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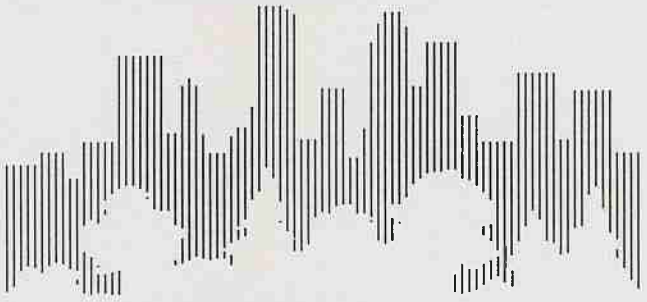

C • O • L • L • E • G • E

MASTERS IN SOCIAL WORK THESIS

Molly Crosby Cave

An Historical Analysis of Open Adoption in the United States

1999

MSW Thesis

Thesis
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MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK
AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

This is to certify that the Master's Thesis of :

Molly Crosby Cave

has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Social Work Degree.

Date of Oral Presentation: May 1, 1998

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LEGACY OF AN ADOPTED CHILD

Once there were two women
Who never knew each other
One you do not remember
The other you call mother.

Two different lives
Shaped to make yours one.
One became your guiding star
The other became your sun

The first gave you life
The second taught you to live it.
The first gave you a need for love
And the second was there to give it.

One gave you a nationality
The other gave you a name.
One gave you the seed of talent
The other gave you aim.

One gave you emotions
The other calmed your fears.
One saw your first sweet smile
The other dried your tears.

One gave you up
It was all she could do.
The other prayed for a child
And God led her straight to you.

And now you ask me through your tears
The age-old question through the years
Heredity or environment-which are you the
Product of?
Neither, my darling, neither
Just two different kinds of love.

Author Unknown

This thesis is dedicated to my birth son Brendan, who I deeply love and care for and to his wonderful parents Tom and Gayle, who will never know how lucky and grateful they make me feel. I admire you all!

AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF OPEN ADOPTION IN THE UNITED STATES

Molly Crosby Cave

Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirement for the degree of
Master of Social Work

AUGSBURG COLLEGE
MINNEAPOLIS, MINNESOTA

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ABSTRACT

AN HISTORICAL ANALYSIS OF OPEN ADOPTION
IN THE UNITED STATES

Adoption has been a way of creating families for centuries. The trend toward more direct and communicative relationships between adoptees, birth parents and the adoptive parents is gaining favor in the adoption arena. The purpose of this analysis is to place an historical context on the evolution of open adoption and to analyze its strengths and weaknesses. The outcome of this research indicates that open adoption is a positive way to build families and create lasting relationships between the adoptee, birth parents and adoptive parents.

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Chapter I.

Introduction

A. Purpose of this Analysis

The purpose of this analysis is to place in an historical context the concept of open adoption and to analyze its strengths and weaknesses as a public policy in terms of its impact on individuals involved in the adoption process. In addition, this research is an attempt to compare and contrast open adoption with closed/confidential adoption. It is important that in the social work field we continue to study the trends of open adoption and the role it can play in the lives of many people, especially when striving to foster the well being of families, however they are formed. By understanding open adoption, social workers may be able to identify problem areas in the adoption triad (birth child, birth parents and adoptive parents) and better understand when different types of adoption are most appropriate for the child and families involved.

B. Background

The Child Welfare League of America defines legal adoption as, "the method provided by law to establish the legal relationship of parent and

child between persons who are not related by birth" (Brodzinsky & Schechter, 1990, p.273). Adoption has been a way of creating families for centuries. The oldest written adoption laws were found in the Code of Hammurabi in 2800 B.C. (Cole & Donley, 1990)

The death of thousands of men and women during the Civil War resulted in significant numbers of children without adults responsible for them. The influx of large numbers of immigrants to the United States resulted in some unanticipated consequences, such as poor and homeless people. Being that the poor and homeless were unable to care for their children, adoption became a solution to the problem (Cole & Donely, 1990).

In 1854, Reverend Charles Loring Brace, founded The Children's Aid Society in New York. He believed a family lifestyle was a better solution for children than living in almshouses or on the streets. Brace's idea was to start an "orphan train movement," by which "...thousands of dependent children from eastern cities, who were an economic drain on the public coffers, were transported by railroad to western states where they would be an economic asset..."(Simpson, 1987, p.143) because they could be put to work by farmers and others who would take them in. Between 1854 and 1924 an estimated 100,000 children were sent west on the orphan trains (Simpson, 1987).

Another way in which orphaned children were cared for was through "foundling" homes, in which they would be cared for and nursed through early childhood and then deemed adoptable at 7 years of age (Melina, 1993). The welfare of children was greatly affected by high infant mortality rate and by an inadequate number of peasant wet nurses.

During the 1920's and 1930's infants were rarely placed for adoption, primarily due to the fact that formula, or baby's milk did not yet exist, therefore a mother had to nurse her child for the first year of life (Cole and Donely, 1990). According to Cole and Donely,(1990) during this time many states passed laws prohibiting a woman from being separated from her child during the first six month nursing period.

During this time period, if adoption placements occurred it was standard adoption practice to have closed, confidential records regarding the adoption triad. According to Melina and Roszia (1993), the Minnesota Act of 1917 led to a nationwide agreement by states, of having closed and sealed adoption records. By 1929 all states had some sort of legal adoption proceedings to follow, in which all adoptions had to be submitted to the court for approval. (Baran & Pannor,1984, p.316) For the most part, this practice continues today with some states only having to have agency approval of the adoption and

court finalization.

