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Family Relations
Interdisciplinary Journal of Applied Family Science

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Birth Family Contact Experiences Among Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Adoptive Parents With School-Age Children

Objective: *To examine how lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents navigate openness dynamics with children's birth family across a 5-year period, when children are preschool- to school-age.*
Background: *Few studies regarding birth family contact have included longitudinal data as well as a sample of adoptive parents of varying sexual orientations. Thus, this study used a multiprong theoretical approach grounded in emotional distance regulation, families of choice, and gender theory.*
Method: *A mixed-methods approach with longitudinal quantitative survey and qualitative interview data from 106 lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families was employed to examine the type of contact, its frequency, who was involved, perceptions of this contact, and the extent to which formal agreements exist between adoptive and birth families regarding contact.*
Results: *Findings revealed variations in the status and perceptions of contact across adoptive families. We also discovered that many lesbian and gay adoptive parents reported that birth parents had intentionally selected a same-sex adoptive couple, and birth parents appeared to have distinct reasons for this choice.*
Conclusion: *Although some differences in birth family contact distinguished lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parent families, these families generally appeared more similar than different.*
Implications: *Implications—particularly a need for demonstrated competencies in adoption openness—are discussed for adoption professionals in policy, practice, and legal realms.*

The rate of lesbian and gay (LG) adults adopting children in the United States doubled across the first decade of the millennium (Gates, 2011), and LG adoptive parents have also become more visible in the United States (Pertman & Howard, 2011). Although there is growing literature about adoptive LG parents and their children (e.g., Farr, Forssell, & Patterson, 2010; Pertman & Howard, 2011), little is known about their family dynamics.

Open adoption, defined as any contact or information sharing between birth and adoptive families, has been controversial historically but is increasingly common (Grotevant, 2012). Adoption agencies typically offer an option for open adoption (Siegel & Smith, 2012), and birth parents (often mothers) may select the adoptive

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Key Words: Adoption, birth family contact, lesbian and gay, mixed-methods, openness arrangements, sexual orientation.

parents in private domestic adoptions (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016a). Thus, some birth parents select lesbian or gay adoptive parents, and in these cases, LG adoptive parents have direct contact with their child's birth family; this contact may proceed differently between LG and heterosexual adoptive parents, however, because the two groups tend to have different preferences for openness, among other factors (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016a; Farr & Goldberg, 2015). It is also not clear how many or for what reasons birth parents choose same-sex adoptive parents. Thus, we sought to contribute knowledge about openness dynamics by exploring experiences of birth family contact among LG and heterosexual adoptive parents at two time points: when children were preschool- and school-age. We aimed to go beyond providing only a comparison of same- and different-sex parent families (Vaughan & Rodriguez, 2015) or simply replicating a mostly cross-sectional literature (cf. Farr & Goldberg, 2015). This is in line with recent movement away from the "no differences" doctrine, heteronormative assumptions, and treating heterosexual parent families as the "gold standard" of healthy and normal family life; Stacey & Biblarz, 2001).

Specifically, we explored four main research questions using a concurrent triangulation mixed-methods design, appropriate for analyzing both quantitative survey and qualitative interview data collected concurrently (Creswell, 2013). With survey data, we evaluated (a) whether adoptive parents have contact with birth family postplacement and whether this changes over time or varies by family type and (b) adoptive parents' satisfaction with current contact and whether they desired future contact. With interview data, we investigated (c) the type (e.g., social media, telephone, letters) and frequency of current contact, with whom contact occurs, as well as whether written agreements or contracts guide contact; and (d) among LG adoptive parents, whether birth parents specifically looked for a same-sex couple and what reasons were perceived by adoptive parents to motivate this choice.

We expected substantial individual variation, regardless of family group. This study was largely exploratory in nature because these research questions have not been simultaneously addressed in a sample of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual adoptive parents followed over time. On the basis of previous research with adoptive families, we expected that the status of birth family contact would be more likely to decrease than increase from when children were in preschool to elementary school (Crea & Barth, 2009; Dunbar et al., 2006). We also hypothesized that birth mothers would be the most common birth family member with whom adoptive parents had contact, but the types and frequencies of contact were seen as more exploratory given mixed evidence from other similar studies (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016a; Farr & Goldberg, 2015; Von Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006). We expected that social media would be a commonly reported method of birth family contact, given the level of saturation Internet usage has reached in the United States and other industrialized nations (Fursland, 2010; Perrin & Duggan, 2015), including among LG adoptive parent families (Black, Moyer, & Goldberg, 2016). Written agreements regarding contact are common among adoptive parents who pursue domestic, private, infant adoption (Faulkner & Madden, 2012), so we hypothesized most adoptive parents would report having some sort of formal contact agreement with birth families.

Conceptual Foundations

We employed several distinct, but related, conceptual perspectives to provide the framework for this study. First, the process of emotional distance regulation, which describes the dynamic relationship processes of connection and separation driven by individual differences in comfort level over time, is at the center of contact dynamics between birth and adoptive families (Grotevant, 2009). Of interest here is how sexual minority and heterosexual adoptive parents negotiate contact dynamics with birth families over time via emotional distance regulation processes. For example, it remains unclear whether sexual minority and heterosexual adoptive parents systematically differ in their reports of contact patterns, satisfaction with those contact patterns, or desires for future connection with birth family. Given the absence of heteronormative assumptions inherent to the concept of emotional distance regulation, it is appropriate to apply this framework to LG adoptive parents (Farr & Goldberg, 2015).

