

# Adoptees' Contact With Birth Relatives in Emerging Adulthood

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## Abstract

While openness in adoption has become more common in the United States, little research has examined contact between birth and adoptive families as adoptees become adults. Using quantitative and qualitative data from 167 emerging adult adoptees, factors characterizing contact (e.g., type, frequency, with whom), satisfaction with contact, and the influences of transitional events and significant relationships were explored. Among these variables, satisfaction with contact with birth parents in emerging adulthood was significantly associated with greater openness levels. Four qualitative case studies, representing increasing openness levels with increasing satisfaction, provided illustrations of variability in emerging adult adoptees' experiences of contact with birth parents. Overall, with regard to openness in adoption, emerging adulthood represents a transitional period marked by substantial individual variation.

## Keywords

openness arrangements, adoption, emerging adulthood, adoptive families, contact

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Openness in adoption describes opportunities for contact between birth and adoptive families within the adoptive kinship network, which joins them both, after a child is adopted. Contact varies in degree and type, and can involve letters, emails, phone calls, gifts, or in-person visits (Grotevant, 2012). While openness arrangements have become more common in the United States since the 1980s, the practice remains controversial. Some cite concerns about birth mothers' privacy, and others worry about protecting adopted children, particularly in cases involving prior abuse or neglect (Loxterkamp, 2009). Research has addressed questions raised in these debates (Grotevant et al., 2007), but gaps in knowledge remain. Specifically, few studies have examined the impact of openness arrangements as adoptees enter adulthood (Siegel, 2012).

In westernized countries, emerging adulthood is viewed as a period lasting from the late teens to the late 20s, with an emphasis on ages 18 to 25 (Arnett, 2007). As a time of increased independence and responsibility, adoptees' decisions may change about the amount and type of contact in which they will engage during emerging adulthood. One structural barrier to independent decision making is removed when adoptees turn 18, since many obtain the legal right to make decisions about their adoption records and/or contact (specific rights gained, e.g., access to original birth certificates, varies from state to state; Howard, Smith, & Deoudes, 2010). For some, this may lead to opportunities to continue ongoing contact arrangements with birth families. For others, this may lead to changes in established patterns. Some adoptees without contact may decide to seek out more information or contact, while others will not.

Furthermore, changes in family and personal relationships during emerging adulthood may also affect adoptees' decisions about contact. Marriage or the birth of a child may initiate a desire for more information or contact. Career or school demands may take precedence over a focus on possible changes in established patterns of contact. For families without contact, the emerging adult adoptee's desire for birth family contact may conflict with that of the adoptive parents. For families with ongoing contact, the emerging adult adoptee may assume a new role in managing contact within the context of existing relationships between birth and adoptive families. Thus, emerging adult adoptees establish adult relationships with both their adoptive parents and birth relatives within the complex relational structure of the adoptive kinship network. In addition, the thoughts and feelings of spouses, partners, and children (and whether they are supportive or not) may be considered as decisions about contact are navigated.

The period of emerging adulthood presents several intriguing questions about how adoptees experience openness in adoption. Once adoptees reach

legal age, how does contact or information sharing occur? Are factors such as satisfaction with contact relevant to openness arrangements during emerging adulthood? How do adoptees, as emerging adults, describe (potential) contact with birth relatives? To address these questions, we first review the literature.

### *Openness in Adoption*

The literature suggests that no single approach characterizes the openness arrangements of all adoptive families—there is no “one size fits all” version (Grotevant, 2012). Multiple factors influence how contact evolves over time and how it impacts adoptees’ outcomes. We focus our review primarily on descriptive research (i.e., exploring what types of openness arrangements exist) and based on adoptees’ experiences with contact (i.e., examining roles of satisfaction and parent-child relationships). Particular emphasis is given to studies of emerging adulthood and adolescence, as few studies about adoption openness have targeted adult adoptees.

First, some historical context about openness in adoption is beneficial. During the early 20th century, sealed birth certificates and closed adoptions were prevailing practices in the United States; the rationale was to protect adopted children from the stigma of illegitimate birth (Siegel, 2012). In the 1960s, a growing number of adoptees and birth parents shared their stories of why adoption secrecy had been harmful (Siegel, 2012). During the 1980s and 1990s, the practice of adoption openness became increasingly common—today, up to 95% of agencies with infant adoption programs offer options for openness arrangements (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Openness arrangements involve a variety of contact possibilities, ranging in type and intensity. Adoptions vary from closed or confidential adoptions (i.e., no identifying or contact information is shared) to fully disclosed adoptions (i.e., birth and adoptive family members share identifying information and can contact one another directly). Contact denotes any communication between birth and adoptive family members after the child is adopted. Contact may or may not include the sharing of identifying information (e.g., home addresses, last names), it may be initiated by birth or adoptive family members, and it may be mediated by a third party, such as a social worker or adoption agency employee (Grotevant, 2012). Contact varies in the amount of information shared, frequency of contact, and number of family members involved.

