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Impacts of Structural and Communicative Openness on Psychological Safety in Adoptee Experiences

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Abstract

This qualitative study aims to explore how different types of adoption openness relate to the lived experiences of 25 U.S. adult individuals who were adopted as children. A deductive qualitative coding approach was used to analyze transcripts of 25 semi-structured interviews with adult adoptees. The interviews were analyzed using concepts of adoption openness, including both structural and communicative openness, and perceived psychological safety. Using a thematic analysis, this study found that openness in adoption, especially communicative openness, is deeply relevant to positive adoptee identity development and the strength and quality of family relationships. Openness was also positively related to adoptees' reported sense of psychological safety. These findings suggest that nonprofit executives, program officers, social workers, and others who work to provide appropriate adoption education, regulation, and support, should encourage openness among the adoption triad.

Keywords: *Adoptee, structural openness, communicative openness, psychological safety*

Introduction

Open adoption involves both structural and communicative openness (Brodzinsky, 2005). Structural openness includes sharing biographical information and involves in-person or other types of contact with biological family (Berge et al., 2006). Communicative openness involves transparency and open dialogue regarding adoption within adoptive and biological relationships (Brodzinsky, 2005). Openness in

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adoption is complex and tends to exist on a continuum, with the pattern of openness and secrecy often fluctuating over the lifespan for all members of the adoption triad: the adopted individual, the birth relatives, and the adoptive family (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant et al., 2008; Wolfgram, 2008). Closed adoptions, however, function differently. In a closed adoption, no identifying information passes between the child's adoptive and birth families (Grotevant et al., 2019).

Since the 1970s, structural openness in adoption has become increasingly common, particularly in Western nations like the United States (Grotevant et al., 2014). The National Council for Adoption (2022), a nonprofit adoption advocacy organization, collects private adoption data in each state because it is not collected through any federal agencies. Research done by the National Council for Adoption indicates that in the United States, approximately half to two-thirds of domestic infant adoptions now incorporate some degree of openness, varying from occasional updates via letters and photos to regular face-to-face interactions between birth and adoptive families (Neil, 2012; Vandivere et al., 2009). However, the prevalence of open adoption in the U.S. differs across adoption types: private domestic, foster care, and international (Crea & Barth, 2009; Seymore, 2014; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Private domestic adoptions tend to have the highest level of contact between birth relatives and adoptive families, while foster care adoptions are generally less open, despite expectations that older children might be more likely to maintain contact with their birth families (Crea & Barth, 2009). Openness in international adoptions is much less common due to challenges such as geographic distance, language barriers, cultural differences, and legal complexities; however, openness in this context is growing (Seymore, 2014). Furthermore, the nature of openness may change within individual families over time, with elements like frequency of contact, participants in openness, and types of contact all potentially shifting (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Nonprofit adoption agencies play a significant role in determining the level of openness practiced in adoptive families, as found by MacDonald & McSherry (2011). This is noteworthy, considering that there are over 3,000 adoption agencies in the United States, both public and private, many of which are nonprofit (Nolo, n.d.). Furthermore, the way in which open adoption education is presented seems to impact the practice of openness within adoptive families. When adoptive parents choose higher structural openness because of agency and/or social worker promptings rather than for the well-being of the adopted child, they are less likely to maintain openness after placement (MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). While Colorado and Rhode Island have legal requirements regarding the discussion of prospective adoptive parents' understanding of structural openness in home studies, as far as we know, no states currently require in-depth training or education regarding communicative or structural openness (Children's Bureau, 2023).

Research indicates that open adoption is preferred over closed adoption for promoting the psychological well-being of adoptees (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Siegel & Smith, 2012). By promoting positive self-esteem, a stronger sense of identity, and close familial bonds, open adoption practices contribute significantly to adoptees' overall psychological well-being and resilience (Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant, 2020; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Both structural openness and communicative openness have been shown to positively relate to adoptee adjustment and identity for-

mation (Brodzinsky, 2015; Grotevant et al., 2019; Jones & Hackett, 2007; Ranieri et al., 2022). Studies show that communicative openness, in particular, is strongly related to positive outcomes for adoptees, such as higher self-esteem, stronger adoptive identity, and decreased externalizing behaviors during adolescence and emerging adulthood (Brodzinsky, 2006; Horstman et al., 2016; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011). Research also suggests that knowing one's biological family, regardless of the frequency of contact, helps adoptees feel a stronger sense of belonging within the adoptive family (Siegel & Smith, 2012; Wrobel et al., 2003). Furthermore, research indicates that openness supports closer relationships between adoptees and their adoptive parents, while secrecy often leads to negative interpersonal outcomes, including loneliness and attachment issues (Feeney et al., 2007; Ranieri et al., 2022; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Despite its apparent benefits, open adoption is not without challenges, including potential feelings of confusion or "otherness" (Neil et al., 2015; Siegel & Smith, 2012). These potential risks, however, are typically outweighed by the positive impacts on adoptees' well-being. Given the profound influence of openness on adoptee adjustment and family dynamics, this study highlights the relevance of open adoption not only for nonprofit agencies working with adoptive families but also for social workers across various fields. For example, adoption-specific mental health and child welfare services, which emphasize trauma-informed and attachment-based approaches, may help to address core issues such as loss, identity, and grief (Atkinson & Riley, 2017; Penner, 2023). Therefore, adoption support services can further help families navigate the nuances of open adoption.

In order to apply and foster psychological safety to adoptive families through these support services (Neil et al., 2015; Grotevant, 2020), we propose that families function as organizations, each with unique dynamics. As organizations have been referred to and researched as a type of family structure, we will also rely on this background to view families through an organizational lens.

Background and Theory

Structural Openness

The definition of "open adoption" has changed over the last several decades. Prior to the early 2000s, much of the research that discussed open adoption referred to "structural open adoptions," where adoptees have direct contact with biological relatives (Brodsinzky, 2005). A structurally open adoption supports an adoptee's direct contact and relationship with biological family members and can range from biographical information being shared to in-person or other types of contact with the biological family (Berge et al., 2006; Grotevant et al., 2019).

Earlier studies of structural openness were marked by the concern that contact with biological family members may confuse adoptees or lower their self-esteem (Grotevant, 2020). However, research by Wrobel (1996) called this assumption into question and suggested that adopted children who were given information about their biological families benefited from an understanding of their adoption. Furthermore, adoptive parents in structurally open adoptions not only demonstrated more empathy toward the birth parents and their child, but also felt they had a secure relationship

with their child (Grotevant et al., 1994), showing that this type of openness benefits adoptees as well as their families.

