

Communicative Openness About Adoption and Interest in Contact in a Sample of Domestic and Intercountry Adolescent Adoptees

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ABSTRACT. Adolescent intercountry ($n = 122$) and domestic ($n = 40$) adoptees and their adoptive parents were asked about their views on communicative openness. The adoptees were also asked for their thoughts on birth parents and contact. A modest association between communicative openness and feelings about adoptive status and self-esteem was found. Girls were more interested in many aspects of their adoptions than boys. Compared with the situation at 11 years of age, there was greater parent-child agreement on whether the child had difficulties talking about adoption. Nevertheless, at age 15, children were still nearly twice as likely to report difficulties talking about adoption issues than their adoptive parents realized. At the age of 15, the majority of the adoptees expressed a desire for contact with birth relatives, but this was a reduction from the numbers at age 11. They also reported finding it easier to talk about adoption issues than they did at the age of 11. The implications for policy and practice are discussed.

KEYWORDS. Communicative openness, adoption, intercountry adoption, contact

INTRODUCTION

Communicative Openness Within Adoption

It is generally held that having an open and honest dialogue regarding adoption, termed communicative openness, between adoptive parents and their child is beneficial to all (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrich, 1996; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 1998; Berge, Mendenhall, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2006), but questions remain. Do adoptive parents and their adopted children share a common view regarding the degree of openness? In families in which there is less communicative openness, are there any negative consequences? Does the level of curiosity change over time? Is the degree of openness determined by the amount of contact, or do adopted children who are in closed adoptions have the same level of interest and desire for contact with their birth families?

Communicative openness in adoptive families is a complex construct that has been defined as having a number of dimensions (Brodzinsky, 2005; Neil, 2007): communication with the adopted child about adoption; comfort with the idea that the child is connected also to another family; empathy with the adopted child; attitudes toward communication with the birth family; and empathy with the birth family. These dimensions

describe the adoptive parents' approach to openness, which may or may not be reciprocated by the child or young person. This paper focuses on the degree of communication between the adopted child and the adoptive parent about adoption and birth parents as described by both parties. This further develops the construct of openness from both perspectives, rather than perceiving it solely from the viewpoint of the adoptive parents or the young person.

There may be differences in perceptions between children and their parents in the importance and ease of discussion about adoption issues. It was found in an earlier report of the English and Romanian (ERA) study that adoptive parents did not always appreciate how hard it was for their adopted children aged 11 to talk to them about adoption (Hawkins, Beckett, Castle, Groothues, Sonuga-Barke, Colvert, Kreppner, Stevens, & Rutter, 2007) and that for children who found it harder to talk, there was an association with lower self-esteem (Beckett, Hawkins, Castle, Groothues, Sonuga-Barke, Colvert, Kreppner, Stevens, & Rutter, 2008). This study will explore whether the patterns found at age 11 in the ERA study continues for the same adopted young people studied at age 15.

The degree to which adoptive parents and children talk about adoption may be determined by many factors: the amount of information that the adoptive parents have about the child's background, which may be limited; their views of the birth family; the developmental stage of the child; the degree of contact that the adoptive parent has with the birth family; and the individual style and approach of the adoptive parents and of the adopted children. Also, children with extremely adverse early experiences may have a more marked level of cognitive or behavioral difficulties that may make communication more difficult or stressful.

Whereas the amount of information that the adoptive parent has about an adopted child may influence the degree of communication, if for example a child was abandoned, and whether the adopters had met the birth family, the particular approach of the adopters and strategies used to address these issues will also vary; some adoptive families are able to talk about the issues freely, while others may feel more constrained. Openness could be influenced by the age of the child at adoption, with adoptive parents of babies perhaps more likely to want to deny the child's difference (Kirk, 1964) and not focus on their adoption. In contrast, when children are placed past infancy, this may be less likely. Other reasons for difficulties in talking may be explained by individual differences in personality.

The constraints in communication may be on one or other side of the adoption dyad, but open communication may be impeded for both

parties if one or the other feels such constraints. The adoptive parents' approach may enable discussion, as indicated by Wrobel et al. (1998, p. 653): "... adoptive parents who provide information about birth parents to their adopted children create a climate where adopted children can act to satisfy their curiosity." Adopted children may also set up barriers by not wanting to discuss their background, and it may feel intrusive to try to persuade them to talk. The degree of communication is also likely to change throughout the child's development, with older children wanting more information about their adoptions (Wrobel et al., 1996, 1998). It is thought that communication about adoption within the family passes through a number of stages, primarily determined by the child's developmental stage and their particular informational needs at that stage (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003; Wrobel, Grotevant, Berge, Mendenhall, & McRoy, 2003). Sex has also been found to be important, with girls desiring more communicative openness, being more interested in their adoptions and birth families than boys (Wrobel et al., 1996), and thinking about their biological families more than boys (Irhammer & Cederblad, 2000).

Different levels of openness can also exist within the same family; Beckett et al. (2008) found that children within the same family reported different views about how easy or difficult it is to talk about adoption and that parents can often underestimate the difficulties their children have when discussing adoption. Wrobel et al. (1998) and Wrobel, Grotevant, et al. (2003) found that children communicate differently with each parent. Hawkins et al. (2007) found no differences in difficulty talking about adoption between domestic (United Kingdom) and intercountry adoptees.