Siegel (2012) observed that the literature on openness in adoption includes a variety of studies that ask different questions: What types of openness arrangements exist? Who participates in and controls decision-making processes related to openness? How does openness impact child adjustment,

adoptive identity, curiosity, and information seeking about birth families? What is the role of satisfaction with contact? How does openness affect adoptive and birth family dynamics? While this literature reflects conceptual complexity and methodological challenges, the research to date indicates that some form of openness is generally positive in terms of adjustment and functioning for members of the adoptive kinship network (Siegel, 2012). For instance, Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy (2003) discovered that children who had more information about their birth parents also had more active communication with their adoptive parents about adoption (the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project, or MTARP, described in more detail later). Among the same sample, children in fully disclosed open adoptions reported greater satisfaction with contact due to greater information access and birth family communication (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996).

Satisfaction with contact has been a variable of interest in several studies. Crea and Barth (2009) found that satisfaction with openness arrangements was higher among families with open, rather than closed, adoptions. Results from the MTARP study have shown that adolescent adoptees with contact with birth mothers and birth fathers were more satisfied than those without contact (Mendenhall, Berge, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004). Satisfaction was highest for families with ongoing contact including meetings with birth parents (Grotevant et al., 2007). Adoptees who reported less satisfaction with contact were more likely to desire more (not less) contact; no significant sex or age effects were found (Grotevant et al., 2007). Similarly, Siegel's (2012) longitudinal work revealed that adoptive parents of infants, children, and adolescents report satisfaction with most openness levels. When dissatisfaction was noted, it was due to desires for more frequent or consistent contact, in line with Grotevant et al.'s (2007) results. Lastly, satisfaction with contact has been predictive of fewer externalizing behaviors among MTARP adolescents (Grotevant, Rueter, Von Korff, & Gonzalez, 2011). Thus, given its associations with adjustment and family dynamics, satisfaction with contact appears to be an important and complex variable deserving further study. Satisfaction with contact may influence how emerging adults negotiate adoptive kinship network relationships, independent of their adoptive parents; yet, little is known about this topic.

Adoptees' age and sex have been found to be relevant to experiences of contact with birth families in several studies. For example, Hawkins et al. (2007) found that desire for information about and contact with birth families differed according to adolescents' age and sex in their study of 122 international and 40 domestic adoptive families. Fewer adolescents (at age 15) desired contact with their birth families than they had at age 11, paralleling

earlier findings (e.g., Crea & Barth, 2009). Adolescent girls, on average, wanted to know more about their adoptions than did adolescent boys (Hawkins et al., 2007). Earlier work has also found sex differences among adoptees, particularly with adoptive identity (e.g., Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2007). Broader literature on identity development indicates that the process may be more complex for girls than for boys, especially in relational domains (e.g., Kroger, 1997). Perhaps girls are apt to show more interest than boys in relational aspects of their adoptive identity, such as establishing contact with and gaining more information about their birth families. Indeed, among emerging adult adoptees with no contact, women are more likely than men to seek out birth family information (Skinner-Drawz, Wrobel, Grotevant, & Von Korff, 2011). Whether sex differences differentiate adoptees with varying degrees of openness is a question for further exploration.

In a review of the literature, Wolfram (2008) noted that contact between birth and adoptive families facilitates the likelihood of sustained contact over time. This may be due to planning for future contact during in-person visits and empathy felt between birth and adoptive family members. Crea and Barth (2009), in their longitudinal study of adoptive families ( $N = 469$  adoptees), found that the overall number of adoptive families in contact with birth families decreased between 8 and 14 years post-adoption, consistent with earlier research (e.g., Frasch, Brooks, & Barth, 2000). However, for those families in contact 8 years post-adoption, the number of visits, letters, and phone calls increased 14 years post-adoption (Crea & Barth, 2009). Adoptive parents' perceptions were relevant to contact over time such that positive perceptions of how contact affected the family were associated with greater contact.

Thus, openness in adoption is a dynamic experience for adoptees and their families. Contact between birth and adoptive families may be predicted by earlier contact, as well as by developmental tasks related to emerging adulthood—negotiating adult responsibilities, roles, and relationships—which may impact the likelihood of contact and information seeking. Factors like adoptees' age, sex, and satisfaction with contact are also likely to be influential. The present study aimed to address these dynamics among emerging adult adoptees.

### *The Present Study*

Openness arrangements among emerging adult adoptees were explored using longitudinal data from MTARP, which began in the 1980s to investigate variations in openness arrangements, contact between birth and adoptive families, and their antecedents. The sample includes birth and adoptive family members involved in domestic infant adoptions, who participated in three

waves of data collection. Details about MTARP openness arrangements during childhood and adolescence can be found elsewhere (e.g., Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant et al., 2007).

In this study, quantitative analyses examined openness arrangements and qualitative analyses explored experiences of contact with birth families in emerging adulthood. There were three main questions: (a) What characterizes openness arrangements for adoptees over age 18? (b) How is satisfaction with contact associated with openness arrangements during emerging adulthood? (c) How do emerging adult adoptees describe their experiences of openness?

