

REPORT

Thinking About the Birth Father: Loss, Longing, Ambivalence, and Indifference Among Adopted Adolescents With Lesbian Mothers

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ABSTRACT

Adopted youth often have contact with or at least information about birth family members—but such relationships or knowledge rarely extend to birth fathers. The current study explores ideas, feelings, and questions about birth fathers among youth raised by two mothers, including whether or not they desire contact. Interviews were conducted with 25 adolescents, ages 13–19 years. Thematic analysis of narratives revealed seven groups of respondents who displayed a range of interests, feelings, and contact desires in relation to birth fathers. Some adolescents had limited information about or interest in their birth fathers, others showed ambivalence and uncertainty, and still others voiced curiosity and strong interest. A few articulated a sense of a fathers' 'absence' and a longing for a fatherly presence. The data are interpreted in the context of ambiguous loss, uncertainty management, and gender perspectives. Implications for future research, adoption practice, and adoptive parenting are considered.

1 | Introduction

A growing body of literature has explored open adoption dynamics in diverse families. However, contemporary research has spent less time exploring ideas about and roles of birth fathers in open adoptions; and, little attention has been paid to birth father dynamics in lesbian-mother families, which are uniquely characterised by the absence of a male parent in the household. Amid the reality that adopted youth may have contact with birth family—but rarely birth fathers specifically—this study considers how youth raised by two mothers reflect on their feelings and questions about birth fathers, against the backdrop of what outsiders might regard as 'father absence' given the cultural significance of fathers in U.S. society (Lamb 2010). Grounded in ambiguous loss, uncertainty management, and gender perspectives, it focuses on adopted teenagers specifically in recognition

of the fact that during adolescence, adopted youth are often engaging with questions about identity and origins in new and complex ways.

1.1 | Ambiguous Loss and Uncertainty Management

Ambiguous losses are losses that are confusing, lack resolution, and may lack societal recognition or verification as losses, and thus can be difficult to process and grieve (Boss 2016). Both the losses and feelings about them may be ignored, diminished, misunderstood, or criticised (Boss 2016). Children who are adopted may struggle with ambiguous loss surrounding the absence of birth relatives, but because of the lack of validation surrounding such loss and the lack of resources to

Summary

- Adopted teenagers often lack information about their birth fathers in particular.
- This study finds that adopted teenagers with lesbian mothers vary widely in their feelings about and desire for contact with their birth fathers.
- Findings highlight the gendered nature of certain adoption-related experiences and the need to inquire separately about birth mothers and birth fathers in research on adoptive families.

process it, may not recognise their feelings of emptiness or absence as loss (Knight and Gitterman 2019). Adopted youth who lack contact with or information about their birth families may be more likely to experience ambiguous loss than those who maintain communication with or possess considerable information about their birth family, and may also experience more uncertainty and have more questions about a range of areas, including physical characteristics and abilities (Goldberg 2019; Powell and Afifi 2005; Roszia and Maxon 2019).

Loss, uncertainty, and questioning may be heightened during adolescence when identity construction is especially salient (Powell and Afifi 2005) and curiosity about genealogical and/or ethnic background reaches a peak (Brodzinsky 2011). The physical and emotional changes of adolescence often result in an intense period of identity exploration and construction, which inevitably raises questions about one's self in relation to others, including birth and adoptive family (Grotevant et al. 2000). Constructing a sense of self as an adopted person may be more complex amid missing, unclear, or ambiguous information surrounding one's origins or birth family (Colaner and Soliz 2017; Grotevant et al. 2017). Adolescents' level of clarity versus uncertainty surrounding their origins and birth family is likely to be shaped by the circumstances of their adoption, as well as how their adoptive family communicates about such circumstances (Grotevant et al. 2017). Children adopted internationally or domestically via closed adoptions may possess little information about their adoption or birth families compared to children whose families agreed to open adoptions, which are characterised by an exchange of information with the birth family before and/or after the adoption, and possibly face-to-face contact or other forms of communication (Goldberg 2019). Notably, structural openness (amount of contact between birth and adoptive family) is correlated with communicative openness (communication about adoption within the family), such that adoptive parents in open adoptions also talk more openly about adoption (Brodzinsky 2006). However, some adoptive families who lack contact with the birth family do talk freely about adoption (Goldberg 2019), and communicative openness as well as satisfaction with contact are more consistently related to adoptees' psychological adjustment than structural openness (Alegret et al. 2020; Brodzinsky 2006; Goldberg et al. 2011).

Faced with both high levels of uncertainty about their origins and low levels of perceived control over being able to reduce such uncertainty, adolescent adoptees with limited information about their origins may exhibit different feelings about

their birth fathers than those who possess greater certainty about their origins and/or those who have limited details but feel that they could find out more if they wanted to (Powell and Afifi 2005). According to uncertainty management theory (Brashers 2001), adoptees may manage uncertainty in a variety of ways depending on how they appraise such uncertainty. They may avoid the topic of birth fathers and/or seek out information about them for fear of uncovering negative or threatening information, choosing to maintain their uncertainty over possible emotional destabilisation. Thus, present uncertainty is preferred over possibly encountering negative information. Other adoptees may experience a great deal of ambiguous loss accompanying such uncertainty and may be motivated to obtain information if they believe that knowledge, even if painful, is better than not knowing (Powell and Afifi 2005; Roszia and Maxon 2019). In their research with adopted adults, Powell and Afifi (2005) found that participants could be categorised into three groups: those who felt relatively secure regarding their adoption (uncertainty was well-managed; no ambiguous loss); those with fluctuating uncertainty and moderate loss; and those with significant loss and a strong desire for closure. Adults in the first and second groups generally described more open communication about adoption within their adoptive families, and those in the second and third groups generally described more information-seeking strategies—such as using technology and support groups to reduce uncertainty and find birth family, as well as indirect and passive strategies like searching for information, which was viewed as a technique aimed at avoiding confrontation and rejection.

How, and how much, adoptive families communicate about the adoption and birth family, and whether the adolescent has contact with any members of their birth family, impact children's experience of loss, including whether they feel able and encouraged to talk about their loss and/or to connect with birth family (Brodzinsky 2006; Powell and Afifi 2005). Such communication is especially important amid feelings of loss or sadness, which may or may not be acknowledged directly by adolescents themselves. Research suggests that adopted teenagers may not necessarily endorse conscious or explicit feelings of loss, but many do acknowledge feelings of sadness around some aspects of their adoption story, and most endorse curiosity regarding their origins (Barroso and Barbosa-Ducharne 2019).