Children who have contact with birth relatives are thought to be more communicative at home about adoption: openness thus breeds openness. This has been found to be true in both domestic (Wrobel et al., 1998) and intercountry adoptions (Irhammer & Cederblad, 2000). When there is no direct or indirect contact, how does this affect communication? Do adopted young people who do not have contact feel a sense of connection to their birth families; do they have a sense of having two sets of parents? Contact per se may not be as important in determining openness as other factors, such as adoptive parental warmth, emotional sensitivity, and support from adoptive parents (Brodzinsky, 2005, 2006). Thus, *communicative openness* within the adoptive family may be more important than *structural openness* (where there is an arrangement for continuing contact) in determining outcomes.

This paper will investigate communicative openness in two samples of children adopted into British families in the early 1990s: one sample adopted from Romania after experiencing severe early deprivation (most [87 percent] from institutional settings) and a sample of children adopted within the United Kingdom who were largely relinquished as babies. In both groups of adoptions, the possibility of continuing contact was not widely anticipated at the time of the adoption because of several factors, including the practice at the time, logistical difficulties, and the wishes of the adopters and some birth parents (Beckett, Bredenkamp, Castle, Groothues, & the English and Romanian Adoptees Study Team, 1999; Castle, Beckett, Groothues, & the ERA Study Team, 2000). The paper will also examine the wishes of the adoptees in relation to contact and how this relates to openness. This research study will add to the growing body of research with adoptees (Wrobel et al., 1996; Thomas, Beckford, Lowe, & Murch, 1999; Mendenhall, Berge, Wrobel, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2004; Morgan, 2006; Berge et al., 2006) to establish the degree of openness and its association with outcomes.

The ERA Study

The ERA project is a large, longitudinal study of the development of 217 adoptees from Romania ($n = 165$) and the United Kingdom ($n = 52$). The children, their parents, and their teachers have participated in waves of data collection at the ages of 4, 6, 11, and 15 years. The information collected on adoption forms only part of a much larger investigation into outcomes (see Rutter, Beckett, Castle, Colvert, Kreppner, Mehta, Stevens, & Sonuga-Barke, 2007 for a review of the study to date).

AIMS

The aims of this paper are to examine first the degree of communicative openness in the families, second the adopted young people's thoughts about their birth families and their desire for contact, and third change in the adoptees' views on communicative openness between the ages of 11 and 15; fourth to compare the views of adoptees and their adoptive parents; and finally to examine the association between communicative openness and a sense of well-being. Throughout the analyses, comparisons are made

according to type of adoption (domestic/intercountry), sex, and age at placement.

METHODS

Sample

The overall sample is composed of two groups; a group of children adopted from Romania and a group adopted within the United Kingdom. Both groups joined their adoptive families between February 1990 and September 1992; the children in the Romanian sample were all younger than 3.5 years at the time of placement, but their ages ranged from a few weeks to 42 months, and the children in the UK sample were all placed before the age of 6 months (mean age of placement was 2.4 months). The overwhelming majority of the children from Romania (87 percent) had come from institutions where they had been placed as infants (mean age, 1 month) and had not had any contact with their families after placement. A few had been adopted directly from their family ($n = 21$). Very few of the children had any memory of their birth families (see Rutter et al., 2007 for details of the children recruited into the initial sample). The Romanian sample was stratified into groups of children placed into adoptive families before and after the age of 6 months. During enrollment, the target was to include equal numbers of boys and girls in each group. However, due to availability, this was not possible for the children in the group that experienced the longest period of deprivation. Therefore, there are more girls than boys in the group that was aged 6 months or older on arrival into the United Kingdom. Furthermore, there are more boys than girls in the volunteer sample of domestic adoptees.

At age 11, the child adoption interview was conducted with 180 of the 217 children in the total sample, yielding an overall response rate of 83 percent. At age 15, the response rate was reduced to 75 percent (see Table 1 for more information about the participation rates broken down by group). To investigate bias, *t*-tests were used to establish whether children who did not take part in at least one of the age waves (11 and 15) differed from those who participated at both waves in terms of sex, age at placement, group (Romania vs. United Kingdom) and self-esteem. No significant differences were found between the groups with regard to these factors.

TABLE 1. Participation Rates for the Child Adoption Interview at Ages 11 and 15 by Group.

	Age 11	Age 15
UK adoptees (n = 52)	47	40
Adoptees from Romania <6 mo on arrival (n = 58)	46	45
Adoptees from Romania ≥6 mo on arrival (n = 107)	87	77
Total (n = 217)	180	162

Measures and Variables

Communicative openness and thoughts about contact were measured in a number of ways using child and adoptive parent interviews. The semi-structured child adoption interviews used at ages 11 and 15 were designed specifically for this study. As a starting point, researchers examined items included in the adopted adolescent interview schedule in the Minnesota/Texas Adoption Research Project (Mendenhall et al., 2004). (See Hawkins et al., 2007 for more details of the interview used at age 11). The format of the interview at age 15 included questions on communicative openness: difficulty talking about adoption (adolescents' reports of difficulty talking for themselves and for their parents); the amount of discussion about adoption that goes on at home and their satisfaction with it; the children's thoughts about birth relatives; whether they feel that they have two sets of parents; and desire for contact (see full details in the Appendix). They were also asked how they felt generally about being adopted; the replies of those who said that they thought about it were coded as negative, mixed, or positive.

The parent interviews were also conducted when the adolescents were 15 years of age. As part of a much larger interview, the parents were asked how interested their child appeared to be in various aspects of their adoptions (e.g., birth relatives, being placed for adoption), whether their child appeared to worry about any aspect of their adoption, and how difficult they felt it was for them and the child to talk about adoption issues at home (see full details in the Appendix). The questionnaire was modified for the UK sample to remove reference to Romania. Adoptive parents had also been asked in their very first interview about their attitudes toward the birth mothers and fathers, and responses were coded on a 4-point scale from negative to very positive.