Upon reaching legal adulthood, adoptees may experience fewer barriers to information, which could facilitate searching for birth relatives. Among some adoptees, information seeking increases around age 18 when records may become accessible (Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004). The degree of change in information seeking, however, varies widely from adolescence to emerging adulthood among MTARP adoptees (Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). Some adoptees do not seek additional information nor search for birth families, even after turning 18 (Wrobel & Dillon, 2009). Earlier MTARP results have shown that variability characterizes openness arrangements within and across time points (Grotevant et al., 2007). Thus, we expected that emerging adult adoptees' descriptions of contact would demonstrate notable individual variation, in terms of type, frequency, involved members, and factors facilitating contact (e.g., transition events, satisfaction with contact, family dynamics, and important relationships). We predicted that, on average, satisfaction with contact would be higher among adoptees with greater levels of openness. Since the sample represented a wide age range of emerging adult adoptees (and some young adult adoptees), analyses included consideration of adoptees' age, sex, and marital status.

## **Method**

### *Participants*

Participants were drawn from MTARP, which had an original sample of 190 families, who were recruited through 35 domestic infant adoption agencies in 23 states. Adoptions varied in terms of birth family contact from completely confidential (closed) to fully disclosed (open). Participants were predominantly White, Protestant, and middle- to upper-middle class.

Data from Wave 3 were primarily used in this report. In Wave 3 (2006-2007), 167 emerging adult adoptees participated (86 males, 81 females), who averaged 24.95 years (range: 21 to 30). The majority of emerging adult adoptees were employed (84.4%). Most lived in their own house or apartment

(75.3%) and paid all their housing expenses (55.6%). A third had graduated from a 4-year college (33.9%) and another third were currently attending school full- or part-time (33.2%). A fifth of adoptees were married (20.6%) and had at least one child (20%). Of these, 24 had one child: 20 were biological children, two were adopted, and two were stepchildren. Five emerging adults had two biological children and one had four.

Preliminary analyses revealed that emerging adults (18-25 years),  $n = 87$ , and young adults (over 25 years),  $n = 80$ , in this sample differed in terms of demographic characteristics. Young adults were significantly more likely than emerging adults to be married,  $\chi^2(3, N = 155) = 9.51, p = .023$ , have children,  $\chi^2(1, N = 148) = 12.39, p < .001$ , live independently (not with parents),  $\chi^2(6, N = 162) = 14.93, p = .021$ , and be financially independent,  $\chi^2(3, N = 162) = 11.64, p = .009$ . In contrast, emerging and young adults did not differ on any of the variables of interest: Openness arrangements with birth mother and birth father, frequency of contact with birth mother, birth father, and other birth relatives, and satisfaction with contact. Therefore, emerging and young adults were not distinguished separately in further analyses.

## Materials

*Demographic Questionnaire.* The Wave 3 Emerging Adult Demographic Questionnaire included questions about employment, school history, living arrangements, and relationships.

*Emerging Adult Interviews.* Semi-structured interviews were conducted with adoptees. Participants recounted their adoption stories through a series of specific questions, followed by probes and further questions. In particular, participants discussed contact with birth relatives (e.g., "Tell me about contact you have had with your birth family"). Adoptees were also asked about their degree of satisfaction with their openness arrangements, regardless of how much contact had occurred. Responses were coded for satisfaction on a 0 to 4 scale, with 0 indicating *very dissatisfied*; 1, *dissatisfied*; 2, *neutral*; 3, *satisfied*; and 4, *very satisfied*.

## Procedure

A secure online data collection system was designed for Wave 3, in which project investigators and advanced graduate students who had received extensive training interviewed emerging adult adoptees. Each participant was issued a unique username and password that granted access to the

consent forms, questionnaires, and interviews. Interviewers and participants “met” online for two to three confidential sessions (chats) for one to three hours each. Alternatively, some participants ( $n = 30$ ) completed a phone interview identical to the online version, and several ( $n = 18$ ) mailed paper questionnaires identical to the online surveys. Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and checked for accuracy. Compensation was US\$75 for the surveys and US\$75 for the interviews. The study was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Minnesota and the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

*General Coding Procedure.* All interview transcripts were coded by principal investigators, or graduate or advanced undergraduate students. Coding required moderate to high levels of inference. Acceptable reliability was established at .80 agreement, which coders were required to attain on two or more transcripts before coding independently. For interviews that were double-coded (40% at Wave 3), coders periodically discussed ratings to resolve any disagreements. Final ratings were chosen after consensus between the two coders and were checked by the coding supervisor. Interrater reliability was monitored throughout the process.

## **Results**

First, information about openness arrangements is given to describe contact between birth and adoptive families. Second, satisfaction with openness is examined. Finally, qualitative case studies are provided to illustrate experiences of varying levels of contact in emerging adulthood.

