

# Perceived information ownership and control: Negotiating communication preferences in potential adoption reunions

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## Abstract

In this study, the tension adoptees feel between learning information about their past and protecting themselves from negative or unwanted information about their birth/adoption was explored. Specifically, communication privacy management theory was used to explore adoptee preferences for information during a potential reunion with their birth mother/family. Findings suggest adoptees' preferences for information ownership and control correspond to the following privacy rules: (a) permeably boundary privacy rules, (b) privacy rule calibrations of boundary access, (c) protection privacy rules, and (d) privacy rules restricting boundary access. In addition, adoptees often expressed that they would like their birth mothers to serve as information guardians, revealing desired information and concealing unwanted disclosures. By assuming this guardian role, birth mothers and adoptees might have less stressful reunions, especially if both parties have similar expectations for information preferences.

According to the census report, there are approximately 2.1 million adopted children living in the United States and over 50,000 additional domestic adoptions annually (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2011). Despite the prevalence of adoption, research (Baxter, Norwood, Asbury, Jannusch, & Scharp, 2012) suggests that all members of the adoption triad experience stigma. The perception that their family is somehow inferior to biologically related families (Kressier & Bryant, 1996) motivates many adoptees to reconnect with their biological mother at some point in their life (March, 1995), often in search of information related to their birth (Schechter &

Bertocci, 1990). In fact, a study by Powell and Afifi (2005) reveals that adoptees with high levels of uncertainty about their adoption report that actively seeking out a member of their biological family was the only way to ease their unresolved grief. From another perspective, research (e.g., Von Korff & Grotevant, 2011) also suggests that a desire for information about the biological family might be a normative component of adoptee identity development, which points to another reason adoptees might seek to reconnect with their birth mother/family.

In an attempt to reunite, adoptees and birth mothers/families must address communicative challenges, especially considering adoption reunions lack a cultural script to guide their initial interactions (March, 1997). Thus, it might come as no surprise that both parties report feeling apprehensive about communicating with each other (Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005), which might manifest in unproductive ways if adoptees and birth mothers/families have different expectations surrounding information exchange. For example, adoptees might

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desire information the birth mother/family is unwilling to share or the birth mother/family might disclose information their child prefers not to know. In light of potential divergent expectations, as well as the significance of such a reunion on the lives of both parties, examining adoptee information preferences during potential reconnection is an important avenue for identifying behaviors that can help manage productive and positive reunions.

With these ideas in mind, this study examines preferences for privacy management during potential adoptee and birth mother/family reunions from the perspective of the adoptee. Using communication privacy management (CPM) as a theoretical framework (Petronio, 2002, 2010), we explore the tension adoptees feel between learning information about their past and protecting themselves from negative or unwanted information (see Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Drawing from online survey responses of 60 adoptees, we conducted a thematic analysis to examine expectations and perceptions of the private information exchanged during potential adoption reunions.

### *Adoption reunions*

Adoption reunions refer to any contact between adoptees and their birth mothers including phone calls, letters, and face-to-face interaction (Affleck & Steed, 2001). Although there are no official recordings of the frequency of adoption reunions, the prevalence of adoption in general suggests that a large number of individuals might either seek meetings with their birth families at some point in their life or be a support provider to someone who intends to reunite.

Examining the communicative preferences for such a meeting can help combat the uncertainty inherent in the adoption process. A study by Colaner and Kranstuber (2010) reveals that adoptees report feeling uncertain about what their adoption means, details about their birth parents, and how their adoptive parents feel about their birth parents. Powell and Afifi (2005) echo this sentiment, and their research shows that ambiguity can be partially reduced

through a reunion with a birth family. Unfortunately, the uncertainty about adoption more broadly can be exacerbated by fears or ambiguity related to the actual reunion. Findings suggest that adoption reunions lack social rules or norms to guide the interaction (March, 1997), leaving little surprise that birth mothers struggle with how much information to divulge to their birth children, especially regarding information related to the identity of the birth father (Passmore & Feeney, 2009).

Despite these uncertainties, we know little about behaviors or preferences people have for these interactions. Research to date has primarily focused on motivations to reunite or precursory emotions (e.g., Howe & Feast, 2003; Triseliotis et al., 2005), but we know little about the expectations and preferences that adoptees might have for information. In fact, uncertainties expressed by both birth mothers and adoptees suggest that understanding preferences for information (e.g., how much information they want and whether they have any contingencies about that information) could go a long way to facilitate a successful reunion and set the tone for future interactions. Put differently, it is not only important to know the content of adoptee uncertainty but also what information adoptees desire, whether they feel they are owed certain information, and whether they are willing to defer their desires to protect the privacy of their birth mother.

As a theoretical lens for exploring the privacy management issues within potential adoption reunions, we turn to CPM as a framework for this study. CPM illuminates the struggles that adoptees might cope with as they balance their desire for learning the circumstances surrounding their birth with their desire to protect themselves from undesired information. CPM also provides a framework for understanding issues of information ownership and control as well as for exploring the ways certain decisions about private information might lead to positive or negative reunion experiences.