The adolescent and parental interviews were conducted by trained researchers in the participants' own homes; the questions were asked of the adoptive parents and adolescents in separate interviews and then were coded by the interviewer either during the interview or after the interview, if the answer needed further consideration. The interview included a coding frame for the replies that had been developed further from the 11 year interview, which had been extensively tested to ensure inter-rater reliability. The codings were then checked prior to entry by the researchers to ensure accuracy and double-entered into SPSS (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL). Where there was any uncertainty about the codings, they were discussed and agreement was reached about the appropriate coding to use prior to data entry. Should the response not fit into the previously defined categories, additional categories were created. For example, for responses to "Do you have difficulty talking about adoption?", if the young person replied that they did not talk about it, this was made into an additional category. Where opinions were sought, for example about the degree of interest in their background, codings were generally based on a 3-point scale: none, some, or marked. Judgments about whether the coding should be "some" or "marked" was made by the researcher based on the replies. When necessary, clarifications and prompts were used, for example, when the answer required a sense of timing; further clarification was sought about how often adoptees thought about their birth parents (e.g., once a month, once a year).

Assessments were also made of the adolescents' self-esteem at ages 11 and 15 using the Rosenberg questionnaire (1989), a widely used, standardized measure based on a series of 10 questions that are scored using a 4-point scale, adding up to a maximum of 30 points. Norms for young adolescent self-esteem (age 10 to 12) in a population sample have been found to be 18 on a scale of 0 to 30 (Gabhainn & Mullan, 2003), based on a sample of 2798 children in Ireland.

In order to control for other factors that might influence outcomes, measures of the children's level of psychological problems were also examined at all time points. Such measures covered cognitive impairment, quasi-autistic patterns, inattention/overactivity, disinhibited attachment, and emotional, conduct, and peer problems (see Kreppner, Rutter, Beckett, Castle, Colvert, Groothues, Hawkins, O'Connor, Stevens, & Sonuga-Barke, 2007 and Rutter et al., 2007 for more details on these specific difficulties and measures). Three of these behaviors were found to be deprivation-specific: quasi-autistic patterns; inattention/overactivity; and disinhibited attachment. Other more common psychological difficulties

were not associated with early deprivation but were more frequent at the later stages of the assessment in the Romanian sample; these were emotional and conduct disorders (Colvert, Rutter, Beckett, Castle, Groothues, Hawkins, Kreppner, O'Connor, Stevens, & Sonuga-Barke, in press).

Ethical consent was obtained for the interviews as part of the overall approval of the study.

Analytic Strategy

The analytic strategy was first to explore the degree of communicative openness, thoughts about birth parents, and desire for contact within the sample and compare the differences between domestic and intercountry adoptees and between boys and girls. Then, comparisons were made within the Romanian sample, which was split into groups of adoptees placed into adoptive families before and after the child was aged 6 months. The 6-month cutoff allows a direct comparison between the younger (placed younger than 6 months) Romanian and UK adopted groups (also placed younger than 6 months) to directly compare intercountry and domestic adoptions. Six months has also been found to be the critical age in relation to outcomes; raised levels of impairments (e.g., cognitive impairment, quasi-autistic patterns, inattention/overactivity, disinhibited attachment, and emotional problems) have been found in the later-placed group, with relatively few further effects for more extended periods of deprivation (Kreppner et al., 2007).

RESULTS

Adoptive Parents' Feelings Toward the Birth Family

When the adoptive parents were first interviewed, they were asked what their feelings were toward their adopted child's birth parents. The majority in the Romanian sample (79 percent) had met at least one parent, generally the mother, as part of the adoption process (Beckett et al., 1999). In the UK sample, a quarter of adoptive parents had met the birth mother (Castle et al., 2000). The adoptive parents felt on the whole very positive towards the birth mothers, less so about the birth fathers (Table 2). Far fewer were able to comment on their views of the birth father, as they had not met him or knew little about him. There was no association between how the adoptive parents had felt toward the birth mother and any difficulty in talking about them

TABLE 2. Adoptive Parents' Views of Birth Parents When First Interviewed When Adopted Child Was 4 to 6 Years Old.

	UK Sample		Romanian Sample	
	Birth Mother	Birth Father	Birth Mother	Birth Father
Negative	7 (14%)	4 (13%)	19 (13%)	22 (36%)
Neutral	7 (14%)	13 (43%)	37 (26%)	18 (30%)
Mildly positive	21 (42%)	10 (33%)	45 (31%)	15 (25%)
Very positive	15 (30%)	3 (6%)	44 (30%)	6 (10%)
Total	50	30	145	61

at age 15 in either sample (UK sample, $\chi^2[6, 45] = 4.90$, ns; Romanian sample, $\chi^2[6, 126] = 7.62$, ns).

Talking About Adoption Issues Within the Adoptive Home

There were no differences between boys and girls for any of the questions related to difficulties talking about adoption issues. Accordingly, the sex categories were collapsed for this section of analyses.

Adoptees' Difficulty Talking About Adoption and Changes Over Time

As Table 3 shows, the majority of adoptees reported having no difficulties with talking about their adoptions at age 15 (68 percent; $n = 105$); 30 percent ($n = 49$) reported some or great difficulty, and a 5 percent ($n = 8$) stated that they did not talk about adoption at all at home. An analysis of variance (ANOVA) test found no difference according to type of adoption (domestic vs. intercountry) but suggested a possible difference between the two Romanian groups (younger than 6 months vs. 6 months or older), with those who were older at adoption finding it harder to talk ($F(2, 151) = 3.09$; $P < .05$). Examined in more depth, an analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) revealed that this difference was not a function of whether the adoptees were from the United Kingdom or Romania, but a function of the deprivation-specific impairments, which were more frequent among the older adoptees from Romania. Once analyses controlled for these impairments, the group difference was no longer significant ($F(2) = 0.25$; $P = ns$).