Second, among sexual minority communities, the phrase *families of choice* conveys the agency with which LG individuals choose

supportive people for fictive kinship, especially in the absence of support from families of origin (Weston, 1991). LG individuals may be more likely than heterosexual individuals to dismiss heteronormative cultural ideals of families, such as those emphasizing nuclear family bonds or biological relatedness. Indeed, LG parents often describe adoption as their "first-choice" pathway to parenthood and less often report the importance of a biological relationship with children (Farr & Patterson, 2009; Goldberg, Downing, & Richardson, 2009). The families of choice framework (Weston, 1991) indicates that LG parents might also be more receptive to birth family contact than heterosexual parents, given that forming and engaging in nonnuclear and self-defined "families of choice" is common among sexual minorities. Moreover, when birth parents are given the option to select adoptive parents, this also represents a deliberate choice on their part to define family broadly. Thus, the notion of families of choice could help to explain potential differences in experiences of birth family contact among LG and heterosexual adoptive parents.

Third, gender theory suggests that mothers' and fathers' experiences and perspectives of parenthood are shaped by gender; women and men may differentially construct their parenting roles (Connell, 1987; Risman, 2004). In the United States, adoptive (heterosexual) mothers express stronger negative or mixed feelings about birth mother contact than do adoptive fathers (Grotevant, 2000; Sykes, 2001). Mothers are also more likely than fathers to facilitate and maintain birth family contact (Dunbar et al., 2006). Of interest here is whether these gender-related dynamics are unique among heterosexual couples or whether they also apply to LG couples. Moreover, research about birth family contact in the United States has focused on perceptions of adoptive mothers versus fathers (Grotevant, 2000). Thus, with the lens of gender theory, we sought to address contact dynamics among a diverse sample of mothers and fathers (lesbian, gay, and heterosexual), as well as the reported preferences of birth parents with regard to selecting adoptive parents.

Openness Arrangements

During the 1980s and 1990s, the practice of adoption openness became increasingly common in the United States. Today, up to 95% of American agencies with infant adoption programs offer options for openness arrangements (Siegel & Smith, 2012). 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. It may be initiated by birth or adoptive family members, or mediated by a third party (e.g., social worker, adoption agency staff; Grotevant, 2012). Contact varies in the information shared, its frequency, and number of family members involved. Birth mothers, and also birth grandmothers, are most commonly the birth family members with whom adoptive parents have contact across different pathways to adoption (French, Henney, Ayers-Lopez, McRoy, & Grotevant, 2014; Von Korff et al., 2006).

As increasing numbers of Americans use the Internet (Perrin & Duggan, 2015), social media and other networking sites offer additional options for birth family contact (Fursland, 2010). The Internet, including social media, can be accessed via many avenues (e.g., phones, tablets, computers), allowing for contact across geographic distance that may be more affordable than in-person contact (Hertlein, 2012). Social media contact, however, may lead to ambiguities, miscommunication, and challenges with maintaining relationship boundaries (Black et al., 2016; Hertlein, 2012). No research has yet examined the role of social media as related to emotional distance regulation processes in birth family contact, and whether contact via social media has become more prevalent in recent years.

Before an adoption placement, there is often negotiation between adoptive and birth families to determine the nature of contact postplacement (Faulkner & Madden, 2012). The agreement may be a binding contract or a guiding framework (Grotevant, 2012). Agreements may change over time, and through processes of emotional distance regulation, some adoptive families end up with more or less contact than what was initially decided. Regardless, those adoptive families with an agreement have been found to be 4 times more likely to have contact with birth families than

those without an agreement (Faulkner & Madden, 2012). Overall, the influence of written or verbal agreements on patterns of emotional distance regulation related to contact between adoptive and birth families remains largely unknown.

Extant research points to openness as being generally positive with regard to adjustment among members of the adoptive kinship network (i.e., adoptive and birth family members; Grotevant, McRoy, Wrobel, & Ayers-Lopez, 2013). These benefits are likely related to positive adoptive identity, open communication among family members, health and family history information-sharing, and minimizing secrecy about adoption, among other factors (Grotevant et al., 2013). Emotional distance regulation allows members of the adoptive kinship network to determine their comfort level with contact and make modifications when necessary over time (Grotevant, 2009).

Only a few studies, however, have specifically examined adoption openness among LG parent families. Through the lens of gender theory via qualitative interviews, Goldberg, Kinkler, Richardson, and Downing (2011) revealed contrasting feelings about openness among heterosexual and LG parents in the United States. Compared with LG parents, heterosexual parents more often expressed interest in closed adoptions. In comparison, LG parents often reported positive feelings about openness because this allowed for open disclosure of sexual orientation to agency staff and others throughout the adoption process. Also, attitudes about openness varied over time (preplacement to 3–4 months postplacement), with increases, decreases, and maintenance in contact across families; no clear differences in patterns by parental sexual orientation were discernable. Rather, changes in attitudes were attributed to birth parent characteristics and perceptions of the birth parent relationship. Overall, although some participants (regardless of parental sexual orientation) reported challenges with birth parents, most reported satisfying relationships over the two time points (Goldberg et al., 2011).