C. Closed and Open Adoption - Definition of Terms

The practice of closed or confidential adoptions, in which little or no information has been shared with either the birth parents, adoptive parents or adopted child has been the norm in this country until recently. However, there has been an increasing insistence to open not only adoption records, but the adoptive relationship itself. This new concept of "open" adoption, can be defined in numerous ways. Marianne Berry (1991) believes that there is a continuum of open adoptions, in that there are four different levels of the open adoption continuum:

1. *Restricted open adoption:* The adoptive family shares pictures and information with the birth parents for a specified amount of time after the placement, with the agency acting as a liaison between the families. The information is non-identifying.

2. *Semi open adoption:* Birth parents meet with the adoptive family, but there is no further sharing of information. The adoption agency acts as a liaison between the families.

3. *Fully open adoption:* The adoptive family and the birth parents meet and share information for a limited time. The adoption agency can act as a liaison between the families.

4. *Continuing open adoption:* The birth parents and the adoptive family meet and share information over the course of the adoptee's life. Sharing identifying information without the agency's involvement.

Gritter (1997) defines open adoption as having "four observable ingredients: the birth family selects the adoptive family, the families meet each other face to face, they exchange full identifying information and they establish a significant, ongoing relationship." (p.20) Open adoption deals with relationship issues between the birth parents, adoptive family and the adoptee or the adoption triad. Gritter (1997) believes that open adoption should be rid of secrecy and confidentiality. Open adoptions are not co-parenting arrangements. The birth parents have freely and "legally relinquished all parental claims and rights to the child," (Siegel, 1993), regardless of the amount of openness in the adoption triad.

The trend toward a more direct and communicative relationship between adoptees and their birth parents is gaining favor in the adoption arena and with adoption rights groups for birth parents and adoptees (Berry, 1991). "Open adoption advocates asserted that knowledge of one's biological history constitutes an innate human need"(Rompf, 1993). Before the 1970's, pregnancy counseling, post placement services and search services for birth parents were sparse and birth parents felt dissatisfied with with the amount of secrecy (Cushman, Kalmuss & Namerow, 1993). At this point adult adoptees were returning to

adoption agencies wanting information about their birth parents, pushed by deep wounds surrounding their unknown identities and families of origin. (Siegel, 1993)

Until recently, birth parents would place their children for adoption without any information about the adoptive couple and/or the future of their birth child. Similarly, adoptive parents were adopting children without any background information or history about the birth parents or the child. According to Baran and Pannor (1984), the number of open adoption placements are rising and continues to grow throughout the United States as a healthy adoption practice.

Chapter Two

Review of the Literature

A. Evolution of Open Adoption

An increasing number of people who were adopted have, in the past two and a half decades, started to challenge standard, closed adoption procedures (Baran, Pannor & Sorosky, 1976). Many adopted adults have a strong desire to know about their birth families. Many adoptees have reported a lifelong need to understand their identity and many have actively been searching for information for years (Groth, Bonnardel, Devis, Martin & Vousden, 1987). Similarly, according to Groth, et al (1987) many birth parents never felt completely comfortable with their decision to relinquish their child for adoption and felt they had little control over their decision to place or to parent.

In the early 1800's, some claimed that the majority of adoptions were actually "open," in that placement was primarily for the purpose of providing labor and not for parenting the child (Pierce, 1989). Orphans were "imported" (Caplan, 1990, p.85) from England for farm labor, or children whose parents could not care for them would include these children as extended members of their families. The identities of the birth parent was not a concern (Baran & Pannor, 1989). In the late 1800's, when an unmarried woman became pregnant she would seek out a family who would care for her and eventually care for her child. In such cases, the birth mother would maintain contact with the adoptive parents

and the child (Baran & Pannor, 1989).

According to Caplan (1990), a New York pharmaceutical manufacturer named Charles Crittenton wanted to serve pregnant women "in peril." Therefore, he founded the first of many maternity homes. Crittenton's mission was to help young women make adoption plans for their babies and eventually learn how to pursue a "useful life, while being self sacrificing" (Caplan,1990). During this period when such maternity homes were increasing in both size and numbers, the practice of sealing a childs' birth records became accepted practice.

The Minnesota Act of 1917 was passed to seal and make confidential all state adoption records and documents (Melina & Roszia, 1993). Gritter (1997) believes that sanctioning the sealing of adoption records with the Minnesota Act of 1917, was most likely an empathetic way to protect the mother and child from the"..potentially soul destroying stigma of illegitimacy" (p.5) and the potential that the childs' birth parents were in fact alive and capable of parenting their child. McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) expound on Gritter's (1997) statement and explain that confidential adoption was a way to alleviate the shame and embarrassment attached to the adopted child and infant closed adoptions protected the child from unknown "immoral details" of his/her background.

