Adoptive Mothers: Identity Agents on the Pathway to Adoptive Identity Formation

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The concept of identity agents provides a framework to examine adoptive mothers’ responsibility to address children’s dual connection to their birth and adoptive families. Adoptive mothers’ identity agency was assessed using case analysis. Eight extensive interviews with four adoptive mothers were collected at Waves 1 and 2 of a longitudinal study. Adoptees’ identity formation was measured at Waves 2 and 3. Adoptees were $M = 6, 13,$ and 23 years of age at Waves 1, 2, and 3, respectively. Analysis revealed strategies that adoptive mothers purposefully employ during their children’s childhood and adolescence to influence subsequent adoptive identity. Adoptive mothers who act as identity agents draw on their respective theories of identity formation to create opportunities to talk with their children about adoption.

Adoption legally transfers the care and custody of a child from the family of conception, birth, and biology to an expectant adoptive family. Through this process the adoptive family becomes forever linked to the child’s birth family (Reitz & Watson, 1992). This article examines one of the most complex and challenging tasks facing adoptive parents today: the responsibility to come to terms with and
make decisions about the adoptive family’s connection to their child’s birth family. How adoptive parents navigate this task has important implications for adoptees’ identity formation (Grotevant & Von Korff, 2009).

A recent theoretical article on identity agents (Schachter & Ventura, 2008) provided a useful framework for considering how adoptive parents approach this task. Identity agents deliberately and actively interact with young people with the intention of participating in identity formation. The framework is theoretically grounded in the notion that identity formation is a joint project of identity agents and children rather than an individual accomplishment of the child. At the same time, the concept of identity agent does not “imply that these agents are sole agents replacing the developing individual’s agency, nor that the direction of influence is unidirectional” (Schachter & Ventura, p. 9). This framework is ideal for this study because it focuses analysis on links between adoptive parents’ efforts to (a) address connections between the adoptive and birth family, and (b) foster adoptees’ identity development.

Adolescence is a seminal period for identity development in Western cultures (Erikson, 1968; McAdams, 1985). It is a time when young people explore their goals, values, and beliefs, reconstructing past events in order to develop a coherent sense of identity (Polkinghorne, 1988; Waterman, 1993). This process is enhanced by normative cultural expectations that young people should be able to construct coherent stories about their individual process of identity formation by their mid-to-late twenties (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; McAdams, 2006).

Being adopted adds a layer of complexity to identity formation because adoptees must decide what it means to be connected to both an adoptive and birth family, and integrate their individual experience into coherent adoptive identity narratives (Grotevant, 1997; Grotevant, Dunbar, Kohler, & Esau, 2000; Von Korff, 2008). In developing adoptive identity narratives, young people elicit information, explore and contrast their views with those of others, and reflect on the meaning of adoption or being adopted. Recent changes in adoption practice encouraging contact between adoptive and birth family members have highlighted adoptive identity issues for adoptees (Freundlich, 2001; Melina & Roszia, 1993). In a recent study of adopted young adults (McGinnis, Smith, Ryan, & Howard, 2009), about 80% of respondents reported that adoptive identity had been “important” or “very important” to them.

Researchers and adoption professionals have agreed that adoptive parents have a responsibility to address the adoptive family’s connection to birth relatives (Brodzinsky & Pinderhughes, 2002; Kirk, 1964), yet there has been a debate about how adoptive parents should do so (cf. Callahan, 2007; Gritter, 1989). Some claimed that adoptive parents should actively participate in direct contact with one or more birth relatives, exchanging relatively frequent photos, letters, e-mails, telephone calls, and face-to-face visits. Others who also claimed contact is necessary believed it should be limited to an occasional photo or letter exchange. Some favored indirect contact through third parties so that identities need not be ex-
changed. In fact, some adoptive parents avoided contact because they had been told that it is confusing for children and harmful to identity development (Kraft et al., 1985). Yet others claimed that adoptive parents can accomplish this task in the absence of contact (Brodzinsky, 2005). Despite these divergent claims, there has been little research on processes that adoptive parents use to facilitate adoptive identity formation (Freundlich, 2007).