Among a similar sample of lesbian, gay, and heterosexual parents, Farr and Goldberg (2015) drew from the concept of families of choice to study perspectives of birth family contact among 103 adoptive families across the first year postplacement in the United States. Using questionnaire and interview data, few differences were uncovered by parental sexual orientation. Most reported some birth mother contact (generally by e-mail or phone; visits were least likely), most had legally finalized their adoption, and few described plans to withhold information from children (Farr & Goldberg, 2015). Aligned with expectations about families of choice, Brodzinsky and Goldberg (2016a) discovered that, among families who had completed private, domestic adoptions of children who were between infancy and adolescence in the United States, lesbian parents were more likely to have face-to-face birth family contact than heterosexual parents (with gay fathers between the two). There were no differences among family types—lesbian, gay, heterosexual—however, with regard to whether there was birth family contact at placement (59.7% of families) or postplacement (52.2% of families), and in types of contact. Continued examination of whether and how contact differs among LG and heterosexual parent adoptive families is warranted, particularly the inclusion of longitudinal data from both quantitative and qualitative sources.

Only two studies, to our knowledge, have addressed the topic of birth parents choosing LG adoptive parents. First, in Brodzinsky's (2011) national convenience sample within the United States, most (68.7%) LG parents who had completed private, domestic, infant adoptions reported being chosen by birth parents. Gay couples, more often than lesbian couples, reported being directly chosen, noting that birth mothers wanted to be the child's "only mother" (Brodzinsky, 2011). Moreover, birth families' reactions to adoptive parents' sexual orientation were generally reported as "strongly positive" (73.0%); LG parents who had openly disclosed their sexual orientation described a great deal of ongoing involvement with those birth parents (Brodzinsky, 2011). Second, Goldberg, Moyer, Kinkler, and Richardson (2012) found contrasting results among 84 foster-to-adopt parents in the United States. A few LG parents (five of 60) indicated that adoption agency staff had informed them that the birth parents would have resisted the placement if the adoptive parents' sexual orientation was known to the birth parent. Thus, it remains unclear how many birth parents intentionally choose same-sex parents and for what reasons.

Method

Participants

Participants were drawn from a larger longitudinal adoptive families project (Farr, 2017). Initially, at Wave 1 (W1), 106 two-parent families (27 lesbian, 29 gay, 50 heterosexual couples; $N = 212$ parents and 106 target children) from across the United States participated. All had children 1 to 5 years of age ($M = 3$ years) at W1. Children were generally placed at birth. There were equal numbers of female and male children, and many families had more than one child (including many with more than one adopted child). About 80% of parents were White; the target children were more racially diverse. Close to half of the parent had completed transracial adoptions. Families generally were of high socioeconomic status, and most parents reported having full-time employment (Farr, 2017; Farr et al., 2010).

Families were initially recruited via five cooperating private domestic adoption agencies with options for openness arrangements and several other eligibility criteria: All agencies had to have placed infants with same-sex couples, and all had to be situated in jurisdictions that allowed for both partners to be the legal adoptive parents in the early 2000s (i.e., at the time of participant recruitment). Approximately 20 adoption agencies were originally contacted. Of these, 11 responded; three declined involvement, and five of the eight that agreed met all eligibility criteria. Given concerns about confidentiality, the number of eligible adoptive family participants was generally not available (Farr et al., 2010).

Ninety-four (25 lesbian, 28 gay, 41 heterosexual parent) families are represented in this study at Wave 2 (W2), when the target children ranged in age from 5 to 12 years of age ($M = 8$ years). Data are presented from 180 surveys (46 lesbian, 54 gay, 80 heterosexual parents) and 171 interviews (45 lesbian, 51 gay, 75 heterosexual parents). Missing data were due to incomplete survey responses or nonparticipation in the interview portion of the project.

Materials and Procedure

All 106 families that participated at W1 were recontacted and invited to participate 5 years later at W2. At both waves, families were visited in their homes. Parents worked on surveys (hard copies at W1, online at W2) and at W2, parents participated in an individual interview (separate from their partners) conducted by trained research personnel.

At both waves, parents were asked whether there was birth family contact (response options were *yes* and *no*). Parent surveys at W2 also included two questions about satisfaction with contact and their desire for more or less contact. The first was: "Regardless of whether or not you have contact with your child's birth family, how satisfied are you with the current level of contact?" Response options ranged from *very dissatisfied* (coded as 1) to *very satisfied* (7). The second was: "Regardless of whether you have contact or not with your child's birth family, would you like to have more contact in the future?" Response options were *yes, would like more contact* (1), *no, satisfied with the current level* (2), and *neutral* (3). These two items were adapted from related previous studies of birth family contact among adoptive families who had pursued private, domestic, infant adoption (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2013). Frequency counts, other descriptive data, and chi-square analyses were used (a) to compare status of contact among family types at W1 and W2, (b) to examine satisfaction with contact and (c) desire for future contact at W2, and (c) to investigate the type of contact, with whom contact occurs, and its frequency at W2.

Semistructured parent interviews at W2 focused on openness arrangements with birth family and parent experiences of birth family contact, both past and present. The interview was developed for the larger longitudinal project and adapted from other studies of birth family contact among adoptive families who completed private, domestic, infant adoptions (e.g., Grotevant et al., 2013). Interviews typically took place by phone, using Google chat, or in person, depending on participant preference. Each interview lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes in person and by phone, and online chat session interviews lasted about 2 hours. Despite variable formats that allowed flexibility for participants, interview questions and procedures were the same; rapport was established over the course of personal home visits by the first author across W1 and W2. All audio-recorded interviews were transcribed by trained research assistants. In some cases, interview data were used to reconcile inconsistencies about birth family contact resulting from the survey data.

