

ABBIE E. GOLDBERG, LORI A. KINKLER, HANNAH B. RICHARDSON, AND
JORDAN B. DOWNING *Clark University*

Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Couples in Open Adoption Arrangements: A Qualitative Study

Little research has attended to the role of gender and sexual orientation in shaping open adoption dynamics. This qualitative, longitudinal study of 45 adoptive couples (15 lesbian, 15 gay, and 15 heterosexual couples) examined adopters' motivations for open adoption, changes in attitudes about openness, and early relationship dynamics. Key findings revealed that heterosexuals often described feeling drawn to open adoption because they perceived it as the only option, inasmuch as few agencies were facilitating closed adoptions. In contrast, sexual minorities often appreciated the philosophy of openness whereby they were not encouraged to lie about their sexual orientation in order to adopt. Attitudes about openness varied over time, and changes in attitudes were attributed to a variety of factors such as perceived birth parent characteristics and the perceived nature of the birth parent relationship. Overall, although some participants reported tensions with birth parents over time, most reported satisfying relationships.

A literature on open adoption is gradually emerging (Wolfgram, 2008). Open adoptions are characterized by varying degrees of information

exchange (e.g., letters, pictures, visits) between birth and adoptive parents, before or after the adoption (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994). Much of the existing research has focused on the perceived benefits of open adoption from the perspectives of adoption agencies (Henney, McRoy, Ayers-Lopez, & Grotevant, 2003), birth parents (Henney, Ayers-Lopez, Mack, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2007; McRoy, Grotevant, & White, 1988), adoptive parents (McRoy et al.; Siegel, 1993, 2003, 2008), and adopted children (Berge, Mendenhall, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006; Gross, 1993; McRoy et al.). Topically, research on open adoption has focused on attitudes about openness (Berry, 1993; Siegel, 1993, 2003, 2008), changes in open adoption arrangements over time (Berry, Cavazos Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Crea & Barth, 2009), and challenges in adoptive–birth parent relationships (McRoy et al.; Siegel, 2008).

Despite the rich nature of the open adoption literature, it has been limited in several key ways. First, little research has attended to the gendered nature of the adoption process, that is, the role of gender in the perspectives and experiences of members of the adoptive kinship network (adoptive parents, birth parents, and adopted children; Freeark et al., 2005). Gender theory suggests that gendered norms and practices shape individual experience and family formation (Connell, 1987; Risman, 2004). Both men and women may internalize gendered norms such that certain activities (e.g., caregiving) are perceived as primarily female or

Department of Psychology, Clark University, 950 Main Street, Worcester MA 01610 (agoldberg@clarku.edu; lkinkler@clarku.edu; hrichardson@clarku.edu; jdowning@clarku.edu).

This article was edited by Ralph LaRossa.

Key Words: adoption, gay, gender, lesbian, longitudinal, qualitative.

male domains of behavior (Cowdery, Knudson-Martin, & Mahoney, 2009). The role of gender is particularly important to examine within the context of open adoption because of the complex—and potentially gendered—dynamics that evolve via interactions between birth parents and adoptive parents. For example, gendered expectations of behaviors may result in power imbalances between men and women within the adoption context. Birth mothers are the ones who most often choose the parents with whom they will place their child, whereas birth fathers tend to be less involved in, and sometimes directly excluded from, this process (Hollenstein, Leve, Scaramella, Milfort, & Neiderhiser, 2003). The expectation that birth mothers play a more central role in open adoptions may lead to a marginalization of birth fathers by both adoptive parents and birth mothers (Freeark et al.). By extension, research on birth parents' experiences with open adoption has tended to focus exclusively on birth mothers (Henney et al., 2007). Similarly, adoptive fathers are often ignored in research on adoption; many studies include only adoptive mothers (Grotevant, 2000).

The few studies that have attended explicitly to gender dynamics in adoptive relationships have yielded intriguing findings. For example, Sykes (2001) conducted a qualitative study of 15 heterosexual adoptive parents who had varying degrees of contact with their children's birth mothers in which she addressed the gendered dynamics of the adoption process. Sykes observed that adoptive mothers were more likely to describe feeling uncomfortable about "competing" with birth mothers than were adoptive fathers. In her analysis, she suggested that this might be "due to the adoptive fathers' more peripheral role in direct contact arrangements" as well as the fact that "the issue of motherhood evokes such powerful emotions, with competition for entitlement of the emotional bond with the child" (p. 308). Gender theory suggests that both adoptive mothers and birth mothers may ultimately need to confront and negotiate the stereotyped meanings associated with mothering. By virtue of its complex nature, open adoption presents the opportunity to both challenge and clarify the meaning of motherhood in two different contexts.

Several quantitative studies have documented ways in which adoptive parents' feelings about open adoption may vary as a function of gender.

Grotevant et al. (1994) studied heterosexual adoptive couples in open adoption arrangements and found that adoptive mothers tended to express less satisfaction with their level of control over the birth parents' involvement than adoptive fathers. This finding may in part reflect the fact that adoptive mothers, more so than adoptive fathers, tend to be the ones responsible for facilitating and maintaining contact (Dunbar et al., 2006; Sykes, 2001). Also somewhat consistent with Sykes' findings, Grotevant (2000) found that adoptive mothers tended to have stronger negative feelings and more ambivalent feelings about initial meetings with birth mothers than did adoptive fathers. Roby, Wyatt, and Petts (2005) also found that adoptive mothers were more likely to express mixed feelings about continued contact with birth families than adoptive fathers. The greater incidence of mixed feelings among mothers perhaps speaks to the particularly complex relationship between adoptive and birth mothers and the capacity for adoptive mothers to feel at once close to and also threatened by the birth mother (Sykes).

In addition to the limited focus on gender in the adoption process, sexual orientation has garnered little attention in the literature on open adoption. With a few exceptions (Downing, Richardson, Kinkler, & Goldberg, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Sauck, 2007), the research on open adoption has exclusively focused on heterosexual adoptive parents. Lesbian and gay couples are adopting at higher rates than ever before (Gates, Badgett, Macomber, & Chambers, 2007) and may be particularly likely to opt for open adoptions, in that international adoption has become increasingly difficult for same-sex couples and closed domestic adoptions are rare. Same-sex couples might approach adoption from a different vantage point than that of heterosexual adopters. Specifically, their status as sexual minorities who lie outside of the nuclear family ideal (i.e., one that is heterosexual and biologically related) may have implications for how some same-sex couples navigate open adoption. Some research suggests that lesbians and gay men may not place as much emphasis on biological parenthood in itself (Goldberg, Downing, & Richardson, 2009) and appear to have more expansive notions of kinship than heterosexuals, whereby they are more likely to view nonfamily related persons (e.g., friends) as kin (Oswald, 2002; Weston, 1991). In turn, the notion of welcoming a birth parent into their

lives as “extended family” may be regarded as more acceptable to lesbian and gay adoptive parents.