In this study we use select cases, with and without contact between adoptive and birth family members, to identify whether adoptive mothers act as agents of adoptive identity and, if so, what processes they use to come to terms with the adoptive family’s connection to the birth family. We examined adoptive mothers as identity agents because mothers typically do family kinship work (di Leonardo, 1987). Nevertheless, as this study shows, adoptive mothers take different approaches regarding adoptive identity formation.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were drawn from a sample of 184 adoptive families participating in the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998). The full sample was recruited at Wave 1 through 35 adoption agencies located in all regions of the United States. Adoption agencies received training on how to randomly sample target adopted children in families with varying levels of contact between adoptive and birth family members. Target children met the following criteria: (a) adoptees were between 4 and 12 years old; (b) the adoption took place before the child’s first birthday; (c) the adoptive parents remained married postadoption; and (d) the adoption had not been international, transracial, or “special needs.” Adoptees were 4 to 12 years old ($M = 7.8$) at Wave 1, 11 to 20 years old ($M = 15.7$) at Wave 2, and 21 to 30 years old ($M = 25.0$) at Wave 3. The children were placed for adoption at a mean age of 4 weeks and a median age of 2 weeks.

A subsample of four adoptive mothers and their target adopted children was drawn from the full sample. We selected the adoptive mothers from two groups: (a) adoptive mothers who facilitated the highest levels of contact with birth family members throughout their children’s development, and (b) adoptive mothers who did not facilitate contact. From each group, we selected the adoptive mother with the youngest female target adopted child and the adoptive mother with the youngest male target adopted child. Adoptive mothers with young children were selected in order to examine identity agency prior to adolescence. All four adoptive mothers were married and their target adopted children were placed within 1 month of birth. At Wave 2, the adoptive mothers were in their forties, married, and of Protestant faith. Adoptive mothers were not selected based on adoptees’ adopt-
tive identity formation scores (described below), and coders performing case analysis were blind to adoptive identity formation scores.

Procedures

Adoptive mothers participating in this study were interviewed privately in their homes when the target adopted children were between 4 and 6 years old (Wave 1) and again when they were between 11 and 14 years old (Wave 2). Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Procedures for Waves 1 and 2 have been published in detail elsewhere (Grotevant & McRoy, 1998; Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005). The University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board approved all consent procedures.

Adoptive mothers’ identity agency was assessed using case analysis (Creswell, 2007; Yin, 1994). Eight extensive interviews, two interviews (from Wave 1 and 2) with each adoptive mother, were analyzed. Case analysis is useful when researchers have a prior theoretical position, have multiple sources, and are investigating a contemporary phenomenon in context. Three coders independently read both interviews with each adoptive mother as a set, one set at a time. Each coder identified passages indicating one or more of the elements of identity agency (Schachter & Ventura, 2008): (a) concern and (b) goals for identity formation, regarding identity context or ego identity structure (c) actions taken to achieve those goals, (d) an implicit theory of adoptive identity development, (e) assessment of the young person and his or her context in order to assess the role of identity agent, and (f) reflexivity of the agent’s goals and actions to improve them. Coders noted which element the passage represented and why. Two coders met to discuss and prepare results, which are presented below. Results were verified by a third coder. Interview quotes were altered in a few instances in order to protect participants’ identities; meaning was preserved. Names and identifiers were changed or removed.

Measure of Adoptive Identity Formation

Adoptive identity formation was assessed using depth of adoptive identity exploration, which is the degree adoptees reflect on the meaning of being adopted and engage in information gathering about adoption. Depth of adoptive identity exploration was coded for the full sample of adoptees using adolescent (Wave 2) and young adult (Wave 3) interviews. Overall coder reliability was moderate, $\kappa_w = .57$ (Wave 2), and substantial, $\kappa_w = .74$ (Wave 3), according to standards by Landis and Koch (1977). Weighted kappas fully correct for chance agreement while also adjusting for the degree of disagreement between coders (Cohen, 1968). Procedures for coding adoptive identity have been published in detail elsewhere (Von Korff, 2008). Results for the four target adopted children are presented in this article.
RESULTS

Results are presented for each adoptive mother separately, discussing each element of identity agency in turn. The two adoptive mothers facilitating contact (Celia and Mandy) are presented first, followed by the two adoptive mothers who did not facilitate contact (Betty and Lindsey). At placement, Celia and Mandy agreed to exchange letters and pictures with the birth mother through the adoption agency, without identifying information being shared. Betty and Lindsey never had contact with the birth family. Results for target adopted children’s depth of adoptive identity exploration during early adolescence (Wave 2) and young adulthood (Wave 3) are presented at the end of each section.