Interview Coding and Analysis

All interviews were coded by three trained research assistants, who were closely supervised by the first author. Dichotomous (yes–no) responses were discretely coded from interviews with regard to the type of contact (e.g., "Have the adoptive parents ever had social media contact [i.e., Facebook, Instagram, other social networking websites] with any birth family members?") and whether there was any established agreement between adoptive and birth family members regarding contact. Entire interview transcripts were globally coded for birth family members involved in contact (e.g., birth mother, birth father, birth siblings, birth grandparents) and overall frequency of contact: *never/contact has stopped* (1), *rarely (less than yearly; once every few years;* 2), *sometimes (one time to a few times per year;* 3), *regularly (once a month or every 2 months;* 4), and *frequently (a few times a month;* 5).

LG adoptive parent interviews were also specifically discretely coded for yes–no responses to whether birth parents had selected same-sex adoptive parents, as well as globally coded for any themes related to reasons for this choice. We used deductive thematic analysis, involving a comprehensive exploration of reoccurring patterns, to identify and analyze themes from sexual minority adoptive parents' interview responses about whether, and reasons why, birth parents intentionally searched for a same-sex adoptive couple (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first stage of this process involved immersion. The first author and coders carefully read each individual transcription. Next, we engaged in open coding and began to specify emerging codes or categories. Then, to sort the data, we used focused coding to apply our initial codes (Charmaz, 2006). We continued to identify and refine common themes, combining and differentiating them through a winnowing process until we reached consensus on distinct codes. We made subsequent revisions to the coding scheme until the data were all accounted for by our specified categories.

Interrater reliability, which was regularly checked throughout the coding process, was evaluated using two-way mixed, consistency, average-measures intraclass correlation coefficients (ICC; McGraw & Wong, 1996). Excellent reliability was found (Cicchetti, 1994). The ICC was .94 for coding about with whom contact occurred across all birth family members (birth mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, grandparents, aunts/uncles, and cousins), and .89 for coding frequency of contact (all types) across all birth family members. For determining the discrete coding about whether birth parents had selected LG adoptive parents, the ICC was .91. Cohen's kappa was used to calculate reliability among the three trained coders who rated categorical theme data regarding reasons birth parents selected same-sex adoptive parents and was found to be .70, signifying substantial agreement (Landis & Koch, 1977).

Results

Preliminary Analyses

The only demographic difference between participating families relevant to this study is that those who participated at W2 were more likely to have reported W1 birth family contact—86% ($n = 50$) without W1 contact and 96% ($n = 46$) with W1 contact participated at W2, $\chi^2(106) = 5.70$, $p = .017$, $\Phi = .16$ (Farr, 2017). Child age and sex were not associated with contact, satisfaction with contact, desire for more contact, or whether LG parents were selected by birth parents. However, transracial adoption status was associated with contact: Those who had completed transracial adoptions were less likely to have contact ($n = 15$ of 43 families), $\chi^2(94) = 6.26$, $p = .012$, $\Phi = .26$. In addition, LG adoptive parents, who were more likely to have completed transracial adoptions than heterosexual parents (Farr & Patterson, 2009), were more likely to report being chosen by birth parents if the placement was not transracial ($n = 19$ of 25 adoptive parents), $\chi^2(95) = 13.02$, $p = .005$, $\Phi = .37$. Transracial adoptive placements, however, were not relevant to contact satisfaction or desires for more contact. No other parent or family-level demographic variables were statistically associated with contact dynamics.

Status of Birth Family Contact Over Time

At W1, 49 of 106 families reported contact. Lesbian parents were somewhat more likely than gay and heterosexual parents to have birth family contact in these data, but that difference cannot be assumed in the population ($p = .093$). At W2, 50 of 94 families reported contact. Chi-square analysis revealed parental sexual orientation had no statistical bearing on likelihood of contact at

W2. No statistical differences were found with regard to family type among the 59 (of 94) families (63%) who reported contact at one or both time points. Most (80%, $n = 75$) families reported the same birth family contact status (yes–no) at both W1 and W2. Of the remaining families, 11 began having contact with birth family members between W1 and W2, and 8 families had stopped having contact with any birth family members between W1 and W2. Changes in the status of contact between W1 and W2 did not differ by family type. See Table 1 for additional statistical details.

Satisfaction With and Desire for More Birth Family Contact

At W2, survey data were collected on parents' satisfaction with contact and desire for future birth family contact ($N = 180$ parents). Analysis of variance results indicated parents had statistically similar levels of satisfaction with contact across family types. Furthermore, satisfaction levels did not statistically differ between families who had and did not have contact at W2. However, lesbian parents reported more desire for future contact than did gay and heterosexual parents. This effect was not driven by gender, given that no statistical differences were uncovered among lesbian women, gay men, heterosexual women, and heterosexual men. Interview transcripts revealed that one common reason parents hoped for more contact in the future was to access health history records or to know more birth family details when their children asked questions about the birth family. See Table 1 for additional statistical details.

Type, Frequency, and With Whom Contact Occurs

At W2, individual parent interviews revealed additional information about birth family contact dynamics. Among those families who ever reported contact ($n = 59$), interviews were available from 56 of them, comprising 107 parents; although both parents were interviewed from most families, only one parent interview was available for some. Moreover, individual parents within the same family could report different aspects of contact. Thus, data analyses represent individual interviews among those parents who reported having birth family contact. Refer to Table 1 for full statistical results throughout this section.