A turning point in the history of adoption was the 1954 case of Brown vs. the Board of Education, which mandated racial integration of schools. Charles Crittenton could not accommodate the idea of racial integration due to his own

racism, therefore the Crittenton Maternity Homes closed, hence a decreasing number of infant adoption placements were made (Caplan, 1990). Rosenberg (1992) endorses the view that the late 1950's through the 1960's was the preamble of a willingness to change one's thoughts, ideals and values. Society shifted from the idea of the "melting pot, to valuing an individual and their ethnic differences" (Rosenberg,p.11). The Civil Rights Movement encouraged people to look not only at their race and ethnicity, but to explore their roots as well, including birth parents and adoptees (Rosenberg, 1992). According to Rosenberg (1992) this exploration of roots is when any members of the adoption triad begin questioning the whereabouts of their birth family members.

The sexual revolution of the 1960's changed the way people looked upon pregnant, unmarried women, therefore allowing women a voice in their reproductive health (Melina & Roszia, 1993). The legalization of abortion and the availability and extent of new methods of contraception, including the birth control pill, decreased the number of newborns available for adoption (Caplan, 1990). The increased amount of infertility issues among the baby boomers also added to the competition for infants to adopt in the 1970's and 1980's (Melina, et al, 1993).

Women considering an adoption placement for their child gradually began to want more control of the adoption process, especially when they became aware of the unavailability of infants (Melina, et al, 1993) Birth parents, especially birth mothers wanted to know who would be raising their child, they wanted to meet the adoptive parents

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and they wanted ongoing contact with the adoptive parents and their birth child indefinitely (Melina, et al, 1993; Gritter, 1997; Caplan, 1990). The adoption arena was moving toward more transracial and transcultural adoptions as well as extending adoption to include single adoptive parents and gay adoptive parents (Rosenberg, 1992). Today, some advocates of open adoption are stating that it is "time to acknowledge that open adoption is working" (Gross, p. 283) and use open adoption as standard practice (Gross, 1993 & Groth, et al, 1987).

Open adoption, while relatively new, has been gaining momentum since the late 1970's. The majority of this literature review surrounding open adoption tends to cluster around four major themes: 1) the support of open adoption, 2) the opposition of open adoption, 3) grief issues of those involved in an open adoption and, 4) studies of the adoption triad.

B. Support for Open Adoption

Rosenberg (1992) believes that children who are adopted may benefit from the potential following advantages of open adoption: "..1) an increased sense of self, due to knowledge of both birth parents and adoptive parents; 2) an increased knowledge of one's genetic make-up, which adds to self identity; 3) a clear and positive image of one's birth parents,as people who care and are concerned, and finally, 4) an increased awareness of why the adoption placement was made, rather than feeling abandoned by one's birth parents"

(Rosenberg, p.90).

Etter (1993) surveyed adoptive parents and birth parents in 56 adoptions whose open adoption situations were mediated through a written agreement between the families prior to the adoptive placement. All the adoptive placements had taken place four and one half years prior to the study. Of the 56 adoptions, 32 had both an adoptive parent and a biological parent responding to the survey. Of the adoptive parents who responded; 55 adoptive mothers responded and 38 adoptive fathers responded. Of the biological parents who responded; 32 biological mothers responded and 4 biological fathers responded. All 56 adoptions had some degree of openness, with ongoing contact through letters or visits. The majority had continuous, fully disclosed contact. Etter (1993) defines open adoption as,"...adoption that includes an ongoing channel between biological and adoptive parents with communication going both ways" (p.260). The participants of Etter's (1993) survey can be categorized in each definition that Berry (1991) has outlined in term of the continuum of open adoption. All of the open adoption agreements were written before adoptive placement with the communication desires of all parties worked out with the assistance of the adoption agency.

The mean age of the adoptive parent at the time of the survey was 39; their ages ranged from 29 to 48 years old. The mean age for the biological parent at the time of the study was 28; their ages ranging from 20 to 45 years old. Of the 56 adoptions, 98.2% of the participants kept their agreements to allow having ongoing contact. Only one

adoptive family did not allow the birth mother to have continuous contact after the written agreement was made and finalization of the adoption occurred. One hundred percent of the birth parents kept their commitment and 94% of the adoptive families felt very content with their ongoing contact with the birth parents. None of the adoptive parents expressed dissatisfaction. Over half, (52%) of the participants reported having more contact than originally decided upon and 31% of the participants reported having less contact. Two families reported having more contact at first then less as the years went by (Etter,1993).

Etter (1993) suggests that those members of the adoption triad who had the most ongoing contact were the most satisfied and did not find open adoption to be difficult. Based on this high degree of satisfaction, Etter (1993) argues that this negates the myth that ongoing contact between the adoptive family and birth family is too painful for the birth parents and interferes with the bonding and attachment process between the adoptive parents and the newly adopted child. Etter (1993) claims that the high level of satisfaction in the open adoptions she studied are based on three critical elements: allowing the birth parents and adoptive parents to choose the amount of openness they desire, through preparation and counseling to those involved in the adoption triad and finally, a written agreement clearly stating the details of the open adoption agreement.

In a study conducted by McRoy, Grotevant and Ayers-Lopez (1994) 72.2% of adoptive mothers and 82.5% of adoptive fathers in fully disclosed adoptions stated that they have no

fear or anxiety about the birth parents coming back to take their child. McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) interviewed birth parents and adoptive parents comprising 17 adoptions. Of the adoptive parents, 17 adoptive mother responded and 17 adoptive fathers responded. Of the birth parents who participated; 15 were birth mothers and one was a birth father. One birth grandmother participated. The adoptive parents who participated had 24 children total, ranging from ages 4 months to six years. The age range for the adoptive mothers was between 31 to 42 years and the adoptive fathers age ranged from 30 to 47 years. The age range of the birth parents, at the time of adoptive placement was 14 to 42 years old. According to Berry's (1991) continuum of open adoption, two of the participating families had closed adoptions, five of the participating families had "semi open" to "fully open" adoptions and ten participating families had "continuing open adoptions." Fifteen of the families who had some level of openness felt a great sense of entitlement to their child(ren), felt secure as parents and had a strong desire to continue having ongoing contact with the birth parents. The birth parents felt more resolved with their grief issues, more emotionally mature and claimed a greater ability to acknowledge the legal rights of the adoptive parents to the child.