Celia’s Synthesis of Concern, Goals, and Actions With Her Theory, Assessment, and Reflexivity

Celia’s narrative about contact and adoptive identity was remarkably similar at Wave 1 and Wave 2, despite the 8-year time span. Celia viewed the process of developing a sense of self as embedded in relational processes and developing over time. She believed that contact helps a child develop a sense of being “rooted” or connected to two families. Furthermore, at both waves, she expressed deep concerns about the relationship between such contact and her son’s (Lawrence) adoptive identity development.

It [no contact] gives a child no sense of identity, you know, you identify with your adoptive family, but it doesn’t matter how much you love them and how much you give them and how much they are—they find their place in the adoptive home, their roots are somewhere else, you know, I mean, they were [italics added] somewhere else, they’ve been uprooted, so, it’s nice to know where I used to be rooted and this is where I am now [italics added]. It doesn’t take away from the adoptive family.

Consistent with her concern for Lawrence’s future adoptive identity formation, Celia gradually and deliberately increased the type and frequency of contact over time, beginning when Lawrence was about 1 year old. By Wave 1, Celia had exchanged names and addresses with his birth mother and Lawrence had experienced multiple face-to-face meetings with birth relatives. Her decision to arrange visits was grounded in her theory, expressed at Wave 1, that adoptive identity formation involves a future period of exploration and that this developmental stage would be eased if Lawrence had opportunities to learn from and interact with his birth relatives. Celia stated that “I would worry tremendously, when that child got to be 13 or 14 and I could not give him some information. I would be pulling the hairs out of my head trying to find a way because this child means so much to me.”
Celia’s theory about contact and adoptive identity formation was formed, in part, while she reflected on her own experience of losing a parent when she was young. She relied on family members who knew her father to learn about him and about herself in the process:

You know, I’d want to know. I put myself in their place, I had a mother, but my father died before I was born. But I have a picture of him, I have stories about him from my grandmother that tells me he was funny, … I know what became of him, what his last day was like…. I know what he looked like, you know. I got a picture of him. And I know he loved my mother very much. And you know, these things are so important.

Celia expressed the belief at Wave 1 and Wave 2 that Lawrence needed to learn independently about himself in relation to others. Concerning the importance of children learning about biological roots, Celia wondered, “How can you [adoptive parent] give that to an adopted child if you don’t have it there to give?” Consistent with her theory, once reassured that Lawrence would be safe, Celia arranged for Lawrence to routinely visit his birth family members.

I think it’ll [contact] go into adulthood and I think that he will make his own contact with them, because as much as I care for them and everything, you know, the relationship isn’t really directly with me, you know, we talk and I’ll hug Ana [birth mother] every time I see her, but you know, I can go without any communication with them or anything.

Celia remained involved by helping her son maintain contact with his birth relatives and by helping him interpret his experiences, but believed that adoptive identity formation required the child to be part of the relationship building.

And little by little, he [Lawrence] realized who he was and what Ana was to him, because he knew [birth] grandma and [birth] grandpa and then Ana so, finally, one day, he came, and he said, “You know Ana’s my mother?” And he was a little, bitty guy. And I said, “Yes.” Ana had a lot to do with it. She kind of, you know, said it over there and made sure he understood and between the both of us it came kind of natural to him.

Celia assessed changes in the birth mother’s living situation and deliberately talked with Lawrence, at least once per month, to ensure he had opportunities to visit his birth mother when he visited his other birth relatives. Additionally, when birth relatives did not arrange visits several weeks in a row, Celia called to arrange visits with them on Lawrence’s behalf.

Compared to the other elements of agency, there are fewer examples of reflexivity in Celia’s transcript. Celia was confident about her concerns, goals, and action at Wave 1; by Wave 2 she took satisfaction, supported by affirmations from her
friends and family, that she was achieving her goals. According to Celia, Lawrence loved her, his adoptive family, and his birth relatives. She was confident that he had developed a strong sense of self.