### *Communication privacy management*

CPM (Petronio, 2002) theory provides the apparatus for understanding the navigation of adoptees pursuing sensitive information

from their birth mothers/families, who might not be expecting certain information requests, given their lack of relational history (Petronio, 2002, 2010). Put differently, CPM presents the theoretical framework necessary to explore the negotiation of privacy boundaries. CPM introduces the boundary metaphor to illustrate the demarcation of what is public and what is private. In this regard, one goal of this study is to explore adoptees' preferences for negotiating privacy boundaries with their birth mother/family. The following paragraphs further describe the mechanisms that provide context and ultimately drive this coordination process.

#### *Privacy ownership, control, and turbulence*

According to Petronio (2013), privacy ownership (i.e., boundaries of private information), privacy control (i.e., privacy management engine), and privacy turbulence (i.e., privacy regulation breakdowns) are the components that provide insight into the ways individuals regulate private information. Specifically, the first main element of CPM speaks to *privacy ownership* (Petronio, 2013). Relevant to the context of adoption reunion, CPM predicts that individuals believe they are the sole owners of their private information, and with this ownership comes the right to grant access or protect the content. Another CPM axiom suggests that the "original owners" can decide with whom to share their private information, thereby appointing individuals "authorized co-owners" (see Petronio, 2013). When people believe they have legitimate ownership claims on private information, they also believe that they should have control over the information (Petronio, 2002, 2013).

In most situations, the original owner is clearly identifiable and when that person shares his or her personal information, he or she often has implicit or explicit privacy rules for the management of that shared content. This coordination process between the original owner and the co-owners is called *privacy control* (the second main element; Petronio, 2013), and it is the regulation mechanism for the sharing of private information. Specifically, individuals arbitrate privacy rules based on motivations, cultural values, and situational needs as a

way to control their private information (Petronio, 2013). Existing research (e.g., Child, Haridakis, & Petronio, 2012; Thompson, Petronio, & Braithwaite, 2012) suggests that there are important connections between motivations for revealing as well as concealing private information and estimates of risk benefit. Adoption reunions are a unique context where adoptees might have to weigh the risks and benefits of asking for certain private information relating to their birth and birth parents without ever having met any members of their birth family.

In situations where the privacy control process is not enacted or breaks down, *privacy turbulence*, the third main element of CPM, erupts (Petronio, 2010; Petronio & Sargent, 2011). Given the complications that might arise from arbitrating rules intrapersonally (i.e., in absence of the birth mother), CPM might also provide valuable insight into situations when privacy turbulence might occur in the adoption reunion interaction. Understanding preferences for information, then, could significantly help both adoptees and birth mothers create expectations where privacy turbulence is less likely to occur.

#### *Recipients of undesired information*

Reunions can be complicated and anxiety inducing despite adoptees' desire to know about their past. Modell (1997) contends that both adoptees and birth mothers feel compelled to appropriate available relational models (e.g., aunt-like model) or cultural scripts in order to guide their reconnection. But problems arise when each party approaches the reunion using different models and especially considering no model is an exact fit. In fact, birth mothers often claim an identity of mother (Affleck & Steed, 2001) without considering the adoptees' preference for a model in which the birth mother takes on the role of a "relative in general as opposed to a parent in particular" (Modell, 1997, p. 58). These approaches impact the communication that can occur during the reunion. Specifically, birth mothers might overdisclose in an attempt to build close relationships (e.g., Derlega, Winstead, & Greene, 2008; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002), without realizing that features of the

revealed information can be detrimental to the relationship and the emotional state of the adoptee. In fact, scholars (e.g., Afifi, 2003) argue that in certain instances, information recipients might even feel like the information is actually a burden. Petronio and Reiersen (2009) contend that this dilemma (i.e., the dilemma of the *reluctant confidant*) might be exacerbated by the fact that the recipient might not only object to learning private information but also feel an oppressive obligation to protect the disclosure.

In terms of privacy management, Hogan and Brashers (2009) argue that individuals often make conscious choices to, “thwart the entry of particular information into their lives” despite the fact that the information has personal relevance (p. 51). For example, research suggests that individuals might seek to avoid health diagnoses regardless of fact that those individuals are entitled to that information (Barbour, Rintamaki, Ramsey, & Brashers, 2012). Furthermore, Powell and Afifi (2005) found that although adoptees often felt a need to reduce their uncertainty, they also purposely tried to maintain some degree of uncertainty surrounding their adoption and birth parents by not seeking that information. Specifically, uncertainty helped adoptees maintain their emotional and relational status (Powell & Afifi, 2005). Consequently, the literature suggests that despite adoptees’ perceptions that they own and have a right to their history, they still might not want to become co-owners of the content of that information.