1.2 | Birth Father Absence

Few adoption researchers have focused in-depth on the gendered nature of adoptive family dynamics (Freeark et al. 2005; Goldberg 2019; Sykes 2001). Yet there are numerous ways in which gender interplays with adoptive family processes, including the historical marginalisation and invisibility of birth fathers. From the mid-1940s through the early 1970s, unmarried pregnant women were often pressured to relinquish their 'illegitimate' children for adoption (Andrews 2018). In such situations, which were characterised by shame and secrecy, it was generally assumed that the fathers did not care about the women or children—if they even knew about the pregnancies—and birth fathers were generally invisible in the adoption 'negotiations' (Hartmann 2016). In fact, until several Supreme Court decisions in the 1970s that recognised

birth fathers as legal parents, unmarried birth fathers were not necessarily treated as parents in the legal sense, in that birth mothers often listed the birth fathers as ‘unknown’ on birth certificates (Burden 2023). In contemporary adoptions, birth fathers can contest adoptions where they were not informed of the placement, but are also often still treated as an afterthought or a legal barrier (Burden 2023; Clapton 2019). Birth mothers may have personal reasons for not wanting to involve birth fathers in the decision-making surrounding the adoption (e.g., the relationship was violent, or very brief), and, in some cases, will avoid naming birth fathers as the known fathers (Goldberg 2019; Goldberg et al. 2020). And, in some cases, birth mothers do not know the identity of their birth fathers (Goldberg 2019).

Birth fathers who are aware of an unintended pregnancy vary in their response to the situation. Some, perhaps in part because of societal pressures to provide financially or ideologies of birth fathers as peripheral, do avoid responsibility (Goldberg 2019). Others care about the pregnancy but are not encouraged to participate in the adoption process, in part due to societal stereotypes of birth fathers as ‘unsuitable’ to be parents, which may inhibit them from imagining or asserting a role in the child’s life (Clapton and Clifton 2016). Indeed, birth mothers are typically front and centre when the possibility of openness is being considered; birth fathers may not even be part of the conversation (Goldberg et al. 2011). In turn, some birth fathers do disappear, for their own reasons, or because they do not see a role for them postplacement—for example, due to birth mothers’ or adoption professionals’ characterizations of them as callous and uncaring, sexually promiscuous, or uninvolved (Freemark et al. 2005; French et al. 2014).

Although birth fathers are often cast in a negative light, which may impact adoptees’ ideas about them, adoptees may also fantasise about birth fathers in ways that are more positive, even mythic. As Hughes (2015, 155) notes, ‘cultural narratives of abandoned girls longing to be rescued by a male figure in the form of a prince or father/saviour’ may creep into adopted girls’ conceptualizations, narratives, and fantasies about their birth fathers, for example. Fantasies about absent birth ‘others’ are indeed common among both adopted children and children born with the use of reproductive technologies, with the parent of the ‘absent’ gender particularly likely to be the subject of imaginings and fantasy (Ehrensaft 2005; Glassman 2016).

1.3 | Birth Father Significance and Contact

Consistent with the notion that birth fathers are often viewed as less important than birth mothers, and therefore may stay ‘in the shadows’ vis a vis adoptive families (Clutter 2020), birth fathers are among the least common birth relatives with whom adoptive families have contact, with birth mothers, as well as birth grandmothers, representing the most common type (Farr, Ravvina, and Grotevant 2018; French et al. 2014). Further, in a longitudinal study of adoptive families in open adoption relationships, Goldberg (2019) found that many adoptive parents did not view birth fathers as symbolically or relationally as ‘important’ as birth mothers. For some, this tendency persisted throughout their children’s lives. Others, however, did become more curious about their children’s birth fathers over time. In

some cases, their curiosity was spontaneous and organic, and in other cases, it was a response to their children’s questions and interests.

Significantly, even if adoptive parents and/or children become more curious about birth fathers over time, they may not be able to access information about or be able to contact them. Birth mothers may be adoptive families’ main source of information about birth fathers, and may operate as ‘gatekeepers’ of such information (French et al. 2014; Salvo Agolia and Herrera 2021). In a study by French et al. (2014), the authors interviewed birth mothers 12 to 20 years post-adoptive placement. Recalling the time of the placement, birth mothers generally reported negative feelings about birth fathers; however, by 12 to 20 years post-adoption, birth mothers were moving toward a more neutral emotional stance. Some viewed themselves as the protectors of the adoptive family or did not want them exposed to the birth fathers (e.g., because of their substance use or criminal activity). Most birth mothers did not have contact with birth fathers, and among those who did, less than half shared updates with them about the adoptive family.

Among adoptees who lack information about birth parents, it is often especially difficult for them to find their birth fathers. They tend to search first for their birth mothers, who may be the only ones who know their birth father’s identity, but, again, are not always open to providing it (e.g., because of resentment toward birth fathers). This leaves adopted individuals with little information to go on in their search (French et al. 2014; Salvo Agolia and Herrera 2021).

1.4 | Children’s Experiences With and Ideas About Birth Fathers

Research on adopted adolescents’ and young adults’ ideas about and contact with birth fathers is rare. Drawing from a subsample of 30 adolescents, who were selected from a larger sample of 145 adopted adolescents with heterosexual parents based on their high levels of negative affect about adoption and ‘unsettled’ adoptive identity, Lo et al. (2023) found that the majority of the subsample reported having little information about and/or contact with their birth fathers. Relationships with birth fathers were ‘generally negative or non-existent’ and several teens felt ‘vindictive’ toward them, which seemed to be an expression of anger amidst feelings of being unwanted or unloved, and in turn, feelings of ‘incompleteness’ (Lo et al. 2023, 20).

