

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Birth relatives' perspectives about same-gender parent adoptive family placements

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Abstract

Little research exists about the experiences of birth relatives connected to lesbian and gay (LG) parent adoptive families. Using mixed methods, we examined the perspectives of birth relatives and other adoption triad members (adoptive parents, adoptees). First, from interviews with birth relatives ($N = 62$) in the USA, we explored openness to same-gender parent adoptive placements. Next, we conducted a thematic analysis from interviews with a subsample ($n = 24$) whose child was placed with LG adoptive parents about why LG parents were chosen. Finally, eight (of these 24) were connected to seven LG adoptive parent families who were participants in a larger study. Among these adoption triads, we investigated how members described their contact experiences. Results showed that most birth relatives were open to placements with same-gender couples, and those who had done so often made this decision intentionally for various specific reasons. Birth relatives tended to be satisfied with adoptive family contact and desired more in the future. Adoption triad members generally reported warm feelings toward each other and commitments to continued contact. These findings provide insight about diverse conceptualizations of kinship, how contact can be effectively navigated across complex family relationships, and implications for adoption practice and policy.

KEYWORDS

adoption openness, adoption triad, birth family, lesbian and gay, same-gender parents

INTRODUCTION

Few studies have examined birth relatives' perspectives about connections to adoptive families with whom their child was placed (Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008; Grotevant et al., 2013; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015; Madden et al., 2016, 2017; March, 2014; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019). Existing research also focuses more on birth mothers than fathers, grandmothers, or other birth relatives (e.g., Ge et al., 2008); even less exists about relationships between birth families and adoptive families with same-gender parents (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Farr et al., 2018; Goldberg, 2019). Thus, we investigated if birth relatives (inclusive of all birth family members) in the USA were open to adoptive placements with same-gender couples, and reasons for doing so if their child was placed with same-gender parents. Among a subsample, we also explored experiences of contact among birth parents¹ and relatives, same-gender adoptive parents, and their adopted children (i.e., the adoption triad; Nelson, 2020). Our study may be the first to do so across triads with same-gender adoptive parents.

Adoption openness

Openness arrangements exist on a continuum ranging from no contact or sharing of identifying information (i.e., closed or confidential adoption) to full disclosure of identifying information or direct contact between birth and adoptive families (i.e., open adoption; Farr & Grotevant, 2019; Grotevant, 2020). Over the last 30 years, open adoptions have gained momentum in the USA and become the norm in adoption practice (Nelson, 2020). Birth parents, particularly mothers, who placed a child a generation ago often had markedly different experiences in selecting adoptive parents as well as prospects of ongoing contact or information sharing. Contemporary practice in open adoption typically allows birth parents to have some agency in choosing the adoptive family with whom their child is placed (Henney et al., 2003; Siegel & Smith, 2012), at least in the context of voluntary² relinquishment of parental rights. Indeed, many birth relatives involved in private domestic adoptive placements in the USA today do have a substantial direct role in selecting adoptive parents (e.g., reviewing adoptive candidate profiles; having meetings or phone calls with prospective parents; Farr & Grotevant, 2019).

Openness arrangements vary in contact type, amount, and who is involved over the adoption life course, yet aspects of clear communication and expectations among birth and adoptive families appear to contribute to satisfaction (Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008; Grotevant, 2009; Grotevant et al., 2019; Madden et al., 2016, 2017). Research has consistently pointed to the benefits of contact satisfaction among triad members, such as fewer externalizing problems among adoptees and lower levels of grief among birth mothers (Farr et al., 2018; Grotevant, 2020; Grotevant et al., 2013; Henney et al., 2007; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Same-gender parent adoption

Same-gender parenting has historically been, and continues to be, controversial in the USA (Farr & Goldberg, 2018). Despite debate, children of same-gender couples have

¹Some prefer the terms, "first mother," "first father," and "first parent." For the context of this paper, we use the terms birth mother, birth father, and birth parent, consistent with existing research (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

²The phrasing of "voluntary" may be a misnomer, as power structures that exist within adoption systems place birth family members at a disadvantage must be acknowledged. Many birth parents, particularly mothers, describe feeling pressured into their placement choices (Farr & Grotevant, 2019).

similar outcomes to those with different-gender parents across developmental domains (e.g., cognitive, social, emotional) and stages (e.g., childhood, adolescence, adulthood; Patterson, 2017). Moreover, rates of same-gender couples adopting over the last quarter-century have increased substantially (Farr et al., 2020). Indeed, adoption is a far more frequent pathway to parenthood for same-gender couples than different-gender couples (Goldberg & Conron, 2018). Relatedly, some same-gender couples report less desire for biologically related children and appear less likely to attempt having biologically related children than different-gender couples (Farr et al., 2020). Many lesbian and gay (LG) people report adoption as a preferred route to parenthood, whereas different-gender couples often pursue adoption after experiencing infertility (Farr et al., 2020). This adoption preference among same-gender couples may be due to a lesser emphasis on heteronormative or “traditional” family values (Farr et al., 2018).

