Openness and Secrecy in Adoptive Families and Possible Effects on the Interpersonal Relationships of Adult Adoptees

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Abstract

The aim of the current study was to investigate the possible impact that secrecy within adoptive families can have on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees. As part of a larger study, 144 adoptees completed a variety of relationship measures and questionnaires tapping openness/secrecy and parental characteristics within the adoptive families. Those whose adoptive families were more open and honest tended to be closer to their adoptive parents and report that their parents had been more caring and less controlling. In contrast, those whose adoptive families were more secretive scored higher on measures of social and family loneliness, avoidant and anxious attachment, and risk in intimacy. Fifty-seven of the participants were interviewed further about their adoptive experiences and interpersonal relationships. Thematic analysis indicated that openness in adoptive families was helpful in providing adoptees with a model for their own interpersonal relationships and also in assisting adoptees with identity, search, and reunion issues. Conversely, secrecy in adoptive families often led to difficulties in relationships with the adoptive family and general identity and trust issues. Secrecy also seemed to impact negatively on search and reunion experiences. The implications of these findings for adoption practice and counselling will be discussed.

From approximately the 1920s through to the 1970s, adoption in Australia and most other western countries occurred in a closed system where adoption records were kept secret (Swain, 1992). The original birth certificate was replaced with an amended birth certificate containing the names of the adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2005) and adoption was seen as "exactly like building a family biologically" (Hartman, 1993, p. 87). The closed adoption system was challenged in the 70s and there were moves in many countries for adoption records to be opened and for various types of open adoption to be explored (Brodzinsky, 2005). In Australia, adoption legislation was amended in the early 1990s, allowing adoptees over the age of 18 and their birthmothers to have access to identifying information. However, some states also have legislation in place whereby either party can place a veto on the information being released. Thus, secrecy can still persist in spite of legislative changes.

Those who adopted a child in the closed adoption era may have little or no information they can pass on to their adopted child regarding his or her biological heritage. However, the way in which adoptive parents manage the topic of adoption

(e.g., when to tell children they are adopted, what information to provide, how to handle questions that arise), may have an effect on the adoptee's later adjustment. Indeed, Brodzinsky (2005) argues that it is not whether or not the adoption is closed or open that matters, but the extent to which adoptive parents are open with their children regardless of the information they have available. Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, and McRoy (2003) have recently proposed the Family Adoption Communication (FAC) Model, which outlines the different disclosure decisions that adoptive parents make at various stages of their child's development. At any stage, parents can share all known information while actively seeking more, share all of the information they know but without actively seeking more, share some information but not all, or withhold whatever information they know. While this model is useful in describing the different decisions adoptive parents make regarding the information they reveal or withhold at different stages, it does not look more specifically at the actual impact that openness or secrecy can have on the adoptee.

Karpel (1980) argued that family secrets in general have consequences at various levels: (a) informational (e.g., distortion or deception); (b) emotional (e.g., anxiety, fear, or confusion); relational (e.g., the violation of trust); and (d) practical (e.g., the danger of disclosure). These consequences can also be applied to secrecy in adoption. While many researchers have looked at the effects of secrecy at the informational and emotional levels, few empirical studies have looked specifically at the effect of secrecy on interpersonal relationships. In keeping with Karpel's analysis, Schooler and Norris (2002) note that secrecy can undermine trust and intimacy within the adoptive family. Verrier (1993) has also observed that relationship difficulties are the main reasons for an adoptee to seek counselling. While there could be many causes of such difficulties, it is unclear what impact secrecy within the adoptive family may have on interpersonal relationships outside of the family.

The aim of the current study was to examine the possible impact that secrecy within adoptive families can have on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees. It was predicted that greater secrecy in adoptive families would be associated with poorer relationships between the adoptee and his or her adoptive parents (i.e., less closeness, less perceived parental care, higher perceived parental control, and greater family loneliness). We also explored the relationship between secrecy and numerous other interpersonal variables (i.e., loneliness; attachment style; risk in intimacy; and satisfaction, commitment, and trust in close relationships).

Method

Participants

Participants at Time 1 included 144 adult adoptees who were part of a larger study comparing adoptees and non-adoptees on various measures. All adoptees were born in Australia, had Anglo-Australian backgrounds, and were adopted by non-relatives within the first two years after birth. Ages ranged from 18 to 66, with a mean age of 39.21 years. Most of the participants were female (76.1%), were in a marital or de facto relationship (62%), and had completed some additional education after high school (79%). Participants completed a second questionnaire approximately six months later (Time 2). There was a very low attrition rate, with 138 adoptees (95.83%) participating at Time 2. Fifty-seven adoptees (43 females and 14 males) also took part in interviews at Time 3. Ages for the interview group ranged from 18 to 63, with a mean age of 38.23 years. Just over half were in a marital or de facto

relationship (54.4%) and most had completed some education beyond high school (73.7%).