In another study, researchers analysed the qualitative transcripts of 35 adopted adults for references to birth fathers and found that in 22 cases, the birth father was completely absent (Salvo Agolia and Herrera 2021). In fact, when asked whether they wanted information about or to search for birth fathers, participants often responded with surprise and comments such as ‘It never crossed my mind’ and ‘I assumed he didn’t exist’ (p. 992). Those who mentioned the birth father often expressed a lack of interest in or negative associations with him. Importantly, a lack of thinking about and/or preoccupation about the birth father may, for at least some adoptees, reflect a sense of ease with or relative acceptance of a lack of contact. Consistent with this idea, one study of adopted emerging adults

documented a relationship between satisfaction with contact/openness vis a vis the birth father and thinking about the birth father, such that those who were satisfied with the level of contact—regardless of the amount—did not think about him as much (Wrobel and Grotevant 2019).

Likewise, low levels of contact between adopted adolescents and young adults and their birth fathers have been demonstrated in research on adoptive families in general and those in open adoptions specifically (Farr, Ravvina, and Grotevant 2018; Grotevant et al. 2013). For example, Grotevant et al. (2013) found that among young adult adoptees, 35% had contact with face-to-face meetings with birth mothers, 30% had this type of contact with other birth family members (siblings or grandparents), and less than 8% had this type of contact with birth fathers. An additional 7% had contact but no face-to-face meetings with birth mothers; 5% had this type of contact with other birth relatives and 4% had it with birth fathers (Grotevant et al. 2013).

1.5 | Birth Fathers in the Context of Lesbian-Mother Families

Birth fathers may be at least somewhat psychologically present in the lives of adopted children regardless of whether or not they are physically present (Power and Afifi 2005) and may operate a unique psychological space in adoptive families headed by two women. Female same-sex couples who adopt—much like those who become families with the help of sperm donors—may be more likely to envision or be open to a unique role for birth fathers, inasmuch as their parental configuration is made up of two women (Ehrensaft 2005; Goldberg and Allen 2007). Even lesbian mothers who recognise the social construction of gender whereby there are no natural mother and father roles may acknowledge that their children will likely experience a different dynamic being raised by two women than a man and a woman (Downing and Goldberg 2011; Goldberg and Allen 2007). Lesbian mothers of boys in particular may seek out men (e.g., their brothers and fathers, sperm donors) to fulfil certain roles or responsibilities throughout their children's lives (Goldberg 2022; Goldberg and Allen 2007). Significantly, growing awareness that children need information about their origins has contributed to an increasing number of lesbian mothers seeking known donors, or donors who are willing to be known at some future date, such as when the child turns 18 (Koh et al. 2020).

Of course, lesbian mothers who become adoptive parents, including through open adoption specifically, may not conceptualise birth fathers in the same way that some lesbian mothers conceptualise sperm donors—and thus may not be predisposed to look at birth fathers as obvious male 'role models' for their children, or even as people with whom they should necessarily maintain contact. At a basic level, lesbian mothers *choose* sperm donors: that is, they possess information that leads them to select them as genetic contributors. Not only do lesbian adoptive mothers not choose birth fathers, but, the circumstances of their child's conception may be especially charged in that the child is being placed for adoption (Goldberg et al. 2020). Birth parents' lives may

be marked by instability related to mental health, substance use, or housing—and the birth mother-birth father relationship may be tenuous or conflictual (French et al. 2014; Goldberg 2019). Lesbian mothers may also be especially sensitive to birth mothers' circumstances and desires, as women, to minimise contact with the birth father (e.g., if the circumstances of the conception are upsetting and/or involve assault; Goldberg et al. 2020).

Limited work has examined the salience of birth fathers in lesbian-mother families. One exception is a study of 107 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive families in open adoptions that reported on families' contact with the birth family relatives of their school-aged children (Farr, Ravvina, and Grotevant 2018). The authors found that 88% of families reported contact with birth mothers, 48% with birth grandparents, 33% with birth fathers, and 30% with birth siblings. Contact typically occurred less than yearly across different types of birth family members; no families reported contact more than once a month. No differences by family type were found except with regard to birth fathers: Gay fathers were more likely to have had contact (52%) than heterosexual parents (29%) and lesbian mothers (22%). The authors speculated that gay fathers' shared gender with birth fathers may have served as a facilitative factor in contact. Lesbian mothers were more likely than other family types to say that they desired more birth family contact than they had.

Very little work has examined ideas about birth fathers from the perspective of children of lesbian mothers. However, in one study of 44 youth ages 3–18 with lesbian mothers and gay fathers, Messina and Brodzinsky (2020) found that some children experienced a strong curiosity about the birth parent whose gender was absent in their adoptive family (the birth mother for children of gay men; the birth father for children of lesbian women) or, alternatively, idealised a generic maternal or paternal figure that they do not have in their adoptive family. This theme was discussed only briefly but raises important questions about how these dynamics play out in lesbian-mother families, in particular—a context where the birth father's role is likely to be especially salient (as the 'missing' gender) yet also ambiguous and possibly contested.

1.6 | Research Questions

The current study aims to understand the following research questions:

1. (How) do adopted adolescents with lesbian mothers think about their birth fathers? (How) are their thoughts and feelings influenced by whether they have contact with birth fathers?
2. (How) are themes of ambiguous loss, uncertainty management, and desire for information or contact nuanced by participant characteristics, such as adoption type or gender?
3. (How) does the context of lesbian motherhood nuance or complicate how participants think about their birth fathers and/or the role of men in their lives in general?

2 | Method

2.1 | Sample

The current sample consisted of 25 adolescents, ages 13 to 19 (M age = 14.24 years of age, Mdn age = 15.00), all of whom were adopted by two mothers. Three-quarters ($n = 19$, 76%) of participants were of colour (eight Latinx, six Black, three biracial/multiracial, two Asian), and one-quarter ($n = 6$; 24%) were White. Twelve (48%) were cis boys, nine (36%) were cis girls, three were nonbinary/genderfluid, and one was a trans boy. Twelve (48%) were adopted via private domestic open adoptions, three (12%) were adopted via private domestic closed adoptions, seven (28%) were adopted internationally, and three (12%) were adopted via public domestic adoption. Fifteen (60%) had siblings who lived with them. In six families (24%), participants' mothers had divorced during the course of their childhood. See Table 1 for participant age, race, gender, parent race, adoption type, and birth family contact, by pseudonym.