The vast majority of adoptees were happy with the amount of discussion about adoption that went on at home (84 percent; $n = 134$); 9 percent of

TABLE 3. Talking About Adoption Issues at Home, as Rated by Adoptive Parents and Adolescents.

	UK Only	Rom <6 mo	Rom ≥6 mo	% Of total	Total No. Completed Interview
<i>Adoptees' difficulty talking according to adolescents:</i>					
No difficulty talking about adoption	77% (n = 27)	77% (n = 33)	59% (n = 45)*	68% (105)	154
No difficulty talking about birth mother	60% (n = 24)	64% (n = 29)	49% (n = 37)	56% (90)	161
No difficulty talking about birth father	58% (n = 23)	62% (n = 28)	53% (n = 40)	57% (91)	161
Happy with amount of discussion at home	97% (n = 37)	82% (n = 36)	79% (n = 61)*	84% (134)	159
<i>Adoptees' difficulty talking according to adoptive parents:</i>					
No difficulty talking about adoption	85% (n = 39)	81% (n = 43)	76% (n = 66)	80% (148)	186
No difficulty talking about birth families	83% (n = 38)	81% (n = 42)	75% (n = 65)	78% (145)	185
<i>Adoptive parents' difficulty talking according to adolescents:</i>					
No difficulty talking about adoption	70% (n = 28)	84% (n = 38)	70% (n = 52)	74% (118)	159
No difficulty talking about birth mother	68% (n = 27)	77% (n = 34)	64% (n = 47)	68% (108)	157
No difficulty talking about birth father	65% (n = 26)	73% (n = 33)	67% (n = 48)	68% (107)	157
<i>Adoptive parents' difficulty talking according to parents:</i>					
No difficulty talking about adoption	89% (n = 41)	85% (n = 45)	92% (n = 84)	89% (170)	190
No difficulty talking about birth families	87% (n = 40)	81% (n = 43)	90% (n = 82)	87% (165)	190

*Significant difference at $P < .05$. Rom indicates Romanian.

adoptees ($n = 14$) felt there was too little conversation about adoption, and 7 percent ($n = 11$) would prefer less discussion about adoption at home. There was no difference between girls and boys in this respect. At age 11, there had been no significant agreement between parents and children about the children's difficulty in talking about adoption, whereas at age 15 there was a modest level of agreement ($\kappa = .187$; $P < .01$ [see Table 4]). However, the analyses brought out two other important points. First, the overall level of difficulty in talking fell considerably from age 11 to age 15 (from 91/162 to 46/149 on child report and from 35/162 to 25/149 on parent report). Paired t-tests (based on a 3-point scale) showed

TABLE 4. Parent-Child Agreement on Child's Difficulty in Talking About Adoption.

		Age 11 Child Report		Age 15 Child Report	
		No Difficulty	Some/Major Difficulty	No Difficulty	Some/Major Difficulty
Parent Report	No Difficulty	59	68	94	30
	Some/Major Difficulty	12	23	9	16
		$\kappa = .035, P = ns$		$\kappa = .187, P < .002$	

that this comparison was significantly different at age 15 from age 11 for child reports ($t[131] = 4.40; P < .001$; see Figure 1) but not for parent reports (see Figure 2). At age 11, 43 percent of the sample said that they had no difficulty in talking about adoption, whereas at 15 years of age, this figure rose to 68 percent. Broken down by group, this significant difference remained true for both of the groups adopted from Romania (for 6 months or older group, $t[36] = 3.29; P < .001$; 6 months or older group, $t[66] = 2.93; P < .001$); both groups reported less difficulty with talking about adoption at age 15 than at age 11. Although the UK group also found it easier to talk at age 15 than at age 11, the difference was not significant ($t[27] = 1.30; P = ns$).

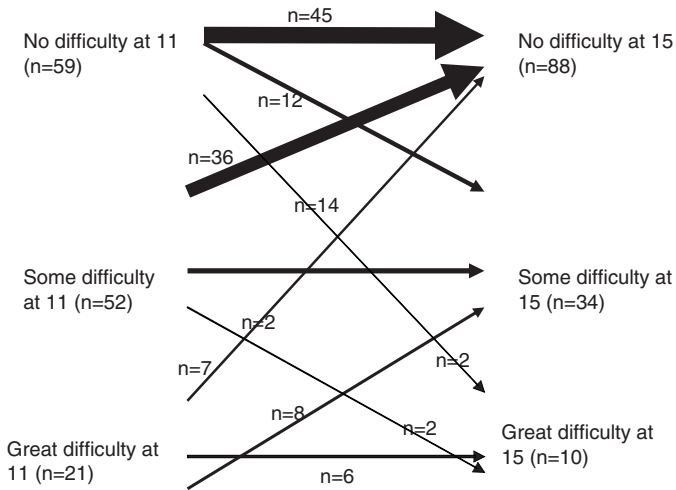
The young people in the Romanian sample who found it hard to talk about adoption but whose parents did not think there was difficulty ($n = 22$) did not have lower self-esteem than those whose parents recognized the difficulty ($n = 15$) ($t[35] = 19; P = ns$).

Adoptive Parents' Difficulties Talking About Adoption

We asked the adoptees whether they thought their adoptive parents had any difficulties with talking about the adoption; 74 percent ($n = 118$) of the group as a whole believed that their parents had no problems and 20 percent ($n = 32$) believed that their parents had some or great difficulty when talking about the adoption generally. Four percent ($n = 7$) reported that their parents did not talk at all about the adoption, and one percent ($n = 2$) said that their parents differed in their level of difficulty in talking.