To see him grow into a nice, young man, you know, he’s almost going on [age]. To see him so sure of himself, you know, I know a lot of it is in himself and I also know that I helped nurture that … so I’ve done a good job with Lawrence, that’s my satisfaction … and I’ve strived so hard for him to know that Ana loves him and Ana wanted the best for him, and he loves Ana and he loves me and that’s what I’ve worked so hard for.

Lawrence had a moderately low level of adoptive identity exploration during early adolescence but, by young adulthood, his level of adoptive identity exploration was high (in the top third of the full sample of young adult adoptees).

Mandy’s Synthesis of Concern, Goals, and Actions
With Her Theory, Assessment, and Reflexivity

Mandy’s concern about the influence of contact on adoptive identity developed gradually as she reflected on her identity as an adoptive mother, on her daughter’s (Nadine) developing sense of self, and on her family’s experience with contact. Mandy exchanged letters and pictures with Calley (Nadine’s birth mother) during Nadine’s first year of life, but had little contact again until Nadine was about 4 years old because “we just had to feel that we were secure in being the parents, we needed that time you know to have that child for ourselves, to not just be the caregiver to this child.” Mandy’s initial motivation to exchange letters was driven by her concern for Calley, “so that it would make the birth mother feel comfortable in the fact that the baby was being taken care of. Make her know that the baby was being loved and watched over.”

Mandy’s view of contact evolved over time. By Wave 1, she had begun to see contact as a way to learn about Nadine’s birth mother, thus reinforcing her identity as Nadine’s adoptive mother and mediating Nadine’s experiences of her birth mother. Consistent with her developing concerns about adoptive identity, Mandy gradually and deliberately increased the type and frequency of contact over time. By Wave 1, she had exchanged names and addresses and experienced multiple face-to-face meetings, and viewed herself as a critical conduit for experiences taking place between Calley and Nadine. She had renewed contact with Calley and developed a relationship with her, “I think you—as you grow and develop and love your children more and more—you want to be connected more with the source of where they came from.” Mandy repeatedly emphasized that she valued contact because it gave herself opportunities to learn from Calley: “[Contact] leaves out the guesswork; there’s an awful lot of guesswork that doesn’t have to be there if you
can communicate what you’re thinking. A lot of time expended on wasted question if you could just ask. Sometimes it’s a real short answer and then it satisfies.”

Like Celia, Mandy viewed the process of developing a sense of self as embedded in relational processes and developing over time. At Wave 1, Mandy said:

I don’t think that Nadine is real aware of exactly what Calley means in her life. She knows the term birth mother, and she knows what a birth mother is, but to her she’s just a really good friend. She’ll sit down to color a picture and say, “can I send this picture to Calley?” But she doesn’t talk about it like she is another mother to her. She is a good friend. I think that will come with age….

I know that being the age, the young age that she is it maybe doesn’t concern her as much and maybe doesn’t stick with her in her mind as much; but it will. So there won’t be one day where we sit down and say, “Listen, you are 12 years old and now we want to tell you about Calley.” She is kind of a household name.

By Wave 2, Mandy had become a keen observer of the ways her facilitation of contact had influenced Nadine’s adoptive identity:

It [contact] molds her [Nadine] because she knows her birth mother, she’s more attached to the fact that she’s adopted and her birth mother than some of the other children who don’t know theirs… Um and I think that’s part of being a girl, part of knowing who she is, so it plays a big part in her.

At Wave 2, Mandy had reassessed the relationship between contact and adoptive identity in response to experiencing Nadine’s adoptive identity exploration firsthand. Although Mandy had initiated contact by Wave 1, she had done so with reservations. At Wave 2, Mandy viewed Nadine’s exploration of contact as an important facet of Nadine’s adoptive identity: “She has a temperament that she would be really hard to live with if she didn’t get to see her birth mother, because she always wants to know more, she wants to find out more stuff.”

Mandy reflected at Wave 2 on the opportunities contact had given her to reinforce her own values and expectations as an adoptive parent:

[Contact] has also given us a real open door to talk about relationships and how God intended the relationships to be. So it has probably been a positive thing that it kept communication with us going as she turns a teenager.

