

Chapter Fourteen

Open Adoption: Extending Families, Exchanging Facts

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On October 25, 1998, the *New York Times* printed a photograph on its front page of two mothers “sharing” a child. The accompanying article, “In Search of a Child: The New Openness,” went on to discuss, among other aspects of American adoption, the spread of *open adoptions*. The photograph was full of implications, not all plumbed in the accompanying article: a scene of two mothers cuddling an infant evokes assumptions about parenthood and family, nurture and love that uphold adoption in the United States. Those evoked assumptions simultaneously cover over the real significance of “openness” in American adoption.

The photo in the *Times* suggested that open adoption brings a birth parent and an adoptive parent together, their mutual concern for and involvement with the child marking the establishment of an “extended family.” That may be the popular view of open adoption, a view that inspires a tingle of dread in individuals contemplating adoption from within—the participants in—or from without—the spectators of—created kinship. In truth, open adoption has about as many meanings as there are individuals embarking on adoptive family relationships. Even agencies, the arbiters of adoption in the United States, do not agree on definitions, and one must expect that the social workers within those agencies accommodate practices to their personal viewpoints.

Practices that now come under the rubric of openness include an exchange of nonidentifying information between birth parent and adoptive parent; a face-to-face meeting without an exchange of names; exchanges of photographs, letters, and names at the time of contact; ongoing contact between birth parent, adoptive parent, and, at parental discretion, the child (Rappaport 1992; Silber and Dorner 1990; Demick and Wapner 1988). In the 1990s, most American adoption agencies offered the possibility of openness among their services. One scholar of adoption estimates that 80 to 90 percent of adoption

agencies encourage information sharing and that about 20 percent have families participating in fully disclosed adoptions in which anonymity is dropped (McRoy 1991). The breadth of these practices and the lack of precision in defining openness reveal several things about American adoption. First, use of the term to cover the exchange of information reveals exactly how *closed* adoption became over the course of the twentieth century.¹ Sealed in state records, locked in agency files, and protected by court orders, “information” is a precious commodity. Second, the breadth of definition exposes a particularistic approach long characteristic of American adoption: each case is treated as special and distinct in practice. Particularism makes sense in the child-centered climate of American placement policy; the perceived tragedy (or expediency) of transferring a child away from her or his biological parent is modified by emphasizing the child’s special needs, personality, and vulnerabilities. The effect of particularism is to throw everything up for grabs—including the lines of kinship adoption follows.

I think there is a third explanation for the expansiveness and, one might say, chaos of meanings of open adoption. The bustle and bounty of referents for the phrase haze over and obscure the real threat opening adoption poses. Unmistakably and overall, open adoption challenges the confidentiality and sealed-record policies of American adoption. The challenge is severe for two reasons: (1) confidentiality is crucial to the ideal of family that adoption practice implements, and (2) confidentiality accords control over constructed families to social workers and other professionals who manage the transfer of children in the United States. Opening adoption weakens the boundaries of family, defies conceptualizations of kinship, and undermines customary regulations of placement in ways that have no precedent in American history. Opening adoption disrupts the function adoption has served in the United States of enforcing the normative nuclear family: father, mother, and children attached to one another forever. Interpreted as sharing a child, open adoption implies that divorce, stepfamilies, and sequential parenting are *fine*. In short, open adoption throws a gauntlet at the consanguineal core of kinship that until now adoptive arrangements scrupulously, vividly, and persuasively represented (see Modell 1994 and Modell 2001).

Open adoption requires a whole new model of parent-child ties. The energy of resistance to such a change is evident in the fierce opposition openness arouses. More importantly, resistance is evident in the hazy way openness is defined—its meaning accommodated to the predilections, the principles, and the unarticulated assumptions of those who practice, oversee, and write about adoption. As other chapters in this book argue, redrawing the lines of kinship is rarely easy or harmonious; in the case of adoption, as in other cases, redrawing kinship happens person by person, day by day. The subject of open adoption extends the analytic perspectives of kinship studies inasmuch as adoption prompts—and always has prompted—an *articulation* of the principles and signs of relatedness. Controversies over open adoption are indicative

of the process of change the institution has consistently manifested. In turn, the controversies show how American adoption offsets substantial revisions of notions of parenthood, family, and kinship.

My argument is more than that. A close look at open adoption reveals an emphasis on "information" that enlarges its impact farther than researchers suspect, participants acknowledge, and historians document.² Several features of the arrangements deemed "open" stand out; these frame my discussion in the following pages. First, opening adoption is premised on the value of information, not on the extension of kinship ties. Second, opening adoption reflects a post-modern isolation of the parent-child tie from family and from continuity over generations. Third, opening adoption has more to do with individual choice than with family. Sounding paradoxical and odd, each of these statements merits discussion—though in the end, they are not separable from one another.

What Does "Open" Mean in Open Adoption?