*Privacy coordination: Linkages, ownership rights, and permeability*

As discussed, adoption reunion provides a unique context that might require extensive privacy coordination (Petronio, 2002). According to Petronio (2002), privacy coordination is both personal and collective, requiring individuals to make disclosure decisions and protect others’ private information. Understanding adoptee preferences for information might influence the ways birth mothers and families negotiate rules for privacy management or create boundary linkages (i.e., connections that form boundary alliances; Petronio, 2002). Put

differently, if adoptees do not express a desire for much information, birth mothers/families might feel more comfortable establishing boundary linkages because there is potentially less of a threat that their private information is asked for or subsequently revealed.

Privacy ownership also might significantly influence adoption reunions. Petronio (2002) describes boundary ownership as the “rights and privileges individuals perceive they have and others afford them as co-owners” (p. 30). Understanding adoptees perceptions of ownership might escalate or assuage birth mother/family anxieties around creating strict or loose privacy rules. In fact, from the adoptees’ perspective, they might consider their ownership and control rights to be more aligned with those of an original owner. This perception presents an interesting complexity: What happens when individuals perceive themselves to have control over information that they do not know the content, and what challenges are then presented to the original owner? In other words, adoptees might consider some information to be *their* private information and consider their privacy rules to take precedent over their birth mothers, who may be perceived as more of an “original guardian,” rather than original owner, of that information.

Finally, boundary permeability might also influence potential adoption reunions. According to Petronio (2002), boundary permeability focuses on how tight or loose individuals perceive collective privacy boundaries. In this regard, birth mothers/families might have thick boundaries (i.e., low permeability) that could make a reunion with an adoptee who wants a lot of information potentially problematic. On the other hand, adoptees might have preferences for thick boundaries so that they avoid the risk of being reluctant confidants. Regardless, CPM provides a compelling heuristic to explore adoptees’ preferences for information. Consequently, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: *What privacy ownership and privacy control preferences do adoptees have for information related to their adoption and birth mothers/families?*

## Method

Upon Institutional Review Board approval, we used a listserv at a large Midwestern university to recruit a sample of 60 adult adoptees. In order to participate in this study, individuals had to be at least 18 years of age or older and have never reunited with their birth mothers.

The average age of the adoptees was 37.2 ( $SD = 13.9$ ), and the majority of the participants were Caucasian (78%). The majority of participants (98.3%) graduated high school, and 50% earned a college degree or higher. In addition, the majority of the participants (78.3%) reported a domestic adoption. Desire to reunite also highly varied across the sample, with 21.8% reporting that they never planned to search for their birth mother, 32.7% who are undecided about whether to search, 27.3% who would like to search but have not started, 5.5% who are currently searching for their birth mother, and 12.7% who have searched and decided to stop.

An online survey was administered to interested and qualifying participants. Participants began by answering demographic information. Next, open-ended items asked participants to describe the types of information they would or would not want from their birth family and whether or not they felt entitled to that information. For example, participants were instructed: "Often, individuals share with us information that we feel like is a burden or that we never wanted to know. Please talk about what information you would NOT like to know about your birth mother/family and/or adoption in general." Other questions prompted adoptees for the information they would want to know and whether or not they felt like that information belonged to them. Overall, these open-ended questions broadly captured adoptee information preferences.

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 26th response; however, all responses were analyzed for validation purposes. For this study, data were analyzed at the unit of the response (i.e., response to all of the open-ended items). In this regard, a single sentence could contain multiple codes or themes

and a single theme could gain expression in several sentences.

### *Thematic analysis*

According to Braun and Clarke (2006), thematic analysis is a "method for identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data" (p. 79). They contend that a theme captures a particularly salient aspect of the data in a patterned way *regardless of whether that theme captures the majority experience*. Therefore, instead of asking questions of quantity, researchers engaged in thematic analysis should ask whether a set of data speaks to the research goal or answers the research question in a meaningful way (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

In order to identify themes, we followed six steps: (a) becoming familiar with the data, (b) generating coding categories or subthemes, (c) generating themes, (d) reviewing themes, (e) defining and naming themes, and (f) locating exemplars. In becoming familiar with the corpus, we read and reread the data, making sure to take note of initial ideas. Generating initial subthemes consisted of systematically coding pertinent features of the data and then collating the data relevant to each subtheme. Next, we generated themes by collating the subthemes into potential themes. Themes emerged when the subthemes cohered in a particularly pervasive or evocative way. In other words, some themes emerged based on the salience to the participants as indicated by how much detail they provided to explain their preference or by how prominently the subtheme captured the experiences of the participants. We reviewed themes by checking whether they worked in relation to the identified exemplars and the entire data set. Step (e) required us to define and name each category by refining each theme. This step yielded clear definitions and names. Finally, locating exemplars required us to make a selection of rich, compelling examples that provide evidence of the theme and relate to our research question.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argue that qualitative researchers should verify the trustworthiness of their data by following three standards: (a) credibility, (b) dependability, and (c)

confirmability. To ascertain that the thematic analysis was valid, we engaged in peer debriefing, negative case analysis, and the audit trail (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). First, the authors engaged in peer debriefing, which required them to read the transcripts and discuss the thematic categories and subcategories. Negative case analysis, a particularly conservative validation procedure, was also employed when analyzing these data. According to Kidder (1981), negative case analysis requires that one refine a hypothesis or theme (i.e., categories) until it accounts for *all* units of analysis *without exception*. Finally, throughout the process, detailed notes were kept that aided in selecting rich illustrations of the themes discussed in the results (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