Siegel (1993) defines open adoption as,"..a continuum of options that enables birth parents and adoptive parents to have information about and communication with one another before or after placement of the child or at both times" (p. 16). Siegel (1993) sampled 21 adoptive couples who had 24

adoptions between them, which varied greatly in openness. The adoption placements had taken place one year prior to the study. All 21 adoptive mothers and 21 adoptive fathers participated. The average age of the adoptive mother was was 37 years and the average age of the adoptive fathers was 39.5. Five of the couples had birth children before adopting and four couples had adopted two children by the time of the study. The range of openness in the adoption placements ranges from one closed/confidential adoption to one "continuing open adoption (Berry, 1991) and several other open adoption arrangements in between. In this qualitative study of 21 adoptive families, Siegel (1993) concluded that open adoption gave adoptive parents some control over which birth parents to work with and alleviated some of their initial fear and anxieties about the birth parents and adoption in general. Most of the adoptive parents saw open adoption as an excellent way to prepare themselves for parenting in infancy and throughout the teenage years. They felt that the ongoing contact with the birth parents would give them access to the birth parents medical history, social background, etc. Siegel (1993) noted that adoption enabled adoptive parents to openly and honestly discuss family of origin issues with their child. Many of the adoptive parents also saw open adoption as a secondary concern after dealing with infertility issues, finding a child to adopt, dealing with potentially"..Unresponsive or obstructive social workers, lawyers and medical personnel," (Siegel,p.20) and dealing with issues that will always be a part of a family created through or in part to adoption.

Campbell, Silverman and Patti (1991) questioned 114 adoptive parents whose children were adopted through closed adoption. They found that the adoptive parents believed that the more supportive the adoptive family, the more likely the child is to search for birth parents in the case of a closed adoption. The majority of the 114 respondents, believed an open adoption situation would have alleviated some of the issues at home for the adopted child and felt that the child's self esteem and parent/child relationship would have increased if the child had a better understand of their adoption situation and a knowledge of their birth parents (Campbell, et al, 1991). Like Campbell et al (1991), Bertocci and Schecter (1991) reviewed 12 studies of search and reunion data, involving adoptees from closed adoptions. They found an overwhelming similarity in the two studies, in that children who did find their birth parents experienced an improvement in their self esteem and self identity, and an improved relationship with their adoptive parents. Likewise, Sachdev (1989) sought the opinions of 300 randomly selected adoptive parents, birth parents, adult adoptees and social work personnel regarding opening sealed adoption records for those involved in a closed adoption. Half of the adoptees and birth parents and 37.4% of adoptive parents considered identifying information about one's family of birth a "fundamental right" (p.497). Seventy two percent of the adoptees and 50% of birth parents support the statement that information and identification about one's birth family is a way to add to the completion of one's self identity and self esteem.

Johnson (1996), interviewed 5 couples who had adopted a child within 6 years of the interviewing process. All interviews were conducted in person with both the adoptive mother and father present. All 5 of the couples were married, 4 couples did not have children prior to the adoption and and 1 couple had a birth child prior to the adoption. All 10 participants were high school graduates and 3 couples were college graduates. The age range of the participants was 25 to 40 years old. All 5 of the couples indicated that the adoptions of their children were open, but in varying degrees. Each participating couple..."had their own definition of what open adoption means to them" (p.24). One participating couple chooses to exchange letters and cards with the birth mother and vice versa on Christmas and on birthdays, while the other 4 couples chose to have ongoing contact with the birth parent, whether through the agency as a liaison or on their own. Two of the couples indicated that they decreased the amount of openness with the birth parents and 3 couples increased the amount of contact with he birth parents. All couples indicated satisfaction with their current level of openness with the birth parents and all of the couples expresses that open adoption has enhanced their parent-child relationship.

C. Opposition for Open Adoption

According to Byrd (1988), the contact with and knowledge of birth parents through an open adoption may encourage birth parents to postpone or ignore the grief issues and prolong

the separation process from their birth child. Byrd (1988) also believes that ongoing communication of those involved in the open adoption triad, will be a constant reminder of the loss of an infant, or serve as the,"..stimulus for the fantasy that relinquishment of a child is not really a loss at all" (1988, p.20). With regard to the adoptive parents, Byrd (1988) contends that the bonding process between adoptive parent and child will be continuously interfered with if the contact with the birth parents is present. Finally, Byrd (1988) states that open adoption allows for both the adoptive parents and the birth parents to teach their own individual set of values to the child, where within confidential or closed adoption, the adoptive parents are able to nurture their child in a safe environment and in turn, the child will internalize a single set of parental values. Bryd (1988) contends that the only "proof" of the advantages to open adoption are through "testimonials" which do not lean toward reason and research.