Lesbians and gay men may also differ from each other in ways that may have implications for how they navigate open adoptions. Indeed, some research has found that, compared with adoptive fathers, adoptive mothers may struggle more with accepting the birth mother as a member of the adoptive kinship network—at least in the initial stages of claiming their own identity as “mother” (Sykes, 2001). Yet, lesbians who are adopting with a female partner deviate from heteronormative gendered roles in multiple ways, which may cause them to develop more expansive ideas about motherhood (Dunne, 2000). For example, they may be less likely to approach motherhood with the perception that there can only be one mother. They may feel less possessive and protective of their maternal identity in relation to the birth mother and, in turn, feel less threatened by birth mother involvement as compared to heterosexual adoptive mothers.

Of further interest is how gay male couples negotiate and experience relationships with birth mothers. As gay male adoptive couples develop their parental identities, they contend more directly with gendered norms related to fatherhood than motherhood (Mallon, 2000). Confronting the societal notion that women are better suited to caretaking roles than men, they may feel pressure to have a female parental figure involved in their child’s life. Thus, when developing relationships with birth mothers, gay men may feel less threatened than lesbian or heterosexual adoptive mothers, inasmuch as they experience less perceived or symbolic competition with birth mothers and in fact may perceive birth mother involvement as particularly desirable.

A third limitation of the research on open adoption is the lack of attention to the pre-adoptive period. Although some research has examined adoptive parents’ perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of open adoption (Siegel, 1993) and their retrospective accounts of why they chose open adoption (Berry et al., 1998), to our knowledge, no published research has prospectively examined adopters’ motivations for pursuing open adoption, despite the fact that they may have long-term implications for adoptive–birth family relations (Berry et al.; Lee & Twaite, 1997). Berry et al. studied a large sample of heterosexual adoptive parents and found that 46% of parents

retrospectively described having pursued open adoptions because they believed it was best for the child, 20% reported that they did so because they wanted contact with their child’s birth parents, 11% reported that they feared they would not be allowed to adopt otherwise, and 5% reported that the agency had suggested openness. Reduction or cessation of openness 2 years later was related to why the parents chose an open adoption. Among those who initially chose openness because they feared they would be unable to adopt otherwise, 50% had reduced their contact and 21% had stopped contact. Among those who chose openness because the agency recommended it, 29% had reduced their contact and 29% had stopped. Reductions in openness were most common among those choosing openness for these two reasons. Similarly, Neil (2003) conducted a qualitative study of 30 heterosexual adoptive couples and found that when adoptive parents were reluctant to have contact with birth parents but felt as though they had to go along with the agency’s wishes in order to adopt, they tended to continue to feel ambivalent about their children’s birth parents regardless of how much contact they ultimately had with them.

Berry et al.’s (1998) and Neil’s (2003) research suggest that initial attitudes about openness may be relatively stable over time and, further, that a lack of commitment to the philosophy of open adoption may have long-standing implications. At the same time, some research shows that adoptive parents who participate in open adoptions describe themselves as increasingly comfortable with openness over time (McRoy et al., 1988; Siegel, 2003). Longitudinal analysis of qualitative data is needed to better articulate the reasons for stability or changes in feelings about openness. Furthermore, in that the majority of studies on adoptive parents in open adoptions have been conducted at least several years post-placement (e.g., Grotevant et al., 1994; Grotevant & McRoy, 1997; Siegel, 2003), research that examines the immediate post-placement phase is particularly needed in order to examine the early development of open adoption dynamics.

The current study, then, aims to address several gaps in the literature: (a) the lack of attention to gender in the adoption process, (b) the lack of attention to sexual orientation in the adoption process, (c) the lack of attention to the pre-adoptive period, and (d) the need for longitudinal

exploration of open adoption dynamics. This study explores open adoption dynamics from the perspective of 45 couples (15 lesbian couples, 15 gay male couples, and 15 heterosexual couples) who were pursuing open adoption. Data from both the pre-adoptive period (Time 1; before couples were placed with a child) and the post-adoptive period (Time 2; 3–4 months after couples were placed with a child) are used to address the following major research questions:

1. What are pre-adoptive parents' motivations for open adoption? Are certain motivations more or less salient for adopters of different genders and sexual orientations?
2. How do adoptive parents describe their emerging relationships with their children's birth parents once they have been placed with a child? More particularly, how do attitudes about open adoption change (or stay the same) over time? Are certain patterns more salient for adopters of different genders and sexual orientations?
3. What challenges do adoptive parents describe in navigating early relationships with birth parents (e.g., dwindling contact or overstepping boundaries by birth parents)? Are certain challenges more salient for adopters of different genders and sexual orientations?
4. To what extent, and in what ways, do adoptive parents of different genders and sexual orientations expand their notions of family to include birth parents?

METHOD

Data from 90 individuals (30 women in 15 lesbian couples; 30 men in 15 gay male couples; 15 women and 15 men in 15 heterosexual couples) were analyzed. These couples were selected from a larger sample of couples experiencing the transition to adoptive parenthood because they were pursuing domestic private open adoption (through a private agency) as opposed to domestic public (through the child welfare system) or international adoption. Data were collected between the years 2005 and 2009.

Recruitment and Procedures

Inclusion criteria were (a) couples must be adopting their first child and (b) both partners must be becoming parents for the first time. Participants were recruited during the pre-adoptive period. Adoption agencies throughout

the United States were asked to provide study information to clients who had not yet adopted. United States census data were used to identify states with a high percentage of same-sex couples (Gates & Ost, 2004) and effort was made to contact agencies in those states. More than 30 agencies provided information to their clients; interested clients were asked to contact the principal investigator for details regarding participation. Both heterosexual and same-sex couples were targeted through these agencies to facilitate similarity on geographical location and income. Because some same-sex couples may not be "out" to agencies about their sexual orientation, national gay/lesbian organizations also assisted with recruitment.

Participation entailed completion of a questionnaire packet and participation in a semi-structured telephone interview while participants were waiting to be placed with their first child (Time 1, or T1). Participants then completed a follow-up questionnaire packet and telephone interview 3–4 months after they were placed with a child (Time 2, or T2). Participants were interviewed separately from their partners. On average, interviews lasted 1–1.5 hours.

Description of the Sample

Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 52, with a mean age of 37.7 ($SD = 4.8$). The sample predominantly (90.0%) identified as Caucasian. Five participants (5.6%) identified as Latino or Latina, one (1.1%) as African American, one (1.1%) as multiracial, one (1.1%) as Vietnamese, and one (1.1%) as Native American. Participants were, as a whole, financially secure and highly educated: Mean combined family income was \$141,908 ($Mdn = \$114,000$; $SD = \$90,885$). Twenty-nine participants (32.2%) held a college degree, 27 (30.0%) held a master's degree, 14 (15.6%) had an associate's degree or some college, 12 (13.3%) held a Ph.D./M.D./J.M.D.D., and 6 (6.7%) held a high school diploma. The education level for two persons (2.2%) was unknown. Couples resided in diverse regions of the United States: 21 (46.7%) lived in the West, 10 (22.2%) lived in the South, 10 (22.2%) lived in the Northeast, 3 (6.7%) lived in the Midwest, and 1 (2.2%) lived in Canada.