Beyond pursuing adoption as a “first-choice” pathway to parenthood (Farr et al., 2020; Goldberg, 2012), same-gender adoptive parents may be more likely than different-gender adoptive parents to desire or maintain contact with their child's birth relatives (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2011). Moreover, some same-gender adoptive parents have reported that birth parents intentionally sought a same-gender parent adoptive family with whom to place their child (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Farr et al., 2018). Some reasons adoptive parents provided for why birth parents chose them included desires for diversity or having personal connections to others who are sexual minorities (Farr et al., 2018). In contrast, other research with LG adoptive parents has indicated that birth families may feel hesitant to place their child with same-gender parents, given discomfort with minority sexual orientations (Downs & James, 2006). No research to our knowledge has explored birth relatives' perspectives on why they chose same-gender adoptive parents. We sought to fill this gap, given implications for future research and best practices with contemporary birth and adoptive families.

Conceptual frameworks

Families of choice

The term “families of choice” describes the tendency of many sexual minority individuals to seek and receive social support from friends and community members—often because of rejection from their families (Weston, 1991). Families of choice have also been applied as a conceptual framework to explore family formation and contact dynamics among adoptive parents in relation to birth families (Farr et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2011). As possible consequences of ostracism or estrangement from families of origin due to stigma toward birth parents as well as sexual minority people, respectively (Farr et al., 2018; Madden et al., 2017; Siegel & Smith, 2012; Weston, 1991), birth parents may experience agency in *choosing* adoptive parents for their child, while same-gender couples may do so through *choosing* contact with their child's birth relatives. In this way, birth and adoptive families may choose “new” families. Here, we used a families of choice framework to guide analyses exploring birth relatives' reasons for selecting, and their perceptions of contact with, same-gender parent adoptive families.

Emotional distance regulation

Emotional distance regulation describes processes of managing comfort in individual relationships within family systems through interactions over time (Grotevant, 2009, 2020). This conceptual framework has been used in adoption research to understand relationship and

contact dynamics among birth and adoptive families (including those with LG parents; Farr et al., 2018, Grotevant et al., 2013, 2019). Pre-placement, birth parents consider the family with whom their child will grow up and what their role will be in their child's life. Similarly, adoptive parents contemplate their future family, including desires and expectations about their children (and their birth families). Emotional distance regulation relates to the concept of families of choice, as birth and adoptive family members may choose aspects of family structure and relationship dynamics. Concepts of families of choice and emotional distance regulation may intertwine when greater comfort in birth and adoptive family relationships is built from perceived shared experiences, such as stigma about LG identity, adoption, or birth parenthood (Farr et al., 2018; Madden et al., 2017; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Current study

Our primary objectives were to explore, through open- and closed-ended responses, why birth relatives selected same-gender parent adoptive families and how these families perceive contact with one another. Using interview and survey data, we sought to extend previous work in related areas with LG adoptive parents (Farr et al., 2018; Goldberg et al., 2011), and with birth mothers connected to heterosexual parent adoptive families (e.g., Ayers-Lopez et al., 2008; Madden et al., 2016, 2017; Wyman Battalen et al., 2019). First, although our sample of birth relatives was predominantly birth mothers, we were interested in including the perspectives of birth grandmothers, birth fathers, and other relatives, given research indicating the important and commonplace role of these family members in birth mothers' pregnancy and placement experiences (Ge et al., 2008; Madden et al., 2017). Second, we aimed to include birth relatives who placed children recently and many years ago to represent a diversity of experiences related to time since placement (Madden et al., 2016, 2017). Third, we sought to understand birth relatives' satisfaction with contact, particularly by comparing data between a subsample of birth relatives and the LG adoptive families to whom they were connected. We had three research questions, organized in Table 1 with respective (sub)samples and measures:

1. Do birth relatives describe openness to placement with same-gender parent adoptive families? Why (not)? (Was length of time since placement perceived to play a role, given changes in adoption practice and societal attitudes in recent decades?)
2. Among birth relatives connected to same-gender parent adoptive families, what reasons did they describe for choosing these families?
3. Do birth relatives report satisfaction with current contact with adoptive families? Among adoption triads in contact, how do birth relatives, LG adoptive parents and their children feel about each other?

METHOD

Participants

Participants come from two larger USA-based studies, with the primary one about birth relatives' experiences of openness in adoption. The other study from which we drew data is about LG and heterosexual parents and their adopted children (i.e., the Contemporary Adoptive Families Study [CAFS], an ongoing longitudinal study; Farr, 2017). These studies are largely separate (i.e., they were planned at different times with separate research goals), including distinct samples and materials. There is some overlap because CAFS families were asked to