### *Openness Arrangements in Emerging Adulthood*

Adoptees ( $N = 167$ ) reported whether they had any contact with their birth mother, birth father, and/or another birth family member in emerging adulthood. Openness arrangements were coded into four categories using adoptees' interviews: (a) no contact, (b) stopped contact, (c) contact without meetings (contact is occurring, but the adoptee has not had face-to-face contact with birth parents since Wave 2), and (d) contact with meetings (adoptee has had face-to-face contact with birth parents since Wave 2). Descriptions of each group, and contact with birth mothers and birth fathers, are provided in Table 1. Many more adoptees had contact with birth mothers ( $n = 70$ ) than with birth fathers ( $n = 19$ ). Regardless, there was substantial variability in frequency and type of contact within each group, especially among those with ongoing contact.



**Table 1.** Openness Arrangements Reported by Emerging Adult Adoptees at Wave 3.

Definition		Birth mothers		Birth fathers	
		No.	Valid %	No.	Valid %
No contact	No contact between the emerging adult adoptee and birth relatives.	71	42.5	127	76.5
Stopped contact	Information sharing and contact had stopped by time of the interview.	26	15.6	20	12
Contact without meetings	Adoptee has had mediated or personal contact with birth parent, but not face-to-face contact; contact has not stopped.	12	7.2	6	3.6
Contact with meetings	Adoptee has had face-to-face contact with his/her birth parent at least once; contact has not stopped.	58	34.7	13	7.8

Note. Data were missing from one participant regarding openness level with birth father.

Frequency and type of current contact with birth mothers, birth fathers, and/or other birth family members are found in Table 2. For adoptees with contact, frequency of contact tended to be “often” or “frequent” with birth parents and other birth relatives. About 43% ( $n = 72$ ) of emerging adult adoptees had ever had contact, in their lifetime, with an additional birth relative. Of these, most had contact with birth siblings ( $n = 53$ ; 31.9%), birth grandmothers ( $n = 44$ ; 26.5%), birth grandfathers ( $n = 29$ ; 17.5%), birth mother’s spouse/partner ( $n = 31$ ; 18.7%), or another birth family member ( $n = 45$ ; 27.1%). The type of contact was variable, but phone calls and visits were most commonly reported. A substantial minority reported receiving letters, pictures, emails, gifts, or other contact.

Age, but not sex, was related to openness level in emerging adulthood,  $F(6, 162) = 2.95, p = .009$ . Emerging adult adoptees with fully disclosed adoptions were significantly younger ( $M = 24.08, SD = 1.74$ ) than those in confidential adoptions ( $M = 25.53, SD = 1.53$ ).

### Satisfaction With Openness Arrangements

Overall, emerging adult adoptees were moderately satisfied with contact with birth mothers ( $M = 2.56, SD = 1.26$ ) and birth fathers ( $M = 2.51, SD = 1.18$ ). Several significant differences, however, emerged as a function of adoptees’ level of openness (see Table 3).

**Table 2.** Frequency and Type of Current Birth Family Contact as Reported by Emerging Adult Adoptees.

	Birth mothers	Birth fathers	Other birth relatives
Frequency of contact ( <i>n</i> )			
Frequent	38 (23%)	9 (6%)	22 (33%)
Often	19 (12%)	5 (3%)	20 (30%)
Occasional	13 (8%)	5 (3%)	8 (12%)
Rare	3 (2%)	2 (1%)	3 (5%)
None	91 (55%)	137 (87%)	13 (20%)
Type of contact ( <i>n</i> )			
Phone calls	65 (39%)	17 (10%)	41 (30%)
Visits	61 (37%)	16 (9%)	50 (25%)
Letters	56 (34%)	10 (6%)	26 (16%)
Gifts	52 (31%)	13 (8%)	30 (18%)
Photos	53 (32%)	11 (7%)	30 (18%)
Emails	54 (32%)	10 (6%)	32 (19%)
Other	5 (3%)	0 (0%)	4 (2%)

Note. With Frequency of Contact, "frequent" indicates contact at least once a month or one extended visit per year, "often" indicates contact occurring 3 to 11 times a year or once a year for an extended visit, "occasional" indicates contact occurring once or twice a year, and "rare" indicates contact occurring less than once a year. Type of Contact was not mutually exclusive; adoptees could report multiple types (percentages reflect  $N = 167$  reporting on Type of Contact with birth mothers, birth fathers, and other birth relatives). Data regarding frequency of contact were missing from three participants about birth mothers ( $N = 164$ ), nine about birth fathers ( $N = 158$ ), and six about other birth relatives ( $N = 66$ ; out of 72 adoptees who ever had contact with extended birth family members outside of birth parents).

Adoptees' age was not significantly associated with satisfaction with contact in emerging adulthood. Satisfaction with contact in emerging adulthood, however, did vary significantly with adoptees' sex. Men were significantly more satisfied than women with their contact with their birth mothers ( $M_{males} = 2.80$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ ;  $M_{females} = 2.31$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ),  $t(164) = 2.55$ ,  $p = .012$ , and with birth fathers ( $M_{males} = 2.74$ ,  $SD = 1.06$ ;  $M_{females} = 2.27$ ,  $SD = 1.26$ ),  $t(162) = 2.61$ ,  $p = .010$ . Thus, adoptees' sex, but not age, was included as a covariate in further analysis.

