Adoptive parenting
Harold D Grotevant and Albert YH Lo

Challenges in adoptive parenting continue to emerge as adoption policies and practices evolve. We review three areas of research in adoptive parenting that reflect contemporary shifts in adoption. First, we highlight recent findings concerning openness in adoption contact arrangements, or contact between a child's families of birth and rearing. Second, we examine research regarding racial and cultural socialization in transracial and international adoptions. Finally, we review investigations of parenting experiences of lesbian and gay adoptive parents. Overall, parenting processes (*e.g.*, supportive vs. problematic family interaction) are better predictors of child adjustment than are group differences (*e.g.*, open vs. closed adoptions; adoption by heterosexual vs. same-sex parents). The distinctive needs of adopted children call for preparation of adoption-competent mental health, casework, education, and health care professionals.

Address
Department of Psychological and Brain Sciences, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 135 Hicks Way, Amherst, MA 01003 USA

Corresponding author: Grotevant, Harold D (hgroteva@psych.umass.edu)

Throughout human history, some children have required care by adults other than their biological parents [1,2]. Although these arrangements have often involved informal care by extended family or community members, contemporary western adoption is characterized by a legal arrangement in which parental rights and responsibilities are transferred from a child's birth parents to other adult(s) who will provide care [3]. Even though the practice of adoption is widespread, specific family arrangements continually evolve in adaptation to historical, ecological, legal, and cultural contexts.

Just as the arrangements have changed, so has advice to adoptive parents. In the mid-20th century, adoptive parents were typically counseled to love their adopted children and treat them in the same way they would treat a child born to them. An extensive literature developed in recent decades has revealed that special consideration needs to be taken in adoptive parenting, both as a function of the child's pre-adoption experiences (which may have included maltreatment or institutionalization) and the child's post-adoption family arrangements (which may involve contact with birth relatives, being raised by parents from a different racial or cultural group, being raised by same-sex parents, or any combination of these).

Effective adoptive parenting requires attunement to the distinctive needs of the child in the family. In this review, we examine the evidence base relevant to adoptive parenting in three areas with considerable current research activity: (a) openness in adoption, or contact between the child's families of birth and rearing; (b) cultural and racial socialization needs of children adopted by parents of a different racial or cultural heritage; and (c) parenting challenges faced by same-sex couples who adopt.

Openness in adoption

The first issue, openness in adoption, has implications for the very definition of an adoptive family. Since the 1970s, there has been increasing recognition that adoption is not simply the subtraction of a child from one family and addition to another, but that adoption creates an adoptive kinship network, in which the child links his or her families of birth and rearing, even if that connection is only a psychological one [4]. Currently, approximately half to two-thirds of infant domestic adoptions in the United States involve direct contact with birth relatives [5,6]. The occurrence of open adoption varies widely by country, but it appears to be more common in the US than in western Europe. Contact in international adoptions is much lower and depends on the child's country of origin. Historically, adoption was often accomplished informally among extended family and community members. However, in the early 20th century, the practice of adoption by non-relatives was brought into the legal code through the establishment of closed adoptions, in which the identities of birth and adoptive family members were not revealed to each other and adoption records were sealed by the court [7,8]. A growing body of research, mostly based on families who adopted infants, is revealing a great deal about the dynamics of adoptive kinship networks as well as about psychological outcomes for the adopted children and their adoptive and birth parents.

Openness arrangements vary widely from one family to another in terms of the type of contact, frequency of contact, and the individuals who are involved in the contact [9]. Contact can be beneficial for adoptive kinship network participants, but it can also present a number of challenges [10]. The balance between challenge and benefit depends on the individuals involved and the relationships they have been able to forge [11].

In comparison to adoptive parents in closed (no contact) or mediated (indirect contact through an agency) adoptions, those involved in direct contact were least afraid that the child's birth parent might try to reclaim the child [12]. Openness arrangements also change over time as a function of the needs and developmental issues facing the individuals in the family [13]. Successful management of openness arrangements requires flexibility, strong communication skills, and commitment to the relationship; these attributes are generally grounded in empathy toward the child's situation [13].

Early advocates and detractors of open adoption predicted both positive and negative adjustment outcomes for children experiencing birth parent contact. Nevertheless, consistent group differences in adjustment have not been found between adoptees who were experiencing and not experiencing birth parent contact [14–16]. However, adoptive parents, birth parents, and adopted children experiencing contact are usually more satisfied with their openness arrangements than are their counterparts experiencing no contact [17–19]. In turn, degree of satisfaction with openness arrangements is negatively associated with problem behavior in adolescents [18,20].

As adopted children become adults, they take on more independent responsibility for relationships with their birth relatives. Nevertheless, the young adults' relationships with their adoptive parents continue to play an important role in their birth family experiences. As was true at younger ages, birth family contact was associated with greater satisfaction. In addition, however, there was greater satisfaction with openness arrangements when adoptees' communication with their adoptive parents was open and sensitive, regardless of contact [21]. These findings should be interpreted with caution, as there are relatively few studies of open adoptions, and existing studies need to be replicated. The practice of open adoption is relatively new and is continually changing. Samples are difficult to access (especially birth parents), and funding is very limited. Once a critical mass of comparable studies has been produced, it will be important to conduct meta-analyses in order determine the robustness of findings.

Racial and cultural socialization

In significant numbers of child welfare and international adoptions, White parents adopt children from other racial or cultural groups (*i.e.*, transracial or transcultural adoptions). Current research focuses on how, to what degree, and with what consequences White parents integrate the child's race and birth culture into the child's life. Although adoption professionals have offered opinions about this to prospective adoptive parents for years, a coherent scientific evidence base from which to make informed recommendations is only now beginning to emerge.

Calls in the literature for acknowledging cultural and/or racial differences in adoptions can be traced to Kirk's [22] shared fate theory, which addressed the degree of importance adoptive parents place on the child's adoption status. Recent studies have utilized Kirk's original shared fate theory as a model for examining how much value adoptive parents place on the racial and/or cultural differences between themselves and their child, with the possibility of family members acknowledging or rejecting these differences [23,24].

Acknowledgement of racial and/or cultural differences by family members has been found to be positively related to parents' socialization of the child about his or her birth culture as well as positive engagement of adopted adolescents during family conversations about adoption [25•,24]. In terms of child adjustment, disagreement between family members about the importance of ethnicity and race was associated with higher levels of adolescent behavior problems when compared to simply the family acknowledging or rejecting differences as a unit [26••].

Interest in adoptive parents' acknowledgement of racial and/or cultural differences has highlighted two distinctive aspects of parental behavior. The first, *cultural socialization*, involves exposure to the child's birth culture and development of pride in its customs, language, food, history, art, and so on. In contrast, the second, *preparation for bias (or racial socialization)*, acknowledges that White parents must prepare their children for racial experiences such as discrimination, which they themselves have likely never encountered [27–30].

Recent studies of transracially adoptive families have found evidence of both protective and risk-related roles of socialization in predicting adjustment and social outcomes. For example, parental cultural socialization promoted ethnic/racial identity in transracially adopted individuals in Italy [31,32]. Both cultural socialization and preparation for bias weakened the link between discrimination and negative psychological adjustment in the form of stress and depression [33,34].

Lastly, researchers have examined cross-context connections in socialization. For example, frequent conversations about racial/cultural issues among adopted peers