Communicative Openness

Communicative openness creates an environment where adoption can be discussed within an adoptive family, and communicative openness can exist independently of structural openness (Brodzinsky, 2005). In this type of structure, adoptive parents recognize their child's dual identity and provide the support needed for their child to develop a healthy sense of self (Brodzinsky, 2015; Jones & Hackett, 2007). Research indicates that open communication yields positive emotional exchanges between adoptive parents and adoptees, contributing to higher self-esteem (Brodzinsky, 2015; Reese et al., 2007). Furthermore, adolescent adoptees who felt that their families had more open communication reported higher levels of trust toward their parents, experienced less alienation from them, and reported better overall family functioning (Kohler et al., 2002).

Interestingly, Brodzinsky (2005) found that adoption communicative openness may be a more important predictor of an adoptee's self-esteem than structural openness. This outcome suggests that communication with adoptive parents about adoption may be more related to developing a positive identity than having direct contact with biological family members, which is encouraging for adoptees and their adoptive families who are unable to locate or contact the adoptees' biological relatives. Communicative openness can also be present with structural openness. Studies indicate that biological parents who share stories about their reasons for relinquishment with their adopted children facilitate deeper connections with those children (Hays et al., 2016) and joint storytelling by adoptive and biological parents builds trust and camaraderie (Koenig Kellas, 2005).

Psychological Safety

The concept of psychological safety has been primarily studied within the workplace. Edmondson (1999) defined psychological safety as a shared belief held individually as to whether a workplace is safe to engage in interpersonal risk-taking. In a psychologically safe environment, individuals believe they won't be shamed or reprimanded for asking questions, taking risks, or expressing themselves, which fosters confidence to engage in experimentation necessary for learning and growth (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006; Kahn, 1990).

Edmondson (1999) introduced the following scale to measure levels of psychological safety within a team:

1. If you make a mistake on this team, it is often held against you.
2. Members of this team are able to bring up problems and tough issues.
3. People on this team sometimes reject others for being different.
4. It is safe to take a risk on this team.
5. It is difficult to ask other members of this team for help.
6. No one on this team would deliberately act in a way that undermines my efforts.
7. Working with members of this team, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized.

8. It may be hypothesized that adoptees experience a deep need for psychological safety.

Since adopted individuals' birth heritage differs from their adoptive families, more effort is required from adoptive families to help them feel accepted and supported, so they feel safe enough to not only confidently engage in the process of understanding their birth story and identity, but also take risks and express themselves in society in adulthood (Brodzinsky, 2015). We hypothesize that there is a connection between the degree of openness in adoption, both communicative and structural, and the perceived psychological safety experienced by adults who were adopted as children.

Psychological Safety Within Adoptive Families

Organizations that cultivate a psychologically safe environment greatly benefit their members. Psychological safety allows individuals to cope with significant change, achieve shared goals, and contribute to the organizational structure more effectively. This is due in part to the fact that members who experience psychological safety can focus on problem-solving and goal-achievement instead of protecting themselves from perceived harm that may come from asking questions or raising difficult topics (Edmondson & Mogelof, 2006). Continued learning is also an important part of psychological safety in the workplace. Carmeli et al. (2008) described outcomes related to interpersonal relationships and psychological safety: "The findings suggest that positive work relationships are a key relational mechanism that contributes to perceptions of psychological safety and learning behaviours in work organizations" (p. 81).

A meta-analysis on psychological safety revealed that psychological safety is especially important "in hazardous work contexts where speaking up and providing feedback is imperative in order to reduce errors and improve safety" (Newman et al., 2017, p. 528). This may be applicable within adoptive families, not connected to physical safety hazards but rather to challenging emotional and social situations. While the success metrics within an adoptive family may not be to reduce errors and improve safety, engaging in frequent and open conversation can contribute to healthy family functioning (Rueter & Koerner, 2008), with a shared goal of preserving relationships rather than reducing errors.

Applying Existing Frameworks to Psychological Safety in Adoption

A recent study applied Family Systems Theory to organizational leadership concepts to create a Corporate Family Model that aims to treat dysfunction in the workplace (Wilke, 2015). The corporate family was conceptualized this way: "Rather than consisting of a bunch of individuals doing their own thing, a corporation joins people together into one, united entity," similar to how families function (Wilke & Wilke 2010, p. 12). While examining how psychological safety impacts adoptive family functioning, we will liken adoptive families to corporate families. For example, as communication within organizations impacts group functioning, so too does communication within adoptive families. The Family Communication Patterns Theory (FCPT) suggests that "creating a shared social reality is central to family functioning," and that families employ different communication dimensions to achieve such functioning (Rueter & Koerner, 2008, p. 716). This is particularly important to adoptive families, which inher-

ently have additional relationship dynamics and communication structure as a result of structural and/or communicative openness about adoption.

Reuter and Koerner applied FCPT to adoptive families and found that communication styles uniquely impact adoptees: "Controlling parenting without communication is much more detrimental to adopted children than to nonadopted children" (Rueter & Koerner, 2008, p. 726). In a study of 143 adult adoptees, Hortsman found that adoptive parents who demonstrated a conversation-orientation communication pattern were more likely to engage in open adoption communication, which made adoptees less likely to show a preoccupation with their adoption (Horstman et al., 2016). This is supported by earlier studies which found that adoptees express more security and confidence in exploring their adoption when adoptive parents establish flexible and open communication and that adoptees may reflect their adoptive parents' opinions about openness (Siegel, 2012; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011).

An additional family communication model exists for adoptive families: the Family Adoption Communication Model (Wrobel et al., 2003). It establishes three phases of communication encountered by adoptive families: (a) adoptive parents provide children unsolicited information, (b) adoptive parents address children's curiosity by answering children's questions, and (c) adoptive children take control of finding their own information to satisfy their curiosity.

It is possible that movement through each phase coincides with levels of psychological safety experienced by an adoptee. In the first two phases, communication about adoption is led by the adoptive parent. The third phase is led by the adoptee. Wrobel notes that not all families experience each phase. Some may pause or stop altogether. When applying the concept of psychological safety, one could surmise that successful open communication and conversation orientation in the first two phases from an adoptive parent establishes the psychological safety necessary for an adoptee to initiate their own information seeking. The opposite could also be true: that limited communication in the first two phases leads to a lack of information that motivates an adoptee to search for answers about their birth families on their own.

Current Study

While numerous studies have explored how the level of adoption openness (structural and communicative) in early life might be related to the development and well-being of adoptees, few have focused on impacts of adoption openness expressed by adoptees during adulthood. This qualitative study has three main objectives: (a) to better understand adult adoptees' retrospective evaluations of their early adoption experience, particularly the present impact of growing up in their adoptive families; (b) to evaluate adoptive family processes through a workplace-team framework, aiming to explore the relationship between openness in adoption and themes associated with the construct of perceived psychological safety; and, (c) to contribute new perspectives to the field of adoption research that may lead to future studies.