TABLE 1 Research questions (RQ), associated samples, and relevant measures

RQ 1.	Do birth relatives describe openness to placement with same-gender parent adoptive families? Why (not)? (was length of time since placement perceived to play a role, given changes in adoption practice and societal attitudes in recent decades?)
Sample	62 birth relatives in the U.S.
Measures	<i>Openness to LG adoptive parent placement</i> : birth relative interviews coded yes/no
RQ 2.	Among birth relatives connected to same-gender parent adoptive families, what reasons did they describe for choosing these families?
Subsample	24 birth relatives whose child was placed with LG adoptive parents
Measures	<i>How LG adoptive parents were selected</i> : deductive thematic analysis of birth relative interviews
RQ 3.	Do birth relatives report satisfaction with current contact with adoptive families? Among adoption triads in contact, how do birth relatives, LG adoptive parents and their children feel about each other?
Sample	62 birth relatives; 7 adoption triads ($N = 29$; $n = 8$ birth relatives, $n = 14$ LG adoptive parents, $n = 7$ adopted children)
Measures	<i>Satisfaction with current contact</i> : 1–7 scale survey responses (birth relatives, adoptive parents) <i>Future contact</i> : categorical survey responses (birth relatives, adoptive parents); children's interviews coded yes/no <i>Feelings about adoption triad members</i> : 1–5 rating scale for feelings about adoptive families coded from birth relatives' interviews; feelings about birth relatives coded from adoptive parents' and children's interviews

forward a new study invitation to birth relatives with whom they had contact. Some materials (i.e., interview and survey questions) were similar across studies. This offered an opportunity to compare responses from birth and adoptive families who were in contact (i.e., research question three). Data collection with birth relatives occurred between 2017–2019, including a subsample connected to CAFS families. CAFS data were collected in 2013–2014 (i.e., Wave 2 or W2); children were in middle childhood. Birth and adoptive families are geographically diverse and live across the USA.

Birth relatives ($N = 62$)—51 birth mothers, five grandmothers (three paternal, two maternal), two fathers, two aunts (one maternal, one paternal) and two sisters—completed a full interview. They averaged 39 years old ($M = 38.87$; $SD = 13.85$) and had a median annual total household income of \$64,500. Placements generally occurred at birth or within several months thereafter. Time since placement varied widely, ranging from pregnant ($n = 1$) to over 50 years ago ($M = 15.57$; $SD = 15.51$). Birth relatives identified as white (83.6%), Multiracial/Multiethnic (8.2%), or Latino/Hispanic (4.9%). Eight birth relatives (four mothers, one father, one maternal aunt, and two maternal grandmothers) were connected to seven CAFS same-gender parent adoptive families. The maternal birth aunt and one maternal birth grandmother are connected to the same CAFS family. Especially in the few instances where birth relative participants were biologically related, efforts to maintain confidentiality were of utmost importance. Similarly, no information about birth family participants was shared with CAFS adoptive families.

Contemporary Adoptive Families Study participants represented seven families, including seven children and 14 parents (eight lesbian mothers, four couples; six gay fathers, three couples). CAFS adoptive parents are similar demographically to others who complete private infant adoptions in the USA—predominantly white, educated, and affluent (Farr & Grotevant, 2019). Adoptive parents generally identified as white, were in their mid-40s, had attended college, and had an annual household income of \$272,000. Children (girls: $n = 3$) were

more racially diverse than parents (Multiracial: $n = 2$; white: $n = 5$) and averaged 7.5 years old ($SD = 1.27$).

Procedure

Participant recruitment

Ten birth relatives were recruited through their connections to CAFS participants, who were originally recruited from five domestic private adoption agencies across the USA. These agencies offered options for openness and all parents had completed infant adoptions. The second author emailed CAFS adoptive parents and asked them to forward a study invitation to child's birth relatives.

Other birth family participants were recruited through adoption agencies, birth parent support groups, online listservs, and snowball sampling. Research assistants compiled a comprehensive list of organizations (available upon request), who the second author emailed with a study description and recruitment invitation that could be forwarded to prospective participants. Any birth relative (over age 18) of a child placed for adoption in the USA was eligible to participate. One birth mother was recruited through the Transition to Adoptive Parenthood Project (TAPP; Goldberg et al., 2011), which is also a longitudinal study examining LG and heterosexual adoptive parent families. The second author forwarded a study invitation to the TAPP study director, which was then emailed to TAPP adoptive families and forwarded to birth relatives (if relevant).

Data collection

At CAFS W2, adoptive parents and children were visited at home. They completed online Qualtrics surveys including information about demographics and adjustment. To lend flexibility to parent participants, semi-structured interviews were conducted via phone, online chat, or in-person with trained graduate students. In-person and phone interviews with parents lasted 30–45 min, and online chats lasted 2 h (given longer time for typing). In-person interviews took place at home with adopted children. These were shorter, given accommodations for age and attention span, and lasted 20–30 min. Data collection from birth relatives occurred as a separate project several years later. Demographic and adjustment assessments were completed via Qualtrics. Semi-structured interviews were conducted via phone or online chat with trained graduate students. Phone interviews averaged 2 h; online chats took between 4 to 5 h. Before participating, adult participants gave written or verbal consent and children provided assent (adoptive parents gave permission for their children). In-person and phone interviews were audio-recorded and fully transcribed verbatim by trained research assistants. Study materials and procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of the University of Kentucky and the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Materials

Interview guides

Semi-structured interview guides used among adoptive parents and children in CAFS W2 assessed contact experiences with birth families; these were adapted for use with birth relatives and were developed from similar studies (Grotevant et al., 2013). Questions for birth relatives

included, “Were you open to the possibility of a same-sex couple as adoptive parents?”. Birth relatives were asked why they chose the family with whom their child was placed. Questions posed to adoptive parents included: “How would you describe your current feelings about [child]’s birth family members?”. Children were asked similar questions: “How do you feel about being with [birth relatives]?”

