggests that adoptive parents allow birth parents who are mentally and emotionally stable to interact with the child, saying that “whoever’s healthy is in. Whoever’s not healthy—if everyone is healthy, typically the communication goes through the birth mother or the birth father. I mean, they’re your primary...But as long as everyone’s healthy, yeah, and it does get very complicated.” The various subsystems and configurations increase the complexity of the relationships. These complex systems are intertwining to create what Helen refers as a “family forest” to replace notions of a “family tree.”

*Entailments of Open Adoption Relationships*

Given the complex and varied relationships shaping open adoptions, practitioners' insight into how adoptive parents regulate the adoption kinship network is essential. RQ2 inquired about the opportunities and challenges embedded in open adoptions. Opportunities are specific suggestions adoption practitioners recommend adoptive parents consider when engaging in an open adoption. Open adoptions, however, generated some challenges and one consideration for the adoptive parents based on the complexity of the kinship network. Each of these findings is detailed in turn.

*Opportunities*

Three specific opportunities emerged in practitioners' reports: practicing the entrance story, education and counseling, and setting clear boundaries. Practitioners saw these opportunities as positive influences on open adoption relationships.

*Practicing the Entrance Story.* One of the most important opportunities generated by open adoption was that adoptive parents were able to practice the adoption entrance story. Adoptive parents give the adoptee context to the birth parent's presence in the kinship network and the details of their open adoption placement through their adoption-related storytelling. Practitioners encourage adoptive parents to set the groundwork for these disclosures from the very beginning. Carla explains:

That's one thing that we talk to them about ... even during the home study process. Start practicing and talking about it. Talk to your child about their story before they can talk back and understand you. That way you are totally comfortable...with adoption, and the language that you need to use and all of that.

One reason this practitioner encourages practicing the entrance story is so that the adoptive child can become familiar with the language of adoption. Sarah echoes, "Teach them to talk about it from, from day one, from birth, saying... 'We're so glad we adopted you', just becoming comfortable with the words themselves." Indeed, practitioners emphasized the importance of communicating how the child became a part of the open adoption-family system. This practice prepares the child for future interactions with the birth parents.

*Education and Counseling.* In addition to educating the adoptive child, practitioners also encourage adoptive and birth parents to become educated about open adoptions. Given the complexities of open adoption relationships, considerable effort is needed to fully understand the dynamics of merging birth and adoptive subsystems into a kinship network. For example, Carla argues, "The healthier open relationships have to come from some ... part where the, the adoptive family and the birth parents had good counseling and good education." Unfortunately, education and counseling might not always be available. Ashley describes:

I don't think there's a lot out there for them. I think...you know, people have them read books, and...um, there is a push for education now, which is why we're working so hard to figure out what they need to think about it. You know, I

mean I don't think we're gonna...um, teach them everything there is to know about being an open adoptive parent, you know. That's not even possible, because everyone is different. But, what we're hoping to do is...help them think about what they even need to discern.

In this example, we see that the practitioner recognizes that each adoptive family might find a different path that works for them and the birth parents. The important educational component, however, is not having an open adoption checklist but rather an understanding of the issues that might require communication.

*Setting Clear Boundaries.* Once adoptive parents discern the issues that might become problematic, practitioners encourage that they set firm rules for interaction. Maureen shares that setting boundaries during the first hours of the child's life can be particularly important:

So that would be one of my first things that I would say, is to be sure that...all of the "i"s are dotted and "t"s are crossed. You know, and...just...explaining things to both parties, both sides, and...what's going to happen. I, I like to have a...hospital agreement when we have a newborn. I, I like to have, it's an informal...document that...a nurse usually...signs as being a witness ... And that hospital agreement goes out to "We'll hold the baby first"—To "We'll be allowed to see the baby." Uh, what...you know circumstances will be when the mother gets ready to leave the hospital. How that's all gonna work.

Beyond the initial postbirth interactions, however, ongoing boundary regulation is important. Clear boundaries that define the subsystems in the kinship network are essential to maintaining the system. Adoptive and birth parents establish parameters around the type and frequency of contact they will utilize. Adoptive parents, because they have the legal relationship with the child after the adoption, control the amount of contact by establishing clear boundaries. These boundaries often have to be reassessed, as in a situation Molly explained in which a birth mother relapsed into drug use about a year after placing her child. Contact with the birth mother was not healthy for any of the family members, so they had to say, "We're going to back off for a while."

### *Challenges*

Perhaps not surprisingly, open adoption also presents particular challenges to adoptive families. Practitioners identified three common issues in open adoption relationships: birth-parent grief, birth-parent circumstances, and mismatched expectations. As it happens, challenges are the issues that practitioners identified as negatively influencing the success of open adoptions.