Methods

Interview data for this study comes from a publicly available, top-rated open-adoption podcast (Nelson & Nelson, 2021-present). Transcripts of 25 interviews from

this podcast were selected because they fit the sample frame for this study: adults who had been adopted as children, in both open and closed adoptions. The first author is a co-founder of the podcast and conducted 24 of the interviews used for this study with the other co-founder of the podcast. One other author conducted one of the interviews as a volunteer with the podcast. Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained from the first author's university to use these previously collected interviews for research purposes. Participants were born between the early 1960s and the late 1990s, and were primarily female (female, $n = 21$, 84%). Most were in their late 30s or early 40s at the time of the interview. Most were placed for adoption as infants; however, seven participants ranged from age one to four years old at the time of placement. Eight of the participants in this study were international adoptees and twelve were transracial adoptees. Only participants who were adopted in the United States were included.

Participants were recruited through an open call by the podcast and through posts on the podcast's social media accounts. About half ($n = 13$) of the interviewees self-selected by responding to the open call and contacted podcast volunteers to participate. The other half were contacted directly by podcast volunteers because of adoption-related content they posted on social media ($n = 8$) or because of personal connections ($n = 4$).

Interviews for this study were conducted between June 2021 and July 2023 and recorded via Zoom ($n = 24$), apart from one interview, which was conducted in-person and captured with audio-recording equipment. Open-access transcripts from these interviews are available online. Links to redacted transcripts are available upon request from the first author. For the use of this study and this paper, identifying information has been redacted, and participants are referred to by pseudonyms. The semi-structured interviews were conducted following an interview protocol (see Appendix). The interview protocol encouraged participants to share their individual adoption stories. Interviewers asked questions regarding communication and structural openness in adoption, challenges faced by participants relating to adoption, and thoughts on what participants wished adoptive parents knew. All interviews were approximately an hour long.

Qualitative analysis was guided by a codebook developed using Brodzinsky's (2005) Adoption Structural Openness (ACO) framework, Grotevant et al.'s (2007) conceptualization of structural openness in adoption, and Edmonson's (1999) psychological safety scale. These frameworks provided theoretical foundations for coding participants' retrospective experience as adopted children.

Structural openness was coded based on the type and extent of contact with birth families (Grotevant et al., 2007) during childhood. Categories ranged from "no contact" (or closed) to "contact with meetings," which included face-to-face contact during childhood. Additional categories included "contact without meetings," describing exchanges such as through letters or phone calls, and "stopped contact," where early contact with birth families ended before adulthood. A separate category, "reunion in adulthood," captured experiences of reuniting with birth family members after childhood, providing a way to account for differences in structural openness across the lifespan.

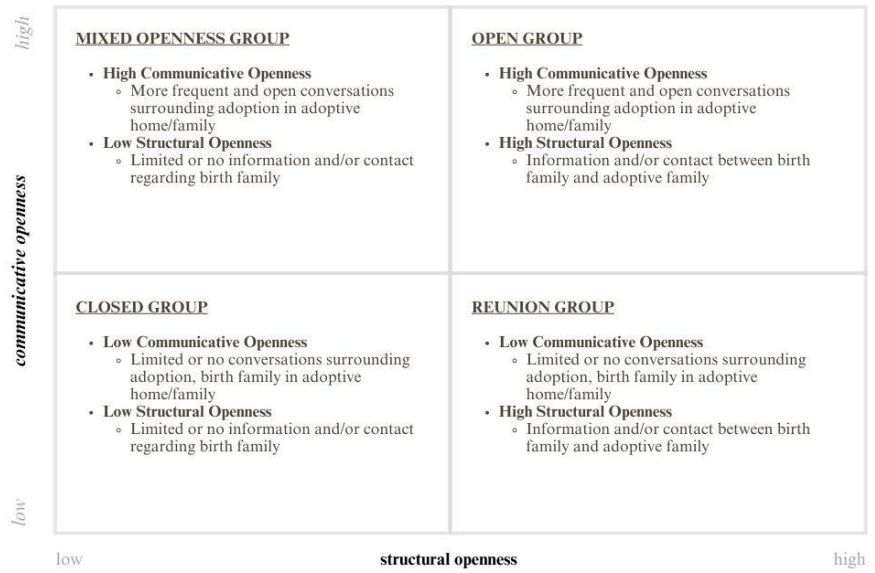
Communicative openness, based on Brodzinsky's (2005) ACO framework, focused on parent-child discussions about adoption-related topics. Codes identified instances of adoptive parents' willingness to engage in open, developmentally appropriate dis-

cussions about adoption, promote the adoptee's dual connection to both adoptive and birth families, and offer empathy for the adoptee's feelings about adoption. Related subcategories included parental comfort with birth-family communication, as well as empathy for birth relatives. Additionally, separate analyses explored openness in reunions with birth relatives that occurred during childhood versus adulthood.

To analyze the intersection of these two themes, participants' levels of structural and communicative adoption openness were mapped onto a 2x2 grid (Figure 1). This framework categorized participants into four groups: Mixed Openness Group (low structural/high communicative), Closed Group (low structural/low communicative), Open Group (high structural/high communicative); and Reunion Group (high structural/low communicative). Adoptee experiences were coded for levels of structural and communicative openness, and patterns and themes were identified for each group.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework of Levels of Structural and Communicative Openness in Adoption



Psychological safety, as described by Edmonson (1999), was coded to capture adoptees' perceptions of their emotional security within their adoptive families. Subcategories included the ability to take risks, ask for help, or express differences without fear of negative consequences. Examples of psychological safety were further conceptualized by open codes, identifying specific instances where participants either (a) did not feel psychologically safe to express themselves or inquire about their adoption, (b) felt psychologically safe to express themselves or inquire about their adoption, (c) received negative communication about their adoption and biological family, or (d) received positive communication about their adoption and biological family.

Additional open codes were identified for related experiences, such as responses of adoptive parents when participants made mistakes; moments when participants felt valued for their unique selves; encounters when participants felt supported by adoptive family members; instances where participants felt safe asking adoptive parents for help; examples where participants felt safe taking risks, being different, and bringing up problems and/or tough issues with adoptive parents; and instances where a lack of psychological safety was expressed. Additional codes emerged from the data for the circumstances remembered from childhood home life, childhood expressions that may have illustrated deeper feelings regarding adoption experiences, societal perceptions witnessed by participants, experiences seeking support and/or connection, willingness to volunteer information, and other adoption expressions regarding feelings of trust and validation.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed for each code to ensure consistent identification of codes. Coders iteratively refined codes by comparing coded segments within and across interviews, ensuring consistency through intercoder agreement checks. For five interviews, an average intercoder reliability score of 0.83 was reached, after which the remaining 20 interviews were coded. To ensure coders were coding transcripts similarly, each transcript was reviewed by another author. Coding decisions, reached jointly by the authors, were noted in the coding software to ensure consistency throughout the process.