Contact provided frequent opportunities for Mandy and her daughter, Nadine, to talk about adoption-related issues. They talked at least once a month, whenever Nadine had been thinking about her birth mother or when letters or presents from her birth mother arrived. At Wave 2, Mandy articulated that her facilitation
of contact with Nadine’s birth relatives had helped shape Nadine’s adoptive identity:

Because Calley still is a part of her, whether she is around or not. You know, I can’t pretend that I gave birth to the children, because I didn’t. I can’t tell them things about them that I don’t know…. There’s been [years] of her knowing who the birth mother is and finding out information about herself and I think that’s changed, uh, she loves her birth mom and I think that’s great. She sees the warts with it too so that, I, that’s part of Nadine’s maturity.

Nadine had a high level of adoptive identity exploration during early adolescence and young adulthood (in the top third of the full sample of young adult adoptees).

Betty’s Synthesis of Concern, Goals, and Actions With Her Theory, Assessment, and Reflexivity

Betty held potentially contradictory views on adoptive identity formation. On the one hand, she said contact was harmful, “I mean, how do you explain to them, ‘Well, I’m your mother but this is your birthmother.’ I mean, it gets so confusing for the child.” Betty also feared contact might allow her son’s (Doug) birth mother to reclaim him. On the other hand, she believed adopted children should have information about birth parents in order to develop a coherent sense of self:

There’s going to be more questions and stuff come along and the more information you can give them [the better]—to make them to know and to be happy—because if they start looking … they’re trying to fill that emptiness or that one void.

Betty did not seek information about Doug’s birth family because she felt sufficient information had been provided at placement. She planned to share that information with Doug in the future. Betty’s goals were to help Doug (a) understand that he was an adoptee, and (b) develop a positive attitude about adoption. These goals were based on advice given by the adoption agency at placement, not on Betty’s implicit theory of identity development. Consistent with her goals, Betty started talking with Doug about adoption when he was about 4 years old. She explained, “You don’t want it [adoption] to just be sprung on him because that’s not fair to him. You know, let him try to understand a little bit at a time.” At the same time, Betty was concerned that it would be scary for Doug to learn about adoption because he might feel he had been rejected by his birth parents or become fearful he would have to leave his adoptive parents. At Wave 1, she assessed Doug’s needs and her goals and actions. She also modified the frequency and style of talking
about adoption with Doug, presenting adoption in an increasingly positive style so that Doug would feel positive about adoption.

By Wave 2, Betty was relatively unconcerned and unreflexive about adoptive identity, “in fact with Doug, why, you kind of sometimes even forget he’s even adopted” and “I just think Doug forgets he’s adopted, I really do. You know, that just doesn’t enter his mind.” Betty’s concern appeared to wane because she believed she had accomplished her goals. She assessed Doug’s relationships at home and school, and reported that he understood adoption and had a positive attitude about it. Doug (a) talked comfortably with others about adoption, (b) lacked sad or scary feelings about adoption, and (c) lacked interest in adoption or in searching for his birth family members. Betty said that “[Doug] has always been … very understanding about it [adoption], but I don’t think he has never, it has never ever really bothered him about being adopted, you know.” The most striking example of Betty’s lack of reflexivity was her portrayal of Doug as disinterested in adoption while simultaneously stating that Doug was interested in—and asked questions about—connections to his birth family. Also striking was Betty’s warning to Doug about contact when he asked her about birth relatives. She told him that “you got to remember, Doug, that you don’t know for sure if they would want to see you. You got to remember that, that if you contact—so you contacted them that maybe they wouldn’t want to see you.”

Doug had a moderately low level of adoptive identity exploration during early adolescence and a low level of adoptive identity exploration in young adulthood (in the bottom seventh of the full sample of young adult adoptees).

Lindsey’s Synthesis of Concern, Goals, and Actions With Her Theory, Assessment, and Reflexivity

Lindsey had several theories about adoptive identity formation. First, she theorized that self-knowledge about adoption played a role in identity formation: “I feel like the more she [Karen, adopted daughter] knows about herself, the better she’ll be able to relate and to adapt to situations and all.” Second, she theorized, even as early as Wave 1, that adolescent adoptive identity exploration, particularly exploring connections with birth relatives, might interfere with other identity formation processes.