*Birth Parents Need Time to Grieve.* Often, practitioners noted that adoptive parents did not afford their respective birth mothers enough time to grieve. For example, many practitioners noted that "The birth parents need some time to grieve" (Helen) or "[Birth mothers] really grieve for their child and themselves" (Kelsey). Brandon goes on to explain, "[I]t's...a gut-wrenching decision for birth mothers, and we see that, and we get, we, we're right in the room when that decision's being made." Adoptive parents might not always recognize the difficulty

birth mothers experience when making the decision to place their child for adoption. Although open adoptions join subsystems together into a kinship network, there might be times that are sensitive for the birth parents, such as the months following relinquishment, the child's birthday, and holidays. Giving the birth parents the time to cope with these difficulties is an important component of regulating the kinship network.

*Explaining Birth-Parent Circumstances.* Practitioners also note the potential difficulty adoptive parents face in explaining to their child the sometimes unfortunate circumstances experienced by their birth mothers. Sarah shares:

And so sharing that sort of information, but you know when you talk about...the situation when someone's getting out of jail in a couple weeks, or—you know a lot of times there's difficult experiences surrounding the placement of the child.

In this example, the practitioner explains the difficulties some adoptive parents might experience explaining the circumstances of their birth mother. Maureen and Cindy both noted that conversations with the child are especially difficult when drug use is a factor. Given the interdependence of individuals in the kinship network, actions of the birth parent affect individuals in the adoption subsystem, including the child. In recognition of this observation, practitioners suggest that adoptive parents might consider arbitrating rules surrounding the management of certain information (e.g., the extent to which parents provide the child with details) so that they have a plan if their child asks difficult questions.

*Mismatched Expectations.* Finally, both adoptive parents and birth parents may need to recalibrate the system boundaries as the child ages. As a form of self-regulation, FST points to calibration as an important maintenance function of the system. Calibration is particularly important for the kinship network in aligning mismatched expectations. Steve expresses, "Sometimes we end up finding that [the adoptive parents] want more openness than the actual birth parent themselves, and they crave the communication more than...the actual birth mother or birth father." This practitioner explains that in some instances the adoptive parents seek a stronger connection to the birth parents than is actually reciprocated. Moreover, this expectation might change. For example, Roger recalls, "Especially for the adoptive parents, their...feelings on contact can change over time." In fact, many practitioners noted that the adoptive parents sought more and more contact as time went on. Calibrating the expectations among members of the system is essential to maintaining these relationships.

Overall, the theme of challenges represents areas that practitioners identified as potentially problematic for adoptive parents. By recognizing and taking these challenges into consideration, adoptive parents might have the opportunity to forge better relationships with the birth mother and to more successfully explain their relationship with the birth mother to their child.

### *Considerations*

Considerations (based on practitioner observations for adoptive families) are topics that could help some families and be obstacles for others. Given the equifinality of open adoption relationships, factors that support positive relationships in some

kinship networks may prove to be a detriment for other networks. This was the case with social networking. Perhaps one of the most prevalent themes, practitioners discussed the importance of online information-privacy management. Social network sites like Facebook were opportunities to connect for some families but were also invasions of privacy for others. Sarah recounts:

We've actually found Facebook to be very, um...harming in the relationship. We have an adoptive mom right now who's constantly watching what the birth mother is doing... She's constantly watching her...and she's wanting us to call and tell the birth mom to stop doing this on her Facebook, and...it's like, "Mmm, no. We're not going to do that."

On the other hand, Facebook has facilitated a positive relationship for some families, as Lindsey explains:

Facebook is a big deal ... It's like rocked the world of adoptions, I think. Um...you know, just recently I was working with a family who's...posting pictures on Facebook where the birth mother is friends with them on Facebook. And so the birth mother will make comments like, "Oh, my little baby, give him a hug for me!" or "I miss him."

Consequently, social networking sites can both hinder and help adoptive families manage their relationship with the birth mother. Given the various responses, adoptive parents and birth parents might discuss the boundaries of privacy for all parties.

In conclusion, the opportunities, challenges, and considerations identified by practitioners for adoptive parents provide an untapped perspective that might increase the health and success of open adoptions. Overall, practitioners emphasized that there are many paths to success as well as choices adoptive parents can make to facilitate or hinder those paths.

## DISCUSSION

The present study utilized family systems theory to explore how individuals in open adoptions interact to regulate the adoption kinship network. Adoption practitioners have unique insight into the open adoption experience by working with individuals from all aspects of the adoption triad and can thus provide a macrolevel view of the kinship network. Reports from adoption practitioners reveal the numerous, complex relationships that comprise the kinship network; FST concepts of equifinality, openness, and complex relationships illuminate the intricacies of open adoption systems. As a result of this complexity, there are significant opportunities for connection. At the same time, the complexity of the system generates challenges. Social networking provides both costs and rewards that become more and less salient in specific families. These findings have important implications (a) for family systems theory and (b) for open adoption research.