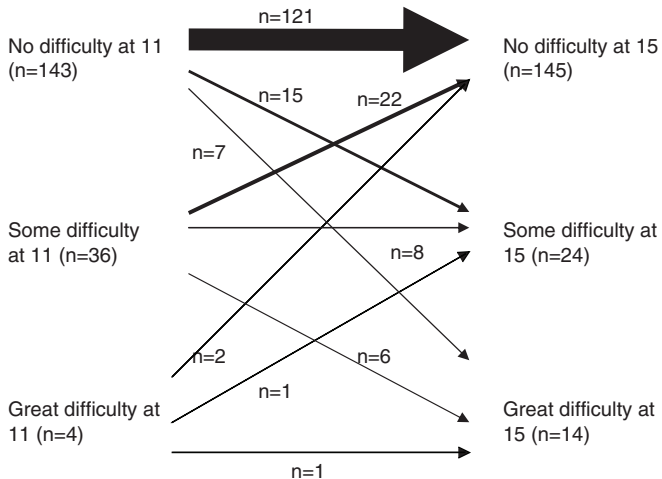
When the same questions were asked of the adoptive mothers, most reported that they did not find it difficult to talk to their children about

FIGURE 1. Difficulties Talking About Adoption at Ages 11 and 15 (Child Report).



*Difference between 11 and 15 significant ($t [131] = 4.40; P < .001$).

FIGURE 2. Child Difficulties Talking About Adoption at Ages 11 and 15 (Parent Report).



* Difference between 11 and 15 not significant ($t (182) = .89; n.s.$)

TABLE 5. Parent-Child Agreement About Parents' Difficulty in Talking About Adoption.

		Age 15 Child Report of Parents' Difficulties	
		No Difficulty	Some/Major Difficulty
Parent Report	No Difficulty	92	22
	Some/Major Difficulty	34	5

$\kappa = .07, P = ns$

either the adoption itself (89 percent; $n = 170$) or their children's birth families (87 percent; $n = 165$). Only 11 percent of adoptive mothers said that they found it either "quite" or "very" difficult to talk to their children about the adoption ($n = 20$), and 13 percent said that it was either "quite" or "very" difficult to talk to their children about their birth families ($n = 25$). There was no agreement between the children's and parents' reports of any difficulties that the parents had in talking about adoption (Table 5), although 92 parents and children (60 percent) agreed that there was no difficulty for the parents in talking.

What Associations Does Communicative Openness Have With Well-Being?

T-tests suggested that children who were happy with the amount of discussion about adoption at home had higher levels of self-esteem at age 15 than those who were not happy ($t[148] = 2.72; P < .01$; Rosenberg mean scores, happy: 21.4, not happy: 18.6). As the children in the late-placed Romanian group had significantly lower self-esteem than the other two groups and were also less likely to be happy with the amount of discussion about adoption at home, we controlled for age at placement, using an ANCOVA. However, even controlling for age at placement, children who were happy with the amount of discussion at home still had higher levels of self-esteem ($F[1] = 4.93; P < .05$). Children who were unhappy about the level of discussion about adoption at home were also less happy about the fact that they were adopted ($t[132] = 3.29; P < .001$) and less happy about the fact that their birth parents gave them up ($t[21] = 2.28; P < .05$). Children in the Romanian sample who found it harder to talk about adoption

at age 15 were also more likely to have both conduct and emotional problems at age 11 than those who did not find it hard to talk about adoption (conduct $t[109] = -2.36$; $P < .05$; emotional problems $t[109] = -2.08$; $P < .05$). These effects were still significant when the child's age at adoption was controlled for (conduct difficulties $F[1, 108] = 4.42$; $P < .05$; emotional difficulties $F[1, 108] = 3.78$; $P = .05$).

Contact With Birth Parents

The majority of the sample at age 15 reported having had no contact with any of their birth relatives (81 percent; $n = 131$). Only a very small number of both samples had had any *direct* contact with their birth families (UK group, 5 percent; $n = 3$; Romanian group, 7 percent; $n = 12$). A slightly larger number reported having *indirect* contact (e.g., occasional letters or telephone calls) with birth families (UK group, 23 percent; $n = 9$; Romanian group, 15 percent; $n = 18$); analyses on the significance of direct or indirect contact were not carried out as the numbers were too small.

Adoptees' Interest in Their Adoptions

Table 6 summarizes adolescents' and adoptive parents' ratings of their curiosity and interest in their adoptions. Most adoptees reported that they thought about their birth mother and father either occasionally (i.e., less than yearly to less than monthly) (for mothers, 44 percent; $n = 71$; for fathers, 39 percent; $n = 62$) or frequently (i.e., more than monthly to more than weekly) (for mothers, 24 percent; $n = 39$; for fathers, 16 percent; $n = 26$). However, 32 percent ($n = 51$) of the adoptees said they *never* thought about their birth mothers, and a higher proportion, 45 percent ($n = 73$), said they *never* thought about their birth fathers. There were no associations between not thinking about birth mother and self-esteem at age 11 or 15 in either the UK or the Romanian sample (UK sample at age 11 $t[37] = -.19$; $P = \text{ns}$; UK sample at age 15 $t[38] = 1.42$; $P = \text{ns}$; Romanian sample at age 11 $t[113] = 1.40$; $P = \text{ns}$; Romanian sample at age 15 $t[111] = 1.51$; $P = \text{ns}$). Girls were significantly more likely to report thinking about their birth mother than were boys ($t[159] = 3.45$; $P < .001$), but there were no differences between the sexes with regard to thinking about birth fathers (Table 6). We asked adoptees how it felt to have two sets of parents. For the majority (74 percent), this was not a concept that they had thought about. For the minority who had thought about this issue, 11 percent felt positive, 10 percent felt neutral, and 6

percent felt negative about having two sets of parents. We then asked the adolescents whether they considered that thinking about their birth parents hurt their adoptive parents' feelings. Most (74 percent; $n = 103$) reported that it would not, but 26 percent believed that thinking about their birth parents would definitely ($n = 15$) or possibly ($n = 21$) hurt their adoptive parents' feelings if they knew.