Satisfaction with and desire for contact

Birth relatives who completed an interview also reported via Qualtrics survey ($n = 61$; 98%) about their contact satisfaction with the adoptive family and desires for future contact, regardless of previous or current contact. These questions (and response options) were: “how satisfied are you with the current level of contact?” (1 = *very dissatisfied* to 7 = *very satisfied*), and, “would you like to have more contact in the future?” (1 = *would like more contact*, 2 = *no, satisfied with the current level of contact*, 3 = *neutral*, 4 = *other, please explain*). CAFS adoptive parents answered the same two survey questions. (Desire for contact was rated from adopted children’s interview responses, described next.)

Data analysis plan

Aligned with each research question of this mixed method study, interview data were discretely (i.e., specific responses were rated or categorized) or globally (i.e., whole interviews were analyzed) coded by teams of trained research personnel. For all coding, team members worked individually and then met regularly to discuss and resolve discrepancies. There were no discrepancies among discrete codes. To establish trustworthiness and methodological rigor, team members routinely engaged in reflexivity (i.e., self-examination) through journaling activities, written notes complementing data collection and analyses, and discussion to explore possible influences of their identities and experiences (i.e., positionality; Braun & Clarke, 2021; Levitt et al., 2018). Research personnel represented varied social (i.e., racial/ethnic, sexual) identities and personal connections to adoption.

Regarding our first question about openness to placement with a same-gender couple, two research assistants discretely coded participants’ interview responses (yes/no). If participants indicated no, the coding team listed the reason why. In addressing our second research question, whether and why birth relatives selected same-gender adoptive family placements, the first and third authors engaged in deductive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021) of interviews with birth relatives ($n = 24$) whose child was placed with LG parents. This process involved reading through the transcriptions several times, globally coding data for emerging codes, and sorting codes into broader, related themes (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

To evaluate our third research question of how birth and LG parent adoptive families felt about each other, we examined survey and interview responses. To facilitate the comparison of mixed method data from different informants, our approach was primarily quantitative (i.e., Likert-style survey responses; quantified ratings of qualitative data), but also illustrative (using exemplar quotes). From surveys, we explored birth relatives’ satisfaction with and desire for contact, as well as complementary reports from CAFS adoptive parents in contact with birth family participants (i.e., seven adoption triads). From interviews, separate coding teams of three rated (i.e., 1 = *very negative* to 5 = *very positive*) birth relatives’ feelings toward adoptive families, adoptive parents’ feelings toward birth relatives, and children’s feelings toward birth relatives. Given the short depth of children’s responses, their interviews were discretely coded (yes/no) about desire for future contact. Coding materials are available upon request.

RESULTS

Openness to same-gender couple placement

In assessing our first research question through discrete coding, we found that most birth relatives described being open to placement with a same-gender couple ($n = 44$; 71%). Of the 18 participants who were not open to same-gender placements, most explained that this was not an option during placement ($n = 12$; 66%) and/or they did not have the option to choose the adoptive family. These 12 birth mothers had placed their child 25 or more years ago in a closed adoption, before same-gender couples were legally able to adopt. Some birth relatives noted religious ($n = 4$) or other reasons ($n = 3$; e.g., wanted a mother and father, did not want child to be bullied for having same-gender parents) why they would not have been open to a same-gender adoptive couple. Almost half of the 18 ($n = 8$; 44%) who were not initially open to same-gender adoptive placements stated, unprompted, that now they would be open to such placements.

Why same-gender couples were chosen

To address our second research question, we conducted a thematic analysis of interview responses from 24 birth relatives (i.e., 20 families; four birth relatives were connected to the same adoptive family, two others were connected to another adoptive family) whose child was placed with LG adoptive parents. There were six overarching themes with distinct subthemes: (1) *purposeful placement with LG parents*, (2) *did not seek but was open*, (3) *ideal family circumstances*, (4) *incredible feeling of connection*, (5) *avoiding religious extremes*, and (6) *similarities between birth and adoptive family*. The first two themes were mutually exclusive, characterizing (a) those who specifically sought LG adoptive parents ($n = 12$) versus (b) those who were open and ultimately placed their child with LG parents ($n = 12$). Remaining themes applied across the 24 participants. Quotes below include pseudonyms.

Purposeful placement with LG parents

This overarching theme characterized birth relatives who specifically sought an LG couple ($n = 12$). Five subthemes were identified. The first, (a) *personal connection to LGBTQ+ individuals or community* ($n = 3$), was highlighted by Jennifer (birth mother, white, placement 12 years earlier): “My sister and her wife have two little boys that they're in the middle of fostering and trying to adopt,” and by Jamie (birth mother, white, placement 16 years earlier): “I wanted a gay couple, because my aunt was gay...she was trying to adopt, and because she was gay, she was having...a hard time adopting.” The second, (b) *desire to place into family that cannot have biologically related children* ($n = 6$) was captured by Hannah (birth mother, white placement 4 years earlier): “I did want a same-sex couple...knowing that...you can't biologically have your own children.” The third, (c) *gendered parenting and socialization* ($n = 5$), was represented by Brianna (birth mother, white, placement 12 years earlier) in wanting to place with gay fathers to avoid “too many hens” with multiple mothers: “...with lesbian couples I felt as if it were too many hens in the henhouse? I didn't want three mothers arguing over what was best for the child,” as well as Ashley (birth mother, white, placement 10 years earlier): “I wanted my son to have two male perspectives. So, when I was trying to select parents, I wanted a gay [male] couple.”