The term "open adoption" applies to what are called stranger or nonrelative adoptions. These are the adoptions that form popular stereotypes: a child, previously unknown and unrelated, is adopted by an adult or a couple. Relative adoptions occur between individuals who know one another, and increasingly adoptions are undertaken within a family and by new partners of a biological parent. Different assumptions about information attach to each form of adoption. In stranger adoptions, the assumption is that necessary information will be passed from birth parent to adoptive parent, traditionally through a social worker or other intermediary. In relative adoptions, the assumption is that the participating adults know the child and have relevant information about her or him. Recently, too, the rise in foster child and older child adoptions means the child herself or himself carries a wealth of information into the adopting family. These developments have the dual effect of bringing information to the forefront, since it differs from one type to another, and of confounding the meaning of the word. In this chapter, I focus on openness in the conventional stranger adoption.

Many reasons are given for the shift away from closed and confidential adoptions. (The story, of course, is complicated by the plethora of interpretations of "closed" and of "open.") Probably the least disputed reason is one that focuses on adoptees. In the 1960s, in a movement well described elsewhere, adoptee demands for more information about themselves intensified and, in an increasing number of cases, led to a search for members of a birth family (see e.g., Carp 1998; Modell 1994). Birth parents followed soon after, with claims for "information" that at once resembled and extended the claims adoptees were making. In response to demands, and alert to the number of achieved reunions, agencies began offering more information at the onset of an adoption; such information was thought to forestall later dissatisfaction

and possible disruption of the adoptive family. The perceptible groundswell out there energized agencies into attending to client demands, among which "information" took the lead.

Another explanation for openness exists, intertwined with the presumed significance of information. This second explanation might be called the market factor in American adoption. In the United States, adoption depends on the willingness of a parent to relinquish her child—to offer a child for distribution, as it were—and on the willingness of an adult to take in (permanently) the child produced by another person. The ratio of supply and demand, furthermore, is not just a matter of balancing product availability and consumer need, but also of negotiating the principles of exchange held by those who enter an adoption market. Supply as well as interpretations of the transaction changed in the 1960s and 1970s. Fewer parents relinquished and those that did joined the chorus calling for information. More potential adopters entered the market and they, too, chafed against the secrecy and confidentiality agencies imposed.³

Clients came to agencies no longer assuming they had to be docile about the terms of adopting. Agencies had to comply with the mobilization of client interests or lose their business. Information became both the centerpiece and the cover for a profound sea change in cultural understandings of kinship, parenthood, and identity.

The emphasis on information itself needs to be explained. All members of the adoption triad were influenced by the preoccupation with background, ancestry, and, eventually, genetics spreading through American culture. Publicized in various ways, including the poignant personal memoirs displayed in print and on television, the urge to *know* won converts right and left—and still does. Controversial—and heated, the subject of releasing or protecting information touches deep roots in American culture. The debate around confidentiality exceeds that occurring in European nations, which, by and large, approach adoption with similar goals and understandings. A scholar of adoption from Finland, herself an adoptee, Wegar (1997: xi) remarked on her surprise at the persistence of closed records in the United States. Exploring "the structures of belief, perception and appreciation that shape the controversy" over sealed records, her book hints at the distinctive importance information—its content, storage, and distribution—plays in the United States. My discussion concentrates on the role of information in open adoption, and shows the emphasis on "facts" to be a major break in the links between adoptive kinship, kinship, and cultural values.

Practicing Openness in Adoption

The move toward openness, in any of its guises, has been slow and cautious. "Meetings between birthparents and adoptive parents started in 1974 at the

Children's Home Society of California (CHSC)," reported McRoy, a prominent researcher on American adoption. "As of 1984, 10 percent of their adoptions could be classified as *open*, in some respects. Less than 1 percent included the exchange of last names, addresses, and phone numbers" (McRoy, Grotevant, and White 1998: 16). Ten percent is not abundant, especially when qualified by "in some respects." Other agencies followed the California example, also offering openness *in some respects*. Most often, the practice involves providing the birth parents and the adoptive parents with much more information about each other than had been the case in twentieth-century American adoptions. A few agencies encourage, even advise, face-to-face meetings, but these meetings do not necessarily include an exchange of names, addresses, or other identifying information.

I have been working with an agency in my community that introduced a policy of openness ten years ago. Like other agencies in the country, this one defined the move as innovative and has moved cautiously in implementing new practices. The data for my discussion below come from my research with this agency (supplemented by contact with other agencies in the community), as well as from the studies of open adoption now available. These studies, while expanding, are still preliminary: new practices have not produced enough cases to warrant a large-scale research project (Gross 1993). When research with families is done, the population is small, self-selective, and, generally, consists of the articulate and the forthright members of an adoption community. In addition, the subjects of a majority of these research projects, including my own, are primarily white, middle-class—mainstream—Americans. The agency is old, elite, and well respected in the community. While customarily accepting clients—birth and adoptive parents—who have resources and options, along with introducing open adoption, the agency has also expanded its community to include nonwhite and less well-off clients. My initial findings suggest that the clients willing to try some form of openness are individuals with higher education and income.