## Results

Before conducting a thematic analysis to explore the privacy ownership and control preferences of adoptees, we first examined the content of information people reported as a preliminary step. While the thematic analysis will uncover trends related to the preferences people have for information management, we also felt it would be useful to document the content of the information people most frequently report wanting and feeling a sense of ownership over (see Table 1). Results suggest that people want to learn primarily about their health information, which is consistent with existing adoption literature (Scharp, 2013). Other categories include (a) birth parent information (e.g., location of birth parents), (b) extended family information (e.g., existence of siblings), (c) adoptee identity (e.g., nationality), (d) birth mother circumstances (e.g., biological mother's situation at time of birth), and (e) adoption circumstances (e.g., the process of their adoption). This content analysis ultimately served to supplement one of the themes that emerged after the thematic analysis was complete.

Overall, four themes were identified that characterize adoptees' preferences for privacy ownership and privacy control of adoption-related information. In particular, subthemes emerged from only one of those

themes, "Privacy Rule Calibrations of Boundary Access: A Preference for Conditional Disclosure." Recall that privacy ownership refers to the idea that individuals believe they are the sole owners of their private information who have the ability to appoint information co-owners, and privacy control references the coordination process between the original and co-owners of that information. Taken together, these four themes represent general preferences that provide insight into the ways adoptees would like to manage information about their adoption and birth mother/family.

### *Permeable boundary rules: A preference for full disclosure*

When asked about their preferences for information, some adoptees indicated they would like to know everything about their adoption and their birth families. In fact, adoptees who reported this preference tended to believe that they were legitimate owners of the information despite the fact that they did not actually know the information. Although the type of information they wanted varied, adoptees who wanted to "know it all" often provided detailed lists (see Table 1). For example, one adoptee explains:

I want to know it all—I want to know who she was, what happened to make her give me up, who she is and what she is like now. I want to know if I have any other family out there. I want to know my nationality. I think I am Irish, but I can never say for sure. I want to know my health history and whether she was given DES during her pregnancy. I want to know if I am like her, if I look like her ... in short, I want to know anything a woman would know about her mother. I would also want if know if she thought of me every Mothers Day for the last 42 years, as I have of her. I would want her to know how much I have missed her. (#22)

This woman clearly indicates that there is information that other women have about their mothers (i.e., "anything a woman would know about her mother") that she does not. A desire for information commonly co-owned by

**Table 1.** *Perceived information owned and desired*

Category	Prevalence	Exemplar
Health information	<i>n</i> = 48; 80%	“All relevant medical and psychological information that might help prevent and/or address issues that arise in either me or my future family.”
Birth parent information	<i>n</i> = 17; 28%	“I think when the information is available an adoptee should have the right to know information about birth parents (like names and possible contact information).”
Extended family information	<i>n</i> = 15; 25%	“I feel like I have a right to know if I have siblings.”
Adoptee identity	<i>n</i> = 14; 23%	“Without a tie to my biological and ethnic past, I don’t feel as if I have a firm sense of who I am. Do I think I am ‘entitled’ to this information? Absolutely!”
Birth mother circumstances	<i>n</i> = 11; 18%	“I feel like I should know what her occupation was and what economic status she was in.”
Adoption circumstances	<i>n</i> = 10; 17%	“I would like to know why I was given up for adoption, why my mother selected that option, and who my birth father was.”

other mother–daughter dyads such as nationality, health history, and physical resemblance points to the emphasis Americans place on biological ties in defining and making sense of what it means to be a family. Another woman describes:

Everything! Her background and personality traits. Physical Traits [*sic*] A long conversation about WHY i was given up for adoption and what she’s doing now and w/in my lifetime. WHAT DOES THIS WOMAN LOOK LIKE?? I mean, honestly. Am I a spitting image of her or my father? Or a combination of both? I am 5-8 and the tallest Indian woman I have ever seen. Is it really true I have ‘Brahmin Stock?’ I am lighter, and taller than most I see here in my state of [state]. (#32)

Again, this adoptee indicates that becoming an information co-owner is important, and as the exemplar suggests, verification of physical similarity is a particularly salient type of desired information. This finding corresponds to other adoption reunion literature (Scharp,

2013) that suggests that a desire for physical resemblance is a way that adoptees romanticize reuniting with their birth mothers.