Results

Participant narratives closely aligned with the study's *a priori* codes, as evidenced by all 25 participants (100%) discussing both structural and communicative openness, and 24 (96%) sharing experiences related to psychological safety. Communicative openness emerged as the most frequently discussed theme ($M = 5.04$ references per interview). Negative communication about adoption was mentioned slightly more often ($M = 2.36$) than positive ($M = 1.73$). Participants also described a range of experiences related to the perceived psychological safety in their family environments, with a lack of psychological safety reported more often ($M = 3.61$) than feelings of security ($M = 2.77$) (Table 1).

Table 1

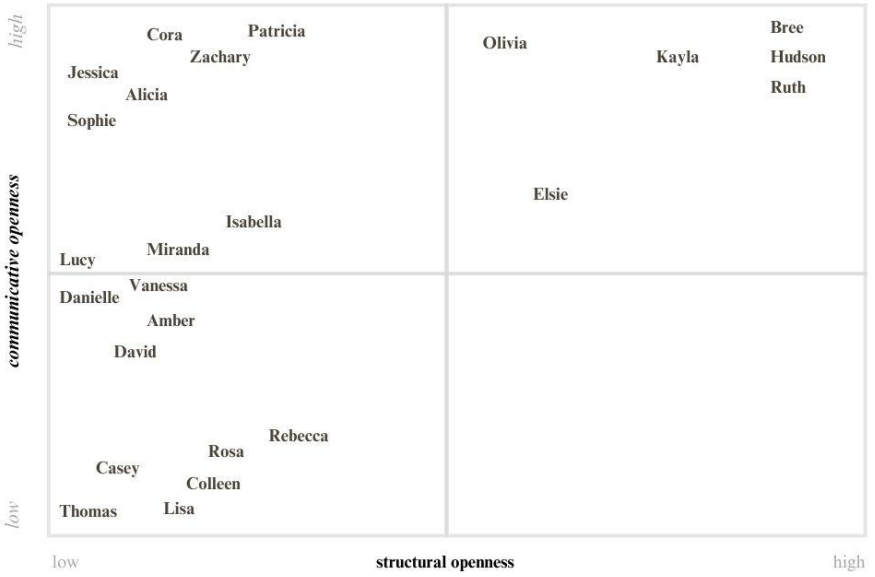
Numerical Content Analysis of Qualitative Coding

Theme	No. references	No. interviews	% interviews	Avg. no. references per interview
Theme 1: Structural openness	123	25	100	4.92
Theme 2: Communicative openness	126	25	100	5.04
Theme 3: Psychological safety	117	24	96	4.88
Sub-theme A: Lack of psychological safety	65	18	72	3.61
Sub-theme B: Presence of psychological safety	47	17	68	2.77
Sub-theme C: Negative adoption communication	33	14	56	2.36
Sub-theme D: Positive adoption communication	26	15	60	1.73

Interviewees were placed into one of four groups based on the levels of communicative and structural openness in their adoptive families (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Placement of Interviewees in Groups based on Communicative and Structural Openness of Childhood Adoption Experiences



Note: Names have been changed for confidentiality reasons.

Findings from the thematic analyses are presented according to the openness-level groups. Quotes are shared with participant pseudonyms, type of adoption, and whether they were adopted pre- or post-1990, as reference to whether openness was more commonplace at the time of their adoption (Henney et al., 1998).

Mixed Openness Group: Low Structural, High Communicative

Nine of the 25 participants in this sample experienced low structural openness and high communicative openness. Seven of the nine participants in the Mixed Openness Group were born during the 1980s and 1990s, while one participant was born in the 1960s and one in the 1970s. Six of the participants in the Mixed Openness Group were transracial adoptees, and four of those six were also international adoptees. Themes observed in the Mixed Openness Group include open conversation surrounding adoption in the home, including adoptees "always knowing" their adoption stories, curiosity surrounding the identity of birth family, and adoptive parents expressing the desire to help adoptees connect with birth family in the future.

Communicative Openness in Mixed Openness Group (Low Structural, High Communicative)

Narratives regarding adoption shared some elements in this group. Adoptees in this group "always knew" their adoption stories. Dialogue about adoption was open and comfortable, shared often in the adoptive homes of those in this group. Lucy (international adoptee, post-1990) said, "My mom would always tell me the story of adopting me." Jessica (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "We always grew up knowing we were adopted. It was just always something that was very normal to us."

Most of the narratives adoptive parents shared were positive, although some adoptees were told neutral narratives. Alicia (private adoptee, pre-1990) said the narrative her adoptive parents shared was "very factual. It wasn't talking about emotions." Alternatively, when Patricia (private adoptee, pre-1990) asked her adoptive mother when she first told her she was adopted, her adoptive mother's response was, "It was the day after you came home with us," at six weeks old. The conversations around adoption were remembered as "always normal" and "comfortable" by those in this group.

This open dialogue regarding adoption also affected thoughts and actions regarding adoption reunion in this group. Isabella (international adoptee, pre-1990) said that her adoptive parents were open with her adoption information, but that what they knew was limited. She said, "My parents' openness about my adoption enhanced my ability to say I needed help [with search and reunion], and they supported me."

Many adoptive parents in this group offered to help adoptees with search and reunion from the time they were young. "I had this real urge to find my biological family," Cora (foster care adoptee, pre-1990) said. "I always wanted to, and my adoptive parents always supported me in that." Similarly, Patricia said, "As a child of course I wondered what my [birth] parents looked like, but I never had that void in my life where I needed a mother or a father. I was always curious about what they looked like, and do they like the same things I like. That curiosity never went away." Patricia went on to discuss how her adoptive parents supported her curiosity. "As I was growing up, my mom and dad said, 'Someday if you want to find your birth parents, we'll help you,'" she said.

Structural Openness in Mixed Openness Group (Low Structural, High Communicative)

While those in the Mixed Openness Group did not experience structural openness during childhood, many in this group did go on to find their birth family in adulthood with the support of adoptive family members. Those who reunited with their birth family moved to the Open Group in adulthood, continuing to practice communicative openness while moving toward structural openness as well. Some in this group expressed sadness at the lost opportunity to build relationships with birth family during childhood. Jessica said, "If I had grown up knowing my biological family in any capacity, I think it would have drastically changed my life and theirs."