On average, couples waited for an adoptive placement for 19.7 months ($SD = 16.5$). At the time of placement, children's mean age was 0.05 months ($Mdn = 0$ months; range

0–1 month; $SD = 0.19$). Twenty-three couples (51.1%) adopted girls, 21 (46.7%) adopted boys, and 1 (2.2%) adopted twins (a boy and a girl). Eighteen couples (40.0%) identified their child's race as biracial, 16 (35.6%) as Caucasian, 9 (20.0%) as Latino/Hispanic, and 2 (4.4%) as African American.

Regarding efforts to have a biological child, 13 of 15 heterosexual couples had attempted to conceive prior to adopting, and 14 of 15 lesbian couples had attempted alternative insemination. Heterosexual couples tended to pursue more extensive, expensive efforts in an effort to have a biological child. For example, nine heterosexual couples, compared to three lesbian couples, had pursued in vitro fertilization (IVF). Among those couples that had pursued IVF, heterosexual couples completed a mean of five IVF cycles ($Mdn = 3$ cycles; range 1–12 attempts; $SD = 3.81$) and lesbian couples completed a mean of three cycles ($Mdn = 3$ cycles; range 2–4 attempts; $SD = 1$). None of the gay male couples had pursued biological parenthood (i.e., via surrogacy).

Open-Ended Questions

Participants were interviewed by the principal investigator and trained graduate student research assistants at T1 and T2. To facilitate similarity in interviewing style and method across interviewers, the interview schedule was designed in such a way that it included a series of standard questions that were asked of all participants, which were accompanied by standard probes. Interviews were transcribed to capture participants' thoughts in their own words. Identifying details were removed to ensure confidentiality and pseudonyms are used in place of actual names. Data for the study are derived from several open-ended questions, which were designed to probe participants' perceptions and experiences pertaining to open adoption.

T1 Questions

1. Why did you choose open adoption?
2. How much contact would you prefer to have with regard to your child's birth parents? (Probe: What type of contact would you like—in person, telephone calls, letters—and how often? Why?)
3. Do you have any ambivalence or concerns about open adoption, or contact with the birth parents or birth mother? Explain.

T2 Questions

1. Did you meet the birth parents/birth mother? If yes, what was that like?
2. What are your feelings about them?
3. What type or level of contact do you currently have with the birth parents/birth mother?
4. How happy are you with the current arrangement? (Probe: Have any challenges come up in your relationship?)

Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic analysis (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) of the data by focusing on participants' constructions of the dynamics of the open adoption process, paying special attention to how these themes might vary between men and women, and how these themes might vary among members of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual couples. Because of the longitudinal nature of our study, we paid specific attention to emerging patterns that occurred from T1 to T2 (e.g., changes in views on openness), and we developed themes, derived from the codes that were most substantiated in the data, to reflect these patterns. We approached our analysis from a feminist perspective, viewing gender as a socially constructed category that is instilled with distinct meanings within a social context (Miller & Scholnick, 2000). To develop themes from the data, we used a process of analytic triangulation, by which we independently coded the data and compared our findings throughout the coding process to identify similarities and differences in the data. After cross-checking our codes, and expanding and collapsing where appropriate, we continued to reevaluate the coding scheme, return to the narratives, and create new codes based on emerging theoretical constructs. This lengthy, iterative process of coding involved a continual back and forth between the data and our emerging analysis. We discussed the emerging codes and our differences in interpretation at regular coding meetings, ultimately verifying the most substantiated codes as the coding scheme emerged. Once we had developed clearly articulated codes, we applied focused coding to the data, using the most significant codes to sort the data. These focused codes, which can be understood as being more conceptual and selective (Charmaz, 2006), became the basis for the themes developed in our analysis. The final coding scheme

was established once we had verified agreement among all the independently coded data.

To further illustrate our process of moving from initial coding to focused coding, we provide an example. In initial coding meetings, all four authors discussed thoughts about and interpretations of passages of text, such as the following T1 response from a heterosexual woman named Clara about the type and level of contact that she envisioned with birth parents: "I think, in all honesty, it depends on [the] personality [of the birth parents]. We definitely would like to meet them before or when the baby is born, and then we'd see. In terms of ongoing contact—not sure how we feel about that. That would sort of depend on the situation." The initial codes that we developed on the basis of our independent reading of this passage were: "hesitant about ongoing contact," "amount of contact depends on birth parents' personality and the 'situation,'" and "contact is expected with birth parents (rather than with birth mother only)." These initial codes were relatively short and precise, the goal being to stay close to the data and to capture participants' perceptions. After completing several rounds of coding, we discussed which codes should be collapsed or integrated, and the process of focused coding began as all four authors returned to the data, applying the most significant and frequent codes (Charmaz, 2006). At this stage, we specifically attended to examining connections between codes across time points and according to couple type (lesbian, gay, heterosexual). For example, we examined Clara's T1 response in relation to the information that she provided at T2 regarding her experience with the birth parents. At T2, she had seemingly increased her investment in open adoption, on the basis of a positive experience with a birth mother whom she "liked and trusted." We therefore coded this part of her narrative as "increased investment in openness over time due to good birth parent—adoptive parent connection." This theme, which captured a dynamic process across time, was then reapplied to all of the data, whereby we examined other participants' narratives for a similar shift in perceptions of openness.

Since partners within a couple often described distinctive interpretations of their own experiences, we indicate how many individuals endorsed each theme as well as how many of those participants were part of a couple in which both partners endorsed the same theme. This

allowed us to analyze individual perceptions while simultaneously highlighting congruent perceptions within couples. Of further note is that we examine and discuss patterns that differed according to gender and sexual orientation only where relevant; gender and sexual orientation were not, as might be expected, ultimately salient to all themes that emerged from the data.

RESULTS

Adoptive Parents' Motivations for Open Adoption

At T1, adoptive parents identified a range of motivations for pursuing open adoption. These varied, somewhat, according to adoptive parents' sexual orientation. There were no noteworthy patterns that varied by participants' gender.

Best Interest of the Child

Many participants were motivated to pursue open adoption because they believed that it would be in the best interest of their child, both psychologically and physically.