But my biggest concern is when they get to be adolescents because at that particular time they’re starting to seek out who they are and I don’t know if it’s really fair to be—to all of a sudden have them bombarded with all this “I’m adopted. Who are my real parents?” I mean, they’re already trying to figure out who they are and what their relationship is, you know, “Why am I here? Where am I going?” and all this and then to have this other thing about being adopted and you know, “What am I really like? Who are my parents really like?” … I mean, they’re having a hard enough time just
trying to get themselves together being just adolescents without having all that dumped on them too.

Finally, Lindsey theorized that aspects of adoptive identity, including a sense of connection to an adoptive and a birth family, could be explored in tandem with religious identity.

That the Lord went through a lot of—went through a process—to select the right situation with the right birth parents, bringing her [Karen] into the right adoptive parent situation. So, I think that she feels that, because the Lord went through a lot of trouble to put her here, that—the sense that, the family’s special… . But, I, so I think that just their belief, you know, that the Lord is sovereign over their situation and that he’s going to take care of them and put them in the best situation.

Lindsey’s concerns, goals, and actions were consistent with her several theories. Lindsey ensured that Karen understood she was adopted: “From the very beginning when she was in the crib we told her she was adopted.” Furthermore, Lindsey tried to nurture Karen’s adoptive identity exploration during childhood by providing developmentally appropriate information about her adoption, even though the information was limited, and by giving Karen opportunities to express her curiosity about her adoption and birth family.

Lindsey took action in Karen’s childhood to prevent adoptive identity exploration from taking center stage during adolescence: “It seems like if it’s a big secret they may want to—then that stirs up their curiosity more than if it’s just kind of matter of fact, this is the way it is.” Lindsey also used her religious beliefs to help Karen make sense of adoption. “Of course, our feeling has always been because of our belief in God and how he’s, how he cares for his children and how he’s put us together and all.” She assessed Karen’s development using an implicit theoretical stance consistent with her religious beliefs about adoption: “Most parents have no choice as to who they get. Whereas they [our adopted children] realize they were chosen to be in our family. And they feel in one sense they’re maybe a little bit more special than if they would have been, you know, born in the family.” Lindsey also assessed other aspects of Karen’s adoptive identity, reconsidering her goals and actions in the process: “Sometimes I feel like maybe we should seal things [records] but then she’s [Karen] accepted everything so well that everything’s gone okay.”

Lindsey also demonstrated reflexivity. She observed that Karen was curious about her birth mother and might want to search for her. Lindsey also expressed fear that Karen’s birth mother might replace her in some way. At the same time, she stated that her fears were unreasonable because she (Lindsey) was Karen’s mother in Karen’s mind and heart. Lindsey felt it was important to try to come to terms
with her fears so she could support Karen’s adoptive identity exploration, consistent with her own theories, instead of acting on her fears.

Lindsey had a high level of adoptive identity exploration during early adolescence and young adulthood (in the top third of the full sample of young adult adoptees).

DISCUSSION

Case analysis of adoptive mother interviews provided substantial evidence that adoptive mothers act as adoptive identity agents and revealed ways that adoptive mothers use contact with birth family members to facilitate adoptive identity formation. Results for the two adoptive mothers who facilitated contact (Celia and Mandy) and one of the adoptive mothers who did not (Lindsey) contain rich examples of identity agency. Like Lindsey, Betty did not facilitate contact, but Betty’s results reveal little evidence of identity agency. At young adulthood, adoptees’ depth of adoptive identity exploration results were consistent with adoptive mothers’ identity agency results. Lawrence (Celia’s son), Nadine (Mandy’s daughter), and Karen (Lindsey’s daughter) all had equally high levels of depth of adoptive identity exploration while Doug (Betty’s son) had a low level of exploration.

Celia, Mandy, and Lindsay acted as adoptive identity agents in three ways. First, consistent with an identity agent theoretical framework, Celia, Mandy, and Lindsey (a) expressed deep concerns and felt responsible about their children’s adoptive identity development, (b) developed specific goals to fulfill their responsibility, and (c) acted on their concerns and goals. Celia and Mandy did so by facilitating contact with their children’s birth relatives and by helping their children interpret their experiences. Lindsey drew on her religious beliefs to help Karen explore her connections to both her adoptive and birth family. Celia and Mandy discussed the dilemma posed by taking responsibility for their children’s adoptive identity development, given their lack of knowledge and personal experience with their birth stories. They felt their children needed these stories to develop a coherent sense of self as adopted persons.