Like other agencies in the country, the placement agency I work with practiced caution by attending to the expressed wishes and needs of clients. Like other agencies in the country, this one also attributed its change in policy primarily to the swelling of demand for information on the part of adoptees. Social workers also reported that parents contemplating relinquishment, as well as individuals applying for adoption, request more detailed information about the "other" parents of their child. The thumbnail sketch, with its summary of health, habits, and hobbies, no longer suffices.⁴ In addition, the agency had been losing business, with the shortage of infants remarked all over the country and the consequent turn to international or independent adoptions by potential parents.⁵ A wider swath had to be cut in order to attract clients.

In the 1980s, the agency began offering three different types of adoption: traditional (closed), semiopen, and fully disclosed adoption. Traditional

adoption preserves the confidentiality and sealed-records policy of American adoption. In semiopen arrangements, letters and photos are exchanged along with information, but identifying information is not provided.⁶ In fully disclosed adoptions, the parties meet one another face to face, have phone conversations, and exchange names—though, I discovered, often not addresses.

Potential adoptive parents come to the agency expecting a conventional, closed adoption. This may be because they know the "normal" rules of American adoption or it may be that, like many adoptive parents before them, they value the protection and insurance that secrecy (presumably) provides. A certain number of birth parents, too, request anonymity, for the reasons that have always existed: the stigma attached to an unplanned pregnancy, perhaps personal shame at a "mistake," and often simply the desire to be private about a decision still regarded as odd or unnatural in American culture. These clients indicate the hold secrecy has, preserving as it does the closure and permanency of transfer that adoption is supposed to effect in the United States. Operating in a context in which "openness" (in some form) receives the approval of the Child Welfare League of America as well as of a number of individuals already engaged in adoptive relationships, the agency intervenes with a presentation of the advantages of "disclosure."

These presentations occur in group meetings and at carefully structured panels. The presentations do not concentrate on the best interests of the child, recognizably not the total issue, but on the expectations, comfort level, and understandings of family that clients bring to the table. To the credit of the agency, presentations do not force a point of view; they do address common fears and concerns that haunt participants in adoptive kinship in American society. Based on my interviews, attendance at a number of meetings and panels, and anthropological-style immersion in this adoption community, the concerns voiced by birth parents and adoptive parents resemble those discussed in studies of adoption in general. Confronted with the idea of limited or no confidentiality—of knowing about and even knowing in person—the other parents of one's child, birth and adoptive parents worry about similar things. How will the presence of a birth parent (or family) affect adoptive parent attachment to and bonding with the child? How important are biological factors (or genetics) to a child's development and identity? What role is a birth parent to play in the child's life? How does a child handle the presence of several different mothers and fathers in her or his life? Elaborated and generalized, these are also the issues that come up in debates over openness in adoption literature, in the media, and in casual conversations about a nonsecret, nonconfidential "transaction in parenthood."⁷

Like the debates, concerns voiced by potential birth and adoptive parents often "forget" the child. This sounds paradoxical, especially since the language manifestly focuses on the child. In fact, one of the most frequently cited reasons for opening adoption is that "more information" facilitates the process of telling the child about adoption. There are no gaps or mysteries, no secrets or

confusions on the part of the parents; consequently, in conversations with the child about adoption, parents do not need to hesitate, fabricate, or romanticize. Entering the large body of literature on telling, the pros and cons of open adoption still leave the content of information, the significance of "knowing," a matter of individual, and diversified, understanding and application.⁸

Close examination of most texts on open adoption, including those I gathered in my fieldwork, reveals that the child is regarded as a recipient, a beneficiary of his or her parents' satisfaction with the arrangement they have made. The assumption within my adoption community, as in much adoption literature, is that when birth parent and adoptive parent are content, the child will be well served, her or his interests carefully nurtured and protected. The child's changing perceptions, experiences, cognitive and emotional growth are less prominent in group discussions and on panels than the level of comfort the adults achieve.⁹ And while the child may slide away from direct focus because there are not enough children experiencing new types of openness to constitute a study population, the primary reason is that open adoption in the end has to do first with the adults and secondarily with the child. Moreover, open adoption has less to do with kinship among individuals than with control over information and, with that, identity.

One Case

One sunny spring morning, I spent three hours with a wife and husband who were participating in an open or *fully disclosed* adoption, in the language the agency used. I arrived at their urban townhouse around 10:00 A.M., and was greeted with coffee, fresh fruit, and cookies that "Danny helped bake." Danny, age four, was around, playing with his cars and trucks. Unlike other adoptive parents I interviewed, Marilyn and Daniel did not "hide things" from young Danny.¹⁰ They were very happy to talk about open adoption and told me they wanted to "help others make the decision we made." Admitting to fear at first, they were comforted by attending a panel of birth parents who had met and knew the adoptive parents of their children. "There was nothing frightening about them. They were just young girls who had made a mistake, or couldn't tell their parents, or wanted to go to college." Marilyn and Daniel both expressed appreciation at the amount of exposure to various types of adoptive arrangements they had received at the agency.