After controlling for adoptees' sex, significant differences in satisfaction with openness arrangements were found as a function of adoptees' levels of contact with birth mothers,  $F(3, 161) = 10.43$ ,  $p < .001$ , and with birth fathers,  $F(3, 159) = 3.33$ ,  $p = .021$ . Post hoc analysis showed that adoptees with current contact, including meetings with birth mothers, were significantly more satisfied than other adoptees. Similar patterns of satisfaction with contact

**Table 3.** Adoptees’ Satisfaction With Openness Arrangements With Birth Mothers and Birth Fathers: Analysis of Covariance by Openness Level Controlling for Adoptee Sex.

	No contact	Stopped contact	Contact without meetings	Contact with meetings	F (df)
Birth mothers	n = 71	n = 25	n = 12	n = 58	(3,161)
Mean	2.49	1.94	1.53	3.13 <sup>a</sup>	9.62 <sup>**</sup>
SE	0.14	0.23	0.33	0.15	
Birth fathers	n = 126	n = 19	n = 6	n = 13	(3,159)
Mean	2.51	2.08 <sup>b</sup>	2.26	3.34 <sup>b</sup>	3.33 <sup>*</sup>
SE	0.10	0.26	0.46	0.32	

Note. 0 = very dissatisfied. 1 = dissatisfied. 2 = neutral. 3 = satisfied. 4 = very satisfied. Data were missing from one participant regarding satisfaction with contact with birth mother, and three regarding satisfaction with contact with birth fathers.

\*p < .05. \*\*p < .001. <sup>a</sup>Post-hoc analysis indicated that the mean for contact with meetings with birth mothers was significantly different from the three other groups of openness arrangements. <sup>b</sup>Post-hoc analysis indicated that the means for contact with meetings with birth fathers and for stopped contact were significantly different from one another.

were found with birth fathers—adoptees with current contact, including meetings with birth fathers, were significantly more satisfied than other adoptees. Thus, adoptees were most satisfied with contact with both birth mothers and birth fathers when contact included meetings.

### Qualitative Descriptions of Adoptees’ Contact With Birth Families

Interview data were selected from a subsample of adoptees to enrich understanding of emerging adult adoptees’ experiences of contact with birth families. Specifically, four extended case studies are presented (names and other identifying information have been changed). There is one illustration from each of the four types of openness arrangements represented in the Wave 3 data (i.e., no contact, stopped contact, contact without meetings, and contact with meetings). Consistent with the quantitative results, cases were selected that demonstrate adoptees’ increasing satisfaction with contact as the level of openness increases.

*1. No Contact—Julie.* Julie, age 24, does not remember being told she was adopted and feels she “always knew.” Julie’s adoptive mother was unable to have children after giving birth to her older brother. Julie is unsure why she was placed for adoption but believes her birth mother wanted the “best

possible life” for her and believed she could not give that to her. Julie has never had any contact with any members of her birth family and her birth father never knew that her birth mother was pregnant with her. Julie talks openly with her family and boyfriend about her adoption but does not want to talk to her friends about being adopted.

Julie very much wants to know more about her birth mother and thought about registering with the adoption agency to seek more contact a few years ago. Julie explains that she has always had questions about her birth mother, such as what she looks like, whether they look alike, and her name. The information Julie received from the agency states that her birth mother also placed a child for adoption 2 years before Julie was born, and Julie would like to know if her birth sibling is a boy or a girl.

Despite her desire to know more about her birth mother, Julie states that she “probably won’t ever” seek more information because she believes her birth mother has never sought out any information about her. Julie explained that her adoptive mother used to give letters with updates about Julie to the adoption agency for Julie’s birth mother. According to Julie, the adoption agency told her adoptive mother that her birth mother “never called the agency to see what [she] was up to.” In addition, Julie and her adoptive mother went to the adoption agency when she was in high school and were informed that Julie’s birth mother has “never contacted the agency asking about [her].” It seems that Julie is hurt by what she perceives as her birth mother’s disinterest in her; Julie explains that the only thing that would change her decision not to seek more information about her birth family would be if her birth mother tried to contact the adoption agency to see how she is doing. Julie does not believe her birth family will ever try to search for her because she thinks “they have their own families now and are busy with them.”

**2. Stopped Contact—Tamara.** Tamara, age 21, was told that because her birth parents were unmarried, they decided to place her for adoption as her birth mother’s older sister had placed her child for adoption years earlier. Her birth mother was still in school and did not have enough money to support a child and her birthfather “wanted nothing to do with a baby.” Tamara’s birth mother chose open adoption because she “knew what her sister had gone through after choosing a closed adoption of her daughter.” Tamara recalls seeing and talking to her birth mother on the phone when attending a family vacation and meeting up with her when she was in her preteens. There has been no contact with her birth father.