Psychologically "healthier" for the child. Thirteen lesbians (including four couples), 15 gay men (including four couples), 5 heterosexual women, and 5 heterosexual men (three couples) emphasized that they were pursuing open adoption because they felt that it was the "healthier approach" (as compared to closed adoption) in that there was "no secrecy," and "everything was out in the open." Such openness was presumed to positively influence children's psychological development. These participants expressed the feeling that open adoption could provide their children with a more detailed knowledge of their family history, as well as allow them to obtain information about their background directly from their birth parents. As Ian, a heterosexual man, observed, "They're going to know they're adopted. They're going to want to know where they come from and who they came from, so why not make it a lot easier [for the child]?" These findings echo prior research with adoptive parents, who often cite the ability to answer their child's questions in the future as a major benefit of open adoption (Berry et al., 1998; Siegel, 1993).

Some participants mentioned that having conversations with friends and family members

who were adopted had facilitated their awareness of the drawbacks of closed adoptions and propelled them to think beyond what they wanted in considering their child's future needs. Ryan, a gay man, explained that "we both have friends that were adopted and some of them know who their birth parents were and some of them don't. Just knowing them over the years, we like the possibility of the child knowing the birth mother if they want." Significantly, participants often discussed the benefits of their child having information about and contact with the birth *mother*, specifically. Discussion of potential birth father involvement was absent in many participants' narratives, suggesting the perceived primacy of the birth mother—adoptive parent relationship.

Access to health information. One lesbian, one heterosexual woman, and one heterosexual man were motivated to pursue open adoption specifically because of the ability to access detailed health and medical information from the birth parents. These individuals said they wanted to know that they would be able to contact their child's birth parents for health or medical information in the case of an emergency. Matt, a heterosexual man, explained: "If there ever were any kind of medical issue, a bone marrow transplant . . . it would definitely be good to know who the birth parents are and where they are and be able to access that information."

Male or female role model. One lesbian and four gay men noted that one of the most attractive features of open adoption was the possibility of gaining a male or female role model, respectively, through the process. They expressed the belief that easy access to a male or female role model would benefit their child's gender development. Specifically, Kate, a lesbian, was excited by the possibility of an active and involved birth father who could provide her child with an accessible male figure: "As two women, we are not going to have that male perspective to offer. So we are hoping to get a birth father that wants to be involved in his child's life." Thus, in this instance, the role of the birth father was particularly salient for Kate, given the fact that she and her partner were a lesbian couple without a designated male parental figure in the family. Most lesbians, however, did not highlight the importance of the birth father in providing this role.

Likewise, Todd, a gay man, explained that "we really wanted to have a mother figure and that is why we chose open adoption." In a similar vein, Enrique said, "One thing that we think is pretty unique about being gay parents is that the child will never have another mother, that will be the child's only mother. The open adoption would give that child the opportunity to identify with that person." Thus, making a distinction between birth mother and *the* mother (i.e., adoptive mother) was inconsequential to these gay men. Discursively differentiating biological kinship relations from adoptive relations may be perceived by some gay men as unnecessary given that there is no adoptive mother in need of asserting her primary maternal role. As men parenting with other men, they recognized that their child would be lacking a primary female parent and in turn were eager to include a mother in their children's lives.

Best Interests of All Members of the Adoption Triad

Four lesbian women, three gay men, two heterosexual women, and two heterosexual men emphasized that they were pursuing open adoption because they felt that all members of the adoption triad (the child, the birth parents, and the adoptive parents) benefited from the openness and honesty inherent in open adoption. For example, Gary, a heterosexual man, remarked:

I like the idea of the openness. You know, being able to have all your questions answered from day one. No, there's no secrets. . . . I don't like secrets; it's very difficult for me to keep a secret; I just don't like it. And I want the baby to know whatever he needs to know. And also for the birth mother. It's really unfair to have to go through life knowing nothing.

Notably, in discussing the benefits of open adoption to all triad members, participants typically explicitly referred to the birth mother, thus minimizing the birth father's role.

Best Interests of the Adoptive Parents

In some cases, participants spent less time focusing on how open adoption would benefit their child or their child's birth parents, but rather emphasized the ways in which open adoption made their own lives easier, often describing

how it was the quickest, easiest, or most comfortable route to becoming a parent.

Practical reasons. Many participants chose to pursue open adoption because of practical reasons. The types of practical considerations that were described by participants differed by sexual orientation. Eight heterosexual men and nine heterosexual women (including five couples), but no lesbians or gay men, tended to emphasize that they had agreed to pursue open adoption because “that’s where the tide is turning”—that is, they acknowledged that more and more private adoption agencies were encouraging open adoptions, and they felt as though they had little choice in the matter if they wished to adopt a child in a reasonable span of time. In turn, they often had lingering concerns about open adoption. As Matt, a heterosexual man, asserted, “You’ve got one set of parents, that’s how you know who you are and which tribe you belong to. You know who’s in, who’s out, who’s in this family. If the lines get too blurred, it’s too chaotic.” Nevertheless, he and his wife were pursuing open adoption because “you’re not gonna find closed adoptions anymore. And so it’s just like, well, we’ll be open to it, you know, whatever we’ve got to do to get a baby.” In many of these cases, men and women did not immediately accept the idea of open adoption, but felt that “because of the trend, we have to be flexible and change with the times.” Their narratives echo research indicating that some level of contact with birth parents is increasingly the norm in domestic private adoptions (Berry, 1993; Gross, 1997; Sykes, 2001).

Lesbians and gay men described other types of practical considerations. Two gay men (one couple) acknowledged having chosen to pursue domestic open adoption because they had “heard that gay men would have the same luck or even better than a traditional couple [because] a lot of birth mothers want to be the only woman.” They therefore chose open adoption because they believed that it was the route most likely to bring them a child. One gay man and one lesbian noted that they had chosen open adoption on the basis of a friend’s recommendation of an agency that only did open adoptions. Their selection of open adoption, then, was incidental and based on convenience.

We can be “out.” Seven lesbians (two couples) and three gay men (one couple) said that they had chosen private domestic open adoption,

and not international or public domestic adoption, because they wished to be “out” about their sexual orientation in the process. These individuals liked the situation where they could be open about their same-sex partnered status to their agencies as well as to their child’s birth parents, a desire often cited by same-sex couples (Goldberg et al., 2007). As Kate stated, “We didn’t have to lie about who we are. You know, pretend to be straight living together. . . . And we were like, we don’t live our lives that way and we didn’t want to adopt that way.” Similarly, Bryan said he was drawn to open adoption because he and his partner were “both open and honest as a gay couple.” For Bryan, open adoption meant being honest about his relationship to all members of the adoption triad.