Adoptees' Feelings About Their Adoptive Status

The majority of adoptees reported that they felt positive about being adopted and about being placed for adoption by their birth parents (Table 6). Very few reported any negative feelings about either being adopted (5 percent; $n = 7$) or about being placed for adoption by their birth parents (8 percent; $n = 10$). The adoptees' feelings about their adoptive status were largely confirmed by their adoptive parents. The adoptive parents' reports of child worries did not differ significantly across either type of adoption (domestic or intercountry) or early/late placement. However, t -tests indicated that parents believed girls were significantly more likely to worry about their birth families than boys ($t[184] = 1.55$; $P < .01$).

Adoptive Parents' Reports of Young People's Interest in Their Adoption and Birth Family

In general, parents reported their children to be fairly uninterested in most aspects of their adoptions, with over 70 percent asking no questions at all of their parents about each aspect of adoption we inquired about. Parents rated girls to be more interested than boys about their birth mothers ($t[143] = 4.68$; $P < .001$), their birth fathers ($t[147] = 2.93$; $P < .01$), and being placed for adoption by their birth parents ($t[122] = 3.86$; $P < .001$). There were no differences in parental ratings of adoptees' curiosity between the younger-placed Romanian group and the UK adoptees, indicating no differences according to type of adoption (domestic vs. intercountry), but the older-placed Romanian group was more interested than both of the other two groups (UK and Romanian children younger than 6 months) in all areas: interest in birth mother ($F[2, 188] = 5.13$; $P < .01$), birth father ($F[2, 187] = 3.09$; $P < .05$), and being placed for adoption by their birth parents ($F[2, 188] = 7.34$; $P < .001$).

TABLE 6. Adoptees' Interest in Their Adoptions, as Rated by Adoptive Parents and Adolescents.

	UK Only	Rom <6 mo	Rom ≥6 mo	Boys	Girls	% Of total	Total No. Completing Interview
	<i>Thoughts about birth parents according to adoptees:</i>						
Never think about their birth mother	33% (n = 13)	31% (n = 14)	31% (n = 24)	40% (n = 33)	23%*** (n = 18)	32% (51)	161
Never think about their birth father	46% (n = 18)	51% (n = 23)	42% (n = 32)	46% (n = 38)	45% (n = 35)	45% (73)	161
Thinks thinking about birth parents would hurt adoptive parents if they knew	17% (n = 6)	35% (n = 15)	24% (n = 15)	19% (n = 13)	23% (n = 23)	26% (36)	140
	<i>Interest in birth parents according to adoptive parents:</i>						
Child asks no questions about birth mother	83% (n = 38)	83% (n = 44)	61% (n = 56)**	86% (n = 83)	59% (n = 55)***	72% (138)	191
Child asks no questions about birth father	83% (n = 38)	94% (n = 50)	74% (n = 67)*	89% (n = 86)	74% (n = 69)**	81% (55)	190
Child asks no questions about being placed for adoption by birth parents	96% (n = 44)	93% (n = 49)	74% (n = 68)***	94% (n = 91)	75% (n = 70)***	81% (155)	191

(Continued on next page)

TABLE 6. Adoptees' Interest in Their Adoptions, as Rated by Adoptive Parents and Adolescents. (Continued)

	UK Only	Rom <6 mo	Rom ≥6 mo	Boys	Girls	% Of total	Total No. Completing Interview
	<i>Feelings about adoptive status according to adoptees:</i>						
Feel positive about being adopted	68% (n = 23)	71% (n = 25)	63% (n = 43)	69% (n = 48)	64% (n = 42)	67% (90)	136
Feel neutral/mixed about being adopted	29% (n = 10)	26% (n = 9)	30% (n = 20)	27% (n = 19)	30% (n = 20)	28% (39)	136
Feel negative about being adopted	3% (n = 1)	3% (n = 1)	7% (n = 5)	4% (n = 4)	6% (n = 3)	5% (7)	136
Feel positive about being placed for adoption by birth parents	61% (n = 20)	63% (n = 22)	55% (n = 33)	55% (n = 37)	62% (n = 38)	59% (75)	127
Feel neutral/mixed about being placed for adoption by birth parents	36% (n = 12)	34% (n = 12)	32% (n = 19)	37% (n = 25)	30% (n = 18)	33% (42)	127
Feel negative about being placed for adoption by birth parents	3% (n = 1)	3% (n = 1)	13% (n = 8)	8% (n = 5)	8% (n = 5)	8% (10)	127
	<i>Feelings about adoptive status according to adoptive parents:</i>						
Child has no worries about being adopted	83% (n = 38)	79% (n = 41)	78% (n = 69)	85% (n = 80)	74% (n = 68)	80% (148)	186
Child has no worries about birth family	80% (n = 37)	81% (n = 42)	73% (n = 64)	87% (n = 82)	66% (n = 61)**	77% (143)	186

*** $P < .001$; ** $P < .01$; * $P < .05$.

Desired Contact With Birth Parents

The views of the adolescents on their wishes for contact with birth relatives were mixed. Just over half of the sample who responded to these questions would like some form of contact with their birth mothers (51 percent; $n = 75$) and birth siblings (52 percent; $n = 73$). The pattern was the same for the UK and Romanian samples. Fewer were interested in contact with other birth relatives, however, with 67 percent and 73 percent reporting that they would prefer no contact at all with their birth fathers ($n = 95$) and other birth relatives ($n = 106$), respectively. There was no association between the age the children had been when they joined their families and their desire for contact within the Romanian sample ($t[109] = .17$; $P = ns$).