Cas O'Neill (1993), an Australian social worker, defines open adoption as a continuum from..'non-identifying letters and photographs passed on through the agency, to contact in a neutral place, to a completely open situation where telephone numbers and visits are shared between families, often without surnames being exchanged," (p.45) O'Neill has noted a trend that has begun with open adoptions In Australia and New Zealand over the past few years. O'Neill (1993) states that adoptive parents are becoming more and more disappointed by birth parents that only maintain contact with their birth child and the adoptive family for the first year or two after

the adoptive placement after an open adoption agreement had been made between the adoption triad. O'Neill agrees with Byrd (1988) in that frequent contact between the birth parents and adoptive parents may raise the potential of clash of family values and rules. According to O'Neill (1993), another concern with open adoption is that it takes a lot of commitment and emotional and mental energy to develop, maintain and continue a relationship between the birth family and the adoptive family, especially when the relationship began as circumstantial. Because the relationship of the members of the adoption triad is developed over a long period of time, adoption agencies may not be able to continue their post-adoptive support (O'Neill,1993).

Again, using Berry's (1991) definitions of the continuum of open adoption, O'Neill states that various forms of open adoption are practiced between the adoption triad. Usually identifying information is not shared, therefore O'Neill's research encompasses all four of Berry's definition, but the trend would be more "restricted open adoption."

Kraft, Palombo,Mitchell, Woods and Schmidt (1985) define confidential/closed adoptions as,"...adoptions in which exchange occurs of all non-identifying and medical data regarding the adoptive and biological parents through the agency," (p.70) and open adoption is defined as, "...adoptions in which all identifying data is often exchanged and contact between parties is not only permitted but at times encouraged...contacts may occur through progress reports, letters, gifts, photographs, video tapes or even

actual visits between the adoptive and biological parents" (p.70). Kraft, et al state that their research does not distinguish between the varying types of open adoption, as they have defined it, because the "...psychological consequences.." of any form of open adoption appear to be similar. Kraft, et al (1985) state that the attitudes adoptive parents take toward the birth parents are potentially a serious interference with the bonding and attachment process with their newly adopted child. An essential factor that permits attachment and bonding to the baby, is the security the adoptive parents have in the permanence of the newly formed relationship. Kraft, et al endorse the view that if the security of a permanent family is threatened by the birth parents in an open adoption relationship, the adoptive mother may feel intruded upon,and the attachment and bonding process between adoptive mother and baby will not maintain. It is very common for adoptive parents to feel guilty,"..because of having benefited from the misfortune and pain of another human being"(Kraft,et al, p.78). The adoptive parents then feel that they "owe" the birth parents, which again hinders the bonding process, and increases adoptive parent anxieties about ongoing contact, which according to Kraft, et al (1985) may be a way adoptive parents protect the parent-child attachment and bond.

E. Grief Issues

Both proponents and opponents of open adoption agree that birth parents need to grieve the loss of their birth

child and work through their loss in their own manner and style (Curtis, 1986). According to Sorich and Siebert (1982), the birth parents' process of grieving is interrupted by continuously worrying about the well being of their birth child and fantasies surrounding him/her. Through open adoption, advocates believe that the birth parents are better suited to directly experience the separation and loss of their birth child (Sorich, et al, 1982). Chapman, Dorner, Silber and Winterberg (1986) believe that birth parents need to move through four stages of mourning before the grieving process of the adoptive placement has been fulfilled. First, the birth parents need to realize and accept the reality of the loss of their birth child. Second, the birth parents need to experience the pain of their grief in their own way. Third, the birth parents must adjust to their lives without their birth child as a constant, and fourth, the birth parents need to shift their emotional energies onto relationships and away from their birth child (Chapman, et al, 1986).

Lamperelli and Smith (1979) contend that a birth mother begins her grieving process during her pregnancy. If an adoptive placement is planned, and in anticipation to her loss, she begins to move through the stages of"...impending death," (p.86) as described by Kubler-Ross (Lamperelli, et al,1979). Various researchers have noted the commonality of birth mothers going through Kubler-Ross' (1969) stages of grief (i.e. denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance) as they are pregnant,when they deliver the baby and when they place the child for adoption. They also agree

that each stage of the adoption proceedings requires time emotionally (Harvey, 1977; Lamperelli & Smith, 1979; Millen & Roll, 1985; Rynearson, 1982). Lancette and McClure (1992) point out that many birth parents view placing their child for adoption as similar to death. However, the grieving and separation process can become more complicated because there are few formalized rituals around adoptive placements, unlike death and dying where there is usually a funeral service and a burial.

Lancette and McClure (1992) interviewed 5 women who had placed their children for adoption in order to look at their grief and loss issues. All of the birth mothers involved were from 18 -24 years of age. And had graduated from high school and 3 of whom had 1 year of college. This was the 1st pregnancy for 3 of the participants and the 3rd pregnancy for 2 of the participants. Three of the birth mothers had placed their children for adoption 2 years prior to the study, 1 birth mother had placed her child for adoption 1 year prior to the study and 1 birth mother had placed her child for adoption less than 1 year prior to the study. All of the women in the study had some degree of openness with the adoptive parents. From lengthy interviews, Lancette and McClure (1992) concluded that the main underlying themes of the 5 birth mothers was the sorrow of the loss of dreams and fantasies associated with mothering their child and marriage. Their grief revolved around the loss of their child, the self questioning, and fantasy of,"...What if I would have parented?" (p.92) as well as the fantasy that the birth father would return.