Measures

At Time 1, participants completed demographic questions and items relating to their adoption, search, and reunion experiences. Of particular relevance to the current study was an item measuring the adoptive family's attitude toward discussing the topic of adoption. Response options included: Open and honest discussion (my questions were answered and discussion was encouraged); on a 'need to know' basis (my questions were answered but discussion was not encouraged); taboo subject (discussion seemed to make family members uncomfortable and was discouraged); or "I was given lies and misinformation". As some participants checked both the "taboo" and "lies and misinformation" categories, these categories were combined into a secrecy category for the analyses. Thus, participants' responses were coded as 1 (*open and honest*), 2 (*need to know*), or 3 (*secrecy*). Participants also rated their current emotional closeness to each of their adoptive parents on a scale from 1 (*extremely distant*) to 6 (*extremely close*). A number of standardised measures were also completed, with the Attachment Style Questionnaire (ASQ; Feeney, Noller, & Hanrahan, 1994) and the Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) being relevant for the current study. The ASQ consists of 40 items that are rated on a scale from 1 (*totally disagree*) to 6 (*totally agree*). The two-factor solution was used to derive measures of avoidant attachment (16 items) and anxious attachment (13 items). The PBI consists of 25 items tapping the extent to which parents exhibited caring or overprotective (controlling) attitudes and behaviours while the participant was growing up. Each of the adoptive parents was rated separately, thus yielding four subscores (i.e., mother care and overprotection and father care and overprotection).

At Time 2, participants again completed the ASQ and also responded to various measures of interpersonal relationships. Measures of relevance to the current study included the Risk in Intimacy Inventory (RII; Pilkington & Richardson, 1988); the social, family, and romantic loneliness subscales from the Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults (SELSA; DiTommaso & Spinner, 1993); the relationship satisfaction and commitment subscales from the Investment Model Scale (IMS; Rusbult, Martz, & Agnew, 1998); and the Trust in Close Relationships Scale – Short Version (TS) adapted by Boon and Holmes (1992).

Fifty-seven participants were interviewed at Time 3 regarding their adoption, search, and reunion experiences. Each participant was interviewed by a same-sex researcher who followed a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview was specifically designed to gain further information regarding participants' relationships with adoptive parents, friends, romantic partners, and birth relatives (for those who had had reunions). Of most interest to the current study was the interview material regarding the degree of openness or secrecy within the adoptive family and the possible impact of those communication patterns on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees.

Procedure

Adoptees were recruited from various sources, including advertisements, university newsletters, flyers left in doctors' and counsellors' waiting rooms, adoption support groups, psychology classes, and networks available to the researchers.

Inclusion criteria were that they had to be Anglo-Australian and adopted by non-relatives within two years of their birth. At Time 1, participants were sent a package including a cover letter, consent form, questionnaire, and a reply-paid envelope. Participants were contacted again approximately six months later (Time 2) to complete the follow-up questionnaire. No incentives were offered for participation at Time 1, but participants received either movie vouchers or $20 if they completed the follow-up questionnaire at Time 2. Fifty-seven of the participants were also invited to take part in an interview (Time 3). These participants were chosen to reflect a wide variety of adoption, search, and reunion experiences (including both searchers and non-searchers).

Coding of Interview Transcripts

As part of the larger study, a thematic analysis similar to the one described by Joffey and Yardley (2004) was conducted in order to investigate the extent to which adoption experiences might impact on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees. The first and second authors first read 15 of the transcripts and independently noted themes that were relevant to this overall research question. Themes were organised under higher-order categories where relevant. The two coders then reached consensus on the coding labels to be used for the remainder of the analysis and a coding manual was developed. The second author extracted quotes from all transcripts that pertained to the main research question and coded all of these quotes using the established coding categories. The first author then independently coded a random selection of 50% of the quotes and the two coders discussed and resolved any discrepancies. As a result of these discussions, some category labels and definitions in the coding manual were modified. Consensus was reached on the final codes and categories. For the current paper, we will focus on the categories that related specifically to the possible impact that openness or secrecy within the adoptive family can have on the interpersonal relationships of adult adoptees.