Second, as adoptive identity agents, Celia and Mandy deliberately wove complex adoptive and birth family relationships—and the meanings associated with them—into the fabric of everyday experience. Lindsey used religion to support her daughter’s interest in the meaning of adoption and her connection with her birth family, despite the lack of contact.

Finally, Celia, Mandy, and Lindsey drew on their respective theories of adoptive identity formation to create opportunities to talk with their children about adoption. Lindsey was motivated to fulfill her daughter’s desire for information about her birth family so that adoptive identity formation would not interfere with her overall identity development. Celia and Mandy sought to guide their children’s
interpretation of their experiences with birth family contact. The use of conversation expressly for the purpose of identity formation is consistent with narrative theory. Interactions provide a powerful day-to-day social context for narrative exchange (Pasupathi, 2001), and a large body of theory and empirical research has proposed that conversation shapes recollections and narrative identity (Berger & Kellner, 1964; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Previous research (Neil, 2009; Von Korff, 2008; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003) also suggested that contact, particularly face-to-face contact, is positively associated with adoption conversation.

Implications for Practice and Research

The theoretical framework of identity agents was useful in identifying the work that adoptive mothers do to address the adoptive family’s connection to the child’s birth family in the interest of adoptive identity formation. Identity agency has implications for children’s identities as well as parents’ identity formation. Mandy’s case reveals that contact can be a powerful mechanism for adoptive mothers’ identity formation. Reciprocal effects between identity formation and identity agency need to be explored as researchers seek to assess identity agency or try to capture the effects of identity agency on young children as they unfold over time.

Lindsey’s concerns for adoptive identity coexisted with her concerns for religious identity, which suggests that future research should explore alternative ways (other than contact with birth family members) in which adoptive parents act as adoptive identity agents. This is consistent with Brodzinsky’s (2005) suggestion that adoptive parents can forgo contact with birth relatives if they are willing to “consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share that meaning with others, to explore adoption related issues in the context of family life, to acknowledge and support the child’s dual connection to two families” (p. 149).

Future studies should also examine the relationship between adoptive identity agency and the ability of adoptive parents to manage fears in relation to the adoptive family’s connection to the birth family. Finally, all mothers recruited to this study were married. But, even though mothers often take the lead in kinship work, their partners may have ideas of their own that call for further examination.

This report is significant in that (a) it applies a new theoretical framework to examine the processes that adoptive mothers use to foster adoptees’ identity formation, and (b) it includes reports from adoptive mothers collected before the seminal period of identity formation. Nevertheless, these results cannot be used to generalize to a population.

There are no widely agreed on road maps for adoptive identity agents as they engage in kinship work, much less as they negotiate contact with birth families. Adoptive parents who have facilitated contact generally have been satisfied with it (Berry, Cavazos Dylla, Barth, & Needell, 1998; Ge et al., 2008; Grotevant &
McRoy, 1998) but, as these data show, it is not a simple matter to incorporate contact with birth relatives into adoptive family life. Furthermore, as this study showed, contact with birth relatives is only one of many pathways available to adoptive parents who act as agents of adoptive identity. Our closing words come from Mandy who asked researchers and adoption practitioners to allow families to make their own decisions about contact, on a case-by-case basis, based on the identity formation needs of their children: “Our idea of open adoption now as compared to when we first started is a completely different view. I think we’ve learned, as well as the agency, about open adoption. It can’t be pushed on anybody; you have to feel real comfortable yourself … everybody’s different.”

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors gratefully acknowledge the adoptive family members who generously shared their experiences with them as part of the Minnesota-Texas Adoption Research Project. Funding was provided by National Institute of Child Health and Human Development grant R01-HD-049859, National Science Foundation grant BCS-0443590, and William T. Grant Foundation grant 7146. Lynn Von Korff received a Mary Ellen McFarland Fellowship from the Department of Family Social Science for her doctoral dissertation, part of which constitutes the basis of this article. During the preparation of this article, Lynn Von Korff and Harold D. Grotevant were supported by funds from the Rudd Family Foundation Chair in Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

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