D. Studies of the Adoption Triad

1. Adoptive Parents

Rosenberg (1992) points out that the adoptive parents feel they benefited from open adoption by the following: living more honestly with adoptive status, not biological status; experiencing a more sincere, genuine encounter with their child; comfort with knowledge of the genetics of the family of origin; experiencing more authentic communication with their child about his/her birth family; experiencing positive feeling s toward their child's birth parents; and, communicating this feeling and attitude to their child.

Berry (1993) studied adoptive parents who had an open adoption relationship with the birth parents of their infant. A high degree of satisfaction was found, in that 90% of the adoptive parents were very satisfied with the ongoing contact with the birth parents at the early post adoption phase and 95% of the adoptive parents said they would do it open adoption again (Berry 1993). The major themes of comfort with open adoption for adoptive parents, according to Berry (1993) are: planned contact with the birth parents from the beginning of the adoptive placement, knowledge that the child had not been neglected or abused prior to placement, the birth mothers education level, the directness of contact, the adoptive parents older age in comparison to the birth parents and the communication between adoptive parents and birth parents prior to adoptive placement.

Belbas (1988) and McRoy, Grotevant & White (1988) agree

that the more contact the adoptive parents have with the birth parents, the less they tend to worry about being the child's parent and the more entitled they feel to parenthood.

2. Birth Parents

Chapman, Dorner, Silber and Winterberg (1986) state that the birth parents they have worked with acknowledge a deep sense of peace in knowing where their child is and that the needs of the child are being met through the adoptive parents. Birth parents who actually hand over the child to the adoptive parents feel empowered and feel a sense of control over their lives, plus it confirms that the adoptive parents are indeed the parents of the child (Chapman, et al,1986).

3. Adoptees

People who were adopted through confidential adoptions have little or no medical and social history, fear the possibility of "incestuous relationship with unknown birth family members," (p.80) fear the potential rejection of their adoptive parents if they inquire about their birth family and feel that they waste energy and emotion in fantasy and unrealistic dreams about their birth families, due to all of the unknowns (Chapman, Dorner,Silber & Winterberg,1987b).

McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988), worked with 100 adult adoptees who were placed for adoption through confidential adoption, but were involved in the search process for their

birth parents. The adoptees stated that due to limited background information, they were searching for ,information to fill the emptiness and to resolve the confusion, regarding their background; information to increase self understanding and self awareness and, information about their medical background.

Chapter III.

Discussion

The literature about open adoption is largely based on "anecdotal experience" due in fact to the newness of open adoption as standard practice. There are no central government agencies that tabulate open adoption adoptions, therefore it is difficult to research open adoptions, as they are not reported to one specific office state of federal office (Feigelman & Silverman, 1983).

The biggest gap throughout the literature, is that there is no set definition of "open adoption." Because there is no standard definition for "open adoption" and no consensus among professional as to what "open adoption" means, McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) believe the lack of definition is part of the controversy surrounding open adoption. The Ad Hoc Committee to Reevaluate Adoptive Placement Philosophy, a nationwide group of social work professionals whose goal was to investigate adoption policies and define open adoption did so in 1981 (McRoy, et al, 1988; Lindsay & Monserrat, 1990). The definition is as follows:

> "Open Placement recognizes that adoption is a life long process involving the adoptee, birth parents and adoptive parents. Open adoption affirms that an adoptee, although relinquished and a full member of his/her adoptive family, nevertheless remains connected to his/her birth family. Although legal and nurturing rights are transferred from birth parents to adoptive parents, both sets of parents recognize the importance of keeping open avenues of communication to share valuable information during the child's minority years. Placement agencies accept the responsibility to educate and counsel both birth parents and adoptive parents for a fuller understanding of adoption as a unique institution t which both sets of parents have mutual concerns and obligations. In Open Placement, agencies will expand their services to respond sensitively to the evolving

needs of all three parties to adoption." (McRoy, et al,p.18 & 19, 1988)

As in any analysis, one is able to discern whatever one wants from this definition, Moreover, confidentiality and withholding personal, identifying information is still possible with this definition, while the essence of "open adoption" is to disclose information and get rid of the secrecy surrounding it (Curtis, 1986). Open adoption to one adoptive parent may mean sending non-identifying letters and photos through the adoption agency three times a year, while another adoptive parent views open adoption as ongoing face to face contact and communication with their adopted child's birth parents and family throughout the life of the child.

Being that open adoption can be defined in many ways, Berry (1991) has given us 4 definitions of open adoption (restricted open adoption, semi-open adoption, fully open adoption and continuing open adoption) in a continuum which may help those involved in the adoption process become more aware of what is meant by open adoption. Gritter (1997) defines open adoption as having"...four observable ingredients: the birth family selects the adoptive family, the families meet each other face to face, they exchange full identifying information and they establish a significant, ongoing relationship"(p.20). Gritter's (1997) definition of open adoption, could be used in the social work field, where it is used to educate not only those members of the adoption triad, but the social work community and society at large. This definiton allows for varying degrees of openess in the adoption arrangement, in that each memebre of the adoption

traid is able to voice her/his opinion of what is and what is not comfortable to them individaully, therefore allowing room to grow and develop into this newly formed relationship. If an adoptive family and a birth family decide to make an open adoption agreement, over time and in thier own ways full identifying information should be shared in that it frees the relationship of secrecy and shame and allows for a foundation of trust, empathy and honesty.