2.2 | Procedure

Participants ($n = 25$) came from a larger study ($N = 60$) that examined adoption, adolescence, and identity among a diverse group of adopted teenagers, including teens with two mothers, teens with two fathers, and teens with a mother and father. Given our interest in centring gender dynamics in our exploration of participants' ideas and perspectives on birth fathers, and conducting a rich, in-depth analysis, the decision was made to focus solely on teens with two mothers. Indeed, one challenge of large qualitative datasets is the difficulty of applying a truly in-depth, rigorous analysis to dozens or even hundreds of participants; in turn, one advantage is the ability to narrow the focus of analysis to a specific subgroup, and/or specific or circumscribed set of questions or topics, within the dataset (Goldberg and Allen 2024).

Parents were contacted about an opportunity to interview their teenage children (13–19) for a study on adoption, adolescence, and identity. These parents had completed a number of prior interviews and surveys as part of a longitudinal study on adoptive parenthood. Both parents had to consent to their children's participation; teenagers also gave assent. Parents were given the option of reviewing the questions in advance, and several did so. They were also given the opportunity to veto any question; none did, although a few noted that their children had ADHD and thus might find the length of the interview challenging. Once parents gave consent for their adolescents to participate, Zoom or phone interviews lasting 1 to 1.5 h were scheduled with the adolescents. The Principal Investigator, a professor of clinical psychology, and doctoral students in clinical psychology conducted the interviews. The study was approved by Clark University's internal Human Subjects Review Board. All interviews were transcribed verbatim.

This study primarily focuses on participant interview data related to their contact with and ideas about birth families, with a focus on birth fathers. We specifically centred birth fathers in our analysis to engage a richer, focused analysis that addressed gender(ed) dynamics in adoption. In our analysis, we primarily drew on responses to the following questions, which

were accompanied by probes (e.g., the interviewer probed specifically for content related to birth fathers after an initial query related to birth family in general): (1) Do you have contact with any birth family members? Who? (2) If you see them in person, when was the last time you saw them? What was that like? (3) Do you talk to them on the phone, text them, or connect with them on social media? What is that like? (4) How happy are you with your relationship with your birth mother/birth father/others? (5) What do you know about your birth family/What is your birth family like? (6) *If they have no contact*: Tell me about that. Have you ever had contact? (7) *If they have no contact*: Do you ever think of your birth family? Who do you think of the most? What is your feeling toward that person(s)? (8) Do you want contact with anyone in your birth family? Who? How come? (9) How do you understand the reasons why you don't have contact? (10) If you could ask your birth parents any question, what would it be?

2.3 | Data Analysis

Interviews were examined using reflective thematic analysis, a flexible, yet rigorous approach to analysing qualitative data whereby patterns (i.e., themes) in the data are attended to and organised (Braun and Clarke 2006, 2019). Data analysis focused on feelings, ideas, and desires related to birth family contact, with a particular focus on birth fathers. The first author and primary coder is a White cisgender woman who has researched the experiences of youth from diverse family structures for over two decades, with an emphasis on adopted youth and youth with LGBTQ+ parents. She began the coding process with open coding, reading the transcripts multiple times to gain an understanding of participants' perspectives and noting preliminary ideas about the core constructs of interest. Her knowledge on the relevant literature, theoretical frameworks, and familiarity with the dataset as a whole (i.e., several years of interviewing participants) informed the initial analysis (Goldberg and Allen 2024). Following the initial open coding, the first author made the decision to focus specifically on the transcripts of participants with two mothers. She wrote detailed memos for each individual to describe their perspectives vis a vis birth fathers and other birth relatives. In each memo, she noted participants' age, gender, race, birth family contact, type of adoption, and other details.

She then used selective coding to sort the data into initial categories that stayed close to the data and were specific (e.g., 'I don't think about my birth father'; 'I wonder about my birth father'). She then identified larger groupings that unified and provided meaning to these codes and connected them to larger constructs of interest (e.g., ambiguous loss). She refined the emerging scheme throughout the process. She also examined how and to what extent participants' demographics, particularly gender and type of adoption, intersected with key themes. The nearly final coding scheme was applied to all interviews. She then invited three research assistants, one adopted and two non-adopted, to review segments of the data against the scheme. These students provided minor input, which the author used to inform the final scheme. The second author, a White cisgender man who has been studying and writing about adoption and adoptive families for over four decades, reviewed the final coding scheme and a

TABLE 1 | Demographic data for participants (N=25).

Case #	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parent race	Gender	Adoption type	Birth family contact
1	Emma	16	Black	Both White	Cis girl	Private domestic closed	Rare contact with birth brother only (in person, cards)
2	Marc	15	Multiracial	Both White	Cis boy	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth parents (social media); regular contact with birth grandparents (in person, text)
3	Callie	15	White	Both White	Cis girl	Private domestic, open	Rare/early contact with birth mother and birth grandparents (in person, social media)
4	Fern	15	Biracial	Both White; divorced	Nonbinary	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother (text and in person)
5	Quinn	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	Private domestic, open	Occasional contact with birth mother and birth siblings (in person)
6	Ariana	16	Latinx	Both White	Cis girl	International	None
7	Bella	15	Multiracial	Both White	Cis girl	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth grandparents only (video chat)
8	Ruth	14	White	Both White	Cis girl	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother and birth sibling (text, social media)
9	Tim	16	Asian	Both White; divorced	Cis boy	International	Regular contact with birth sibling only (in person, text)
10	Julian	15	White	Both White	Nonbinary	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth mother. birth grandparents, and extended family (in person, text)
11	Shawn	15	Black	Both White	Cis boy	Private domestic, open	Rare contact with birth mother (in person)
12	Will	15	White	Both White; divorced	Cis boy	Private domestic, open	None
13	Gabby	16	Latinx	Both White; divorced	Cis girl	Private domestic, closed	Rare/early contact with birth mother and birth siblings (photos, letters)
14	Maddie	14	White	Both White	Cis girl	Private domestic, closed	None

(Continues)

TABLE 1 | (Continued)

Case #	Pseudonym	Age	Race	Parent race	Gender	Adoption type	Birth family contact
15	Daniel	15	Latinx		Cis boy	Public domestic	Regular prior contact with birth father and extended family (in person); current contact with birth mother and her extended family (in person)
16	Leo	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	International	Regular contact with birth mother and sibling (in person)
17	Gabriel	15	Latinx	Both White	Trans boy	International	None
18	Lucas	15	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	International	None
19	Nate	13	White	Both White; divorced	Cis boy	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth father and extended family (in person, text)
20	Finn	15	Asian	Both White; divorced	Cis boy	International	None
21	Percy	18	Black	One White One Black	Cis girl	Public domestic	Rare contact with birth mother (social media, text)
22	Charlie	14	Black	Both White	Genderfluid	Private domestic, open	Rare/early contact with birth mother (text)
23	Sam	14	Latinx	Both White	Cis boy	International	None
24	Kacie	13	Black	Both White	Cis girl	Private domestic, open	Regular contact with birth siblings only (in person, text)
25	Elliot	16	Black	Both White; divorced	Cis boy	Public	Regular contact with birth siblings only (in person, text)

selection of the data, which led to minor changes in the storyline and organisation of the findings.