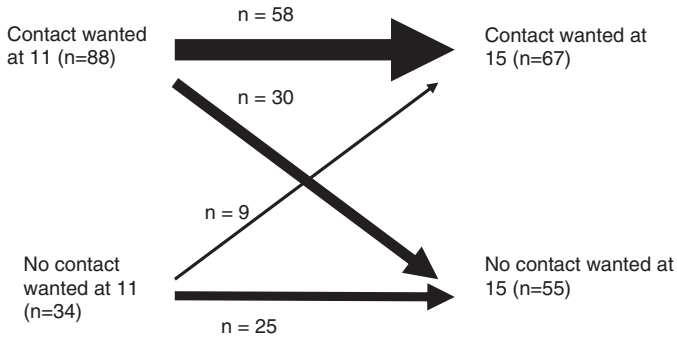
Which Children Were More Likely to Desire Contact With Birth Relatives?

Sex, type of adoption, difficulty talking about adoption, and concern for adoptive parents' feelings were unrelated to desired contact with birth relatives. However ANOVAs revealed that children who thought about their birth mothers occasionally or frequently were more likely to desire contact with them than children who never thought about their birth mothers ($F[2, 142] = 18.99$; $P < .001$). Likewise, children who thought about their birth fathers occasionally or frequently were more likely to desire contact with them than children who never thought about their birth fathers ($F[2, 142] = 9.09$; $P < .001$). Adoptees who reported wanting contact with their birth mothers had lower levels of self-esteem ($t[138] = 2.19$; $P < .05$; mean Rosenberg scores, contact wanted: 20.1, no contact wanted: 21.9), but this was a modest finding and did not extend to contact wanted with birth fathers, siblings, or other relatives.

Has Desire for Contact With Birth Parents Changed Over Time?

Figure 3 illustrates how the adoptees' desire for contact with birth mothers has declined over time, between the ages of 11 and 15. A McNemar test confirmed that the adoptees were significantly less likely to want contact with both their birth mothers ($\chi^2[1] = 10.26$; $P < .01$) and their birth fathers ($\chi^2[1] = 10.81$; $P < .01$) at age 15 than at age 11.

FIGURE 3. Children's Views on Contact Wanted With Birth Mothers Between Ages 11 and 15.



DISCUSSION

Main Findings

This paper explored communicative openness in adoption in a sample of intercountry and domestic adolescent adoptees from the perspective of both the adoptees and their adoptive parents. Perceptions differed between adopted young people and their adoptive parents in key areas: how curious adoptees were about their background and how easy it was to talk. Adoptive parents reported that their children showed little curiosity with regard to their adoptions at age 15. However, most adoptees reported that they thought about their birth parents either occasionally or frequently and the majority would like some form of contact. Adoptees found it more difficult to talk about adoption than their adoptive parents realized. However, despite these differences, most of the adolescents said they did not find talking about adoption issues difficult and were satisfied with the amount that they were able to talk about adoption. Adoptive parents reported little difficulty in talking to their children about adoption issues, and their children, to a large extent, agreed that their parents did not find it hard to talk; however, around 20 percent of the adoptees believed that their parents did have problems in addressing these issues at home, and the child's perception was not generally shared by the adoptive parent. Some also thought about the concept of having two sets of parents; this engendered positive, negative, or neutral feelings in more or less equal measure, but for the majority this was not an issue that they thought about. The adoptees generally felt

positive about being adopted, and the adoptive parents reported that their children had few worries about aspects of their adoptions.

What was the impact of the difficulty in talking on other outcomes? Those who found it hard to talk were also more likely to have lower self esteem at age 15 and to have had emotional or conduct difficulties at age 11; however, the direction of any causation was not evident, and the effects were modest. It was just as likely that the children's emotional or conduct difficulties contributed to difficulties in talking as that the difficulties in talking added to emotional and conduct difficulties. There was no relationship between whether the parents recognized that the child had difficulty talking and the child's self esteem. However, the findings do reinforce the concept that being able to talk is associated with a healthier psychological outcome.

The majority of the adoptive parents reported positive feelings toward birth mothers, but this had no bearing on how easy or hard they found it to talk to the adopted children. Whereas most of the adoptees had experienced no contact at all with their birth families, around half of the adoptees interviewed *would* like some form of contact, especially with birth mothers and siblings. Unsurprisingly, children who thought more about their birth parents were more likely to desire contact with them. However, concern for adoptive parents' feelings had no impact upon whether the adoptees desired contact, and difficulty in talking did not make them more likely to want contact. Adoptees were less likely to express a desire for contact with a birth relative at age 15 than 4 years ago, but the majority would still like contact and it is possible that a greater interest may emerge at a later date. Although the majority were interested in their background, roughly a third of the whole sample expressed little interest in any aspects of their adoptions, said that that did not think about their birth parents, had no strong feelings about their adoptive status, and did not appear to worry about any aspect of their adoptions at the moment, although this may change in the future. This group did not have lower self-esteem than those who did think about their parents. This is consistent with the findings at age 11 and with the findings of Berge et al. (2006) that not all adoptees feel a need to have contact with their birth parents and that children can be happy with their status as an adoptee without any such contact. However, this may change over time; Smith and Wallace (2000) found that the peak age for searching out birth parents is around 29 to 32, and Wrobel, Kohler, et al. (2003) emphasized that communication about adoption is a dynamic process that evolves and changes over time.