Negotiating Early Relationships: Openness Over Time

Given prospective adoptive parents’ various motivations for choosing open adoption, how did their relationships with birth parents actually unfold once they were placed with a child? The following section considers how adoptive parents’ investment in openness (and, consequently, their actual contact with birth parents) may change or remain stable over time, in response to a variety of factors. Indeed, adoptive parents’ initial investment in openness was only one of several factors that reportedly influenced their desire to have contact with their child’s birth parents. Birth parents’ own level of investment in openness also played a role in their evolving relationships. Additionally, the adoptive parent–birth parent match (i.e., how well the adoptive parents “clicked” with the birth parents) as well as unexpected events (e.g., perceived betrayal or drug use by birth parents) influenced adoptive parents’ investment in openness. Thus, we describe several different patterns in openness that unfolded. We consider adoptive parents’ initial investment in openness (at T1), when they had only an abstract notion of open adoption, in conjunction with their level of investment in openness at T2, when they were navigating the reality of an actual birth parent relationship. Specifically, we first describe participants whose investment in openness increased from T1 to T2, and we then describe participants whose investment in openness decreased from T1 to T2. For both groups, the experience of being placed

with a child or meeting birth parents ultimately changed their original feelings about openness. We then describe participants whose investment in openness remained high and those whose investment in openness remained low from T1 to T2. For both groups, participants' original investment in openness was reinforced by the experience of being placed with a child in an open adoption arrangement and therefore remained unchanged. Finally, we describe participants whose investment in openness remained high from T1 to T2, but whose frequency of contact with birth parents was lower than expected, because of factors that were beyond their control.

Increased investment in openness over time (T1, hesitant; T2, open). One lesbian, six gay men (three couples), four heterosexual women, and two heterosexual men (one couple) described becoming increasingly invested in the possibility of contact with birth parents over time. Pre-adoption, some individuals expressed hesitation or ambivalence about openness, noting concerns about boundaries and personality compatibility; however, they ultimately matched with birth parents they liked and trusted. The reality of their open adoption arrangement served to quell their abstract anxieties, and, post-placement, they emphasized a commitment to open adoption. Vivian, a heterosexual woman, indicated at T1 that she would have preferred a closed adoption but was pursuing open adoption because she felt that she had to in order to successfully adopt. When asked about how much contact she would want to have with a child's birth parents, she responded, "In an ideal world, maybe e-mailing pictures a couple times a year, maybe a meeting once a year, but I want these children to know that there's only one mommy and one daddy." Thus, although she had resigned herself to some level of (minimal) contact, she was quick to emphasize the importance of maintaining certain boundaries. At T2, her opinion had changed, on the basis of her positive experiences with her child's birth parents: "They're such wonderful people, and we both felt such a connection with them, we feel comfortable being flexible and I mean, they gave us a gift, and we consider them part of our extended family."

Robert, a heterosexual man who experienced a similar shift in openness, reflected on his changed feelings: "I think everybody starts out at the beginning of this thinking they don't want

any contact, and it's funny how quickly you move to a different place where you just wish for that contact, how good an idea it is." Such sentiments nuance previous findings suggesting that, over time, many parents develop more empathy for birth parents and begin to see them as real people who need not be threatening to the parent-child relationship (Grotevant et al., 1994; Sykes, 2001).

Decreased investment in openness over time (T1, open; T2, hesitant). Three lesbians (one couple), two gay men (one couple), and two heterosexual women described themselves as becoming less open over time. Pre-adoption, they expressed enthusiasm about the possibility of an open adoption, and yet the reality of their particular situation caused them to pull back or want less contact than they had anticipated. Participants' decreased openness to contact was often related to the birth parents' unexpectedly chaotic personal lives, drug use, or emotional instability as well as to an unpleasant relationship between the birth mother and birth father. For example, Melissa, a lesbian, had positive feelings about open adoption at T1: "The more books we started reading about, you know, how wonderful it was and how healthy it was for the child, it took away so many questions in their life." At T2, however, difficulties with her child's birth parents had caused Melissa to feel less open to an ongoing relationship:

As time progressed and our adoption actually came to finalization, things turned a little bit with the boyfriend. . . . And it got crazy, and I don't know, at one point she was talking about suicide, and I mean it just, it got really ugly there, too. . . . So I can't say that we have the same relationship today that I think that we would have before the turning point.

Likewise, Sharon, a heterosexual woman, had initially felt that "it's important for our baby to know the birth mother. . . . We feel it's important our baby to know where they came from." At the time of the post-placement follow-up, however, she said about her child's birth mother:

She has been real nasty to us recently through e-mail. And I know part of it is probably just emotionally difficult for her. . . . I think my feelings on open adoption might have changed a little bit, now that I have a baby. I still feel very strongly about it and the fact that I want Emily to know who her

birth mother was, and to know about her. . . . But I think I'm a little bit more possessive now than I thought I would be.

Thus, for Sharon, a difficult situation with the birth mother—as well as her own feelings of “possessive[ness]”—led her to feel less open than she expected. Indeed, prior research has indicated that ongoing contact between birth parents and adoptive families may diminish over time (Berry et al., 1998), and these narratives suggest how and why this might be the case.

Investment in openness maintained over time (T1, open; T2, open). Five lesbians (including two couples), 13 gay men (five couples), 3 heterosexual women, and 3 heterosexual men (two couples) expressed an investment in openness at T1 and had maintained their investment in openness at T2, which they typically attributed to a good placement situation. For example, Allison, a heterosexual woman, explained at T1 that she wanted open adoption “because I think it’s the best for our baby. . . . I want them to know why they look like they do. Maybe why they like music, because Ben and I are not musical at all. It would be nice for them to know where they come from. I think open adoption is really good for that.” At T2, her commitment to open adoption was solidified by an “amazing” relationship with the birth mother: “This adoption is everything that we had hoped for. We really wanted open adoption, and we wanted to meet her, you know. We wanted to know her family; we wanted to have post-pregnant visits, so it worked out. We lucked out.” Significantly, pre-placement Allison discussed the notion of having birth mother *and* birth father involvement, but post-placement, her contact was entirely forged between the birth mother and her family, reinforcing the salience of the birth mother role in sustaining the adoptive family—birth family relationship (Dunbar et al., 2006).

Notably, this theme of openness being maintained post-placement emerged most frequently for the gay men in the sample, even though a similar number of gay male and lesbian couples expressed a strong investment in openness at T1. Thus, it appears that more gay men than lesbians may have been matched with birth mothers who also wished to maintain contact. This outcome could be related to the motivations of some birth mothers for choosing a gay male couple (e.g., with the hope of being more

involved in her child’s life). Indeed, five of the gay men in this category discussed their impressions that the birth mothers had specifically sought out a gay couple. They described these women as being particularly eager to be the “mother figure” for the child and thus were highly motivated to stay in contact with the adoptive family.