3 | Findings

Participants' narratives revealed a spectrum of feelings, interests, and engagement regarding birth fathers. Participants, in turn, could be categorised into seven different types or groups, based on how much information they possessed about the birth father (and level of associated uncertainty), curiosity and/or interest in additional information or future contact, and feelings about and toward the birth father (e.g., ambivalence, longing, anger).

3.1 | 'I Don't Care': No Interest in or Need to Know (More) About Birth Father

Four participants (Fern, Ariana, Tim, Shawn), two internationally adopted and two with initially open adoptions who had rare contact with their birth mother only, emphasised that they had very limited information about their birth fathers and had little interest in or desire to make contact with them. Fern, a 15-year-old biracial nonbinary participant, said, 'I literally don't know my birth dad. All I know is his name...I know that he is part Greek and that's where I get my Greek from. But that's literally all.' These participants downplayed the significance of their birth fathers, asserting that they did not think about them much at all ('I do not have a need to remember') and nor did they have an interest in getting to know them ('I don't really care'). Of note is that Fern voiced more complex thoughts about their birth mother (e.g., 'she didn't even know she was pregnant!') than their birth father ('I forgot about him until you brought him up'). Overall, however, these youth distanced themselves from their birth fathers, maintaining that they 'didn't think of [them]' and had 'no need for [more] information.' In this way, by downplaying the birth fathers' psychological presence, these participants were perhaps more able to avoid a sense of loss and longing (e.g., amid a low likelihood of making contact with them).

Tim, an internationally adopted cisgender (cis) Asian boy, specifically contextualised his lack of interest in his birth father in terms of his positive relationships with his two moms. Tim asserted he had 'everything [he] need[ed]' in his two-mom family and did not have a need for a father in general or a birth father specifically. He noted the advantages of growing up in a two-mom family, speculating that his parents were 'more supportive and loving than what he imagined a father figure to be.' Tim further highlighted ways in which one of his moms was 'more like a dad', in that she was 'stricter and encouraged [his] interest in the military.'

3.2 | 'I Have Questions For Both of Them But ...': Curious But Resigned to No Contact

Six participants (Emma, Maddie, Gabriel, Lucas, Finn, Sam), four adopted internationally and two via closed private domestic adoption, also had limited information about birth parents—but, unlike the above group, voiced curiosity about and interest in both birth mothers and birth fathers. Their interest

was general and fairly non-specific, perhaps in large part because the likelihood of making contact was low amid a lack of information. Emma, a 16-year-old Black cis girl, who had 'seen a couple of photos of [my birth father], but that's it,' said, 'I think contact would be nice, but I don't think it will ever be able to happen.' Although these participants acknowledged thinking about both their birth mothers and birth fathers, birth mothers occupied more of a psychological presence in their lives, such that they thought more frequently about and had more questions for their birth mothers. Maddie, a 14-year-old White cis girl, wondered more about her birth mother (who was a 'single mom with a three year-old [who] hid her pregnancy, so I don't think anyone else really thinks about me besides her') than her birth father, who felt like a 'total unknown.' Although Maddie said she had 'accepted' that she might never meet her birth parents, she acknowledged thinking especially about her birth mom, 'because I just never had one person in my life who I... was blood related to.' About his birth family, Sam, a 14-year-old Latinx cis boy, shared:

I don't really know much about [them]. I do know that the father left for some reason, so my mother was raising, like, two brothers and a sister, I think...I had three siblings. I wish I could talk to them. But I haven't...and I really haven't seen what my family looks like either. [If I could ask them anything], I guess [I'd want] to get a more clear answer on why she put me up for adoption...[and] why just me?...[But] I know she's a good mother because she wanted the best for me.

Here, the language of 'the father' versus 'my mother' is striking, as it highlights a subtle undercurrent throughout the narratives that was rarely voiced explicitly: the birth mother was the more psychologically significant birth parent, even to the extent that she occupied a more proximal stance in relation to the participant, whereas the birth father was positioned at a distance. In turn, Sam's questions about why he was placed for adoption are directed at his birth mother, who is represented favourably inasmuch as she is presumed to want the best for him.

3.3 | 'I Hear He's Not the Greatest': Ambivalent About (Contact With) Birth Father

Four participants (Quinn, Ruth, Julian, Leo), all of whom had contact with their birth mothers (e.g., via text, social media, or in person) but not their birth fathers, acknowledged 'wondering' about their birth fathers, but indicated that they probably would not (a) ask their birth mothers for more information, or (b) seek contact with their birth fathers. Their reasons varied but typically concerned the cues that their birth mothers had given them. Two said their birth mothers were 'closed-lipped' about information related to their birth fathers and 'probably wouldn't share anything', whereas in two cases, their birth mothers had conveyed that 'he is not a very nice person.' Thus, amid birth mothers' reluctance to discuss—or, their explicitly negative commentary about—birth fathers (French et al. 2014), these teens did not feel encouraged to ask questions about or seek contact with their birth fathers. As Ruth, a 14-year-old White cis girl, said, 'My birth dad isn't the best person so I kind of want to stay away.'