After considering the pros and cons, Marilyn and Daniel agreed to try a fully disclosed adoption. They met the young mother and exchanged information about themselves with her. "We felt comfortable with her," they told me, and were overjoyed when, five months later, she handed the baby to them in person. Certainly there seemed to be no secrets here; or, rather, the secrets were not imposed by the agency but by the participants themselves. Social workers are present during initial meetings to facilitate and to make sure that

each person is satisfied with the exchange of information. Personal reports, and my observations, suggest that the exchange of information expands but never breaks the envelope sanctified in adoption practice over the years. With or without intervention by a social worker, the "facts" people offer one another resemble the conventional sketches American adoption agencies have always provided: health, background, interests, hobbies, attitudes toward children, and feelings about family. Added to this information are whatever details can be learned from reading the gestures and facial expressions of another person. And because theirs was "fully disclosed," Marilyn, Daniel, and the birth mother, Sally, also exchanged identifying information, primarily names and phone numbers.

As important as the initial meeting for all three was the opportunity to keep lines of communication open after the baby had been placed and legally adopted. To meet this goal, Marilyn and Daniel regularly sent letters and photographs to Sally documenting Danny's growth and development. Sally called at first regularly, and then sporadically; every Christmas, Marilyn and Daniel brought Danny to visit Sally and her mother. When Danny was two, Sally left the state, stopped phoning, and ended contact. Marilyn and Daniel still visit with Sally's mother on Christmas, but Sally is not a major topic of conversation. Marilyn and Daniel are pleased that Danny has contact with the birth grandmother. They frankly admitted that they were "relieved" that Sally was not more interested in the child. At age twenty-one, she probably would "move on with her life."

Redrawing Kinship or Disclosing Information?

This is one story. What does it mean in the larger discussion of changed adoption practices? Nearly a decade ago, Caplan (1990) published a step-by-step narrative of an open adoption in the *New Yorker*. The piece follows the fortunes of Peggy, who would not relinquish her child unless she could know the parents; Tom, the child's father and Peggy's boyfriend whom she did not want to marry; and Lee and Dan, the adoptive parents who accepted the requests Peggy made. Both analytic and sensitive in its descriptive thickness, Caplan's story reveals the cultural complexities embedded in changed adoptive arrangements. Similarly, the story of Sally, Marilyn, Daniel, and Danny exposes the difficulties and dilemmas in a shift to openness.

The complexities are different, without being contradictory. Caplan tells a story of unsuccessfully redrawn kinship. The story I told (much more briefly) demonstrates the significance and the multiple meanings of *disclosure*. Together, the two cases illuminate what opening adoption meant and did not mean in late 1990s American society. As Caplan tells the story, Peggy and Tom developed a close, familial relationship with Lee and Dan before the birth of the child. The four spent time together, drawing and redrawing the

lines of relationship that connected them to one another. Peggy, like other birth mothers in studies, seemed to consider Lee a mother figure; Lee, in turn, nurtured and worried over Peggy. The fathers had a different approach to family, one equally gendered: the two men took responsibility for the ties between all four adults. After the baby was born, problems arose, unresolvable even with an *as-if* kinship map. Caplan's narrative, with the strikingly unambiguous title "An Open Adoption," ends with Peggy gone from the lives of Lee, Dan, and the baby, and with Tom only a voice on the answering machine. In the last scene, the adoptive family is alone in the kitchen, preparing breakfast—just like any other "real" family.

In one way a failure, in another way the adoption suggests what "open" may really mean to those who practice and those who support the practice within agencies. (For the moment, I leave out the most militant supporters of open adoption, those who insist on "new" families. I come back to the point in my conclusion.) The completion of the story comes from my fieldwork, from Sally, Marilyn, Daniel, and Danny. They participated in what the agency carefully calls "fully disclosed" adoption. By rejecting the word "open," the agency avoids the vagueness of that term, the titillating publicity surrounding the idea (for instance, "two mothers sharing a child"), and the suggestion of completely fluid family boundaries. Instead, taking the phrase "fully disclosed" maintains the positive aura the word "open" has in an American context and emphasizes *the transfer of information rather than the creation of kinship ties*.

"Fully disclosed" speaks to the end of sealed records and closed files, hidden facts and doctored data. "Fully disclosed" underlines the documentary aspect of any form of adoption in 1990s American society; it refers to the composed and coherent representation of crucial actors, not to the emotional and familial minefield through which Peggy, Tom, Dan, and Lee walked. Sally chose a disclosed adoption (according to Marilyn and Daniel) because she wanted to *know* the parents of her child; she wanted to learn their outstanding traits and personal perspectives, as well as the lineaments of their social and domestic worlds. Marilyn and Daniel, in turn, emphasized the importance of *knowing* Sally. For them, too, the word had a particular meaning, which had nothing to do with intimacy and everything to do with a perception of important information. One might even say (without losing sight of the feelings Marilyn and Daniel had about adoption and their adoptive family) that "knowing" distanced them from an intimacy with Sally, putting the contact into a clear and manageable arena.

