

Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (MTARP)

Participants

Each of the families in the project adopted a child in the late 1970s or early 1980s. Families and birthmothers were first interviewed between 1987 and 1992 and again between 1996 and 2000. Grotevant and colleagues at the Minnesota site have followed the adopted children and their adoptive parents (e.g., Grotevant, Ross, Marchel, & McRoy, 1999; Dunbar & Grotevant, 2004); McRoy and colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin have followed the children's birthmothers (e.g., Christian, et al., 1997; Fravel, et al., 2000). In addition, staff from private adoption agencies around the United States were interviewed at three points in time: 1987-89 (N=31 agencies), 1992-93 (N=34), 1999 (N=29). They provided information about their experiences with openness and other adoption practices, enabling us to look at historical changes in adoption practice as they were occurring (Henney, et al., 1998; Henney, et al., 2003).

Wave 1: 1986 – 1992

Adoptive families and birthmothers were recruited for the study through 35 adoption agencies located across the United States. We sought families in which there was at least one adopted child (the "target child") between the ages of 4 and 12 at the time of the interview, who was adopted through an agency before his or her first birthday; in which the adoption was not transracial, international, or "special needs"; and in which both adoptive parents were married to the partner they had at the time of the adoption. We simultaneously sought birthmothers who made adoption plans for children placed with these families. Participants in the study were located in 23 different states from all regions of the U.S., making this study the only nationwide one of its kind.

In 1986, we contacted approximately 40 adoption agencies across the United States to assess the range of openness arrangements they offered and their interest in participating in the study. Among our primary considerations in selecting agencies for participation was that we preferred that the agency be offering a range of openness options to families and that the staff would be willing to follow a random sample process to select participants for the study. We also asked the initial agencies we contacted to nominate other agencies for involvement. After the initial contact, we sent agencies a research prospectus outlining the research design and asked their willingness to participate. The qualifying agencies which originally agreed to participate offered confidential, mediated and fully disclosed adoptions, or believed that some of the families for whom they had arranged mediated adoptions had subsequently fully disclosed to each other. As recruitment of participants progressed, agencies found that families and birthmothers with confidential adoptions were the most difficult to locate, since they generally had not kept in touch with the agency. Therefore, in order to have a larger number of participants with confidential arrangements, we recruited several agencies specializing in confidential adoptions.

We asked each participating agency to select all children who met the criteria outlined above, then to sample randomly among them within levels of openness until they located a set number of families and birthmothers willing to be interviewed. A few families (12 of 190, or 6.3%) and birthmothers (20 of 169, or 11.8%) were recruited through advertisements in newspapers and periodicals. Data were collected between 1987 and 1992. Although this sample is not a fully random one, participants were specifically *not* recruited on the basis of their success with adoption or their having an interesting story to tell, which is often a problem in volunteer samples.

At Wave 1, the study's participants included 720 individuals: both parents in 190 adoptive families, at least one adopted child in 171 of the families, and 169 birthmothers. Demographic data are included in the attached table. The vast majority of adoptive parents were Caucasian, Protestant and middle to upper-middle class. Of the 190 adoptive couples interviewed, 177 identified themselves as Caucasian, 3 as Latino, 1 as African American, and 1 as Latino and Caucasian. Eight couples gave no indication of their race but were identified by interviewers as Caucasian. These couples reflect the population of families who are typically involved in formally adopting unrelated children, and birthmothers who tend to place their children for adoption. Virtually all adoptive parents in the study had adopted because of infertility. The average level of education was 16.2 years for adoptive fathers and 15.1 for adoptive mothers. Adoptive fathers ranged in age from 32 to 53 (mean = 40.7) and adoptive mothers from 31 to 50 (mean = 39.1).

The average number of adopted children in each home was 1.9. Ninety of the target adopted children were male and 81 were female. Their ages ranged from 4 - 12 (mean = 7.8 years). Target children in 19 of the 190 families were not interviewed. In 8 cases, the child was deemed too young to participate in a valid interview; in 9 cases, the adoptive parents requested that the child not participate; in 1 case, the child refused to be interviewed despite parental encouragement, and there was equipment failure in 1 case.

At the time of the birth of their child, the birthmothers ranged in age from 14 to 36 years (mean = 19.1). Almost 2/3 of the birthmothers delivered when they were teenagers. At the time of the study, the birthmothers ranged in age from 21 - 43 (mean = 27.1), and the average number of years of education attained was 13.5. Income ranged from 0 to \$50,000+; the modal income range was between \$20,000 - 29,000. In terms of ethnicity, 157 (92.9%) were Caucasian, 4 (2.4%) were Latino, 2 (1.2%) were Native American, 1 each were African American and Asian American, and 4 did not list their ethnicity. Half of the birthmothers were currently married, and they had from 1 - 5 children.

Wave 2: 1996 - 2001

At Wave 2, participants included the parents and target adopted adolescent from 177 adoptive families: 173 adoptive mothers, 162 adoptive fathers, and 156 adopted adolescents (75 boys and 81 girls). At Wave 2, data are also available on 88 siblings and 127 birthmothers.

At Wave 2, most adoptive parents were still married. Five adoptive mothers and 3 adoptive fathers who participated were divorced; 1 adoptive mother and 2 adoptive fathers were separated; 1 adoptive father and 1 adoptive mother were widowed. The average level of education was 16.3 years for adoptive fathers and 15.1 years for adoptive mothers. Adoptive fathers ranged in age from 40 to 60 years (mean = 49.3); adoptive mothers ranged from 40 to 57 years (mean = 47.4 years). The adopted adolescents ranged in age from 11 to 20 (mean = 15.7).