Results

Quantitative Findings

For the current study, the ASQ was the only measure completed at both Time 1 and Time 2. Statistically significant Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients indicated that greater secrecy in adoptive families was associated with less emotional closeness to adoptive mother ($r = -.50$) and father ($r = -.46$), less perceived parental care from mother ($r = -.51$) and father ($r = -.48$), greater perceived overprotection or control from mother ($r = .38$) and father ($r = .34$), and greater family loneliness ($r = .27$). With regard to other interpersonal relationships, secrecy within adoptive families was significantly associated with greater social loneliness ($r = .31$), risk in intimacy ($r = .28$), avoidant attachment ($r's = .27$ at Time 1 and Time 2), and anxious attachment ($r = .22$ at Time 1 and .21 at Time 2). Secrecy was not significantly correlated with romantic loneliness, trust in close relationships, relationship satisfaction, or relationship commitment. As age correlated significantly with secrecy ($r = .23$), partial correlations were also computed controlling for age. The same pattern of results was found, except that the correlation between openness and anxious attachment at Time 1 was no longer significant.

Qualitative Findings Regarding the Impact of Openness

Openness within adoptive families helped adoptees in their (a) resolution of adoption-related issues such as identity and belonging, (b) search and reunion experiences, and (c) relationships with others.

Resolution of adoption-related issues. Many participants appreciated the fact that their adoptive parents had told them about the adoption when they were quite young, and this often helped the adoptee's sense of identity and belonging. For example, some adoptees indicated that being told early in life meant that adoption was not an issue, they always felt that they belonged, and that there was no sense of confusion later. A 30-year-old male participant also noted how his adoptive parents' openness helped him to deal with adoption-related issues while growing up. Some of the other children at school had teased him for being adopted, and he was able to discuss it with his parents and together come up with a solution to deal with the teasing. As he noted, "I don't think adoption itself is more or less, better or worse than biological sort of things. I think the way it's explained and managed and described is what has impact on people".

Search and reunion experiences. While many adoptees noted that their adoptive parents had been very supportive throughout their search and reunion experiences, some also noted how their parents' openness had particularly impacted positively on their searches and reunions. For example, a 39-year-old female adoptee noted that the positive outcome of her reunion had a lot to do with the fact that she had never had anything about the adoption hidden from her. A 36-year-old male also noted that he never had any reservations about searching for his biological parents because everything about his adoption had always been out in the open. Another male participant had such an open relationship with his adoptive parents that he was happy for them to read letters that he had sent to, and received from, his birthmother.

Relationships with others. Some participants noted that their adoptive parents had been good role models of openness and that this enabled the adoptees to be open in their own relationships. For example, a 31-year-old male said that his romantic partners always knew that he was adopted: "We were always pretty open about talking about things. I suppose that's just the way that ... because I grew up that way. It certainly helped in a relationship to be able to sit down and say, 'Hey, I've got a problem with this, can we work things out?'".

Qualitative Findings Regarding the Impact of Secrecy

Conversely, secrecy and/or lies or misinformation within adoptive families seemed to impact negatively on the adoptee's (a) relationships with adoptive parents, (b) identity, search, and reunion experiences, and (c) relationships with other people.

Relationships with adoptive parents. A number of adoptees noted how their adoptive parents' unwillingness to openly discuss adoption impacted negatively on their relationship with them. Adoptees who found out later in life that they were adopted were especially likely to experience a loss of trust or sense of betrayal. For example, one woman said that the late disclosure of her adoptive status broke the trust with her adoptive parents. Another felt very cheated and that she had been lied to all her life. In some cases, participants mentioned actual lies they had been told by adoptive parents. For example, one woman found out she was adopted via an anonymous telegram, but her adoptive mother denied it. Both adoptive parents had

numerous opportunities after that when they could have told her the truth, but they both died still holding onto their secret.

Identity, search, and reunion experiences. Adoptive parents' secrecy regarding adoption can also negatively affect an adoptee's exploration of identity issues and their search and reunion experiences. In keeping the adoption a secret, or making it a taboo topic, some adoptive parents made it difficult for their adopted children to find out more about their backgrounds. For example, when one adoptee was almost 40, her adoptive mother revealed that she had always known the birthmother's name, where she lived, and the circumstances of the adoption. She had gone to great lengths to keep this information secret, even to the point of using razor blades to cut the birthmother's name out of the adoption papers. Another woman suspected that her adoptive mother knew more than she was saying. However, every time the adoptee broaches the subject, her adoptive mother "cries and she gets all hysterical. So it's just a no go zone". Not only does secrecy affect whether or not adoptees find out certain facts about their own identities or backgrounds, but it can also affect the way in which search and reunion experiences progress. For example, some adoptees also engage in secrecy by not telling their adoptive parents of their search and/or reunion. While there are different reasons for such secrecy (e.g., not wanting to hurt the adoptive parents), some adoptees noted that they were secretive because of the secrecy of their adoptive parents. As one woman explained, "I didn't feel I could tell them ... because I, when I confronted them about, about being adopted, they were in complete denial ... I didn't tell them because, you know, it would just upset them ... But part of me also goes, 'well why should I talk to you about it, you know, because you know, you never spoke to me about it'".