"Fully disclosed" uncovers the significant feature of opening adoption as it occurred in late twentieth-century American society: each party to the transaction received an elaborated description of the other, a more complete life history, a thicker file folder. Birth parents and adoptive parents entered the arrangement with the desire to provide and to acquire a thorough dossier on the key actors in the event. The content ultimately depends on personal definitions, decisions, and responses to the inevitable changes a lifetime brings.

Knowing is not the beginning of a relationship. Marilyn and Daniel were relieved when Sally moved away. And Sally did, after all, move away and stop phoning. With some exceptions, participants in open adoptions tend to reduce contact quickly. "For all studies, the actual amount of contact . . . is in the range of two to four contacts a year" (Gross 1993: 273). Adoptive parents in other studies admit being "tired out" by the visit of a birth parent. "Sometimes I think I'm tired of sharing. It's getting ready for the visits. The kids will fight and punch each other and you say, 'Oh Lord, please don't do this in front of them [birth parents].' When they leave, I say, 'Whew, that's another visit over with'" (quoted in McRoy, Grotevant, and White 1988: 89). While this might be the comment of any harried mother, the word "sharing" suggests the deeper problems adoptive parents perceive in continued contact. As the mother's remark reveals, the arrival of a birth parent is not just that of another relative but of someone who actually shares the child. No matter what term the "visitor" is given, aunty or first name, she (or he) evokes an uncomfortable, because not delineated, participation in the child's life and identity. Contact is not a first draft of kinship but a smudged picture of interactions.

Birth parents end contact, but for somewhat different reasons. Apparently, a number do accept the "move on with life" prescription so deeply embedded in relinquishment rhetoric in the United States (Modell 1994). From this vantage point, staying in contact with the adoptive family signifies remaining in a niche without a future. Plus the relationship birth parents find themselves in is not *sharing* but *being* a child. Statements like "the adoptive mother is like a mother to me," or "I can always depend on her," run through reports on contact between birth and adoptive parents. Continued contact seems to work only for a small segment of the American population. In her book *Open Adoption* (1987), Lindsay described satisfactory relationships between birth parents and adoptive parents. Participants tended to be members of religiously based adoption communities. Homogeneity was the rule, and reference to "God's gift" of a child smoothed over the problems of defining behaviors and relationships among the individuals participating in the adoption. Like other studies, Lindsay's is horizontal: there is no time scale through which to track changes in the relationships established at the onset of an adoption. As she recognizes, longitudinal studies are vital; this does not, however, vitiate her findings that something else is needed if contact is to last: religious beliefs, a tight community, a charismatic social worker.

Another group reportedly able to manage ongoing contact is loosely deemed "intellectuals." As used, the term not only covers a mélange of so-called daring, somewhat marginal members of American society, but also underlines the intellectual dimension of engaging in openness. "Some liberal people think that they can handle all this [openness] but I personally wouldn't want to" (quoted in McRoy, Grotevant, and White 1988: 77). A recent book on the experience of being adopted reiterates the idea: "As happens

in any innovation, the pioneers of open adoptions are a very select group of parents: highly educated, liberal, open-minded, nondefensive, experimental individuals who are not tied to traditional mores and lifestyles" (Brodzinsky, Schechter, and Henig 1992: 190). The implication is that opening is a politically correct thing to do, which, as well, introduces a dependence on information that has nothing to do with "real" parenthood. From one point of view, then, "facts" intrude in the creation of loving, unconditional parental ties; from another point of view—for those who choose disclosed adoption—facts cement the tie between parent and child. Both viewpoints stress the informational aspects of opening adoption, not the establishment or the continuity of contact between birth and adoptive parents.

It's very 1990s American culture to stress information. The intrusion of "freedom of information" into adoption has been striking in the past three decades, as it has been in other areas of American life. To get information is culturally considered better than being denied information. In the case of adoption, one must ask "what information?" and "why better?" Under the auspices of their agency's fully disclosed practice, Sally, Marilyn, and Daniel gleaned more information about each other than they would have in a conventional confidential arrangement: they saw each other, they asked questions of one another, they presented themselves in person, not just on paper. Marilyn and Daniel told me they felt they could be better parents of Danny knowing his background, knowing "where he came from." Sally felt better placing her child in an environment she knew.

The remarks seem to focus on parental satisfaction and on the factors that make adults happy with an adoption. Yet Marilyn, Daniel, and Sally were not being self-interested. Rather, their views on the adoptive arrangement reflect a principle in American culture that the well-being of a child depends on the nature of his attachment to parents. The three also seem to accept the (connected) assumption that parental bonds are strengthened, even ensured, by feelings of comfort on the part of parents.¹¹ In the case of the birth parent, the assumption refers back to—and explains—the oft-repeated conviction that a contented birth parent does not try to "snatch back" her child. In the case of the adoptive parents, the assumption refers back to—and explains—the conviction that adoptive parents bond better when there are no "mysteries" about the child or the child's past. Open adoption expands and penetrates these assumptions by inserting "knowing" or, interchangeably, "information" into the equation.