Parents were asked with whom in the birth family they have had contact. Among those adoptive parents who reported in W2 interviews ever having reciprocal contact with the birth family ($n = 107$), contact was most commonly reported with birth mothers. Contact with other birth family members was also reported by adoptive parents with birth grandparents, birth fathers, birth siblings, birth aunts or uncles, and birth cousins, but contact with these birth family members was less common than with the birth mother. Chi-square analyses revealed that gay fathers were more likely than lesbian and heterosexual parents to have contact with birth fathers. No differences were found by family type with regard to any other birth family members with whom adoptive parents had contact.

Chi-square analyses revealed some statistical differences in type of contact by parental sexual orientation. Although the majority in each family type had met their child's birth family in person, heterosexual parent families were more likely than LG parent families to have done so. Lesbian mothers were more likely than gay or heterosexual parents to have reported receiving letters from their child's birth family. Other forms of contact, including receiving phone calls or texts, photographs, e-mails, gifts, or connecting via social media did not differ by family type. For those adoptive parents who reported contact at W2, the frequency of contact with birth family members was also quite variable. Most commonly, contact occurred "rarely" (defined as less than yearly/every few years) across different types of contact, and no families reported "frequent" contact (more than once a month). No differences were found in overall frequency of contact as a function of parental sexual orientation.

More than 80% of adoptive parents reported that they had a written or verbal agreement regarding birth family contact, and the likelihood of having one did not differ by family type. Interview responses also indicated that most adoptive parents were following their agreements, which were commonly facilitated through the adoption agencies and involved sending annual or semiannual letters, photographs, or other updates to the birth family. Furthermore, the frequency of contact did not differ between adoptive parents who reported an agreement and those who did not.

Virtually all adoptive parents reported having multiple types of contact with the birth family. Meetings were the most commonly reported

Table 1. *Comparisons of Contact Dynamics Across Lesbian, Gay, and Heterosexual Parent Families Across Two Waves of Data Collection*

	Total families		Lesbian		Gay		Heterosexual					
Variable	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	*n*	%	χ^2	*df*	*p*	Φ
Contact status												
Contact status, W1	49	46.2	17	63.0	10	34.5	22	44.0	4.75	106	.093	.21
Contact status, W2	50	53.2	15	60.0	14	50.0	21	51.2	0.64	94	.725	.08
Contact ever, W1/W2	59	62.8	18	72.0	15	53.6	26	63.4	1.93	94	.381	.14
Contact changes									4.07	94	.397	.21
No change, W1 to W2	75	79.8	20	80.0	24	85.7	31	75.6	—		—	—
Increased, W1 to W2	11	11.7	2	8.0	4	14.3	5	12.2	—		—	—
Decreased, W1 to W2	8	8.5	3	12.0	0	0.0	5	12.2	—		—	—
Contact, W2												
Satisfaction[a]	5.1	1.9	5.3	1.8	5.1	1.7	4.9	2.0	0.51	2, 179	.603	—
Future contact desire	69	38.0	22	48.0	15	28.0	32	40.0	18.11	180	.006	.32
With whom?												
Birth mothers	94	87.9	29	90.6	23	85.2	42	87.5	*0.42*	107	.812	.06
Birth fathers	35	32.7	9	21.9	14	51.9	14	29.2	6.48	107	.039	.25
Birth grandparents	511	47.7	18	56.3	14	51.9	19	39.6	2.39	107	.302	.15
Birth siblings	32	29.9	6	18.8	10	37.0	16	33.3	2.82	107	.244	.16
Birth aunts/uncles	24	24.0	8	27.6	6	24.0	10	21.7	0.33	107	.846	.06
Birth cousins	8	8.2	4	13.8	1	4.0	3	6.8	1.91	107	.385	.14
Types												
In-person	88	82.2	22	68.8	20	74.1	46	95.8	11.29	107	.004	.33
Phone (calls/texts)	44	41.1	17	53.1	11	40.7	16	33.3	3.11	107	.211	.17
E-mail	44	41.4	10	31.3	10	37.0	24	54.5	3.04	107	.219	.17
Letters	41	38.3	19	59.4	10	37.0	12	25.0	9.64	107	.008	.30
Social media	45	42.1	14	43.8	12	44.4	19	39.6	0.22	107	.895	.05
Photos	59	55.1	19	59.4	13	48.1	27	56.3	0.79	107	.674	.09
Gifts	26	24.3	7	21.9	6	22.2	13	27.1	0.37	107	.832	.06
Frequency									4.01	107	.675	.19
Never/stopped	12	11.2	3	9.4	3	11.1	6	12.5	—		—	—
Rarely (less than yearly)	66	61.7	22	68.8	15	55.6	29	60.4	—		—	—
Sometimes (a few/year)	27	25.2	7	21.9	9	33.3	11	22.9	—		—	—
Regularly (monthly)	2	1.9	0	0.0	0	0.0	2	4.2	—		—	—
Formal agreements	85	80.4	26	81.3	20	74.1	40	83.3	3.22	107	.522	.17

Note. Families represented reflect $N = 106$ (W1), $N = 94$ (W2). Interview data at W2 represent responses coded from 107 parent interviews.

[a]Differences by satisfaction were tested with an analysis of variance; parameters represent *n, %*, and χ^2 columns are *M, SD,* and *F,* respectively.

type of contact with birth family members; 83% of adoptive parents with available interview data reported meetings with any birth family member. Other types of contact reported included letters or greeting cards, phone, e-mails, gifts, pictures, and social media (e.g., Facebook); after in-person meetings, receiving pictures from the birth family was the next most common form of contact reported. See Table 2 for the frequency of each type of contact with each birth family member.