Many in this group were curious to know more about their birth families. These feelings escalated when some participants became parents. Adoptive parents helped and encouraged adoptees to connect with birth family members. Zachary (international adoptee, post-1990) said that he appreciated his adoptive parents' well-meaning help with his search for his birth mother but wished that it had been "at my own pace" as he wanted to take things more slowly early on.

Psychological Safety in Mixed Openness Group (Low Structural, High Communicative)

The Mixed Openness Group demonstrated higher levels of psychological safety than the Closed and Reunion Groups. Edmondson's psychological safety scale's measurement for whether "being different" was safe on a team resonated most with this group.

Adoptees in this group expressed close bonds with adoptive family members. The more cohesive adoptive homes described by the Mixed Openness Group were classified as places where children felt "loved," "equal," "normal," and "accepted." Zachary said, "I was fortunate enough to have family and friends who didn't see me differently because I was adopted." Likewise, Patricia said, "I always felt as loved as my siblings. We were never treated differently from each other." A feeling of unconditional love and acceptance was described when Miranda (private adoptee, pre-1990) said her adoptive parents "always stepped out of their comfort zone and always had my back." Patricia said that the one time she remembers being teased on the playground about being adopted, she had a quick comeback and wasn't bothered by the encounter. "When you treat things as being normal then they are normal," she said. Sophie (international adoptee, post-1990) said that her adoptive mother used movies and songs to start conversations that built psychological safety, saying, "Even though we look different, you're always in my heart."

Many adoptees in this group expressed that, while they felt accepted and cohesively part of their adoptive families, outside of the home they experienced struggles with handling racial and/or cultural differences in communities where they stood out as "different." Miranda said that being different from others was "always in the back of my mind…I struggled a lot with trying to figure out who I was as a Black woman, where I fit in." While discussing the challenges of being raised in a colorblind home, she shared that she felt that, even though her adoptive family looked at her "the same, society didn't, so when I was outside [of my home] it was a very difficult reality check."

Some participants shared ways they were able to connect to their heritage and embrace their differences. Zachary said that every summer he went to a cultural camp that connected him to his birth heritage. "It was a big, big part of my life," he said. Isabella said her adoptive mother planned celebrations for holidays in her birth country to keep her connected to her roots.

Those who were raised in families that looked similar to their biological families seemed to feel less outside scrutiny. Cora said that, because her adoptive family and her biological family were each composed of persons of the same racial identities, "no one knew that I was adopted unless we told them."

Edmondson's scale also measures whether mistakes will be held against individuals. No evidence in this group indicated fears of this nature. On the contrary, Cora shared how her adoptive family rallied around her after she became pregnant as a teen, which she perceived as a mistake, helping her feel loved unconditionally by her adoptive family. Many in this group felt safe sharing grief with adoptive parents, and adoptees in this group demonstrated more confidence in their adoptive parents. Patricia said of her adoptive parents, "They weren't jealous people, they just really felt like love is something you can have with more than one person."

Adoptees in this group were more likely to feel comfortable sharing a spectrum of feelings and experiences. Jessica said that she experienced grief and trauma in addition

to joy and that the feelings "can coexist. It doesn't have to be one or the other." Others in this group illustrated this broad spectrum with multifaceted experiences of adoption challenges and support systems. Sophie and Cora both experienced physical sickness as children that their adoptive parents speculated may be related to adoption trauma, but their adoptive parents felt unsupported by medical and adoption professionals in efforts to find help for their children.

Closed Group: Low Structural, Low Communicative Openness

Ten of the 25 participants in this sample experienced low structural and low communicative openness during childhood. Adoptees in the Closed Group were predominantly older than others in this sample, with all but one participant being born in the 1980s or earlier. Three participants in the Closed Group were adopted in the 1960s. Six participants were adopted in the 1970s and 1980s. One was adopted in the early 1990s. Four participants in the Closed Group were adopted by families of a different race than themselves, and three of these individuals were also adopted internationally. Themes observed in this group include no or limited conversation surrounding adoption in the home, guilt surrounding questions, concern for adoptive parent feelings being prioritized over questions regarding one's identity, and feeling "missing pieces" of one's identity.

Communicative Openness in Closed Group (Low Structural, Low Communicative)

Discussions about adoption in adoptive homes were limited or non-existent in this group. Some transracial adoptees knew they were adopted because they "looked different" from their adoptive families. Rosa (international adoptee, post-1990) said, "A question people ask me a lot is, were you ever sat down and told that you were adopted? No one told me. I just knew. [Because] I looked very different than my adoptive parents, I never had that discussion with them." Casey (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that adoption was "never" spoken of in her adoptive home. "I did not feel I was allowed to ask questions…I definitely felt that it was taboo, and I would be hurting someone or get in trouble for asking these questions." Other adoptees had infrequent conversations around adoption. Amber (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "My parents were okay with not talking about [adoption]…I could tell from a very young age that it was an uncomfortable conversation."

Additional challenges in communication included language barriers. Thomas (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that there was a language barrier between his adoptive mother and him and that it created a "separation between the two of us." He said, "I wish she would have asked some questions, like, do you want to know more information about your birth family? Do you have any desire to search?"

Structural Openness in Closed Group (Low Structural, Low Communicative)

Adoptees in the Closed Group sometimes delayed searching for birth families to spare adoptive parents' feelings. David (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that as he grew older, he became curious "to discover where and who I'm from," but that he also worried about disappointing his adoptive parents. He expected that his search for his birth family would be "crushing" for his adoptive parents, and delayed searching until they passed away. Thomas said, "I knew that if I ever even mentioned wanting to search or look for my biological mom, my adopted mom would never have understood. I can say

with certainty that she never would have supported it. It would have devastated her... and so out of respect for her, I didn't search," until after she passed away. Lisa (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that she often thought about searching for her birth parents, "but at the same time I knew how my adopted parents would react to it." She delayed her search because of these worries on behalf of her adoptive parents' feelings.

As a child, Casey would write about what she imagined or hoped for her eventual reunion with her birth family, but would always destroy her writings to make sure her adoptive parents didn't find them.

Psychological Safety in Closed Group (Low Structural, Low Communicative Openness)

This group demonstrated lower levels of psychological safety, with many participants expressing a lack of trust in their relationships with adoptive parents. Thomas said, "I wish [my adoptive mother] had been more honest with me…after she passed away, [I found that] she hid some details from me, which was hurtful." Rebecca (private adoptee, pre-1990) said her adoptive parents deceived her about the identities of her birth relatives as well. She said, "I felt very guilty asking my mom and dad questions."