Tamara’s contact with her birth mother “dwindled off” and she has not spoken to her or heard from her in the last four years. Tamara described how

her adoptive parents have tried to reach her the last few times, but Tamara has “given up even attempting.” When asked about how she feels that her contacts are no longer acknowledged, she reports experiencing varying emotions: “now I just don’t care, however I do resent her for being there when I was young and completely dropping out of my life now that I’m older—I blame it on negative impacts in her life, difficult situations, and she is possibly nervous about contacting me after so long perhaps anticipating my feelings towards her, or perhaps it has become painful and has regrets about giving me up.” As her words describe, Tamara has fluctuated between resentment and ambivalence about the current level of contact between her and her birth mother. She goes on to describe hesitancy in initiating any change in the current contact saying, “I really don’t care at this point. There is such a large divide between us now that I wouldn’t even know where to begin and I fear that if I did happen to put myself out there and give her the time of day and get to know her again, the same thing would happen, she would disappear again, and the whole process would start all over again, I have no doubt.”

**3. Current Contact Without Meetings—Kenny.** Kenny, age 23, describes always knowing he was adopted. His birth mother did not want to raise a child in a single parent household, and looked for an adoption agency where she met Kenny’s adoptive parents. Kenny has never asked his [adoptive] parents why they decided to adopt, because for “a few years” he did not want “to hear that his parents tried to have kids and couldn’t or something.” Kenny reports that he sometimes forgets he is adopted, until something happens to remind him, such as getting a call from his birth mother.

Although he has never had contact with his birth father, Kenny grew up seeing his birth mother frequently. Things changed, however, when she moved to another state (approximately 8 years ago), and they began speaking on the phone instead of having in-person meetings. In the earlier years of their relationship, Kenny viewed his birth mother as a “friend.” Over time, Kenny notes that he recognized that she was his birth mother and made a choice about his adoption. He describes the relationship now like that of extended relatives. The two share responsibility for contacting each other. Kenny reports relative satisfaction with the phone contact he has with his birth mother. According to Kenny, his birth mother would prefer more contact, but he also notes her understanding—that people at his age sometimes “disappear from family because they are off doing things to set them up for the future.” Although the overall frequency of contact has not changed, Kenny recognizes that his relationship with his birth mother has grown over the years. Kenny reports that his age has been a factor in improving his understanding of his birth mother over time, which has led to more

in-depth communication about adoption with his birth mother. Kenny's story represents the balancing of emerging adult tasks, such as building his career, managing adult responsibilities, continuing to develop an adult sense of self and autonomy, and deepening personal relationships in adulthood—which for Kenny, involves relationships not only within his adoptive family, but also with his birth mother.

**4. Current Contact With Meetings—Amanda.** Amanda, age 28, described that her birth parents were 17 to 18 years old when her birth mother became pregnant. Since they did not feel ready to be parents and were still in high school, Amanda was placed for adoption. Amanda exchanged some letters with her birth mother at age 12, and then met both birth parents at 20. Amanda's contact with her birth mother initially required her to go through her adoptive parents and the adoption agency, but at that time, she felt she was "too busy being a teenager" and "didn't quite know what to say to her." However, after giving birth herself, she described seeing herself in her son, and wanting "to know where I came from." Amanda felt she may have been "missing something," and wanted to create an "adult" relationship with her birth mother that existed separately from the adoption agency. She was excited to have "questions answered" and to know more about her birth mother so as to learn more about herself and her own background.

Thus, at age 20, Amanda initiated contact again with her birth parents through working with her adoption agency. She wrote a letter to her birth mother with her contact information, her birth mother responded, and contact has increased since. After meeting her birth parents, she reports becoming "very close to them." Amanda resides in the same town as her birth mother. She describes her adoptive parents' initial difficulty in socializing with her birth parents when they visited her, but that this dynamic has improved with time. She has discussed with her [adoptive] parents that they are her "parents" and that her birth parents would "never be able to take their place." Amanda is very comfortable with the contact with her birth mother. They take turns initiating contact and making plans, the "same as that of a friend." Amanda reported that she is extremely satisfied with her contact with her birth mother at this time, saying (on a scale of 1 to 10 of satisfaction with contact) that she is a "10—I am free to contact her directly, whenever I want to." This stands in contrast to high school, when she had less contact and rated her satisfaction with the contact as a "5 . . . the arrangements were what they were. I had to go through my parents and the adoption agency to contact her back then, both of which I chose not to do. Probably because I was too busy being a teenager, and didn't quite know what to say to her." As Amanda matured, she was able to initiate the type and amount of contact herself, as

opposed to through a third party, which appears to have significantly improved her satisfaction with contact.