There were a number of interesting group differences. Girls seem to be more curious about their birth relatives, be more likely to ask questions about being placed for adoption, think about their birth mothers more, and be more likely to worry about their birth families than boys. These differences are not surprising and are supported by other studies with similar results, including research with adopted adults that suggests that adopted women are twice as likely as men to search for birth relatives (Smith & Wallace, 2000). No differences between intercountry and domestic adoptees were found with regard to attitudes toward desire for contact or difficulties in talking, painting a similar picture to how these adoptees felt 4 years ago (Hawkins et al., 2007), but some differences were found between the older-placed Romanian group and the other two groups (younger-placed Romanian/domestic adoptees). These differences related to interest in birth families and being placed for adoption, difficulty talking about adoption generally (but not about birth parents), and satisfaction with the amount of discussion at home about adoption. All of these variables relate to communication about adoption and may be explained by the specific difficulties within this group with communication (see Hawkins et al., 2007 for further discussion). As had been found at the age of 11, it was the children who have the greatest level of difficulties who found it hardest to talk at age 15.

Wider Implications

In particular, the study suggests that adoptive parents need to be more aware of how much interest adoptees have in their background and that it may not always be easy for them to talk about this. Difficulty in talking had been even more marked at age 11, so this may also be related to the developmental stage of the young people. While there was greater agreement at age 15 than at age 11 about how easy it was to talk, the level of agreement between adoptive parent and child was still very modest.

Strengths and Limitations

This paper provides an initial exploration of the perception of communicative openness of adoptees and their adoptive parents and demonstrates that there are considerable differences. While it does not encapsulate all the dimensions of communicative openness as defined by Brodzinsky (2005) and Neil (2007) (e.g., the adoptive parents' comfort with and promotion of their child being connected to another family, the adoptive parents' views on contact), it does have the major advantage of being able to explore the

issues from both the adoptive parents' and adoptee's perspective. This dual perspective throws some interesting insights into the complexity of these issues and how they can be seen very differently from the adult and young person's perspective. The construct of communicative openness needs to be broadened to include the views of the both parties. To provide a family-led perspective, there also needs to be further exploration of family dynamics, as is provided in the narrative study of Kaye and Warren (1988), which examines the conversations on adoption that take place between adopted young people and their parents.

There were some difficulties in interviewing the young people, as some of the adoptees have difficulty in talking about issues, but this was not such a marked issue as it had been at age 11. On the whole, the adoptees welcomed the chance to talk about their background and were able to provide replies to the questions.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that communicative openness was perceived differently by adoptive parents and adoptees. Therefore, it is important that future studies look at this from all perspectives and that the views of the adoptees are included in any future assessment of openness. Where there is a sense of openness for both parties, this seems to be positively associated with a sense of well-being. Adolescents' satisfaction with communicative openness was associated with self-esteem, feelings about adoptive status, and feelings about being placed for adoption. These findings broadly support the view of Brodzinsky (2005) that openness for adoptive parents as a "state of mind and heart" (p. 149) is important for adjustment, but the adoptees also will influence the climate of openness as much as their adoptive parents, and for some, issues surrounding openness will not be important during adolescence.

The main strength of this study is that the direct views of adolescents were used as well as those of their adoptive parents to avoid the subjective interpretations of adults. The study also involves a wide range of adoptees from different backgrounds and ages at placement and has the advantage of a longitudinal study to observe change over time. This study explored the direct views of adopted adolescents with regard to communicative openness within their adoptions. Given that "the child is the only adoptive triad member who does not have a choice regarding the openness arrangement, as decisions about the amount of contact are decided by birth parents and

adoptive parents” (Wrobel et al., 1996, p. 2359), their views could usefully inform future policy decisions. Contact and openness are complex issues, and a one-size-fits-all, inflexible approach to adoption arrangements is simply not appropriate (Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005). Adoptees’ needs for information and wishes should be viewed as a dynamic and ongoing process, with services being prepared for changes in terms of support needs for adopted children and their families.

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APPENDIX

Adoption Interview Age 15

Do you find it difficult to talk about your adoption, your birth mother, or your birth father?

Do you think your parents find it difficult to talk about your adoption?

Are you happy with the amount of discussion you have at home about your adoption?

Do you have any contact with your birth mother, your birth father?

Would you like to have contact with your birth mother or your birth father?

Do you ever think about your birth mother or your birth father?

Do you think it might hurt your parents' feelings if they knew you were thinking about your birth parents?

How do you feel about your birth parents having placed you for adoption? Prompt, if necessary, for type of feeling.

In general, how do you feel about being adopted? Prompt, if necessary for type of feeling, overall negative or positive.

How do you feel about having two sets of parents, (one here and one in Romania)?*

*Romanian sample only

Parental Interview Age 4/6

Did you meet his/her parents?

Did/have you formed any impression of them?

Parental Interview age 15

What sort of questions does [the adopted child] ask now about his/her birth mother, father, and family?

How easy or difficult do you think it is for [the adopted child] to talk with you about these things?

How easy or difficult is it for you to talk with [the adopted child] about his/her adoption/birth family?

Do you ever feel that [the adopted child] is worrying about his/her early history, or do you think he/she is dealing with it?