Lack of openness maintained over time (T1, hesitant; T2, hesitant). Ten lesbians (four couples), five gay men, two heterosexual women, and eight heterosexual men (two couples) noted that they were hesitant or had concerns about open adoption pre-placement, and they described little change in their attitudes post-placement. Among lesbians and gay men, their negative attitudes appeared to be maintained or exacerbated in part because of a difficult birth parent situation. For example, Liz, a lesbian, emphasized at T1 that she only wanted a “partly open” adoption, where no last names were exchanged and the only form of contact was letters and pictures. At T2, she described how her son’s birth mother had lied about her drug use. She confided, “I found it hard to talk to her and write her although that’s getting better with time, but definitely for a while there it was very difficult, because she was still just so selfish and it was all about her and not about him.” When asked if she would foster a relationship between her son and his birth mother, she said, “I don’t know if that’s in the cards.”

In contrast, many heterosexual participants who were hesitant about openness pre-placement maintained their reluctant attitudes despite relatively smooth relationships with birth parents (typically birth mothers). When asked about his feelings about desired contact at T1, Larry said, “I was a little less open to it only because my concern was for protection for us. I said to my wife, ‘What if you end up with somebody that was coming over to your house three days a week?’ And I had to say I don’t think that open adoption is meant to be that big a part of the child’s family, their life.” At T2, his views had not changed: “Basically, when Maggie is old enough to understand, if she has questions [she can ask]. I don’t think we need to see her every holiday, but I think maybe an occasional e-mail would be good.”

These patterns may reflect the fact that some of the heterosexual participants in this sample were more likely to pursue open adoption

because they perceived it to be the most practical and expedient means of adopting a child and were therefore less likely to push for contact after a birth parent backed away. In contrast, same-sex couples who were more likely to pursue open adoption because of their belief that openness would benefit their child (despite feeling hesitant personally) seemed to feel more conflicted over their child's birth parents' lack of contact over time.

Investment in openness maintained; expectations for contact decreased. Eleven lesbians (four couples), six gay men (two couples), three heterosexual women, and one heterosexual man maintained a high level of investment in openness, but their expectations for contact had declined in response to the birth parents' non-responsiveness. They noted that they had made extensive efforts to make contact with the birth parents but were met with little response. This withdrawal appeared to cause them to lower their expectations for contact, although their desire for a fully open adoption remained intact. Most expressed disappointment that their hopes for a truly open adoption had not been realized. Wayne, a gay man, explained: "We have no contact; probably haven't talked to them in over two months. It's very different from the contact we were having previously. There's some sadness, actually, on our part, but there is understanding too. . . . I know in my heart of hearts that it's the best thing for Dana to have contact with them."

Heather, a lesbian, had also lowered her expectations for contact but felt unequivocally disappointed about the lack of contact: "It is hard. I feel bad about it. And when I talk to other adoptive parents who have contact, and did this, I definitely feel longing, like I wish that we could have that too. I would really like for Mackenzie to be able to grow up knowing her birth mom. I also have a lot of sadness that her birth father is not known." Thus, Heather was particularly focused on wanting ongoing contact with the birth mother and at the same time noted that she would like to know the identity of the birth father. For these participants, disappointment often appeared to be rooted in the anticipation of their child's grief. They were saddened by not being able to provide their children with the option of contact with their birth parents, especially since so many of them felt invested

in open adoption for the sake of their child's well-being.

Navigating Early Relationships: Boundary Challenges

Most participants reported having established good boundaries with their child's birth parents, typically referring primarily to the birth mother. They felt that their children's birth mothers were sensitive to their need for a certain amount of space to develop as a family and did not overstep boundaries (e.g., by referring to themselves as "the mother"). They also expressed feeling connected to and unthreatened by the birth mother, in part precisely because their child's birth parents had good boundaries. As Ryan, a gay man, stated, "She refers to herself as being the birth mother and she says she would be a really great aunt, she just wouldn't be a good mother." Enrique, another gay man, explained, "For her christening, she sent her a card and signed it 'Beth.' We were like 'Oh God, is she going to sign it Mom?' or you know? So, in that aspect, I really think that she's really minding the boundaries and really paying attention to them."

In navigating their relationship with their child's birth mother or birth parents, however, some adoptive parents encountered challenges related to boundaries and contact. Even in cases where adoptive parents valued openness and claimed to like and respect their children's birth mothers or birth parents, they sometimes encountered challenges in this relationship. Two lesbians, seven gay men (two couples), seven heterosexual women, and two heterosexual men (two couples) described feeling as though the birth mother was pushing or overstepping their boundaries in some way. They expressed uncertainty about how to navigate perceived boundary crossings, inasmuch as they were grateful to the birth mother for placing her child with them, and experienced guilt and anxiety about setting firmer boundaries. In some cases, the birth mother's perceived boundary crossings were related to her claiming an identity or role of "mother": For example, the birth mother had referred to herself as the "mother," or had offered to pump milk for the adoptive couple, which was viewed as a kind but sometimes boundary-violating gesture. Gay men appeared to be the most tolerant of these types of behaviors. Curtis, a gay man, explained how he

had handled the birth mother, Alicia, referring to herself as the “mom”:

It’s a little confusing for kids, at least young kids, if you’re calling your birth mother the mother; the mother is a relationship where they’re the primary caregiver, they’re very present in the child’s life, and that is not the case. I think we’ll refer to her as the birth mother to Joseph, but I don’t feel the need to correct Alicia at this point.

Eddie, a gay man, had also been somewhat troubled by what he perceived as minor boundary crossings by his child’s birth mother (e.g., pumping milk, requesting to accompany the family on vacations) but had not confronted her directly. He acknowledged that his tolerance of these boundary crossings was directly related to the fact that, as a man, he did not feel threatened by her, noting that “We can’t—Don and I—be her mother. So, I have no issue knowing that Janice is her mother. But if her father was part of the equation, if he was still present, I would have a much bigger issue; I wouldn’t want to compete with another man. So I can totally see why [some people feel threatened].”

Heterosexual couples who observed similar types of boundary crossings (e.g., the birth mother calling herself the “mother”) often described feeling upset by these perceived boundary crossings, more so than gay men. Four heterosexual women and two heterosexual men viewed such behaviors as functionally threatening the primacy of the adoptive mother and as undermining the adoptive mother’s status as the “real” mother. Mike, a heterosexual man, discussed how his daughter’s birth mother referred to her as “my daughter”:

It wasn’t as much of an issue for me as it was for Marianne because of the “mother” side of things. I was the only father in the equation. The position of mother was what was murky. If it was just me, I wouldn’t have been that aware of those issues. But there were things that were certainly important to Marianne’s sense of establishing that she is Carrie’s mother.