Colleen (private adoptee, pre-1990) said that, as a child, she knew where her adoptive parents kept her adoption information hidden. She would look through it when they weren't home, hoping to learn something, but never discussed adoption or felt comfortable asking questions about her birth family with them. This lack of communication and psychological safety eroded trust and psychological safety with her adoptive parents. When Colleen grew older, she said that her birth mother lied about her birth father's identity. She discussed her inability to trust any of the parents, both adoptive and biological, in her life.

Some adoptees in this group indicated that they felt insecure or uncertain about relationships with adoptive families. Rosa said that her adoptive parents would find food in her closet. Before her adoption, she experienced food insecurity, and although she had been adopted and no longer went hungry, she was struggling to feel trust and safety in her adoptive home. She said losing connections to "identity and culture is something I've always struggled with."

Multiple participants in this group said that aspects of their adoptive family felt "pretend." Rosa said her adoptive parents were instructed by adoption professionals to "pretend" she spoke and understood English, which was not her first language, and she would eventually integrate. Casey said that her adoptive parents were also instructed by adoption educators to "just move on and pretend" that adoption was not part of their story.

The adoption language used by adoptees in this group differed from other groups. Adoptees in Groups 1 and 3, experiencing more communicative openness, were more likely to share frustration with the term "real" mom/dad being used to refer to birth parents, while adoptees in the Closed Group were more likely to use the term "real" parent when referring to birth parents. Danielle (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "I remember holding my mom's hand as a little kid in the store, and I remember peering around a corner, thinking, my real mom might be standing there."

Adoptees in the Closed Group were more likely to discuss struggles with self-worth, identity, and confidence. Adoptees in the Closed Group also demonstrated lower confidence in love and acceptance of adoptive parents. These results are consistent

with other qualitative research indicating that secrecy within adoptive families often leads to strained relationships and issues with identity and trust (Passmore et al., 2006). Rebecca said that after her adoptive parents had a biological child, "I had this concept where I just wasn't good enough." She felt it amplified her feelings of rejection. David felt that because he was adopted, "I had something to prove."

Some adoptees in this group discussed experiencing higher levels of trust with persons other than adoptive parents. Vanessa (international adoptee, pre-1990) said that her adoptive grandparents never treated her differently and helped her feel like a legitimate member of her adoptive family. Casey said, "Although I know my parents didn't necessarily like me telling other people I was adopted, it didn't bother me to talk about it with other people. I just didn't talk about it with [my adoptive parents] because I felt I wasn't allowed to."

Open Group: High Structural, High Communicative

Six of the 25 participants in this sample experienced high structural and high communicative openness during childhood, placing them in the Open Group. Three adoptees in this group were born in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The other three were born in the late 1990s. One adoptee in this group was adopted internationally. Themes observed in this group include adoptees feeling empowered and confident expressing their true selves, adoptive parents being open to and listening to concerns of adoptees, adoptees feeling a sense of belonging in both their adoptive and birth families, and adoptees feeling supported by and encouraged by adoptive families in making and strengthening connections with birth family.

Communicative Openness in Open Group (High Structural, High Communicative)

Adoptees in this group expressed confidence in both their adoption story and personal identity. Bree (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "I always felt confident as an adopted person." She felt that the "open exchange" in her adoption enabled her to "move forward with confidence." Ruth (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "My parents had provided me with information that was age-appropriate about my adoption, so I knew this was always a part of my story." Elsie (private adoptee, post-1990) said, "I always knew the general story from when I was little, and then as I got older [my adoptive parents] made it more age-appropriate and told me more and more. I don't personally feel like I have any trauma or anything, again because I was given such a stable beginning."

Olivia (private adoptee, post-1990) said, "I always knew I was adopted, and this was my story. My parents were super good at telling us from day one, 'You're adopted, this is what we know, what questions do you have?' and they answered them. They supported us whether or not we wanted to reach out." Bree's adoption was always very open, during an era where adoption was almost always structurally closed. She said her adoptive mom shared pictures and messages from her birth mom regularly, "keeping it normal" throughout her childhood.

Structural Openness in Open Group (High Structural, High Communicative)

Adoptees in this group had ongoing relationships with birth family members. Many spent time with birth parents without adoptive parents present, especially as they grew older. One shared how she would fly to another state to spend a few weeks with

her birth family each summer. Another said his birth mom moved in with his family for a period while he was young.

A unique aspect of structural openness in this group included birth family members embracing adoptees as well as their adoptive families. Bree said, "My [birth] grandma would always send gifts for my sisters when she sent me presents, like for Christmas, she would send my sisters presents too." Ruth said that her birth mom would take her sibling, who was also adopted but had a less open adoption, along with them when they would go on outings. "My birth mother was kind of like birth mom to both of us in a sense," she said. Hudson (private adoptee, post-1990) said that his birth mom was "always there."

Adoptive parents supported adoptees in strengthening relationships with birth family members as well in this group. Ruth said that when contact with her birth mom was less consistent, she would struggle. Her adoptive parents listened to her concerns and encouraged her to reach out herself. "That's really the point at which I started taking more ownership of the communication between us," she said. Hudson likewise said his adoptive parents empowered him to take the reins in his relationship with his birth family as he grew older.

Adoptive parents in this group helped adoptees connect to their roots. Kayla (international adoptee, pre-1990) said, "I really wanted to learn my language, so my mom helped me figure out a way to study and learn Spanish." Ruth shared that her adoptive dad gave her gifts to help her connect to her birth heritage. When Kayla went to her birth country, her adoptive mother asked if she wanted to stay with her birth family rather than in a hotel with her. These examples of connecting with culture and birth family correlated with adoptees in this group feeling a sense of belonging in both their adoptive and biological families. Bree said, "I always felt like I belonged in both places, feeling like I had more people to love that loved me."

Psychological Safety in Open Group (High Structural, High Communicative)

High levels of psychological safety were demonstrated in this group. Adoptees felt psychological safety in talking with adoptive parents, knowing their adoptive parents would stand up for them, advocate for them, and embrace their differences.

Some adoptees in this group expressed discomfort with being different, saying that being different "felt weird." Other adoptees in this group were unsure of when to share information about adoption and when to set boundaries with sharing information. Olivia said, "I always had a little bit of trouble like when someone says, 'Oh you look just like your dad,' do I say, 'Well actually I'm adopted,' or do you just smile and say, 'Yeah I get that a lot, thanks,' and move on. It wasn't necessarily like a negative it was just kind of weird." Elsie said, "I always wanted to look like someone. That was always a big thing growing up. I would look at my parents or my family and be like man, I don't really look like anybody." When she reunited with her birth mom in adolescence, she felt a "shift in the air" and "knew" her birth mom was in the room before seeing her.

Ruth appreciated that her adoptive parents "didn't pretend like differences didn't exist." Hudson said that he never felt pressured to pursue his adoptive parents' interests. "Never, not once did I ever feel guilty, and not once, did I feel ashamed because [I had different interests]. They let me grow up and be whatever I wanted to be."