*Implications for Family Systems Theory*

As families continue to define family relationships for themselves, family configurations are becoming increasingly complex (Galvin, 2006a). The current study, in examining open adoption relationships, offers a glimpse into a family form consisting of blood and legal ties. Given the way adoptive families are formed, the law offers a more central family tie than blood. Specifically, adoptive parents sustain the nuclear family structure while the birth family plays a peripheral, supporting role. Although societal assumptions of family privilege biological ties (Galvin, 2014), here adoptive parents use communication to both include the birth parent in the nuclear family system while simultaneously positioning the biological parent as supplemental to the adoptive family. Just as communication facilitates closeness in diverse families (Galvin, 2006a), individuals can create distance between members through communicative practices (Scharp, 2014; Scharp, Thomas, & Paxman, 2015). In the case of open adoption, genetic relatives are kept at a distance from the adoptive-family subsystem through the management of boundaries, calibration of expectations, and regulation of private information.

Given that the modern family form is marked by ongoing change (Galvin, 2014), the interplay of inclusion and distance in diverse families will continue to be a prominent discursive endeavor. FST has already been an important tool in understanding diverse family forms in explicit and implicit ways (Galvin et al., 2006), including blended families (Braithwaite, Olson, Golish, Soukup, & Turman, 2001) and single-parent families (Fergusson & Dickson, 1995). As families become increasingly diverse, including individuals without legal or blood ties and excluding individuals traditionally considered to be family, FST will provide a useful tool to give shape to these complex family experiences.

*Implications for Open Adoption Research*

Findings from the current study illuminate the complex ways that individuals in open adoptions interact to regulate the open adoption relationship. It should not be surprising to family communication researchers that communication is central to the regulation of the kinship network. After all, adoptive families are created through “law and language” (Galvin & Colaner, 2013, p. 191). What is surprising, however, is the lack of research examining communication in open adoption relationships. Galvin and Colaner called for more research on open adoption communication; given the wide variation of openness configurations, the idiosyncratic nature of each arrangement, and the developmental changes inherent in the relationship, open adoption relationships are highly dependent on discourse. The present study, in providing a macrolevel view of the open adoption system, touches on a number of communication behaviors central to the regulation of the kinship network, including but not limited to entrance narratives, boundary management, privacy management, support networks, perspective taking, and parent-child discussions. More research is needed to fully understand each of these communication behaviors as well as the other discursive practices sustaining these complex families.

*Limitations and Future Directions*

Despite these scholarly and practical implications, it is important to acknowledge the limitations of the current study. Importantly, the findings as presented in the current article are a result of the researchers' analysis of data based on specific research questions posed in the current study. The study themes stem from the theoretical approach (i.e., family systems theory) as well as the validity checks (e.g., negative case analysis) used in the analysis. As with all qualitative analysis, different research questions, theoretical frame, and validity checks would likely produce different findings from the same data.

Additionally, the sample consisted of adoption practitioners who generally prefer open adoptions for practical and value-based reasons (Henney et al., 2003). Practically speaking, adoption agencies have reported in previous research that serving as a middleman between adoptive and birth families is "a tremendous amount of work" (p. 39). This work entails time forwarding correspondence, costs associated with forwarding postal mail and unbillable hours, and potential communication mishaps stemming from transmitting messages between parties. Thus, it is advantageous for adoption agencies to encourage direct communication between adoptive and birth families. Perhaps more importantly, practitioners tend to believe in the merits of open adoption, reporting firsthand experiences with the benefits of contact and the costs of secrecy.

At the same time, practitioners' experience of open adoption may differ from the experiences of individuals who are living and embracing open adoption in real life. Practitioners' certainly witness the benefits and costs to open adoptions, but they do so secondhand through the eyes of the triad members. Adoptive and birth parents experience the emotions and uncertainties in situ. Thus, practitioners' unique standpoint in the adoption process may not have the depth of understanding of open adoption as birth and adoptive families members, and practitioners may have limited or biased insight into the demands and joys that open adoption brings to lived experience. However, the current study does not have data to compare adoptive/birth-family experiences with practitioner perceptions on this matter. Thus, future research should examine potential differences in family and practitioner perceptions as well as engage other members of the triad to further illuminate the intricacies of open adoption.

Participants were recruited from a Midwest state, and thus findings in the current study represent a narrow range of experiences. Future research should draw from a larger group of practitioners to give insight into a wider range of domestic-adoption experiences. With all thematic analyses, these findings should not be generalized to all modern adoption placements. Results should be interpreted within the context of the paradigm and method, and future research should supplement the present study with other methods of data collection, such as focus groups and surveys to provide a wider range of knowledge.

## CONCLUSION

Open adoption placements have revolutionized domestic adoption practice. Lifting the shroud of secrecy that permeated adoption for decades has resulted in significant benefits to adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents (Grotevant et al., 2013). Ongoing contact with and about the birth family is central to the open adoption relationships. This contact, however, is embedded in incredibly complex relationships that are forged and sustained through communication. Findings from the present study illuminate important communication practices shaping these relationships. Genetic and legal ties merge in open adoption arrangements to create webs of family connections embedded in communication practices. More research is needed, however, to attend to the rich communication landscape giving shape to open adoption relationships.

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