Due to the fact that there is not a set definition of "open adoption," it was difficult for this researcher to analyze the data in manner specific to one set practice of open adoption. Within different research contexts, the definitons of what open adoption is, contradicted other researchers, leaving it difficult to interpret what the actual relationships were between members of the adoption traid. In many cases, (Etter,1993; McRoy,et al,1994; Siegel,1993; Campbell,et al,1991; Berry,1991;& Johnson, 1996) the participants in the study had varying degrees of open adoption, therefore, measuring the outcomes of these open adoptions was difficult, especially because they were not categorized.

Small sample sizes is another potential weakness in the research on open adoption. Due to the varying degrees of open adoption, a larger sample is needed in order to look at the different levels of open adoption and deem the research as valid. McRoy, et al (1988) had a sample size of 17 adoptions, including all adoptive mothers and fathers, 15 birth mothers, 1 birth father and 1 birth grand mother. Johnson (1996) had a sample size of 5 adoptive couples and

Berry's (1991) sample size was 21 adoptive couples. This researcher also believes that if the research is to be based on the open adoption experience as many members of the adoption triad, including birth fathers, must be involved in the sample if possible. Due to the sensitivity of adoption, it is most likely difficult to obtain a large sample, especially with specific types of research methods. (ie. snowballing, one shot studies)

The lack of longitudinal studies of outcomes of open adoption relationships between adoptive parents, birth parents and adoptees is also problematic. Once young adoptees have reached adulthood, they may be able to (along with their birth parents and adoptive parents), better assist the adoption field in an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the open adoption experience.

The literature on open adoption, does not make a distinction on race, sexual orientation, single parenting or religious affiliation with regard to adopting a child, or placing a child for adoption. Being that this study is an historical overview of open adoption, this researcher did not research transracial/cultural adoption, gay/lesbian adoption, kinship adoption or single parent adoption, yet feel strongly that they are important issues in adoption and need to be further researched and addressed in the adoption and social work field.

Open Adoption as a Social Policy

In this researchers opinion, open adoption may be viewed as a new form of adoption social policy. Jansson (1994)

defines social policy as, "..a collective strategy to address social problems" (Jansson, p.4). Although open adoptions are not legal and/or binding agreements, it is hard to ignore it as an emerging way of dealing with the social problem of children needing parenting. The following brief framework for policy analysis is offered as one way to look at the new response to the needs of children in our society.

Goals and Objectives of Open Adoption

The goals and objectives of open adoption, in this researchers opinion, are to 1) eliminate secrecy and shame in making an adoption plan: 2) create a family in which the adoptee has ongoing contact with his/her birth family, which in turn increases self awareness and knowledge: 3) to create a non-traditional family through adoption: and, 4) to decrease the grief an loss issues of birth parents who make an adoption plan.

The goals and objectives of open adoption represent an attempt to undo some traditions of adoption. Society continues to view birth parents, especially women, who place their children for adoption as immoral and uneducated. The stigma and the label placed on a woman for placing a child for adoption is similar to women in the early 1900's who were deemed "immoral and in peril..."(Caplan, 1990).Two assumptions of open adoption regarding the adoptive parents are the fear that the birth parent will "kidnap" or take the baby away and the feelings adoptive parents may have that the child is not "their own." A societal assumption toward

adoptees is that they have no self identity due to their adoptive placement and therefore are able to generalize that their birth parents simply gave them away.

Underlying Assumptions and Values

The values of open adoption contradict the assumptions of open adoption and negate many of the societal stereotypes. To reiterate what Rosenberg (1992) contends, adoptive parents feel that they live more honestly with themselves and others with he status of being adoptive parents, rather than biological. this allows the adoptive couple to address their infertility experience and have a more "genuine" and "authentic" (Rosenberg, p.90) relationship with their child and his/her birth parents. Rosenberg (1992) also points out that adoptive parents feel a more positive experience toward their child's birth parents, which in turn creates a more confident feeling toward their child and adoption in general. Berry (1993) found that adoptive parents' comfort levels surrounding open adoption clustered around planning the contact with the birth parents, knowing that their child had not been abused or neglected by their birth parents(s), the higher level of education the birth mother had, the older age of the birth mother and the direct communication from even before placement between the adoptive parents and the birth parents.

According to Chapman, Dorner, Silber and Winterberg (1986) birth parents feel empowered and in control of their lives after an open adoption placement because they know

where the child is and that the childs' needs are being meet. Birth parents are able to feel confident in their decision of placing their child with adoptive parents that they selected and have an ongoing relationship with.

Because there is little longitudinal research on children of open adoption it is hard to say what an adult adoptee of an open adoption situation would say regarding their experience. However, there is evidence that supports the idea that adult adoptees who were placed in closed adoption situations have very little social and medical background information, but more so, according to McRoy, Grotevant & White (1988), many adult adoptees have felt a sense of confusion and a feeling of emptiness regarding the lack of information they have about their birth parents.

Strengths and Weaknesses

Proponents of open adoption believe that open communication regarding adoption between the members of the adoption triad help validate the adopted childs' sense of identity and self awareness (Melina, 1993; Silber & Dorner, 1990; Rosenberg,1992). Curtis (1986) expresses that the adopted person has an "innate human need" (Curtis, p.438) to know about their family of origin, which enables the adopted person to gain a better sense of self and self identity.