Yet their narratives captured a sense of ambivalence and uncertainty. Asked whether he wanted to meet his birth father, Leo, a 15-year-old Latinx cis boy, whose birth mother seemed reluctant to share details about his birth father ('she won't tell...I have no clue [why]'), said, 'I don't know. I mean, I don't even know if he's alive.' Julian, a 15-year-old White nonbinary teen who had regular contact with their birth mother and birth grandparents, 'wondered' about their birth father but was hesitant and ambivalent about reaching out. Julian said: 'Occasionally late at night, I'm like, "What if I did want to meet my dad?" And then I'm immediately like, "Hmm not really, that seems like a lot of work, and I'm tired."' Julian, who possessed little information about their birth father via their birth mother, described growing up 'knowing he was out there,' but also feeling like, 'whatever, I don't care about him.' Julian's ambivalence is best captured by the fact that alongside statements of not caring, they had searched the Internet and social media for information about their birth father, learning a great deal about his hobbies and professional life. In this way, Julian had sought out information, but passively and indirectly—a strategy that avoided confrontation with their birth mother and a potential negative response from their birth father, with whom the possibility of contact was considered but rejected for being 'a lot of work' (Powell and Afifi 2005).

3.4 | 'I Have Questions!': Curious and Excited About (The Possibility of) Future Contact

Three participants (Marc, Callie, Percy), all with past or current contact with their birth mothers, voiced curiosity about their birth fathers and articulated specific questions they wanted to ask them. Marc, a 15-year-old multiracial cis boy, thought he might ask his birth father about his job, favourite activities, and what he did in his 'free time': 'I feel like I would be very curious about that, just to see if [his] genetics influenced me, [my] interests, ...aspects of my personality.' Overall, Marc said that he didn't feel 'resentful or anything' toward his birth father and 'definitely would like to get to know [him]' if he had the chance. Callie, a 15-year-old White cis girl, shared that she wondered about 'how he would feel about me now, like about who I became. I am in high school with a few honours classes. I hope he's proud of me.' These narratives reveal the type of processing that some participants engaged in with regard to their birth parents and birth fathers specifically, wherein they wondered both about their genetic contribution to their personality, interests, and abilities, as well as how they would feel about participants' abilities and accomplishments. Percy, an 18-year-old Black cis girl who was adopted via foster care at a young age, and had recently gotten into contact with her birth mother, shared that she did have 'questions about my dad, and questions about my background, like my family history...' cause like, for anyone who's adopted, I think, most of their struggle is knowing where they came from. The culture and their family history. So that's [what] I'm really curious about.' Regarding whether she had an interest in being in touch with him, she said, 'I actually would.' Percy acknowledged that she

just kind of want to know what he looks like...because, like, when you see your friends and they look exactly like their parents, like exactly like their father—I

always wanted that. I always wanted to see the resemblance and know that I came from somewhere, because I grew up in a family with no one not even close to my complexion. So, I just mostly wanted that with my birth father—I just want to know what he looks like.

Percy, then, acknowledges the uncertainty associated with her birth father, noting both a lack of closure and lack of information—and imagining what 'could' be (e.g., mirroring, connection) if she were able to make contact with him.

3.5 | 'I Feel a Lacking': Interest in a Father (Figure)

Four participants (Bella, Will, Gabby, Kacie), all only children of colour with White parents, and all adopted domestically with limited birth family contact articulated that, having grown up with only women, they felt the absence of a father figure in their lives. They are unique in highlighting their family structure—two-mom-headed—in describing their positionality vis-a-vis men. The three girls in this group detailed how amid limited relationships with men ('we're close with my grandmother but my grandfather died so I haven't ever had a lot of male figures in my life'), they experienced uncertainty and/or discomfort around adult male authority figures, such as teachers. And, they detailed how the absence of a 'father figure' left them without a guide map for heterosexual relationships (in one case) and sometimes fantasising about what they were missing (in two cases): as Gabby, a 16-year-old Latinx cis girl, said, 'dads protect you.' And, Kacie, a 13-year-old Black cis girl, longed for a father figure in part out of a desire to appear 'normal': that is, to avoid scrutiny or social censure on the basis of having two moms.

All of these participants had limited information about their birth fathers ('all I know is that my father was somebody she had just met, and it was a one-night stand'; Bella). Yet the girls in this group did not necessarily want more information about their birth fathers; rather, they wondered about what it would be like to have a father figure *in general*. As Kacie said, 'Sometimes I wish that I had a father. I do have a father, like who is biological to me, but I don't see him at all because he's somewhere else.' Gabby said:

When I was younger...I didn't really get along with guys—like men. But I kind of wish I did have a father figure in my life. And now when I get a boyfriend I'm kind of more looking for like a father figure because it's like, not having a father figure, and seeing other families or other adoptees that have a dad, and then I'm like, 'Oh I don't have a dad.' Which I wish I did, but then sometimes I'm like, 'Would I really want a dad?' But it's hard too, because I didn't get to be with my birth dad, and kind of have a father relationship with him.

Asked what she believed was especially positive or helpful about father figures, Gabby said thoughtfully:

Probably they can protect you more, and you can have fun with them. And just kind of do like a father-daughter dance, and kind of have fun times with them, and sometimes they would buy you more things. That's what some families say—'The dad always buys more things than the mother' or something. But just like, having fun—he could've taught me how to play basketball or do more outside-y things.

Thus, Gabby articulates a set of fantasies about a hypothetical father figure that is grounded in gendered attributions of protection, fun, spoiling their daughters, and teaching sports. Gabby also imagines an alternative reality ('he could have...'). At the same time, she wonders whether she would really want a father, highlighting the ambivalence that most of these participants engaged in as they implicitly traded out their reality with what could have been.

Will, a 15-year-old Latinx cis boy, also articulated a sense of father absence in his life; and acknowledged, like Kacie above, a desire to blend in and be 'normal': 'I've been thinking about it more, just because of high school and people calling me fatherless and adopted and stuff like that. It's something that at my school is looked at as a bad thing, [having two moms and no dad].' Will further noted how he felt different in his family as a boy with two mothers and as a child of colour with two mothers. Asked which birth family member he thought about most, Will responded: 'My *dad*, just because I don't have one.' Will went on:

I do constantly get annoyed about not having a dad...I really wish I had a dad; I don't really know what it's like. But I can kind of guess what it would be like to have a dad; I mean I'd be going to McDonald's every day, but besides that, I'd be playing video games with him probably a lot and that would be really fun.