Overall, then, open adoption accentuates the importance of documents and data in late twentieth-century American adoption. While couched in the framework of parental ties, attachment, and bonding, the desire for information on the part of birth parents and adoptive parents alters the institution of adoption more thoroughly than may first appear. *The quest for facts removes adoption from its basis in family and in kinship.* And that needs an explanation.

Opening onto Chosen, Contingent Ties

Open adoption fits into a longer history of adoption in the United States. Like earlier changes in that institution, the move toward openness stems less from policy decisions or ideological shifts than from particular actions and demands. Like the passage of state laws in the mid-nineteenth century, the challenge to law in the late twentieth century emerges from lots of individual behaviors, under the pressure of changed demographic, economic, and political circumstances. Open adoption fits the history of American adoption in another way. The practice of opening records, in its several variations, perpetuates the oscillation in the functions adoption serves in an American context: caring for runaway and/or needy children; providing an heir to carry on name and property; making a couple into a family.¹² Is adoption for the child or for the adults, the individual or a kinship group? Is adoption a personal or a social phenomenon? The questions persist, as appropriate to alternative as to conventional adoptions.

Open adoption also extracts a theme often subdued in the history of American adoption: a focus on the individual, on personal needs and satisfactions, and on a quest for "identity" that has a long pedigree in American culture. Justification for disclosure, an end to sealed records and secrecy, comes in terms of "helping" individuals through the process of transacting a child and living with the implications of bringing parenthood into the public, legal domain. Not only is this justification on an individual level and not a social one, but it also has little to do with family, with the conceptualization of affectionate affinity that Fortes (1969) inserted into kinship studies. Furthermore, the emphasis on lasting bonds suggests how thoroughly American adoption has come to replace other seemingly frail and impermanent bonds, including marriage and genealogical links between parent and child. In my reading, American adoption has come to represent a permanency missing in a postmodern society in which virtually all relationships seem fluid, flowing, and temporary. An open adoption position claims that facts substantiate the tie between parent and child; in the perspective of those who support disclosure, facts thicken the fictive (or as-if) bond.¹³ Simultaneously, the tie between parent and child becomes the centerpiece, the function and the goal of an adoption. Not continuing a bloodline or completing a family but ensuring (at least) one permanent relationship is the *raison d'être* of American adoption.

With its emphasis on facts and information, fully disclosed adoption pushes American adoption farther from the "core of kinship" than it has ever been before.

In the media, and probably for most people who pay attention, "open adoption" represents expanded kinship. Popularly, "open" evokes ongoing contact between birth and adoptive parents and new forms of an extended family. More than that, in some versions, open adoption suggests deeper and more intimate

bonds than those developing out of "ordinary" kinship. As the *New York Times* photo caption put it: two mothers *share* a child. Given the "genealogical core of kinship" in American culture, that's a pretty profound closeness.

My research, and that of others, indicates that complete and continued contact is a rare scenario; the initial plan often gives way to thin and sporadic contact. Letters, phone calls, and e-mail step in, constituting an exchange and replacing the visits and interactions touted by the press. "Fully disclosed," the term in the agency I work with, most aptly describes the phenomenon in its current state. Openness in American adoption is, at the moment, best defined as keeping channels of communication open, not as ongoing contact, sharing a child, or extending a family.

Why should an emphasis on exchanging information and disclosing facts distance adoption from the core of kinship? And what might the consequences be of such a development? The cultural core of American kinship is genealogical, as Schneider (1968, 1984) argued in his crucial contributions to kinship studies. Historically and ideally, adoption in the United States replicates this genealogical principle. Replication is accomplished in three ways: in the insistence that the adopted child is just like a child born to its adoptive parents, the "as if begotten" premise of American adoption law; in the prescription (until recently) that the created family look just like a family established by marriage and the birth of children; and in the disappearance of a birth parent so the adoptive family can be a normative nuclear unit. Modified in practice over the course of the twentieth century, all three necessitate the sealed records, anonymity, and secrecy of conventional American adoption.

State laws of adoption were followed speedily by laws assuring confidentiality to all parties to the transaction. Laws of confidentiality created the "closed" adoption to which "open" adoption is now juxtaposed. The juxtaposition further illuminates the nature of openness and underlines the extent to which openness *in any respect* refers to "freedom of information" and not to realization of relationship.

"Freedom" is not simply a cliché in this context. Tapping into notions of choice and contract, as well as into cultural notions of the person and of personal autonomy, openness represents a bid for control. "Full disclosure" also represents a move away from the metaphors of fate and destiny that once diffused from biological to legal relationships (Modell 1994). The word openness points to, among other things, a principle that no person should deny information that he or she has to an interested party. The principle implies the "rightness" of control over information on the part of actors in an adoptive arrangement: to be deprived of facts is thought to signal lack of leverage. Similarly, a relationship phrased in terms of fate or destiny comes to seem to be one over which a person has no control. Partially a reaction to the strictures and constraints social workers imposed on transactions in parenthood, openness stretches beyond that to draw on values of honesty and "coming out" that

resonate throughout an American cultural context. Walking in the sunshine, proverbs (and laws) announce, is better than hiding in darkness.