Silber and Dorner (1990) contend if secrecy is eliminated from the adoption process, adoptive parents will experience fewer fears and a decreased amount of stress. According to Watson (1988),adopted children have the

potential to believe something is wrong with them, due to the secrecy and silence around their adoption placement. Etter (1993) found that ongoing communication between the adoptive family and the birth family actually helps the attachment and bonding process of the child to his/her adoptive parents. Similarly, Silverstein and Demick (1994) addressed that adoptive parents have less worries and stresses about the bonding and attachment process to their newly adopted child, due to empathy toward the birth parents and a sense of security that the birth parents selected them to be the adoptive parents.

As stated earlier, the lack of a comprehensive definition of "open adoption" is a weakness in how one defines open adoption and how the literature bases its' research and conclusions. The lack of a comprehensive definition creates an uncertainty about the validity of the research supporting open adoption as a fully-disclosed, identifying relationship between the members of the adoption triad.

Opponents of open adoption believe that open adoption has several limitations. Rosenberg (1992) discusses the potential for a lengthy grieving process for the birth parents, which could interfere with the bonding process between the child and his/her new parents. In the same regard, Berry (1991) states that birth mothers who make open adoption placement plans for their children may have a longer period of seconded guessing themselves and a longer grief and loss period. McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) believe that open adoption limits adoptive parents in that

they may feel they are forced into meeting the birth parents' needs before their own, with regard to comfort level of ongoing contact and extended birth family members.

Chapter IV.

Summary and Conclusion

Advocates of open adoption agree that mutual trust, motivation and maturity are key elements in any relationship between adoptive parents and birth parents (Silber, 1992) An open adoption relationship can be very complex, however the literature and research indicates that open adoption relationships are satisfying to all members of the adoption triad (Johnson, 1996). If the adoptive parents and the birth parents continue to work on establishing a healthy relationship and keep the best interest of the child as its focus, a healthy relationship is obtainable.

Proponents of open adoption believe that standard open adoption practice facilitates better mental health for children by encouraging conversation within the family regarding adoption and its issues (Brodinsky & Schecter, 1990; Melina, 1993; Severson, 1991; Silber & Dorner, 1990). Watson (1988) suggests that by integrating a child's birth family history into their life, a healthier identity formation will develop and the child will feel more comfortable being an adopted child in an adopted home.

With regard to birth parents involved in an open adoption, Silber & Dorner (1990) believe that the birth parents will experience more peace with their decision and feel more in control of their lives after acting maturely and responsibly in making an open adoption placement of their child. Birth parents who place their child in an open adoption relationship feel more resolved with grief issues

and claim to have a greater ability to acknowledge and understand the legal rights of the adoptive parents to the child (Berry, 1991).

Silverstein and Demick (1994) endorse the view that adoptive parents experience less fears regarding the birth parents because they have direct access to the birth parents, therefore enabling the enhancement of trust between the adoption triad. Being that secrecy is not a component of the adoption agreement, adoptive parents experience less anxiety and stress surrounding the birth parents (Silber & Dorner, 1990).

Opponents of open adoption contend that there are risks involved to the members of the adoption triad. According to Rosenberg (1992), in an open adoption relationship,birth parents may experience jealousy toward the adoptive parents and have a hard time emotionally of "letting go," which could interfere with the adoptive parent-child relationship and attachment/bonding process. Prolonged grief and uncertainty about the future may also be a risk birth parents may encounter after the open adoption placement has been made (Berry, 1991).

McRoy, Grotevant and White (1988) suggest that adoptive parents may feel pressured into meeting the needs of the birth parents, before meeting those of their newly formed family, which in turn, may affect the parent-child relationship. Having negative feelings, attitudes and beliefs about the birth parents may create conflicts within the adoptive family, including a resurgence around the grief and loss of issues of infertility (Rosenberg,1992).

Potential risks involved with an open adoption relationship for the child are fears that the birth parents may come back to reclaim them and a skewed sense of loyalty if the birth parents are ever present. (Rosenberg, 1992; Siegel, 1993). Berry (1993) suggests that an adopted child may feel that his/her adoptive placement is not permanent which could interfere with the parent-child bonding process.

More research is needed about open adoption, especially longitudinal studies that survey the outcomes of adult adoptees, placed as infants in an open adoption situation. Additional research is needed on problem areas that arise in open adoption relationships. There is some information on potential problems immediately after the adoptive placement, with regard to grief, separation and loss, however, there is little information about for instance, open adoption and the teenage years. As new studies evolve, members of the adoption triad need to keep abreast of the research in order to continue to make positive, wise decisions regarding openness and possible implications.

Open adoption education needs to be expanded so birth parents or adoptive parents considering adoption have a broader understanding of what open adoption truly means, rather than the underlying assumptions and stereotypes of open adoption. Continuous counseling and education after the open adoption placement is essential for the members of the adoption triad. Good post placement services to adoptive families begins with good preplacement services (Barth & Berry, 1988).

According to Connelly (1996),"..a healthy relationship between the birth parents and adoptive parents needs courage, compassion and common sense: courage to meet each other, rather than giving in to one's fears of the unknown; compassion will illuminate reason for staying in touch, and common sense will recognize and honor the child's need to know who he looks like, and will also aid in recognizing that adoption is not co-parenting"(p.8).

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