The fourth subtheme, (d) *recognize discrimination LGBTQ+ couples face during placement process* ($n = 2$), was expressed by Tara (birth grandmother, white, placement 14 years earlier), “It wasn't as easy for them to adopt a child because...some people...would disqualify them,” and by Kathryn (birth aunt, Mexican-white, placement 4 years earlier), “[Birth

mother] wanted a family that wasn't [going to] be someone's first pick...that was a big thing for her...she always felt bad that there's these people that [want to] get married and they [want to] have families...She just wanted to give a same-gender family a shot at having kids." The last subtheme, (e) *few laws protect sexual minorities* ($n = 2$), related to birth relatives' awareness of the legal barriers that LG adoptive parents face. One participant, Melissa (birth grandmother, white, placement 10 years earlier) indicated her perception that due to few legal protections, LG adoptive parents would likely be on their "best behavior" and would thus follow through with openness arrangements. She said, "I thought that we would probably have more of a chance of having somebody be sincere about open adoption because there's really no laws that cover that."

Did not seek but open

The remaining 12 of 24 participants whose child was placed with LG adoptive parents did not initially seek them, but were open to such placements. Three subthemes characterized their reasons. The first was (a) *seeking an open-minded or seemingly diverse couple* ($n = 6$). Sarah (birth mother, white, placement 5 years earlier), preferred prospective parents who conveyed a spirit of diversity or inclusivity: "We vetoed anyone who only wanted a healthy white baby." The second was (b) *adoptive parents' sexual orientation was not a consideration* ($n = 5$). Emily (birth mother, white, placement 6 years earlier), noted, "We had no preferences on anything. We just wanted to make sure [child] would be with the right people." The third was (c) *unique circumstances* ($n = 2$), such as a child with muscular dystrophy whose only "match" with prospective parents was a female same-gender couple. Amanda (birth mother, white, placement 22 years earlier), recounted, "After the [muscular dystrophy] test came back positive...[counselor] contacted [adoptive parents] and let them know the situation, and they were not at all reluctant to get involved."

Ideal family circumstances

Of all 24 who placed with LG adoptive parents, many birth relatives referenced aspects of an "ideal" family ($n = 18$), noting preferred traits (e.g., almost all sought two-parent families) or circumstances. This theme was comprised by five subthemes. The first, (a) *birth order* ($n = 5$), was exemplified by Brianna (birth mother, white, placement 12 years earlier): "I wanted him to be able to have the opportunity of being the first child." The second, (b) *parents' age* ($n = 5$), was captured in Samantha's (birth mother, white, placement 5 years earlier) reminiscing, "I would want...[adoptive parents] on the younger side." The third, (c) *socioeconomic status* ($n = 9$), was emphasized by Jennifer (birth mother, white, placement 12 years earlier), "...knowing what they did for a living and being sure that they were stable and...have good jobs...I think that was a big factor." The fourth, (d) *geographic location* ($n = 5$), was prioritized by Ashley (birth mother, white, placement 9 years earlier), stating, "[adoptive parents] live really close...and it would be easier to see them. The last subtheme, (e) *quality partner relationship* ($n=5$), was mentioned by several, including Sarah (birth mother, white, placement 5 years earlier): "[adoptive parents] seem like a very strong example of two people who are very much in love and best friends for life. That was a big deal to me."

Indescribable connection with potential parents

This theme reflected unspoken and instantaneous moments of "rightness" upon meeting the prospective parents ($n = 11$). One subtheme was represented by those who were *immediately*

comfortable and relieved after the initial meeting ($n = 11$), such as when Trevor (birth father, white, placement 15 years earlier) expressed that this meeting was: "...a thing you can't put into words, it kinda felt right." The other subtheme represented those who felt connected after *approval from family and friends* had been received about the prospective parents ($n = 4$). For instance, Lisa (birth mother, white, placement 16 years earlier), shared: "That's when I knew, was with the boys' [birth mother's children] approval. Outside of them, I didn't really give a sh** about what anyone else thought."

Avoiding religious extremes

This theme related to birth parents' preferences to avoid adoptive placements characterized by religious extremism ($n = 9$). One subtheme captured those who went on to *reject placements if "too" religious* ($n = 7$), such as when Brianna (birth mother, white, placement 12 years earlier) stated, "I didn't want my...son to be forced into some kind of religion immediately." The other subtheme reflected those who *wanted religiosity, but not extremism* ($n = 2$). Nicole (birth mother, white, placement 10 years earlier), declared, "I liked that they [adoptive parents] were both gay and Catholic. To me that felt like they were balanced in having like faith and religion and community."