Although Amanda has contact with her birth father, she reports being less close to her birth father compared to her birth mother. She feels this is because he is “very remorseful about the adoption” and has “trouble” with the idea of her being placed for adoption. Her birth father often apologizes for the adoption, which makes Amanda uncomfortable. She reports that she had no contact with him until she was 20 years old, but that she would have liked to have had more information about him earlier. She received a letter from him when she was of legal age (18 years), which the agency had prompted him to write about his mental health condition. Amanda noted a readiness to meet her birth family around when she received this letter, and she met him shortly after. Amanda’s experiences reflect identity exploration characteristic of emerging adulthood as well as the role negotiation in relationships with her adoptive and birth parents.

*Qualitative Summary.* These qualitative data reveal a diversity of experiences with contact and reflect relational complexity among birth and adoptive families during emerging adulthood. Variation in experiences was considerable, regardless of level of openness among birth and adoptive families. It appears that particular life experiences, such as attaining legal age, needing medical information, having long-term romantic relationships, or raising children, along with feelings of emotional and personal readiness, played key roles in facilitating, maintaining, or hindering contact. In summary, for all adoptees, emerging adulthood is a unique and individual experience with regard to contact with birth relatives. For some, this period may result in dynamic changes in relationships with birth relatives, while for others, there may be little change. Emerging adulthood appears to include turning points for adoptees as related to openness in adoption, such as developing a career, having children, and changing adoptive parent-child relationships, but these experiences lead to a variety of different outcomes.

## Discussion

The results of this study demonstrate that openness arrangements among adopted emerging adults are complex, variable, and dynamic. Quantitative data suggested that age, sex, and satisfaction with contact were relevant to experiences of adoption openness. Qualitative data elucidated ways that adoptees experienced contact with birth families, particularly those relevant to tasks of emerging adulthood, such as managing adult relationships and responsibilities.

Most emerging adult adoptees had some form of contact with birth family members in their lifetime. Although the majority did not have current contact as emerging adults with birth mothers, birth fathers, or other birth relatives, a sizable minority reported current contact with birth mothers and other birth relatives (usually a grandparent or sibling). Fewer adoptees had contact with birth fathers. For those with contact with birth relatives, contact varied from rare (once a year or less) to frequent (once a month or one extended visit per year). The type of contact varied, but phone calls and visits were the most commonly reported forms of contact with birth mothers, birth fathers, and other birth relatives. Multiple types of contact, such as email, gifts, and photos, were also common. Thus, frequency and type of contact, as well as with whom contact occurred, were notably heterogeneous. These findings parallel earlier findings of individual variation in contact among this sample as adolescents (Grotevant et al., 2007). The results are similar to Siegel's (2012) findings among emerging adult adoptees, and extend the literature with a large sample involved in a wide spectrum of openness arrangements.

Openness arrangements in emerging adulthood were associated with adoptees' age. Younger emerging adults were more likely than those who were older to be in continuously fully disclosed adoptions. This may reflect trends toward openness in adoption that were increasing in the 1980s, when MTARP began (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). Perhaps younger emerging adult adoptees were part of fully disclosed adoptions from the start, as compared with older adoptees, who may have had confidential adoptions or nonidentifying contact mediated by an agency.

Emerging adult adoptees' satisfaction with contact with birth families was moderate overall. Satisfaction was highest among those with ongoing contact with birth parents, including meetings. Consistent with earlier MTARP results, satisfaction with contact was higher among adult adoptees with more, rather than less, contact with birth mothers and fathers (Grotevant et al., 2007; Mendenhall et al., 2004). One significant gender difference was found; men were more satisfied than women with contact with both birth mothers and fathers. Perhaps women have higher expectations of their relationships with birth relatives than do men, consistent with gender socialization patterns (Kroger, 1997), potentially leading to greater disappointment when expectations are not met. It is noteworthy, however, that no other significant gender differences emerged in openness arrangements or contact. Thus, satisfaction with contact remains high for adoptees with greater contact with birth families into emerging adulthood, extending previous findings about satisfaction with contact among adolescent adoptees (Grotevant et al., 2007). These findings, consistent with previous studies (e.g., Grotevant, 2012), suggest that openness in adoption generally works well for adoptees. The results extend



the literature by indicating that openness is important for adoptees across the lifespan, from childhood into adulthood.

The four emerging adult adoptees' descriptions of contact with birth families conveyed diversity in experience and complex personal relationships with birth and adoptive family members, particularly highlighting the movement from parent-led to young adult-led decision making about contact. These case studies indicated that adult adoptees face many stresses and challenges inherent to emerging adulthood, such as balancing work-life responsibilities, taking steps toward their future (e.g., education, career), and maintaining relationships with family members and romantic partners. There was also substantial variation in individual responses to these strains, particularly as related to contact with birth relatives. Some were pursuing more contact, some were maintaining ongoing levels of contact, and others were purposefully choosing not to have contact. Interviews with adoptees were distinguished by themes of stops and starts in communication, perceptions of problematic versus harmonious relationships with birth parents, and events that precipitated less or more contact.