The two lesbians in this category, as well as three of the seven heterosexual women, described a slightly different type of boundary violation. Their children’s birth mothers were not viewed as engaging in behaviors that threatened their parental or maternal status, but rather as becoming more dependent on their

relationship than was healthy or appropriate. These women acknowledged their own potential role in fostering this dependence; that is, they felt a protective pull toward the birth mother and found themselves wanting to “take her home and adopt her too.” At times, they described engaging in various “motherly” behaviors such as talking to the birth mother late at night and offering her financial help. In turn, in some cases they felt that the birth mothers had become overly reliant on their relationship. Tricia, a heterosexual woman, said:

We did help Becky get into an apartment. That was a little stressful. I was really, like, being careful about the boundaries and not letting myself get too involved. . . . She did tell me in the first few weeks post-partum that she was going back into some patterns that might have not been so great. She called me up and she started to cry, and she said, “I am so sorry. I want you to know that I’m not going to call you up and burden you with my personal life.” And she did stop. . . . We offered her counseling, which she did not do. There was one night where I was walking around with Mia and talking to Becky on the phone, and thinking “This is not going to work for me.” Fortunately she set the boundary. She said, “I am not going to do this again.” And I just said, “Yeah, okay.”

Melissa, a lesbian, similarly attempted to direct her birth mother towards therapy: “Nancy comes to us with pretty significant emotional problems. So she is in counseling now. . . . We are trying to back off and let her make her decisions without having her feeling isolated.” Thus, although Melissa felt an emotional pull toward the birth mother, she knew that getting too involved might cause problems. For Melissa, then, the potential for perceived boundary crossings came from within, rather than from the birth mother.

Some adoptive mothers, then, described a need to maintain a certain level of closeness and respect without getting too involved. The multiply gendered aspect of this theme is intriguing: Only adoptive mothers spoke of a protective pull toward birth mothers; no adoptive fathers—gay or straight—spoke of such a protective pull, and few individuals spoke of birth fathers at all, let alone of them being too involved. This finding is consistent with prior research suggesting that adoptive mothers tend to empathize more with birth mothers than adoptive fathers do, which

may be because of their shared gender as well as their female socialization (e.g., they are socialized to be more attentive to others' emotional needs; Gross, 1997; Sykes, 2001).

*Navigating Early Relationships: Opening
Up Ideas About Family*

Because research has suggested that lesbians and gay men often view nonfamily members as kin (Oswald, 2002) and thus often have broad notions of what it means to be a family, we sought to examine the degree to which lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents tended to expand their notion of family to include their children's birth parents. Notably, lesbian and gay participants were more likely than heterosexuals to use language that suggested such inclusiveness (e.g., to refer to the birth mother as "part of our extended family"). Namely, 10 lesbians (four couples) and 7 gay men (one couple), compared to 3 heterosexual women and 3 heterosexual men, described the birth parents (typically the birth mother) as family. Angela, a lesbian, explained, "We have a really strong chosen family and intentional community, and so the idea of different structure of family is really familiar and precious to us. So this idea of having an open adoption where we could form family with the birth family was really appealing from the start." Similarly, Jerry, a heterosexual man, mused, "Open adoption is like extending your family. It's like when you get married, you extend your family. When you adopt, you extend your family."

Participants often went beyond simply identifying the birth parents as extended family to articulate specific ways in which they hoped to enact this familial relationship. For example, several participants noted that they hoped to celebrate Mother's Day with the birth mother. Some participants had chosen a special name for the birth mother that connoted her familial status (e.g., "tummy mommy"), and some participants explicitly noted their intention to include the birth mother in family holidays, including the child's birthday. As Adam, a gay man, asserted, "We're definitely encouraging her to have as much contact as she wants, and she knows that our family tends not to do too much for the holidays and just like for Thanksgiving and Christmas, just kind of whoever shows up is family and so she knows she's more than welcome to be here."

Although these participants described their relationships with the birth parents as family-like, some purposefully delineated the boundaries between their (adoptive) family and the birth parents. As Orson, a gay man, asserted, "She is part of the family, but we are not adopting her too." Thus, although many adoptive couples valued a close connection with the birth parents, even referring to them as "family," they emphasized that the birth parents were *extended* family. Extending family to include birth mothers (and at times birth fathers), then, did not mean that the adoptive parents were losing—or even sharing—their role as primary caregivers.

DISCUSSION

This is the first known study to prospectively examine heterosexual and sexual minority adopters' reasons for choosing open adoption. Our research extends prior work that suggests that adoptive parents in open adoption arrangements often perceive benefits of openness to their children's identity development (Berry et al., 1998; Siegel, 1993, 2008) and to the birth parents' grief resolution (Belbas, 1987). Also consistent with prior work (Berry et al.; Neil, 2003), our data suggest that some adopters are motivated not by a deep valuing of openness but by a perceived need to cooperate with the agency in order to get a child. Further, our findings yield insights into how motivations for pursuing open adoption may at times vary according to sexual orientation and gender. Perhaps most notable is our finding that rather than focusing on the benefits of openness, some heterosexual couples were more likely to emphasize a pragmatic decision-making process. They chose open adoption because of a perceived lack of other options, viewing this route as the most practical way to adopt a child within a reasonable amount of time. Some heterosexual couples may have a more difficult time embracing the idea of an open adoption because adoption, and open adoption specifically, may be markedly inconsistent with the way that they had originally envisioned creating their families (Goldberg et al., 2009). Normative constructions of male and female development often presume a natural progression to biological parenthood through heterosexual sex as a way to start a family. Thus, creating a family in a way that challenges both preconceptions concerning

legitimate family formation as well as legitimate gender identity expression may be at the core of initial concerns related to adoption, and specifically open adoption relationships. In turn, some heterosexual couples may be especially sensitive to, and ambivalent about, the ways in which open adoption fundamentally reconstitutes dominant meanings ascribed to biological parenthood and parental identity development.

In contrast, same-sex couples typically approach parenthood with the awareness that they are fundamentally dependent upon persons outside of the relationship in order to become parents (e.g., donors, surrogates, birth parents). Given that they begin their pathway to parenthood with already expansive notions of family formation that deviate from the heterosexual nuclear family model (Dunne, 2000), same-sex couples may be less likely to resist the notion of openness when considering adoption. Indeed, many lesbians and gay men in our sample were particularly attracted to open adoption inasmuch as it appealed to them as sexual minorities, that is, the philosophy of honesty and openness was attractive from the standpoint that they were not encouraged to lie about who they were in order to get a child (Downing et al., 2009).

Another theme that was distinct to some sexual minorities within this sample was the belief that open adoption offered the possibility of gaining a female or male role model for their child. Gay men were more likely to highlight the possibility of gaining an opposite-gender role model than lesbians, which may reflect the reality that birth mothers tend to be more involved in open adoptions than birth fathers (Grotevant, 2000). Gay men may feel less threatened by birth mother involvement given that gay men are more directly negotiating gender norms related to fatherhood, rather than motherhood, in constructing their parental identities (Mallon, 2000). Further, societal concerns about mother absence may be more salient than concerns about father absence (Goldberg & Allen, 2007), leading some gay fathers to place particular importance on the role of the birth mother. This theme, however, was only present for a small number of sexual minorities.