Similarities between birth and adoptive family

This last theme related to a perceived "match" between birth and adoptive families ($n = 7$). Four subthemes comprised this theme, beginning with (a) *similar parenting styles or family dynamics* ($n = 3$). Brianna (birth mother, white, placement 12 years earlier) described, "I was trying to find something that matched the way that I would raise my own child," and Jamie (birth mother, white, placement 16 years earlier) mused, "I wanted a family just like them... they are so great. I wish they could have adopted me too." The second subtheme, (b) *similar idiosyncratic characteristics* ($n = 2$), was evident in Sarah's (birth mother, white, placement 5 years earlier) comment: "any combination of [birth father] and me...would fit in so well with them [adoptive parents] that nature vs. nurture would become impossible to sort out." The third, (c) *shared interests* ($n = 4$), was illuminated by Nicole (birth mother, white, placement 10 years earlier): "I actually have more in common as far as like [Adoptive father 2]'s really into theater." Finally, (d) *shared identities* (i.e., cultural heritage; $n = 2$), were emphasized by several participants, such as Ashley (birth mother, white, placement 9 years earlier): "[Adoptive father] is [ethnicity]...that's something I really like since [child] is half [ethnicity]...he [child] could have a connection to his heritage."

Perceptions of relationships among adoption triad members

In examining our third research question, survey data showed birth relatives generally felt highly satisfied with adoptive family contact ($M = 6.86$; $SD = 0.37$). This was consistent with reports from CAFS adoptive parents represented, who also felt generally satisfied with birth family contact (Table 2). Moreover, 48.4% of birth relatives desired more contact in the future, 30.6% were satisfied with current contact, and 4.8% felt neutral about it. Several birth relatives listed alternative reasons regarding future contact desires ($n = 7$; e.g., "I'm not sure what more contact would look like, but I'm all for our relationship evolving"). From rated interview data, most birth relatives described positive feelings about the adoptive families with whom their child was placed ($M = 4.31$; $SD = 0.94$). Despite a few discrepancies in positive, neutral, or

negative feelings, CAFS adoptive parents ($n = 14$) and the connected birth relatives reported positive feelings (Table 2). Similarly, CAFS adopted children ($n = 7$) shared positive feelings about their birth families; children unanimously desired future birth family contact (Table 2).

To illustrate feelings among members of one adoption triad, we next include quotes from a birth relative, two adoptive parents, and the adopted child. Firstly, the birth relative expressed:

I'm just so grateful for [adoptive parents] because I can feel...comfortable in knowing that they're always looking out for what is the best decisions to make for [child]. [Child] factors into all the decisions and the choices they're making. Whether it's where they live or where they're working, or what their activities are...[child] is the center of their lives.

Both adoptive parents independently gave their impressions. One said, "We met [birth mother] in person...which was a hoot. She paraded us around town with such pride and gusto and we were so warmly greeted by all. And whether or not they [town people] liked us, the warmth was...because they all cared for [birth mother]." The second adoptive parent described, "it was magical...we flew into [U.S. state] where she [birth mother] lived. Tiny, tiny town - she introduced us to everyone in town, it seemed! So, we felt that she was proud of us, thrilled with us. We just hung out, visited [site in town], talked for hours and bonded." Finally, the child simply stated, "Yeah, she's [birth mother] really kind and loving."

DISCUSSION

Overall, birth relatives largely reported being open to adoptive placements with same-gender couples, and some specifically pursued them. Birth relatives described numerous reasons for choosing LG adoptive parent placements. Some reasons were specific to birth relatives who were open to (and ultimately chose) LG parents, and others characterized birth relatives who sought LG adoptive parents from the outset. There were shared sentiments—positive feelings, contact satisfaction, and desire for more contact—across birth and adoptive family members, including those from the same adoption triads. These results add evidence of positive outcomes related to adoption openness across triad members (Ge et al., 2008; Grotevant et al., 2013; Henney et al., 2007), and extend them to birth relatives linked with LG adoptive parent families.

Regarding our first research question, most birth relatives described openness to their child's placement with LG adoptive parents. Reasons that some were not open reflected that such placements were not available a generation ago. Birth mothers who placed over 25 years ago often had very little agency in selecting adoptive parents (Nelson, 2020). These results help to dispel notions that birth parents seek placements that reflect heteronormative cultural family ideals, counter to some earlier research (Downs & James, 2006). Rather, aligned with previous findings among LG adoptive parents, our study indicates that birth parents may prefer LG adoptive parent families (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016; Farr et al., 2018) for specific reasons.

Regarding our second research question, many reasons birth relatives placed their child with same-gender couples were consistent with LG adoptive parents' reports (Farr et al., 2018). These included sharing personal connections to LGBTQ+ people, valuing diversity, believing same-gender parents would be open-minded, or wanting to help same-gender couples become parents. Families of choice (Weston, 1991), originally posited among LG people, could be extended and applied here: birth relatives' placement decisions frequently reflected that shared values were paramount (e.g., LGBTQ+ community connections, diversity, assisting LG people pursue chosen family through children). These values may have been salient due to birth relatives' personal experiences with adoption-related stigma or marginalization (Madden

TABLE 2 Perceptions of contact across individual members of seven adoption triads