Significantly, at the same time that he shared his fantasy of playing video games and eating fast food with his father, Will also acknowledged that the reality was that

...if I wasn't adopted, then I wouldn't have any of the things that I have right now. I would be probably living with my dad, with my brother, and...he said he wasn't able to support two kids and my birth mom was homeless, so, you know, it's pretty difficult. I mean if I wasn't adopted I'd either be living on the streets or my family would have no money because my dad wouldn't be able to support two kids.

Thus, in contrast to Gabby, who highlighted a more singular fantasy of a father who might spoil and play sports with her, Will, who had more information about the actual conditions that led to his being placed for adoption, describes two sets of fantasies—one positive and one negative. The existence of both of these fantasies, side by side, highlights the ambivalence that these youth experience as they imagine the alternate possibilities to their current realities.

3.6 | 'My Life Would Be Very Different if I Lived With Him': Participants With Birth Father Contact

Two participants (Daniel and Nate), both cis boys adopted domestically, had previous contact with their birth fathers. Nate (age 13, White), who was adopted via private adoption, only had contact with his birth father and his birth father's extended family—never his birth mother. In another case, Daniel (age 15, Latinx), who was adopted via foster care, at one point had ongoing contact with his birth father but now only had contact with his birth mother and her extended family. In both cases, participants conveyed an understanding of the realities of their birth fathers' lives, recognising their circumstances as 'very complicated.' In turn, they seemed to grasp that their lives would be 'totally different' (Nate) if they lived with their birth fathers, who were indeed known entities, with their own difficulties. In other words, these two participants did not fantasise about a different life because they had sufficient information to imagine it; and, they appeared satisfied with the extent of their current contact. As Nate shared, 'Last month I saw him and then I think the month before I saw him, because there was a birthday and then we had...Christmas, so we met up on those times. Usually I see him [maybe] three times a year.'

3.7 | 'It's Complicated': Anger, Longing, and Uncertainty

Two participants (Charlie, Elliot), both adopted through foster care, articulated complex feelings about their birth fathers. Elliot, a 16-year-old Black cis boy, said, voice cracking, that he thought about 'both' birth parents, with feelings ranging from 'happy, sad, [to] mad.' He acknowledged wondering, too, about the multiple siblings from whom he was separated upon being adopted. Charlie, a 14-year-old Black genderfluid participant, voiced intense anger at their birth mother for abandoning them and their siblings ('I hated her then, I hate her now...she ghosted [us]—why put yourself through that and hurt people in the process?') and did not wish to contact their mother ('If I contact her, it's to slap her in the face'). Regarding their birth father, Charlie said: 'My dad, I don't even think he knows I exist... [but] he had to know that my mom was pregnant; he could have done something.' Thus, Charlie vacillated between excusing their birth father's absence by virtue of him not knowing about Charlie's existence and angrily charging him with inaction because he had to have known about the pregnancy. Ultimately concluding that 'has not contacted [me]', Charlie said decisively, 'I don't want to find him.'

4 | Discussion

The current study is unique in its exploration of adopted adolescents' ideas and feelings about birth fathers, with a focus on youth with lesbian mothers, a context in which the potential role and salience of birth fathers may be nuanced by gendered dimensions. Participants' narratives revealed a spectrum of interest and engagement regarding birth fathers, which varied, at times, based on their own gender and the current reality—and future possibility—of contact. Some voiced a lack of interest in learning more about or contacting their birth fathers,

particularly those who viewed the possibility of contact as unlikely or foreclosed, highlighting how an assertion of disinterest may be defensive or protective. Others voiced ambivalence and uncertainty about seeking information or contact, noting that their birth mothers were resistant to talking about their birth fathers or had expressed hostility toward him. Still others voiced a strong interest in knowing their birth fathers. A few voiced a sense of the fathers' absence and a desire for a fatherly presence. Still others had complex feelings about their birth parents in general.

Consistent with prior research (Salvo Agolia and Herrera 2021), some participants minimised the significance of birth fathers, claiming that they rarely thought of him and did not have a desire to seek information about and/or contact him. This type of minimization may represent a reasonable and psychologically protective strategy (Power and Afifi 2005) in response to a high level of uncertainty surrounding their birth fathers, wherein the likelihood of obtaining additional information about them was low (Brashers 2001). One of these participants, a cis boy, underscored the positive aspects of having two mothers in asserting an absence of loss, highlighting his potential attunement to how acknowledging 'father absence' as a 'problem' could be politicised and/or used to argue against lesbian motherhood (Goldberg, Allen, and Sanner 2024).

Other participants with limited information and high levels of uncertainty asserted some curiosity about their birth fathers, but to a limited degree: they were psychologically more invested in their birth mothers, and had more intense and numerous questions for them than their birth fathers. In this way, despite the fact that they were raised by two mothers, the birth mother still emerged as the most psychologically salient birth parent, consistent with prior work showing a tendency for birth fathers to exist 'in the shadows' of adoptive families (Freeark et al. 2005; Goldberg 2019). Yet, like the first group, these teens largely downplayed the likelihood that they would be able to make contact, seemingly accepting their current state of uncertainty as an uncomfortable reality they had to live with (Brashers 2001). Such acceptance may function as a protective mechanism, wherein they are freed from intense psychological processing and internal turbulence vis a vis their birth fathers (Roszia and Maxon 2019; Wrobel and Grotevant 2019).

Other participants, all of whom had contact with their birth mothers, were curious about their birth fathers but acknowledged that they were unlikely to pursue additional information or direct contact, seemingly because of their birth mothers' hostile or avoidant stance vis a vis their birth fathers. Their curiosity, then, was tempered by their birth mothers' seeming resistance or reluctance to share information. This finding echoes prior work establishing birth mothers as frequent 'gatekeepers' of information about birth fathers (French et al. 2014; Salvo Agolia and Herrera 2021). Notably, however, at least one participant had looked for information about their birth father online—a passive strategy that avoided a negative response from their birth mother or potential rejection by their birth father (Powell and Afifi 2005). Others, also with past or current birth mother contact, were unequivocal about their curiosity regarding their birth fathers, likely because they did not also carry the burden of having

absorbed negative information about him. These participants vocalised specific questions about and for their birth fathers that typically centred on personality and abilities, seeing them as one key source of data as they sought to explore their identity and better understand themselves (Brodzinsky 2011). Indeed, these individuals already had contact with their birth mother, making her more of a known, and available, entity. The missing 'piece,' for them, was more clearly their birth father.