In addition to blanket declarations that they would like to know everything, some adoptees were more specific in their desire for information. In fact, some participants acknowledged that not all of the information they sought might be positively valenced. For example, one woman explains, “I don’t know if there is any information that I would not like to know. The truth is the best way, whether I like what I hear or not” (#34). In this exemplar, the adoptee acknowledges that becoming an owner of certain information might not be easy, but clearly weighs the “truth” as more desirable than the potential of learning undesired information.

*Privacy rule calibrations of boundary access:  
A preference for conditional disclosure*

Three subthemes coalesce to form the conditional disclosure theme. Contingencies were primarily based on: (a) specific content, (b) the desire to avoid hurtful information, and

(c) the disclosure preferences of the birth mother/family. These contingencies speak to both issues of information ownership and control.

#### *Content-based rules*

Adoptees specifying this type of contingency generally wanted to learn as much as they could find out. In other words, adoptees in this category also hoped that their birth mother/family's privacy boundary would be thin. They wanted, however, to exclude one topic of information for either their own benefit or because they perceived the information did not fall within their ownership purview. One adoptee explains, "I feel like I have the right to know everything except for 'How it felt to my mother to give up a child'" (#59). Although not explicitly specified, this adoptee suggests that she does not have the information rights concerning her birth mother's emotions. Another adoptee describes:

Really, there is nothing I don't want to know. Even if she hates the fact that she had me, never wants to think of it or acknowledge it, I would rather know than wonder and hope. Come to think of it, there is one thing—I was told as a child that I am undoubtedly Irish. For lack of any better family connections, I latched on to that and really, truly identify myself as Irish. I even changed my first name (legally) to Erin, which means Ireland in Irish. I don't really look it, though, except for my red hair. People think I am polish and I think I look more like a Jew. I would really hate to find out that I am actually a Polish Jew and not who I think I am at all. (#20).

In this exemplar, the adoptee explains that her ethnic heritage is an important part of her identity and that learning information to the contrary would disrupt her self-perception. Overall, these two examples reveal that adoptees consider both ownership rights and the way new information will influence self-perception when considering what information they would like to learn from their birth mother/family.

#### *Personal protection rules*

Many adoptees indicated that their preferences for the ownership and control of adoption information were contingent on a variety of factors that had the potential to impact their emotional well-being. In particular, the valence of the information and potential to inflict hurt on themselves or their birth mothers were important factors adoptees weighed in reporting their preferences. For example, one adoptee explains:

I don't want to know if my birth mother gave me up for a reason such as she didn't want a child, or if i [sic] had to be taken away from her because she was considered an unfit mother. Even though I have a right to know why I was given up, if it was because of her faults I wouldn't want to know the truth. (#43)

This adoptee suggests that learning about the "faults" of her birth mother might be hurtful or conflict with the adoptee's understanding of why she was given up for adoption. Despite her claim that she has a right to that information, she reports that becoming a co-owner would make her a reluctant confidant (see Petronio & Reiersen, 2009). Another adoptee reports:

I would be open to listen to anything but maybe the fear and sadness of when she had to had [sic] me over to my adoptive parents would be something that would make me emotional. I know she wanted to keep me but it was best for me to be adopted so I could have a better life. It would be hard to hear about how she struggled to make ends meet. (#9)

This exemplar is indicative of adoptees who reported that they would be distressed if they learned that their birth caused their birth mother "unhappiness, a lifetime of misery, or worse" (#29). Furthermore, this adoptee suggests that she has made sense of her adoption as something positive and does not want that to be disrupted by new information. Another adoptee explains:

I don't believe I want to know if I was abused or neglected or that the decision was

believed to be wrong. I believe what ever occurred [*sic*] that resulted in my adoption is history. The final decision to put me up for adoption was a great one to be celebrated, not confessed as something that was a mistake. (#24)

This adoptee's account suggests that not only does she not want to know whether she was abused but she also does not want her adoption to be seen as a mistake. Instead, she conveys that her birth mother's decision was a "great one to be celebrated," resisting the cultural stigma often associated with birth mothers (Baxter, Scharp, Asbury, Jannusch, & Norwood, 2012).

#### *Birth mother-orientation rules*

The last subtheme describes adoptees willingness to defer to their birth mothers/families' preferences for disclosure. One adoptee explains:

I feel I only have the right to know what they are willing to tell me. We all have our own pasts and transgressions. I would not tell them everything about my past, as I would not want to have then [*sic*] feel "bad" if they had wanted to be a part of my life all along. I would hope they would tell me about any health concerns or patterns in the family, so I may know if I am a genetic carrier of anything detrimental or need to take certain precautions for susceptibility to anything. I would also want to know for my children's sake. (#16)

In this exemplar, the adoptee acknowledges that everyone has a past, everyone has transgressed, and that the details of those things belong to the person who lived them. Yet, she also signifies that she hopes that certain information would be shared, if not for her own sake then for her children's. Thus, this adoptee represents those who, despite having a preference for information, feel like they should defer to their birth mother/family. In this regard, the adoptee readily acknowledges her mother/family as the original owner of her private information. Other adoptees said

that information disclosure was a question of morals:

I don't really think I have a right to know anything because I think that's more of a moral issue. Obviously, it is better to know about factors that influence my health but how can you force another person to share what is also personal to them. I believe the only thing I really have the right to know is the fact that I was adopted because that's the difference between the truth and a lie. If my birth mother would say that she didn't want to share anything with me, then I think that would be her choice and I don't think I would demand anything further from her. I don't think I have a right to know about my past but I would certainly think that it was unfair of her not to tell me. (#33)

This adoptee suggests that even though the information belongs to the birth mother, her unwillingness to disclose that information would be unfair. Yet, this adoptee also makes a point to signal that it was a moral issue and that despite her perception of it being unfair, she would not demand any information. Again, those willing to defer to their birth mother/family suggest that they do not perceive themselves as rightful information owners; thus, they do not have the right to control that information.

#### *Protection privacy rules: Disclosure preference uncertainty*

Some adoptees were unsure about what information they would like to own/control. In some regards, learning information about their birth presented adoptees with the opportunity to manage and control information that might prove very beneficial for themselves and their families (e.g., learning health information to pass on to their children) but at the same time threaten their peace of mind (e.g., learning about a genetic problem outside of their control). For example, one adoptee describes:

This is where my ambivalence shows. Do I really want to know genetic information? What if it's bad, or it's too late now to do

anything significant [*sic*] about it? If I found out that I do, indeed, have siblings, what would I do about it? Would I like to meet them? What if I don't like them? This is why I've never actually made any serious attempt to find my birth parents. (#31)

This adoptee's response suggests that learning new information can lead to undesired outcomes or even new uncertainties. Participants who indicated that they did not know what information they wanted provide a unique insight into the information-seeking process. Specifically, adoptees in this study considered the valence of the information, potential health benefits, the potential impact on the birth mother, and potential gain of learning information. Another reports:

I believe there is always the potential that I am a product of rape, incest, or that the family history includes mental disorders. That may not be something desirable to know, it is a potential genetic implication to be aware of. These challenging situations can bring a great deal of pain or emotional distress to the birth mother that is not desirable, yet important for the myself to know. My birth mother provided me a great gift. The last thing I want to do is stress her or provide any discomfort. (#26)

Similar to the previous exemplar, this adoptee acknowledges that learning new information could lead to learning undesirable information and, furthermore, causing her birth mother distress.

In addition to not knowing what information they would like, some adoptees also indicated that they did not care about learning information about their adoption or birth mother/family. As this adoptee explains:

Coming at this from my personal decision of never wanting to meet her, I guess I don't have an opinion on what rights I should have. I am grateful that I wasn't aborted—obviously—but I respect women's right to choose. Inherent in that is the choice itself. My birth mother made the right choice for her, which is why I

feel she's entitled to the legal rights of disclosure or not, not the child. (#54)

This adoptee indicates that because she has no desire for a reunion and because her birth mother is the owner of the private information, she would not care what her birth mother disclosed in the event of a reconnection. This response works to reveal not all adoptees seek reunion and suggests that developing preferences for a stranger's information might not be relevant.

*Privacy rules restricting boundary access: A preference for nondisclosure*

Finally, on the other end of the continuum from those who wanted to know everything, and unlike those participants who were unsure about what information they might like, some participants made it clear that they did not want to know anything about their adoption or birth mother/family. These respondents had strong preferences for helping their birth mothers/families maintain thick boundaries (Petronio, 2002), such that they did not want to learn any private information related to their birth. Some participants reported that they did not desire to learn the information, whereas others did not feel they had the right to be privy to the details, ultimately speaking to both issues of privacy ownership and control. For example, adoptees reported, "I'm probably not the best person to have taken this study, because again, I have no desire to know anything about my adoption" (#58), or "I do not want to know about any extended family members, I [*sic*] do not want to know anything about her" (#11). Other participants explained that learning new information might be difficult; thus, they would rather not know anything. One adoptee explains:

I don't feel I have a right to know anything. ... I still feel adoption is the best for the child. I am afraid that my birth mother wouldn't want to see me and that would break my heart so I haven't really tried to [*sic*] hard to find her. But, as far as my birth mother owing me an explanation [*sic*] or whatever ... I don't feel a burning desire to

know. I guess if someone walked up to me and said they knew where she was or where my father was and here is the phone # and she/he wanted me to call ... I would consider it. (#40)

This adoptee reveals that she not only does not feel that the information is her right to own but also that the potential for rejection might stop her from ever seeking any information at all. Her claim that she does not have a “burning desire to know” echoes other adoptees who just simply did not want any information. In fact, this adoptee suggests that even given the chance to learn new information, she might not pursue it.