Family (child age in years; birth relative)	Variable	Parent A	Parent B	Child	Birth relative
1 (7; birth mother)	Feelings toward contact	3	4	4	5
	Satisfaction with contact	6	6	N/A	^a
	Desire for future contact	2	2	Yes	^a
2 (6; birth grandmother)	Feelings toward contact	4	5	4	5
	Satisfaction with contact	6	7	N/A	7
	Desire for future contact	1	3	Yes	2
3 (10; birth grandmother, aunt)	Feelings toward contact	5	5	4	5 5
	Satisfaction with contact	6	5	N/A	7 7
	Desire for future contact	2	1	Yes	1 2
4 (10; birth mother)	Feelings toward contact	5	5	5	5
	Satisfaction with contact	7	6	N/A	7
	Desire for future contact	2	1	Yes	1
5 (8; birth father)	Feelings toward contact	4	4	4	4
	Satisfaction with contact	6	7	N/A	6
	Desire for future contact	1	2	Yes	2
6 (8; birth mother)	Feelings toward contact	3	2	2	5
	Satisfaction with contact	4	5	N/A	7
	Desire for future contact	3	3	Yes	2
7 (8; birth mother)	Feelings toward contact	5	5	4	5
	Satisfaction with contact	6	7	N/A	7
	Desire for future contact	1	2	Yes	3

Note: All birth relatives were on maternal side. Coding scales for interview data from adoption triad members about “feelings toward contact” range from 1–5 (1 = *very negative*; 5 = *very positive*). Additionally, the scale used by adoptive parents and birth relatives (there was no corresponding survey item for children) to rate “satisfaction with contact” ranges from 1–7 (1 = *highly dissatisfied*; 7 = *highly satisfied*). Survey responses for “desire for future contact” included: yes (1); no, satisfied with current contact (2); and neutral (3)—for adoptive parents and birth relatives (children’s interview responses were coded dichotomously).

^aSignifies missing data.

et al., 2017; Nelson, 2020; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Shared values, in turn, could contribute to feelings of closeness and connection among birth relatives and LG adoptive parent families that facilitate the initial adoption placement as well as subsequent contact dynamics, aligned with emotional distance regulation processes (Grotevant, 2009, 2020).

Birth parents’ decisions were also motivated by gender socialization and expectations about lesbian mothers or gay fathers (e.g., wanting their child to have multiple male role models or wanting to be the child’s “only mother”), and future research could explore further the role of both birth and adoptive parents’ gender, as well as adopted children’s gender in placement decisions and contact dynamics. Our findings both relate and run counter to earlier research, for example, among a sample of LGB foster parents who described discrepant closeness to birth family based on gender (i.e., mothers often reported feeling closer to birth families than fathers; Downs & James, 2006). Birth relatives often noted LG parents might face a challenging or discriminatory road to adopting. Relatedly, some believed that same-gender couples would be likely to maintain ongoing contact due to fewer legal protections and resultingly being on “best behavior.” These notions are empirically supported, as research highlights stigma and discrimination experienced by LG parents pursuing adoption (Farr & Goldberg, 2018), and the

likelihood of LG adoptive parents to desire and seek out birth family contact (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016, 2017; Goldberg et al., 2011).

Consistent with families of choice (Weston, 1991), and again extending this conceptual framework, some reasons referenced by birth parents to place with LG adoptive parents reflected hopes of creating a family for their child and themselves through the adoptive family. Some birth family participants were open to LG adoptive parents because they were seeking “a sense of family,” or they felt the adoptive parents were like parental figures. Relatedly, some birth parents carefully considered the kind of family they wanted for their child (e.g., family structure, family values, parenting style, relationship dynamics) and what their role (i.e., relationships, contact, geographic location) would be post-placement—all reflective of choosing one's family, establishing a goodness of fit with placement, and likely contributing to satisfying openness arrangements over time via emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009, 2020).

Finally, aligned with our third research question, our mixed method findings across adoption triad members suggested similarly positive perceptions of one another and shared contact. This mirrors some previous research among heterosexual adoptive parent and birth families (Ge et al., 2008). Even if individual members did not report identical experiences, there were no instances of opposite feelings. Rather, if discrepancies existed, they reflected differences from neutral to positive. As data from birth and adoptive families were collected at different time points, it is possible that discrepancies reflected contact changes over time. These results may represent the first time that birth relatives, LG adoptive parents, and children comprising the same triads have been represented in a single study. Aligned with emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009), it is likely that mutual satisfaction among birth and adoptive family members has led to continued contact (and it is perhaps not surprising that those who were in contact with one another and felt positively agreed to participate in our studies). Perhaps feelings of closeness among birth and LG adoptive parent families have been fueled by commonalities, such as shared values of connection (e.g., “feeling proud” to introduce each other) and how to “do” family (beyond bio- or heteronormative ideals, consistent with families of choice; Weston, 1991) despite (or in the face of) experiencing societal or interpersonal stigma (Farr et al., 2018; Madden et al., 2017). Triad members generally shared consistent and positive reports, which lends further support that openness in adoption can be beneficial to all involved (Grotevant, 2020).