The birth father occupied a particularly psychologically significant role for four cis youth of colour with White mothers who had limited birth family contact and limited information about their birth fathers specifically. They wondered about how having a father might be different and/or change their lives. The three girls' fantasies were less about birth fathers specifically than a generic father figure—but did contain the type of rescue or savoir fantasies that Hughes (2015) observed were sometimes salient for female adoptees vis a vis their birth fathers. In contrast, for the one cis boy in this group, his fantasies in part derived from and were aligned with particulars of his birth father's situation (e.g., he had other children). That these children were all of colour with two White mothers suggests that birth fathers' race, in addition to his gender, may have been an important in their fantasies: A birth father of colour would have offered mirroring of their experiences in multiple ways that were currently missing from their lives (Godon, Green, and Ramsey 2014).

In two cases, participants—both boys—had birth father contact. Such contact informed their understanding that their lives would indeed be quite different if they had lived with them. In this way, contact precluded fantasy that was unmoored from the complex reality of their birth fathers' circumstances. This underscores the importance of open adoption, and birth parent contact specifically, in that it mitigates the idealisation of an alternate reality, as well as the tendency to fill in gaps and unknowns with imaginative stories (Goldberg 2019).

Finally, two participants adopted via foster care voiced complex feelings that included anger and resentment toward their birth fathers. Echoing other work suggesting that such anger stems from feelings of rejection (Barroso and Barbosa-Ducharne 2019; Lo et al. 2023), these two participants' narratives revealed intense feelings of both loss and bitterness. Feelings of anger may be more common among children adopted via foster care, who may possess more details (and possibly memories) of their birth parents' decisions and choices that led to their adoptive placement (Riley and Singer 2019).

4.1 | Limitations, Implications, and Conclusions

The current study is limited in a number of ways. First, it is unclear whether the findings of the study generalise to the larger population of adopted adolescents with lesbian mothers. Qualitative research, using small samples such as this one, provides opportunities to examine research questions in a more detailed and nuanced way, but at the cost of unknown external validity. Future research needs to explore teenagers' ideas about birth fathers not only with larger samples but with a specific focus on different adoptive family types—for example, adoptive youth raised in mother-headed versus father-headed

homes; those with two parents versus a single parent; and youth raised with same-race parents versus those with different-race parents. Research that uses larger samples may be especially helpful in teasing apart the role of domestic versus international placements on teens' interest in and desire for contact with birth fathers.

In addition, we did not explore the role of family support for participants' interest in, feelings about, and desire for contact with their birth fathers. Research indicates that family support, including a more communicatively open environment about adoption, is tied to children's search interests about their origins and is also related to greater satisfaction with birth relative involvement (Colaner and Soliz 2017; Skinner-Drawz et al. 2011). Whether the level of family support differs when the adolescent's interests are directed toward their birth father, about whom there is typically less information, versus their birth mother, is not known. Future work should explicitly address this to better understand the role that adoptive parents play in their children's ideas about their birth fathers, and their interest in and desire to make contact with them. Also of interest is the fact that although participants' race and gender intersected in unique ways, we do not have data on birth fathers' race in order to more fully articulate how this may have impacted their psychological significance.

Our findings are also limited by the questions that we asked, which typically inquired about thoughts and experiences with birth parents and family generally and then were followed up by probes about specific birth family members. Future work might employ a semi-structured interview that addresses each birth family member separately, with in-depth questions focusing on birth mothers, birth fathers, extended birth family, and birth siblings. Such an approach might yield important, nuanced findings related to gender in adoptive family dynamics more generally (e.g., how adopted adolescents feel about birth brothers versus birth sisters, for example). A more in-depth exploration could also focus in greater detail on the phenomenon of ambiguous loss, wherein participants could be queried specifically about their feelings, thoughts, and fantasies about their birth fathers, including the specific content of these psychological processes.

Our data have implications for adoption practice and adoptive parenting. Given that many adoptive youth have an interest in their birth fathers, adoption agencies need to be more proactive in gathering information about them during the adoption process, especially in situations where birth mothers appear reluctant to share such information. Birth mothers need to understand that this information, like the information about themselves, is often desired by children and helps them to develop a better understanding of their origins and a more well-integrated sense of self.

Adoptive parents also need to recognise that their children's interest in and feelings about their origins are highly variable, with some having little interest in their birth family, including their birth father, and others displaying considerable interest in and a strong desire for contact. Moreover, parents need to recognise that their children's interests in these aspects of their lives are not only normal, but inevitable, and will wax and wane

over time, with children showing little interest at one point in their development and substantial interest at other points (Goldberg 2019). Regardless of their children's current level of interest in their origins, parents need to ensure that the family environment remains communicatively open, supporting their children's curiosity, questions, and search interests. Such support is linked to better adjustment and more positive self-esteem among adopted children, as well as healthier parent-child relationships (Brodzinsky and Palacios 2023; Pinderhughes and Brodzinsky 2019).

Despite the fact that in contemporary adoptions, birth fathers are still often treated as an afterthought (Burden 2023; Clapton 2019), birth father contact has the potential to benefit children and birth fathers themselves (Ge et al. 2008). Research indicates that birth fathers in more open adoptions are more satisfied with the adoption and show better psychological adjustment post-placement (Ge et al. 2008); and, likewise, the presence of birth father contact is related to satisfaction with contact among adopted young adults (Farr et al. 2014). Our findings suggest that for some youth in lesbian-mother families, more information about any potential contact with birth fathers may meaningfully facilitate the identity-related exploration that is particularly salient during adolescence (Barroso and Barbosa-Ducharme 2019). Even among the many youth who feel entirely supported by their families, and do not espouse a sense of 'lacking' where (birth) fathers are concerned, more information about birth fathers may be beneficial in mitigating uncertainty and enhancing autonomy. Ultimately, the field of adoption and adoptive families specifically could benefit from the greater acknowledgement of the potential—but not inevitable—psychological significance of birth fathers in the lives of adopted youth.

Author Contributions

Abbie E. Goldberg: conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft. **David M. Brodzinsky:** writing – review and editing.

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Data are available upon request.

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