Taken together, these four themes provide an overview of the different ways adoptees might approach a reunion with their birth mother or family. Results suggest that adoptees not only consider their information desires but also anticipate their birth mother’s/families’ desire for disclosure. Adoptees also express varying degrees of perceived information ownership and desire for boundary permeability. As it happens, these four themes define preferences that could help alleviate future privacy turbulence and emphasize that both adoptee and birth mother/family expectations for the management of private information are important to facilitating a successful reunion. Counselors or practitioners looking to facilitate a successful reunion might consider asking which of these categories resonates strongest in order to help better create expectations for the future interaction.

## Discussion

This study examined privacy management preferences adult adoptees would have in the event of a reunion with their birth mothers/families. Most of the extant literature documents important communication between adoptive parents and adoptees (e.g., Krusiewicz & Wood, 2001), but far less examines communication issues related to the adoption reunion itself. Considering research that suggests negative reunions can have detrimental effects on adoptees’ self-esteem (Kranstuber & Koenig Kellas, 2011), this study

offers insight into some of the key components that could offset negative reunion outcomes.

### *Implications for adoption reunion based on privacy rule preferences*

This study offers interesting implications for adoption research. Overall, adoptees expressed four privacy rule preferences pertaining to their desire to own and control information related to their adoption: (a) permeable boundary privacy rules, (b) privacy rule calibrations of boundary access, (c) protection privacy rules, and (d) privacy rules restricting boundary access.

#### *Permeable boundary privacy rules*

This preference captures the experience of adoptees who hope that all information will be shared, indicating a desire for co-ownership of all the details related to their birth regardless of the valance of that information. Thus, the hope for open access indicates the adoptee preference that their birth mothers will have thin boundaries in terms of permeability. In this scenario, these participants, regardless of having never met their birth mother/family, might expect a strong boundary linkage (Petronio, 2002). These adoptees also often perceived themselves to be the original information owners, which might be a catalyst for privacy turbulence, especially if the birth mother/family has a preference for closed access where protection rules create a boundary of secrecy (Petronio, 2002). In other words, if adoptees who want to know everything eventually learn the information, the birth mother/family might have to arbitrate specific privacy rules if they do not want their information to be shared with others.

#### *Privacy rule calibrations of boundary access*

Perhaps the most robust theme, adoptees who had a preference for conditional disclosure expressed a contingent desire to learn information pertaining to their birth expressed a desire to both protect themselves and, in many cases, their birth mother. Although preferences for ownership varied, adoptees giving voice to this contingent theme reflect the different

factors they weigh when forming information preferences for learning private information relating to their birth. These factors include the perceived valance of the information, the perception of information ownership, and the preferences of the birth mothers/families for disclosure. Even though these factors correspond to information preferences, they might also have implications for the privacy rules adoptees would arbitrate if they ever become legitimate co-owners. For example, concerns for the birth mother's feelings suggest that if learned, adoptees would arbitrate privacy rules to protect not only themselves but also their birth mother.

This theme also suggests that adoptees are intrapersonally arbitrating rules to avoid learning hurtful information as well as to avoid causing their birth mother undue distress. In particular, this category points to the importance of future researchers exploring birth mother preferences regarding reconnections. This second half of the puzzle could go a long way to helping adoptee–birthmother pairs avoid privacy turbulence and to providing practitioners with a concrete guide to creating clear expectations for both relational parties.

#### *Protection privacy rules*

These rules represent adoptees who might not care about information relating to their birth. Adoptees giving voice to this theme reflect different factors that would influence the degree to which they would be willing or reluctant confidants. Similar to the factors the original privacy owners must consider as they arbitrate rules (Child et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2012), these accounts reflect a similar process adoptees experience when considering information seeking. These exemplars also emphasize the importance of timing when creating information linkages. Petronio (2002) argues that telling private information before someone is prepared to hear it might interfere with the possibility of forming useful linkages. Thus, adoptees who express uncertainty in regard to their preferences for information ownership and control might be the most difficult to smoothly reconnect with their birth mothers/families.

Relinquishing future information ownership claims or not believing they have ownership rights might also cause privacy turbulence if the birth mother/family makes them a co-owner of information. Unlike the adoptees who wanted to know everything and believed that that was their right, these participants might violate birth mother expectations in a different way. In this sense, the boundary linkage or alliance would be weak, and might reflect a low level of commitment by the adoptee to negotiate and maintain privacy rules related to that information (Petronio, 2002). In other words, being uncertain about the information means that individuals are more likely to be careful about the flow of information. Thus, these individuals might erect thicker privacy boundaries to prudently control incoming information. Taken together, adoptees who express ambivalence might require an outside facilitator to manage expectations of both the adoptee and the birth mother.