Implications for practice, policy, and law

Domains of open adoption and same-gender parent adoption, at least at their more public intersection, remain relatively new (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016, 2017; Goldberg, 2019). Thus, continued research is critical to guide post-adoption services (Grotevant, 2020; Krahn & Sullivan, 2015; March, 2014). Firstly, our findings point to the need for (and potential benefit of) adoption agencies that include same-gender parent families as prospective adopters, aligned with previous research about sexual minority adoptive parents' perspectives (Downs & James, 2006; Farr et al., 2018). Although birth relatives here intentionally sought (or were open to) placements with sexual minority parents, others may harbor bias or negative perceptions (Downs & James, 2006). Thus, education about sexual minority adoptive parent families for adoption professionals and birth parents could dispel stereotypes and facilitate comprehensive consideration of all possible placements—ultimately serving children's best interests (Nelson, 2020).

Similarly, birth (and adoptive) family members represented in our study generally felt satisfied with contact and desired more in the future. However, not all birth and adoptive families enjoy mutually satisfying open adoption arrangements, nor sustained contact post-placement (Grotevant, 2020). Our results underscore the importance of goodness of fit among birth and

adoptive families at placement in cultivating enduring contact satisfaction over time, given that birth relatives here emphasized connection (i.e., “clicking with”) to adoptive families, as well as shared values, traits, or experiences. For birth and adoptive families whose relationships may be characterized differently, it may behoove adoption professionals to identify common ground to cultivate greater contact, following from emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009).

Family law relevant to adoption and sexual minority parenthood can also be informed by this research (e.g., Farr & Goldberg, 2018), as some birth relatives explicitly highlighted discriminatory laws toward same-gender parents. Building from research that consistently reveals the positive development of children with LG parents (Patterson, 2017), our results provide additional evidence to challenge laws that limit adoption by same-gender parents. Birth relatives felt satisfied with contact and with their relationships to the same-gender parent adoptive families with whom their child was placed. Previous research with LG adoptive parents has also indicated that written contracts or agreements are common (Farr et al., 2018). Here, several birth relatives perceived that LG adoptive parents might be particularly likely to “follow through” with any openness agreements given few legal protections. Further research about the impact of such documents would be beneficial.

Limitations and future directions

Our study is not without limitations. Our results may be subject to self-selection bias (Madden et al., 2017) and there were non-independent data across birth relatives from the same families. Reports from birth relatives connected to CAFS families may be particularly likely to represent positive contact experiences, and thus, this subsample may especially not reflect a representative group. Participants here primarily identified as women; future research would benefit from including more birth fathers and others diverse in gender—especially as such inclusion may debunk stereotypes of birth mothers or parents as single, uninformed, or lacking support (practically or emotionally; Madden et al., 2017). These findings may not generalize to other birth relatives connected to same-gender parent adoptive families, nor to those involved in adoption pathways beyond private domestic infant adoption in the U.S. The wide time range since placement among birth relatives, however, could contribute to generalizability among those who placed children via private domestic adoption.

These data may be subject to retrospective bias (Madden et al., 2017). As CAFS W2 was conducted 5 years before the birth relative study, we could not make simultaneous time comparisons among CAFS adoption triad members. Perspectives of CAFS birth relatives may differ from those of adoptive parents given how these relationships transpired over those years. Further, CAFS birth relatives described experiences with adopted children who were in early adolescence (whereas reports from those children were during middle childhood). Adolescent adoptees may play a direct role in facilitating birth family contact (Grotevant, 2020), and we would expect children's reports to vary by developmental stage (Grotevant et al., 2019). Future work should address what factors influence contact dynamic changes and if these reports align across adoption triad members (Ge et al., 2008).

Despite strengths of including different types of data (i.e., survey, interview via different formats), our approach contrasts with employing a fully qualitative design that could offer a particularly rich analysis of participants' perspectives about placement experiences and subsequent contact. Future research should examine how contact frequency, type, and dynamics of birth and adoptive family relationships change over time (Grotevant et al., 2013, 2019). Although beyond our scope to describe the nature of contact among birth and adoptive families, anecdotally, birth relatives reported that frequency and type of contact were shaped by

different comfort levels (e.g., requesting contact) and life changes (e.g., birth of a child, moving), aligned with emotional distance regulation and life course dynamics (Grotevant et al., 2019).

CONCLUSION

This study gave voice to birth relatives as well as sexual minority parents and their adopted children, all of whom have been underrepresented in adoption research (Brodzinsky & Goldberg, 2016, 2017; Farr et al., 2018). They described experiences of openness during an ongoing historical period where open adoption has become the norm (Nelson, 2020). They explained reasons for intentionally choosing one another, aligned with chosen family (Weston, 1991). Finally, they relayed the closeness they feel to one another over time, across relationships, and amidst life changes, following from emotional distance regulation (Grotevant, 2009), and extending previous results from LG adoptive parents (Farr & Goldberg, 2015). These birth and adoptive families provide models of how complex family relationships can be managed, and they expand notions of “what makes a family” (Farr & Goldberg, 2015; Farr et al., 2018; Grotevant, 2020). Moreover, the findings advance our understanding of family processes broadly, given growing family diversity in the U.S. (Farr et al., 2020; Goldberg & Conron, 2018). This research is timely in elucidating how adoption agencies, community organizations, practitioners and policymakers can best serve adoptive and birth families, particularly in guiding contact post-adoption (Downs & James, 2006; Goldberg, 2019; Henney et al., 2003; March, 2014).

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