Did Birth Parents Select a Same-Sex Adoptive Couple?

Interview data on whether the birth parents selected a same-sex couple were available from 95 LG adoptive parents from 50 families (44 lesbian mothers from 24 families and 51 gay fathers from 26 families). Although many parents were nested within couples, individual reports were examined separately to include as many perspectives as possible about contact

Table 2. *Adoptive Parents Ever Having Birth Family Contact by Type of Contact and With Whom* (N = *107)*

	Total		Birth family member (%)						
Variable	*n*	%	Mother	Father	Grandparent	Sister	Brother	Aunt/uncle	Cousin
Meetings	89	83	81	28	45	17	23	24	6
E-mail	45	42	37	11	9	1	5	1	0
Letters or cards	41	38	33	11	10	1	0	1	0
Social media	46	43	42	7	13	1	2	9	1
Pictures	60	56	53	14	19	2	3	3	2
Phone	45	42	37	1	13	0	2	2	0
Gifts	27	25	20	6	10	1	3	2	0

from adoptive parents. Thematic analysis resulted in four categories related to whether birth parents had specifically searched for a same-sex couple: yes, no, open to/ultimately did select, and don't know/not enough information. The *open to/ultimately did select* theme captured adoptive parents' responses that indicated the birth parents had not specifically been searching for same-sex couples, but were open to the possibility and ultimately did choose a same-sex couple as the adoptive parents. If no explanation was given or if adoptive parents did not have any information about the birth parents' choice, the response was classified as *don't know/not enough information*.

Twenty-five LG parents (26%) reported that birth parents had intentionally sought a same-sex couple to place their child. An additional 38 LG parents (40%) stated that birth parents were open to this option and ultimately did select a same-sex couple. Slightly less than one-third (31%, $n = 29$) of LG parents indicated that birth parents had not specifically sought or directly selected a same-sex couple. The remaining three (3%) did not know what had been involved in birth parents' decision-making process. No statistical differences were found between the responses of lesbian and gay parent families in their responses to this question. One difference, however, was that LG parents who reported birth parents had specifically sought a same-sex couple were more likely to have W2 contact ($n = 20$ of 25) than those who stated birth parents had not specifically sought a same-sex couple ($n = 5$ of 29), $\chi^2(95) = 21.49$, $p < .001$, $\Phi = .48$.

Reasons Birth Parents Selected a Same-Sex Couple

One gay father, Steve (all names are pseudonyms), stated that the adoption agency informed him and his partner that birth parents never request same-sex parents (apparently, it had never happened at that particular agency), but "we applied and a few weeks later [a representative of the agency] said 'You wouldn't believe it: Somebody actually asked for a same-sex couple.'" Although 95 LG parents reported not knowing or not being directly chosen as a same-sex couple (or the reasons for their selection were not discernable from the information provided in response to the yes/no question in the interview), 32 parents (34%) were able to describe reasons behind the birth parents' choice. Key among their perceptions of the reasons birth parents sought and ultimately selected a same-sex couple were a *personal connection* with a sexual minority (e.g., having a gay uncle); factors centered on a birth parent's personal *identity*, such as being a sexual minority or wanting to be the "only mother," and a perception on the part of birth parents that LG parents were a better choice (e.g., because they embody diversity, are more tolerant, are less likely to have others choose them).

There were no statistical differences between lesbian and gay parents in the reasons provided, $\chi^2(95) = 3.78$, $p = .581$, $\Phi = .20$. Among 11 LG parents (12%; three lesbian mothers, eight gay fathers), birth parents were reported to have chosen a same-sex couple on the basis of personal connections to other sexual minority people. John said their birth mother's "best friend was gay and she decided that she wanted to give a gay couple the opportunity to adopt a child." Dan reported that their child's birth mother was inspired by her gay uncle:

> [The birth mother] said, "I had one person in my life who did not abuse me for my body or drugs, and that was my gay uncle." … One of his greatest regrets—I believe he died of AIDS—was that he

> was not [going to be] alive to see her have a child so he could help her raise the child, so she felt she wanted to give her child to a gay couple as a tribute to her uncle.

Another personal connection rationale was captured by a gay father, Rob, who described the birth parents' selection as follows:

> [The birth parents] took the finalist "books" to a family Thanksgiving and passed them around the table. The larger family all voted and it turned out our family was the unanimous pick. That group—an important part of the larger birth family—included a gay uncle and his life partner.

Four LG parents (4%; three lesbian mothers, one gay father) described that birth parents had selected them because of aspects of identity. Kate reported that the birth mother "identified as a lesbian, and so she wanted a lesbian family for her baby." Eric described how the birth mother perceived selecting a male same-sex couple as integral to her own identity as a mother: "She told us that she wanted two men because she wanted to be the only mother in his life." Among 12 LG parents (13%; seven lesbian, five gay parents), birth parents made the choice as a result of perceptions that LG parents would be "better" or were "more deserving" as parents. These reasons seemed to be linked with humanitarian or altruistic motivations or with assumed qualities of same-sex parents. Monica stated that the birth mother believed "she would be more helpful that way [because] straight couples had a better chance [to adopt] than we did," and her partner Debbie said the birth parents "assumed that a same-sex couple would be more tolerant to different people and they'd be more open-minded. The idea of having adoptive parents that were open-minded and tolerant of differences appealed to them." Finally, five LG parents (5%; two lesbian, three gay parents) provided more than one of these reasons for why birth parents had chosen a same-sex couple.