#### *Privacy rules resisting boundary access*

Adoptees who indicate that they do not want or do not care to learn information about their birth might be much less motivated to seek or be receptive to a reunion. Overall, this theme characterizes our participants' expectation of sustaining thick privacy boundaries and rejecting co-ownership, for reasons ranging from not wanting to know to feeling as though they did not have the right to know. Boundaries in this case would help individuals keep their information in and others' information out. On the opposite end of the spectrum from those adoptees who wanted had permeable privacy boundaries, learning any information about their birth would position these adoptees as reluctant confidants and might become the impetus for privacy turbulence (see Petronio, 2013). Thus, understanding preferences might provide insight into the potential success of a reunion regardless of whether the adoptee or birth mother/family is the initiator. Put differently, knowing an adoptee's preference for information might help a birth mother/family not only decide whether they would like to reunite but also provide insight into whether the adoptee would even be receptive to a reconnection.

### *Theoretical and practical implications*

In addition to adding to our knowledge about adoption reunions, this research also might have real implications for theory and practice. First, these results illuminate a privacy scenario that is understudied, yet relevant. What are individual's privacy preferences for the ownership and control of information particularly salient to them that they do not already know? Petronio's theory speaks to privacy rules for regulating information, yet the majority of research on privacy management examines situations in which people know the personal information they are working to protect (e.g., Kelly & Macready, 2009). In this study, we explore a context where the adoptees have to consider not only their preferences for unknown information but also the emotional well-being and privacy preferences of the original owner. Specifically, researchers might consider how individuals solicit information they perceive themselves to own and the relational consequences when that information is either disseminated or kept private.

Concurrently, this study contributes to our understanding of privacy rules and illuminates the significance of privacy rules that drive choice making. In concert with the extant research (Child et al., 2012; Thompson et al., 2012), these findings underscore how motivation and cultural influence drive privacy rule arbitration. For example, some adoptees developed preferences driven by their motivation to preserve their psychological well-being, whereas others developed rules based on their anticipation of their birth mother's preference for disclosure. Overall, the following privacy rule preferences effectively illustrate the way adoptees might seek to regulate privacy boundaries around adoption information.

In terms of practice, the results suggest it is worthwhile to communicate privacy expectations prior to the reunion. Whether through a facilitator or written form, it seems beneficial to the exchange if adoptees identify their overall information preferences. This practice would decrease the risk of undesired information being shared, as well as give the birth mothers advanced notice about desired information. Expectations for the disclosure of

information prior to the reunion can reduce the chances of privacy turbulence, which can help reduce the chances of a negative reconnection.

In addition, our results suggest that adoptees anticipate the privacy preferences of their birth mothers/families but also desire that the birth mother/family conceal information that would be potentially hurtful. In fact, many adoptees assert that they would be reluctant to learn negatively valenced information. For this reason, a prior communication about preferences or a reunion facilitator can function to mitigate the dilemma of the reluctant confidant by setting the birth mother/family up as information guardians. These guardians would disseminate desired information and keep unwanted information private.

### *Directions for future research and limitations*

Many opportunities exist for future research concerning adoption reunions in addition to those directions suggested above. For example, adoptees and birth mothers might be more or less open to asking for or revealing certain information depending on the medium. In fact, Child and Petronio (2010) suggest that privacy rules might change depending on whether information interactions take place in a computer-mediated communication context as opposed to face-to-face. Thus, future researchers should investigate whether information preferences change depending on the communication context. In addition, given the results, future researchers might want to explore what strategies, if any, adoptees use to thwart the disclosure of unwanted information that they do not believe they have rights to know when they are interacting with a birth mother or birth family member. Finally, adoption reunion scholars might particularly want to apply a theory of motivated information management (TMIM) framework to parse out the ways motivation and efficacy influence what type of information adoptees ultimately seek.

As with all research, this study is not without limitations. Particularly, this study is largely descriptive and only captures desires for information from the adoptee's perspective. Future research might consider taking a dyadic

approach to exploring information preferences and should empirically explore how information preferences impact the reunion experience. In addition, this study only captured information preferences at one particular point in time. More research is needed to determine whether preferences change across the lifespan. In fact, the way preferences for information might fluctuate across adoptees' lifespan suggest that linkage timing might be a salient factor beyond the initial reconnection. Taking a lifespan perspective also might allow researchers to track what outcomes are associated when preferences are matching (i.e., privacy coordination) or not (i.e., privacy turbulence).

### Conclusion

Overall, our results provide critical insight into the context of adoption reunion, specifically concerning the preferences adoptees might have for information during a reunion with their birth mothers/families. Our study was the first, to our knowledge, to illuminate adoptees' preferences for the ownership and control of information related to their birth. In many cases, our results suggest that adoptees care not only about their own emotional well-being but also about their birth mother/family. In fact, the most robust theme, *contingent*, suggests that adoptees might like their birth mothers/families to serve as information guardians, revealing desired information and concealing unwanted disclosures. Our findings ultimately highlight the complexities surrounding information ownership and control issues as well as emphasize the heuristic applicability of CPM theory. Taken together, we are encouraged that our results can lay the groundwork for practitioners and adoption scholars.

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