Compared to heterosexual couples, lesbian and gay adoptive parents more frequently emphasized perceiving birth parents as part of their extended families. This finding is consistent with past research findings that suggest that lesbian and gay people in general are more likely

to be inclusive of nonfamily members (e.g., friends) as kin (Oswald, 2002). Indeed, sexual minorities' more frequent inclusion of birth mothers as family may represent an extension of this framework.

The prospective, longitudinal nature of our study uniquely enabled us to examine patterns of openness (e.g., perceived reasons for enhanced openness, maintained openness, and decreased openness) over time in a diverse group of couples. Our findings suggest that although initial attitudes were an important factor influencing openness patterns, the nature of participants' actual relationships with the birth parent(s) also appeared to play a role. This is consistent with prior research indicating that changes in contact between adoptive families and birth families are influenced by a variety of factors, including both parties' level of satisfaction with their relationship and the degree to which both parties are able to negotiate a mutually agreed upon "comfort zone" of contact (Grotevant, McRoy, & van Dulmen, 1998).

Although our analysis indicated a moderate degree of within-couple agreement in various themes, such as partners' motivations for openness and investment in openness across time, in many cases, themes were endorsed by one partner only, indicating the importance of interviewing partners separately (Valentine, 1999). Consistent with Grotevant's (2000) findings, our data suggest that partners within adoptive parent dyads may have different feelings toward birth parents. The use of individual interviews facilitates access to subjective perceptions and feelings that might not emerge in the context of joint interviews.

Most participants reported mutually satisfying boundaries with birth parents. Participants described feeling particularly pleased when birth parents seemed to acknowledge and respect their role as the parents, allowing them to embrace the birth parents more fully. This is consistent with prior research suggesting that adoptive parents are more satisfied when they feel more in control of boundaries (Dunbar et al., 2006). A minority of participants, however, described challenges regarding boundaries, and the themes that emerged appeared to be shaped by both sexual orientation and gender. Gay men frequently described perceived boundary "crossings" by birth mothers, but at the same time were not particularly disturbed by them—perhaps because their own paternal role

was not being threatened. On the other hand, several of the heterosexual mothers who described boundary problems—as well as their husbands—described greater feelings of distress related to these boundary impositions, largely because they felt as though they were in direct competition with the birth mother (Sykes, 2001). Interestingly, several women—but no men—described enmeshed relationships whereby they felt a protective pull toward the birth mothers, which made it difficult to set appropriate boundaries. This finding highlights the importance of exploring the subjective perceptions of partners within couples, because individuals within a couple may highlight different themes as salient. Further, this finding is somewhat consistent with prior research by Sykes, which indicated that adoptive mothers, more so than adoptive fathers, identified with birth mothers in a way that promoted empathy. The current study extends this finding to suggest that feeling overly identified with or responsible for birth mothers can create intrapersonal conflict that may be difficult for adoptive mothers to navigate. Feeling capable of maintaining boundaries around the open adoption relationship is important to adoptive parents' sense of control and, in turn, is regarded as crucial to the success of the ongoing adoptive family—birth family relationship (Grotevant & McRoy, 1997). Practitioners should therefore seek to prepare both adoptive parents and birth parents for potential challenges that they might encounter in their developing relationships and should provide them with supportive resources that will help them to develop healthy, mutually satisfying boundaries.

Finally, by attending to the role of gender in participants' meaning-making processes, our analysis revealed that all adoptive parents tended to focus more on both imagined and actual relationships with birth mothers than birth fathers. This is striking, especially given that we explicitly asked about feelings about birth *parents*. In part, adoptive parents' inattention to the potential role of birth fathers necessarily reflects the reality that birth mothers in general—and in this sample specifically—tend to be more involved with the adoptive family both pre- and post-placement (Grotevant, 2000), but may also reflect the symbolic primacy of the mother in U.S. contemporary culture (Freeark et al., 2005). It may further reflect a need for adoption professionals to provide specific education concerning the role of birth fathers. Greater acknowledgment of and

attempts to include the birth father in the adoption process will benefit all members of the adoption triad, inasmuch as children ultimately desire information about both of their birth parents (Hollenstein et al., 2003; Passmore & Chipuer, 2009) and both birth mothers and birth fathers may desire reassurance that their birth children are alive and well (Freeark et al.). Practitioners should be encouraged to help adoptive parents to create a “mental space” for birth fathers during both the pre- and post-adoptive periods.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our study has several important limitations. First, although we explicitly sought to understand open adoption dynamics during the initial transition to parenthood, long-term follow-up is needed to determine how the patterns and themes that emerged continue to evolve over time. We examined adoptive parents' perceptions of birth parent involvement 3–4 months post-placement, a time when birth parents may be actively processing the grief of having placed a child for adoption and may therefore be less responsive to contact than in subsequent months (Gross, 1993). Open adoption arrangements often change over time, and boundaries and contact may be mutually renegotiated by both the adoptive and birth families (Grotevant et al., 1994). Second, we did not include birth parents' perspectives. Birth parents' desires and efforts to maintain contact were portrayed by the adoptive parents and might not be entirely consistent with birth parents' experiences. Future work should seek, whenever possible, to include the voices of both birth mothers and birth fathers. Finally, it is not clear from this research how preferences for openness ultimately impact members of the adoption triad in terms of well-being and long-term satisfaction with relationships. It is possible that, for some families where contact is not desired by birth parents or adopted parents, it is ultimately healthier—for one or more triad members—for there to be limited or no contact. This question was beyond the scope of our study, but future work should examine the long-term impact of contact preferences on adjustment and relationship satisfaction.

Conclusions

The current study elucidates the complex processes through which lesbian, gay, and

heterosexual couples construct open adoption as a viable, and often desirable, route to parenthood. Far from a singular narrative, participants highlighted numerous aspects of open adoption that led them to choose this as the best adoption route. By attending to differences related to gender and sexual orientation when relevant, our analysis illuminates how gender and sexual orientation might shape individuals' constructions of open adoption and the emerging birth parent relationships that develop during the initial months of parenting. Gay and lesbian couples particularly emphasized the philosophy of openness as it related to their own desire to pursue adoption without having to closet their sexual orientation. Regardless of sexual orientation or gender of adoptive parents, birth mothers, rather than birth fathers, were consistently in the foreground as the primary birth parent with whom adoptive parents created a relationship. In this way, birth parent gender remained a driving (even if discursively silent) force shaping open adoption relationships. Significantly, given the longitudinal nature of this study, our analysis indicates that as couples progressed from the realm of imagining open adoption relationships to the reality of their birth parent situations, they were often able to develop satisfying, even if challenging, relationships with birth parents.

NOTE

This research was funded by grant no. R03HD054394 from the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health & Human Development, the Wayne F. Placek award from the American Psychological Foundation, and a faculty development grant from Clark University, all of which were awarded to the first author. The authors gratefully acknowledge Mark A. Fine for his thoughtful feedback on an earlier version of this manuscript.

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