Connotations of honesty and straightforwardness render the word "open" appealing while allowing the denotations to be arbitrary and idiosyncratic. Positively valenced, openness diversifies the meaning of information; content varies with each person's perspective and circumstances. Ideally, in open adoptions information is not supposed to be constricted and systematized, but loose and individualized. Like adoptees and birth parents who reject their sealed-record adoptions and search for one another, participants in open adoptions decide on the content of information step by step, moment by moment. When Marilyn, Daniel, and Sally sat together, discussing the transfer of the as-yet unborn Danny, each brought to the demand for disclosure a wealth of opinions, experiences, and interpretations of kinship, family, and identity. Despite the presence of a social worker, each acquired a degree of control over the transaction in parenthood that would not have been available in an agency adoption even a decade ago.

Debate over opening adoption and disclosing information takes different forms. The critique may be draped in the principle of "best interests," but this is merely the inherited discourse for a quite different issue. Behind the banner of best interests, I argue, lies apprehension at what opening adoption bodes for the cultural ideologies that conventional adoption has upheld in the United States. Ideologies include expectations about good families, fit parents, and proper kinship. These expectations, in turn, have been supervised and regulated by social workers since the Progressive era in the United States. Awareness of the loss of a supervisory role enters the debate over open adoption in two ways: (1) framing a negative response in terms of the chaos and confusion that will result if "everyone" can arrange her or his own adoption, and (2) pushing experts who advocate disclosure into adding the requirement that clients who embark on open adoption visit the agency from time to time for counseling. And as always in the history of adoption, clients absorb and activate the messages, taking them on as their own. "Because Amy [birth mother] doesn't want to hurt Tricia and Mike [adoptive parents], and because Tricia and Mike care and are concerned about Amy, it's working. And especially because there's an understanding counselor acting as an intermediary when needed, it's working" (Lindsay 1987: 104).

Both advocacy of counseling and acceptance of the advice show how qualified the approval of opening adoption is. Genuine reference to a child's best interests could lead to support for complete openness, ongoing contact, and new relationships as logically as the principle presently leads to either condemnation of the change or close supervision of its implementation. Qualification of approval cannot be attributed solely to ambition and greed for power (or status) on the part of child welfare experts. Nor can it be simply attributed to adoptive parent fear that a birth parent will share, intervene in, and ultimately repossess the child. And arguments that open adoption prevents a

birth parent from “moving on” also carry small weight. Yet, qualification of “disclosure” is apparent in many adoption communities, within the practice of opening itself, as well as in some literature on adoption in the United States.

My first impulse was to conclude that qualified approval resulted from the problems of shared parenthood, for the child and for the adults. Along with this, I considered the difficulty of opening family boundaries in new and unscripted ways. Second thoughts revealed that by framing my conclusion in that way, I, too, had accepted the available discourse: best interests and the connection between a child’s interests and *a particular kinship*. Further examination of my data and of existing studies led to another conclusion: the threat a demand for information poses to the conceptualization of “real” kinship in the United States.

Especially in adoption, an arena of deliberately constructed parenthood, emphasis on “facts” is viewed as (potentially) antithetical to enduring solidarity. The view implicates birth parents and adoptive parents who insist on *knowing* before giving and receiving a child. From this, it is one small step to predicting a (consequently) less-than-secure bond between adoptive parents and child. Beyond the voiced concern that bowing to demands for information will release a chaos of motivations, desires, and actions exists an unvoiced cultural assumption that “facts” are not the foundation for affective ties, intimacy, and parental love.

Conclusion

Arguments for and against open adoption are passionate, often inflammatory, and, at the moment, lacking in substantial data.¹⁴ The heat these arguments generate signals their impact beyond the parameters of adoptive kinship. Extending families and stretching kinship boundaries is not what fuels the passion of the debate. Even “two mothers sharing a child” can be incorporated into a culture of kinship these days, given high rates of divorce and remarriage in the United States. Rather, the insistence by participants in adoption that “facts” can permanently seal the bonds, perpetuate the contracts, and protect the child involved in an adoption troubles some observers and some participants. Discomfort at what seems to be a relentless societal move toward “knowing all” before any relationship can be formed energizes the controversy over open adoption. *Full disclosure*, then, captures the heart of the matter more accurately than “open.”

Three reasons can be cited for discomfort at the insistence that information is crucial to a transaction in parenthood. First, a demand for full disclosure violates the romantic mysticism about kinship in American culture summed up in the dictum blood is thicker than water; second, full disclosure introduces rational, “cold” calculation into an arrangement supposedly based on love, need, charity, and selflessness; and third, full disclosure

alters the historically hierarchical relationship between giver and receiver of a child.