Some adoptees in this group shared feeling "normal," like Hudson, who said, "None of my family ever treated me differently because I was adopted." Others said

that they felt "special" and "loved" as an adopted child. Bree said, "I always felt I was special." Olivia said, "I always had a really good experience being adopted. I thought it was the coolest thing ever, I was like, wow, I'm so loved, my mom and dad wanted a baby so badly that they adopted me, and my birth family wanted to give me a better life so they placed me into my family."

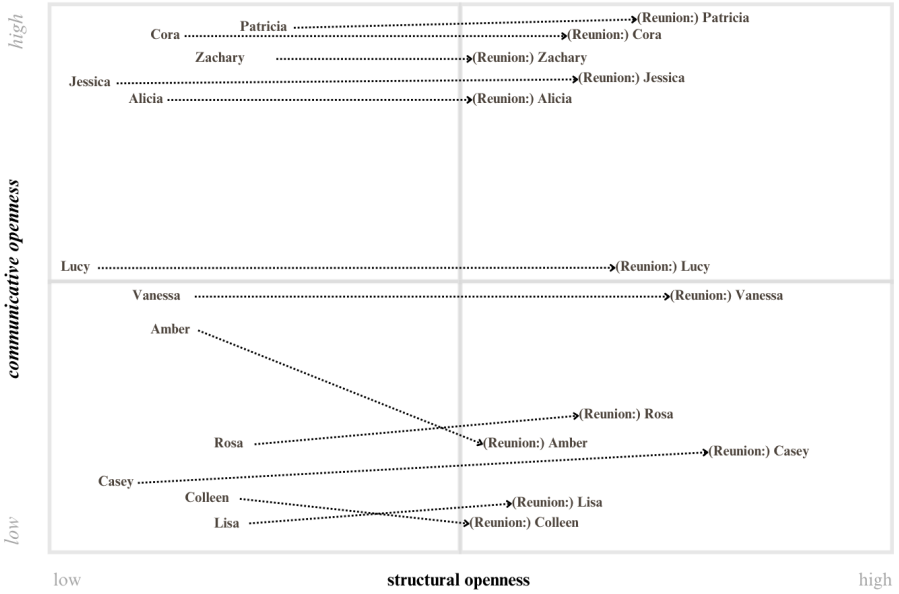
In this sample, all adoptees in this group have maintained relationships with birth family members in adulthood.

Reunion Group: High Structural, Low Communicative

The Reunion Group is distinct, because no participants experienced the combination of high structural and low communicative openness during childhood. This group experienced low structural communication during childhood, and then, with reunion experiences in adulthood, shifted to more structural openness (Figure 3). Those who experienced higher communicative openness were incorporated into the Open Group in adulthood, while those who experienced lower communicative openness with adoptive families in reunion created the Reunion Group, with high structural openness and low communicative openness.

Figure 3

Reunion Experiences in Adulthood: Mapping Transitions of Childhood to Adulthood Experiences with Communicative and Structural Openness



Note: Individuals who did not continue reunion relationships or who waited until their adoptive parents' deaths to search were not included in the Reunion Group.

While no adoptees in this sample experienced this combination of openness during childhood, six of the 10 adoptees in the Closed Group experienced both reunion and some level of suppressed communication regarding reunion with their adoptive parents. Adoptees in reunion in this group indicated lower levels of trust in adoptive parents, particularly when seeking and maintaining connections with birth family. Some expressed feeling disloyal and/or guilty for connecting with their birth family. All participants in this group struggled with communication about adoption reunion with adoptive parents.

One participant avoided telling her adoptive mother she was in reunion with her birth mother for ten years. Another said that her adoptive mother closed off when she discussed her reunion with her birth mother. "[My adoptive mom] was very good about not telling me outright but she did have a conversation with my husband…she was like, 'I really don't want to hear about that,'" Amber (private adoptee, pre-1990) said.

Some adoptees in this group shared that reunion conversations with other adoptive family members, including grandparents and siblings, reflected more support than conversations with adoptive parents. Despite her adoptive parents' lack of support in her search, Lisa (private adoptee, pre-1990) said, "When I told [my adoptive siblings] that I was going down this path to find my birth relatives, they were so supportive." Vanessa (international adoptee, pre-1990) said, "With finding my birth family, it's been hard because I know feelings have been hurt." She went on to say that, while her adoptive parents have been less understanding, her adoptive grandmother was supportive of her search, telling her, "You're our family, but you have every right to want to know where you come from." Vanessa felt "very grateful" for this validation and support.

Participants who did not continue any birth family relationships after an initial reunion were not included in the Reunion Group because they did not practice "structural openness" with birth family members in adulthood. Participants who waited until the deaths of their adoptive parents before initiating a search were also not included in the Reunion Group, because there was no communicative openness, or lack thereof, with adoptive parents regarding reunion experiences. Additionally, some participants are still searching for birth family members or are waiting to determine whether to search.

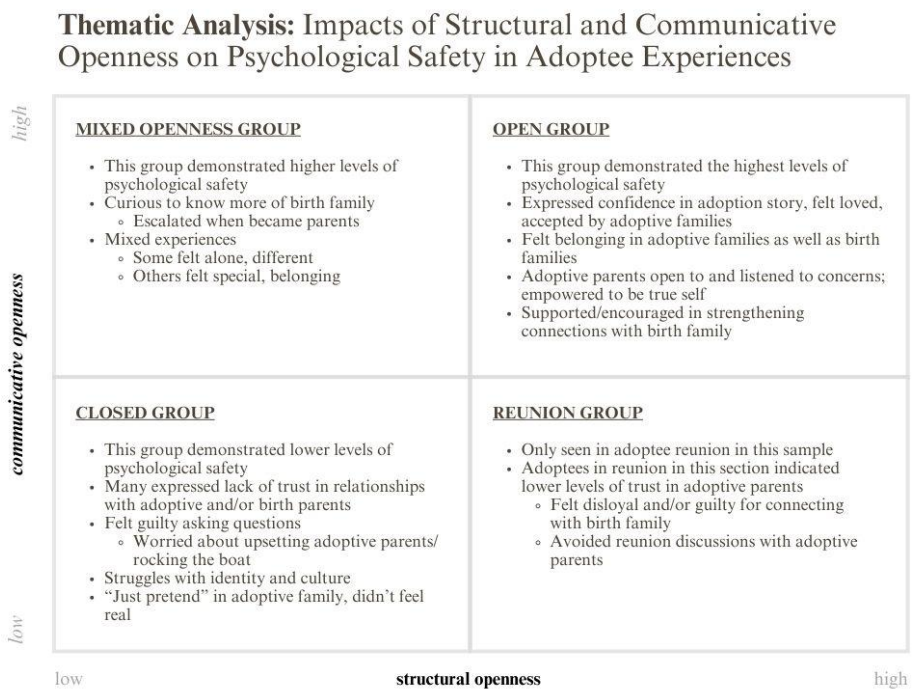
Themes emerged regarding how each group compared in manifestations of psychological safety (Figure 4).