Discussion

Our results indicated that, regardless of parental sexual orientation, contact with birth family was the norm, rather than the exception. Most adoptive parents had some form of contact postplacement and were satisfied with it, which is consistent with what has been found in similar samples (Brodzinsky, 2011; Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016a; Vandivere, Malm, & Radel, 2009). Aligned with other research (Grotevant et al., 2013), the status of contact over time, as well as who was involved in current contact, and its type and frequency, showed considerable variability. Our findings are among the first, however, to explore how formal agreements may be associated with patterns of birth family contact as well as to demonstrate that same-sex adoptive parents may be intentionally selected by birth parents for a variety of specific reasons.

Over approximately 5 years, most families reported a stable pattern of contact (or noncontact) with the birth family contact, which is consistent with existing research on heterosexual adoptive parents and extends the findings to a sample more diverse in parental sexual orientation (e.g., Crea & Barth, 2009; Farr, Flood, & Grotevant, 2016). Interestingly, among the minority of families who had experienced changes, more parents reported an increase rather than a decrease in contact with birth parents. The status of contact did not differ by parental sexual orientation when children were in middle childhood, but lesbian mothers had reported more contact when children were preschool-age. Thus, for some lesbian parent families, contact decreased over time. These results are somewhat in contrast to those of Brodzinsky and Goldberg (2016a), whose findings may reflect a larger sample of families with children representing a wider age range (infancy to adolescence) and thus included different assessments of time between placement and post-placement. This difference in findings could potentially be explained by variable contact dynamics over time and across children's developmental stages (Grotevant et al., 2013).

The majority of parents reported feeling satisfied with birth family contact when children were school-age, which aligns with other research, again primarily among heterosexual adoptive parents (Siegel & Smith, 2012). Satisfaction was not contingent on having current contact, nor did it differ by parental sexual orientation, which is also consistent with the findings of other studies (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016a; Farr & Goldberg, 2015). Previous research has suggested that adoptive families with contact report greater satisfaction (Farr & Goldberg, 2015; Farr, Grant-Marsney, Musante, Grotevant, & Wrobel, 2014), but we did not find this pattern. This discrepancy could be explained by variations in contact and feelings

about it over time, as predicted by the emotional distance regulation framework (Grotevant, 2009).

Lesbian mothers in particular desired more birth family contact. They had apparently experienced more contact when children were preschool-age than when the children were school-age, so their desire for more contact may indicate that they wanted to return to earlier levels of contact or that relatively high initial expectations for contact were increasing with time. Lesbian mothers were also more likely than gay or heterosexual parents to report having received letters from birth family, which is consistent with Brodzinsky and Goldberg's (2016a) findings, so it may be that lesbian adoptive parents would like to have more real-time interaction than that provided by letters. Among all parents, contact with birth mothers was most common; many also reported contact with birth grandparents, fathers, and siblings. Gay fathers were more likely to have contact with birth fathers than were lesbian and heterosexual parents; otherwise, few differences emerged by parental sexual orientation. Together, these findings reflect emotional distance regulation in that contact is a dynamic process that ebbs and flows over time, characterized by establishing boundaries and managing intimacy across relationships in the adoptive kinship network (Grotevant, 2009). The findings may also reflect gender socialization focusing on specific types of relational connections (Risman, 2004), and Weston's (1991) families of choice theory, both of which could influence adoptive parents to be attuned in particular ways to connections with the birth family.

Meetings were the most common type of contact, similar to Brodzinsky and Goldberg's (2016a) results, but LG parents were less likely than their heterosexual counterparts to have met their child's birth family in person; this latter result contrasts somewhat with earlier research (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016a; Farr & Goldberg, 2015). Several factors could explain this difference, such as transracial adoptive status, geographic distance, interpersonal or socioemotional dynamics, or other demographic considerations not examined here, as well as potential differences in how participants were asked about contact or how they interpreted contact.

Even though in-person meetings were less common among LG versus heterosexual parent families, having any form of contact with birth family was equally typical among all family types, which is aligned with Brodzinsky and Goldberg's (2016a) findings. Thus, having other forms of contact (e.g., via phone, photographs, e-mails) may feature more prominently than having in-person meetings for LG adoptive parents, which has been supported by research with similar samples (Farr & Goldberg, 2015). Although not the most common form of contact, 42% of adoptive parents reported using social media to connect with birth family, which is more than double the number of adoptive parents (19%) that Black et al. (2016) found with similarly aged children adopted through a variety of pathways. Overall, social media use was as common as several other types of contact (e.g., e-mail, phone), which is not surprising given known patterns of connection between adoptive and birth families (Black et al., 2016; Fursland, 2010).

Across all family types and all types of contact, adoptive parents were equally likely to have infrequent contact over time; most reported contact with birth family to be about once a year or every few years. Some adoptive parents reported contact more often—a few times a year or even monthly—and others reported that earlier contact had stopped. Overall, our findings support the broader adoption openness literature by highlighting how the nature of contact is complex and varied, with different family members involved, different forms of communication and connection, and different frequencies of contact (Grotevant, 2012).