These three reasons enter the debate on both the pro and the con sides. For supporters of openness, information fills in for the perceived thinness of a constructed parent-child tie, gives a solid foundation for the love that evolves between parent and child, and regulates the relationship between giver and receiver of a child. Advocates argue that the “more ties” a child has, the more secure her or his identity: connections with biological kin, from this position, intensify the connection with adoptive parents. As Marilyn and Daniel explained to me, knowing more about Danny’s background would help them be “better parents,” more confident in expressions of love, and wiser in child rearing. Knowing Sally herself removed for them the mystery and secrecy that make a birth parent a shadowy and therefore threatening figure. “The children have the love and attention of another adult and come to know the birth parent as a real (as opposed to a fantasized) person” (McRoy, Grotevant, and White 1988: 128). Marilyn, Daniel, and Sally accepted the idea that “in the sunshine,” neither birth nor adoptive parents will break the contracts they have made with one another. The straightforwardness and honesty “open” connotes keep everyone from acting in a deceptive fashion.

The latent function of open adoption is linked to the positive valence of “sunshine.” Forthright and in the open, birth parent and adoptive parent face down the stigmas that attach to both their roles in the United States. They are “out of the closet.”

Like every development in American adoption history, the turn to open adoption has multiple causes. Like every other development, too, this one proceeds by fits and starts—fits and starts that result from the particular actions and interpretations of particular individuals. Despite the persistent use of one term, the landscape of open adoption contains a wealth of different niches. In religiously based adoption communities, open adoption establishes ongoing bonds between birth and adoptive families, solidified by similar beliefs and backgrounds (see e.g., Lindsay 1987; Silber and Dorner 1990). In so-called innovative adoption communities, individuals establish chosen and contingent ties that leave behind a model for kinship that rests on a “genealogical core.”¹⁵

With its rejection of the definition of kinship that “blood” and “birth” create, open adoption enters a postmodern world. Relationships are based on knowledge, on choice, and on individual determination of satisfaction and fulfillment. In an American cultural context, findings on open adoption reveal that these relationships are not designated *kinship*, but friendship or “closeness.” Individuals I interviewed, like those quoted in other studies, did not use kinship terms for one another. Furthermore, they emphasized the communication and not the contact, the letters and not the visits. An inclination to redraw the contact into a process of communication, planned and (frequently) ceremonial visits, and casual “chat” between interested individuals indicates how far from kinship the arrangement strays. In real kinship, Americans tend

to claim, contact is affective and expressive of profound feelings, not just a matter of casual conversation and sporadic news. Although this is certainly an idealized (and media-influenced) view, the contrast with the general outcome of an open adoption is clear. At the end of the *New York Times* article that began with "shared" motherhood, a birth mother admitted that she had no idea what will happen next.

Historically, adoption in the United States has replicated and enforced the cultural core of kinship, the genealogical link between parent (mother) and child. Especially after state laws were passed, more than elsewhere adoption in American society insisted on the sanctity of the blood relationship. Insistence led to the tangles evident in the arrangement and recently exposed (and condemned) by participants in adoption: erasure of the birth parent's "natural" blood tie in order to legitimize the adoptive parent's "cultural" blood tie. Open adoption and opened forms of contact cut through the tangles, deceptions, and symbolic subterfuges characteristic of twentieth-century adoptive arrangements in the United States. The distinction between real, with its connotations of good and true, and fictive, with its connotations of second-best and frail, disappear. Parents and children in adoptive relationships do not need to measure their bonds against a mystical blood tie. They negotiate their bonds within a context of evolving communication—not a bad thing, and certainly appropriate to the world the millennium seems to be bringing.

Notes

1. For a fine history of sealed records in American adoption, see Carp (1998).
2. I put the word in quotation marks to indicate that it has no clear meaning.
3. The story I have briefly told here can be developed at much greater length, in terms of other developments in American society of the period—for instance, the Freedom of Information Act. But that would constitute another paper.
4. This is one descriptive phrase for the presumably objective and stringently nonidentifying information a birth parent and an adoptive parent were likely to receive about one another until recently.
5. Independent adoptions occur outside of an agency, though in some states an agency must do a home study before the adoption goes to court. That was true in my state, and the placement agency did such studies. Still, this is not the same as arranging adoptions from first to last.
6. Some parents I met—birth and adoptive—went to lengths to disguise their identities while providing informative photographs to the other members of the triad.
7. I borrow the phrase from Goodenough (1970).
8. David Brodzinsky has done thorough research on telling children about adoption, in the sense of paying close attention to children's changing understandings, and cognitive capacities, over time. These appear in a number of different articles.
9. There are exceptions: Silber and Dorner (1990) interviewed the children of open adoption; McRoy (1991) and McRoy and her associates (1988), and Harriet Gross (1993) all recognize the importance of drawing children more fully into adoption studies. Several projects, including my own, are currently under way.

10. I have changed names and certain details, to protect the identity of this family.
11. Kirk (1964, 1981) has done important work on parental comfort with adoptive parenthood; he does not apply his findings to birth parents.
12. I discuss these issues more fully in Modell, *A Sealed and Secret Kinship: Policies and Practices in American Adoption* (New York: Berghahn Press, 2001).
13. I refer to the cultural proverb, blood is thicker than water.
14. Many individuals who enter the debate admit to the lack of data, awaiting further study of the phenomenon.
15. This is implied by the findings in McRoy, Grotevant, and White (1988), and Gross (1993).

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