Relationships with other people. Some participants noted that their adoptive parents told them not to talk about the adoption to others, thereby closing the adoptee off from other possible sources of support. Moreover, some adoptees noted that the lack of trust they felt towards their adoptive parents also affected trust in other areas. One participant noted that she finds it hard to believe what others say. Another woman noted that secrecy had affected trust in her romantic relationships: "... there's definitely a trust issue with it, like in my life I can see that very much. Like I've never gotten married, I've never sort of had a lot of key milestone markers that most people have had, and I don't mind that so much, but I just find that it's hard to trust people". However, secrecy within the adoptive family does not always translate into trust problems in other areas. One adoptee noted that the "the total cone of silence" surrounding her adoption had actually prompted her to be the opposite in her own relationships, perhaps even being too open at times.

Discussion

As predicted, greater secrecy in adoptive families was associated with poorer relationships with adoptive parents (i.e., less emotional closeness and perceived parental care, but greater perceived parental control and family loneliness). One reason for this is that secrecy on the part of adoptive parents breaks trust and intimacy (e.g., Schooler & Norris, 2002). This also seems to be borne out by our qualitative data. However, it is important to note that secrecy does not occur in isolation, but exists within a dynamic family system. In that regard, secrecy could be both a cause and a symptom of dysfunctional family relationships.

Our analyses regarding the possible impact of secrecy on other interpersonal relationships were exploratory. Results from our quantitative data indicated that greater secrecy by adoptive parents was related to greater social loneliness, risk in intimacy, and anxious and avoidant attachment. However, secrecy was not significantly related to any of the romantic variables (i.e., romantic loneliness or satisfaction, commitment, and trust in romantic relationships). At first it seems surprising that secrecy would be unrelated to trust. However, the items on the trust scale relate specifically to trust with a particular spouse or romantic partner, rather than trust in general. If adoptive parents are secretive regarding adoption-related issues, the violation of trust seems to relate more directly to the relationship between the adoptee and the adoptive parents. Still, our qualitative data reveal that at least for some adoptees, problems in trust did transfer to other relationships including romantic relationships. For others, the secrecy in their adoptive families actually prompted them be more open in their interpersonal relationships. This underscores the importance of considering each adoptee's individual narrative in a counselling situation, as different issues will arise for different individuals.

The current study is limited by the correlational nature of the data, thus making statements of cause and effect rather speculative. We have also only focused on the adoptee's perspective. In future research, it would be useful to also assess the impact of secrecy from the perspective of the adoptive parents and birth relatives. In the current paper, we have only reported on secrecy within the adoptive family. In our ongoing research, however, we will also be looking at the impact of secrecy in other adoption relationships (e.g., secrecy within the birth family). Some themes emerging from our qualitative data also need further verification due to the small number of quotes in some categories.

Although adoption practice has already moved towards more open arrangements, practitioners still need to help individuals who came through the closed system. As noted earlier, however, the extent of openness and secrecy within adoptive families is possibly more important than whether or not the adoption itself was open or closed (Brodzinsky, 2005). Greater openness in exploring adoption-related issues appears to strengthen adoptive family relationships, whereas secrecy can undermine bonds between adoptive parents and their children. Counsellors also need to be sensitive to the emerging needs of adoptive parents. In some cases, adoptive parents have withheld information or even lied, perhaps as a way of keeping control, protecting themselves or their children, or hiding shame (Schooler & Norris, 2002). However, Schooler and Norris also note that "it was not unusual for agencies themselves to edit or even fabricate information that was told to the adoptive parents at the time of the adoption" (p. 5), so that they have also been betrayed. A word of caution is also needed in dealing with openness and secrecy in a therapeutic situation. It has so far been assumed that openness is always good and that secrecy is always bad. However, openness and secrecy may be thought of as a continuum that can change over time depending on the needs of each member of the adoptive family, including the developmental stage of the child (Brodzinsky, 2005; Wrobel et al., 2003). As more information is gained regarding the impact of openness and secrecy, practitioners will be in a better position to assist all members of the adoption triad.

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