It was common for adoptive parents to have a written or verbal agreement about birth family contact, consistent with earlier research on heterosexual adoptive parents (Faulkner & Madden, 2012). In contrast to Faulkner and Madden's findings, however, the frequency of contact did not differ among adoptive parents with (vs. without) an agreement. Although state laws concerning the enforceability of written contact contracts vary by state (Grotevant, 2012), adoptive families without such agreements are not necessarily precluded from having birth family contact.

Our findings contribute to the developing family systems literature on adoptive families with sexual minority parents by indicating that many birth parents do intentionally select same-sex adoptive couples. Our study is among the first to address this question (along with Brodzinsky, 2011; and Goldberg et al., 2012).

These findings indicate that birth parents often play a direct role in selecting prospective adoptive parents in private infant adoptions in the United States (Siegel & Smith, 2012) and that this phenomenon is no less common when prospective adoptive parents are sexual minorities. Moreover, when birth parents had intentionally sought a same-sex couple, those LG parents were more likely to have birth family contact at W2. This may be the product of disclosure and openness about sexual orientation during the joint decision-making process among birth and adoptive families when making placement and adoption decisions (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016b). Furthermore, our conceptual framework concerning "families of choice" may operate not only for sexual minority individuals but also birth parents who place children with LG parents.

LG adoptive parents perceived various reasons that birth parents chose to place their child with a same-sex couple. Birth parents often seemed motivated by aspects of personal identity or relationships, but a few also identified reasons specific to same-sex couples, such as valuing diversity and the prospect of having open-minded parents for their children. These findings are consistent to those of Brodzinsky (2011) and add evidence for gender theory and the "families of choice" perspective for understanding birth parents' choices. Collectively, these results challenge stereotypes about birth parents' choice of prospective adoptive parents; when given the opportunity to place their child with an "ideal" adoptive family, many birth parents did not select a heterosexual couple but rather had specific reasons for choosing lesbian mothers or gay fathers to parent their child.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Although there are several strengths to our study, it is not without limitations. Parents were typically nested within couples, which limits overall variability and sample size. Beyond including larger samples, future research could improve on our results by directly sampling birth parents and adoption agency staff, as well as extending the number of data collection points across children's development. Our findings represent adoptive families with school-age children, so exploring contact dynamics as children become adolescents and adults would extend knowledge of whether and how birth family communication continues as the children develop the ability to both directly participate in and even direct the communication themselves. In other words, including adopted children's perspectives about birth family contact is important for future research. Openness arrangements should also be examined among sexual minority and heterosexual parents who have adopted via other pathways, such as public child welfare adoptions or international adoptions, given that our sample only represents adoptive parents who formed their families through private domestic infant adoption. This pathway to adoption is unique in that birth and adoptive parents often work jointly with adoption professionals in making adoptive placement decisions (Brodzinsky, 2011). In general, more diverse adoptive family samples, in terms of race, ethnicity, family structure, and socioeconomic status, should be included in research about birth family contact. To what extent, and how, contact may be associated with other child or family outcomes is another direction for future research.

Implications for Practice

Our findings provide information about openness dynamics that could be useful to current and prospective adoptive families and all those who work with them. Given trends toward greater openness in adoption, as well as increasing number of LG parents adopting children (Gates, 2011; Siegel & Smith, 2012), it is imperative that adoption professionals have information to guide placement and contact decisions among adoptive and birth family members throughout all phases of adoption process. Given that transracial adoptive families were less likely to have contact and that LG adoptive parents were more likely than heterosexual parents to have adopted across race (Farr et al., 2010), adoption practitioners should be prepared to discuss intersections of race and sexual orientation with prospective and current LG adoptive parents with regard to contact dynamics.

Our findings indicate that LG adoptive parents were less likely than heterosexual adoptive parents to have ever met the birth family, and lesbian mothers in particular desired more birth family contact in the future. Adoption professionals might help their LG clients to identify possible barriers to and facilitators of contact with birth family before the adoptive placement, as well as to guide decisions about

information sharing and successfully maintaining healthy relationships with birth family postplacement. Adoption professionals should understand that many sexual minority adoptive parents, as well as birth parents, are open to ongoing contact with each other. Thus, it is imperative that professionals probe and support receptivity to open disclosure and contact throughout the adoption process with both birth and adoptive parents (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016b).

Especially for LG adoptive parents, who often face discrimination and stigma across the adoption process (Brodzinsky, 2011; Kinkler & Goldberg, 2011), it is imperative that adoption professionals are skilled and competent in providing services that are affirmative of their sexual minority clients. For instance, adoption professionals should be knowledgeable about research regarding sexual minority parent families, openness in adoption, and the roles of disclosure and discrimination that face sexual minority individuals daily. Given that LG adoptive parents were more likely than not to have been specifically chosen by the birth parents, in conjunction with the research presented here and elsewhere that highlights strengths of LG adoptive parents, emphasis should be placed on providing birth parents a diverse array of potential adoptive candidates.

Author Note

This research was supported by funding from the American Psychological Foundation's Wayne F. Placek Grant awarded to Rachel H. Farr (Wave 2). The first author was also supported by funds from the Rudd Family Foundation Chair in Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the Jessie Bernard Outstanding Research Proposal from a Feminist Perspective Award from the National Council on Family Relations. The second author received funding from the Center for Research on Families at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. We thank the members of our research team who have contributed to the design and execution of the overall project, particularly our coding teams at the University of Massachusetts Amherst and the University of Kentucky. We are also grateful to all the adoptive families who generously shared their experiences with us and have made this research possible. An earlier version of this manuscript was presented at the annual conference for the National Council on Family Relations in November 2015.

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