The changing role of adoptive parents in mediating contact was also evident in emerging adult adoptees' interviews. It is possible that when adoptees were children, adoptive parents buffered them from more negative aspects of relationships with birth mothers (or other birth relatives). As adults, however, adoptees can independently assess feelings about birth relatives and determine for themselves whether they want to be in contact. Moreover, romantic partners, spouses, and children may take on a greater role in influencing adult adoptees' decisions about contact, which were themes observed in many of the adoptees' interviews (not only those selected for the cases presented here). Romantic partners can help adoptees feel understood in their feelings about their birth families, and they provide support as adoptees simultaneously individuate from and maintain connections with their adoptive family.

Thus, the experiences of adoptees continue to be important to consider into adulthood, especially as they navigate contact and relationships within the adoptive kinship network. Emerging adult adoptees' interviews demonstrated a number of barriers and facilitators to contact with birth families, such as focusing on education and career, managing numerous adult relationships with adoptive parents, siblings, romantic partners, and children, and continuing to develop a sense of self and adoptive identity. Coordinating contact with birth families appears to be a complex balancing act. An intricate network of relationships and family dynamics is involved, including the needs, desires, and developmental histories of many individuals among birth and adoptive families (e.g., Grotevant, 2009), as in Tamara's case, where there have been several starts and stops in contact with her birth mother. These experiences likely

continue to shape identity development for these emerging adults, specifically as adopted persons (Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005) --as with Amanda, who sought out birth family contact to discover more about herself, or with Kenny, who experienced deeper understanding of his birth mother over time. The case studies also highlight that continuities in contact with birth parents often were as striking as discontinuities. Thus, emerging adulthood presents variable tasks and challenges, which for adoptees, includes negotiating intersections of complex relationships with birth and adoptive families, as well as adoptees' "new" families, including romantic partners and children.

### *Implications for Practice*

The results provide insight into how practitioners (i.e., therapists, counselors, and/or agency personnel, etc.) can support adoptees, especially as they continue to negotiate contact with birth families during emerging adulthood. Practitioners should consider openness in adoption as *an ongoing, dynamic life process* and not as a static, one-time event occurring when children are adopted or when they reach a milestone such as turning 18. Practitioners should be aware that many factors may underline adoptees' desire for more or less contact (e.g., current relationship dynamics, life circumstances, transition events, feelings of readiness). In discussing decisions about contact with birth families, practitioners should consider emerging adults' desires for contact, satisfaction with contact, and current life circumstances. Although satisfaction with contact appears to be greatest among adoptees with more (rather than less) contact with birth families, increasing contact with birth family members may not be in the best interest of all emerging adult adoptees. Particular milestones or life events may be especially salient or influential in making decisions about contact, such as coming of legal age at 18 years, graduations, entering romantic partnerships, or having children. The role of adoptive parents, even if it changes, likely remains important to emerging adult adoptees as they make decisions about contact; romantic partners and children may be uniquely important during this time (e.g., Julie's romantic partner was supportive when she discussed her adoption experiences, and Amanda's child was influential in her decisions about contact). In future reports, we will specifically address the role of close others, such as romantic partners and children, in influencing emerging adult adoptees' contact with birth families.

### *Strengths and Limitations*

This study had several strengths as it was one of the first to focus on openness arrangements among of emerging adult adoptees. The only other study to do so

was by Siegel (2012), but the sample size was limited ( $N = 11$ ) and all emerging adult adoptees had some form of openness in adoption. In contrast, the sample in the current study was relatively large, particularly among studies of openness in adoption, and a variety of levels of openness were represented (closed to open). The findings thus contribute to the literature about adoptive families, openness in adoption, and emerging adulthood as a developmental period. Additional strengths include the use of a mixed-method, longitudinal study of a nationwide sample. Sources of variance were reduced through use of a homogeneous sample. Both qualitative and quantitative data were collected through personal interviews and standardized measures. Good internal validity was facilitated by systematic participant recruitment and data collection.

Despite its strengths, this study was limited in several ways, as it was focused only on individuals adopted as infants in the United States, precluding generalization to those adopted through international adoption or from foster care. Many different circumstances surround openness in international and foster care adoptions (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006). Future studies in this area should include more diverse samples (e.g., socioeconomic status, race) of adult adoptees.

## **Conclusion**

Consistent with earlier findings, the results suggest that openness arrangements among adult adoptees and their birth and adoptive families take many forms during emerging adulthood (Grotevant et al., 2007). For some adoptees, emerging adulthood includes turning points characterized by substantial individual variation and complexity. Satisfaction with contact was highest for adult adoptees with ongoing contact with birth families, and supports the importance of openness in adoption across the lifespan. Regardless of type of openness arrangement, adoptees' experiences of openness were framed by their development as emerging adults. Themes of negotiating roles, responsibilities, and relationships were common for emerging adult adoptees as they made decisions about contact and continued relationships with birth families. Thus, emerging adulthood represents a unique developmental period for individuals adopted as infants. While there are numerous experiences characterizing the tasks of emerging adulthood, for adoptees, this transition also includes navigating openness in adoption.

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