Discussion

While previous research has highlighted the importance of both communicative and structural openness in helping adoptees build healthy relationships within their adoptive families (e.g., Siegel & Smith, 2012; Wrobel et al., 2003), this study expands on that by exploring how psychological safety within adoptive families is associated with both forms of openness using 25 qualitative interviews with adult adoptees. A key finding of this study is that psychological safety is associated with increased openness. Communicative openness, in particular, was associated with increased cohesion between adoptive and birth families and a strengthened sense of self for adoptees (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Horstman et al., 2016; Skinner-Drawz et al., 2011).

Figure 4

Conceptual Framework Regarding General Impacts of Structural and Communicative Openness on Psychological Safety and Adoptee Experiences



Individuals who were adopted expressed varying levels of psychological safety with adoptive families. Those who experienced higher levels of communicative openness indicated higher levels of psychological safety (as seen in the Mixed Openness and Open Groups, where communicative openness was higher, and particularly with participants in the highest quartile of communicative openness), expressing confidence in their uniqueness and assuredness that adoptive parents loved them unconditionally. This aligns with past research suggesting that adoptees in open adoptions experience increased psychological wellbeing (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant & McDermott, 2014; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Individuals who were higher on the spectrum of communicative openness also demonstrated higher feelings of trust and safety within adoptive families. Higher communicative openness seemed to correlate with higher confidence and feelings of belonging. The Open Group (high communicative openness and high structural openness) in particular demonstrated consistently high levels of psychological safety, expressing feeling connected to and loved by both adoptive and biological family members, thus indicating that a combination of high communicative openness and high structural openness may result in optimal psychological safety for adopted individuals.

Individuals who experienced lower levels of communicative openness indicated lower levels of psychological safety, as seen in the Closed Group (low communicative

openness and low structural openness) and the Reunion Group (low communicative openness and high structural openness in adult reunion). Furthermore, participants in these groups were more concerned with pleasing adoptive parents, discussing ways they hid aspects of their personalities from adoptive families. This aligns with previous findings suggesting that secrecy in adoption may be associated with loneliness and attachment struggles (e.g., Feeney et al., 2007; Grotevant, 2020; Ranieri et al., 2022; Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Being different was a struggle discussed by adoptees in all four groups. Past research likewise suggests that feelings of "otherness" are a challenge for many adoptees (e.g, Neil et al., 2015; Siegel & Smith, 2012). Those in families with higher levels of communicative openness were more likely to discuss their feelings regarding being different with adoptive parents, while those experiencing lower levels of communicative openness were more likely to hide their feelings and avoid challenging discussions. Those who were able to connect with birth family members and/or their cultural heritage seemed more comfortable with their differences than those who did not. Those who felt connected with their heritage during childhood experienced higher degrees of communicative openness.

This study supports previous research suggesting that communicative openness is the more important form of openness for building stronger relationships between adoptive parents and adopted individuals (e.g., Brodzinsky, 2006; Grotevant, 2020). To be clear, structural openness has also been found to be important, both in this study and by others (e.g., Berge et al., 2006; Grotevant et al., 2019). The results of this study also support families striving to support adoptees when structural openness is not possible. Furthermore, more open communication may be associated with increased willingness to accept help from adoption support services (Neil et al., 2015; Grotevant, 2020). The findings suggest that when discussions are open and honest, adoptees tend to feel that adoptive families also care for their birth families, which solidifies confidence that adoptive families care for adoptees themselves.

In structurally open adoptions this sometimes meant that, as children, adoptees spent time with birth family members, building relationships and strengthening relationships independent of adoptive families. In structurally closed and communicatively open adoptions, adoptive parents told adoptees that they would support them in search and reunion. Regardless of experiences with reunion, adoptees who felt comfortable talking openly about adoption with adoptive parents were more likely to express confidence in their personal identity. The experiences shared in this study also support Grotevant's findings that openness correlates with increased empathy and more secure relationships between adoptees and their families (1994).

Adoptees experiencing higher levels of structural and communicative openness were most likely to feel like their adoptive parents loved and cared for their birth family. This correlated with higher expressions of high self-worth. Experiences shared indicated that adoptive parents felt trust and respect with and for birth parents, with many stories of adoptees spending time with birth parents apart from adoptive parents. This echoes past research suggesting that when adoptive parents build empathetic relationships with birth parents, relationships with adoptees become more understanding and secure as well (e.g., Grotevant et al., 1994; Wrobel, 1996). Participants who experienced high communicative and low structural openness usually indicated that adoptive par-

ents spoke kindly and respectfully of birth parents, except for one adoptee sharing that her adoptive father seemed to disapprove of her birth father because "a man should step up." Overall, adoptive parents who encouraged high communicative openness were supportive of and engaged in reunion efforts and spoke compassionately of birth mothers, with frequent assurances of the love that first families felt for adoptees.

Past research indicates that adoption storytelling by both birth and adoptive parents is particularly powerful in building deeper, more trusting relationships (e.g., Hays et al., 2016; Koenig Kellas, 2005). In the current study, those who experienced low structural openness and low communicative openness were most likely to share memories of adoptive parents disparaging birth parents. While there was generally little discussion of adoption in this group, some did remember adoptive parents speaking about struggles birth parents faced without kindness or respect. Disparaging remarks regarding birth family correlated with adoptees feeling guilty for seeking connection with birth family members, keeping secrets regarding search and reunion from adoptive parents, and adoptees struggling to make secure connections with others, both in families and other relationships.

Professional Support

As past research indicates, the way in which adoption professionals present open adoption impacts adoptive family culture regarding openness (e.g., MacDonald & McSherry, 2011). This study submits that more efforts are needed to better prepare families to practice both structural and communicative openness. In this sample, many adoptees shared how they perceived the support their adoptive parents received from adoption professionals. All adoptees who shared how they perceived agency support of their adoptive parents suggested a lack of support. While those in the Closed Group most frequently discussed the lack of training and education they perceived their adoptive parents received, some participants in the Mixed Openness Group also felt that their adoptive parents were ill-prepared. Miranda, a transracial adoptee, discussed the lack of racial sensitivity training for her adoptive parents. Lucy discussed how her adoptive parents did not understand the importance of helping her connect with her cultural heritage as an international adoptee. These results are consistent with research indicating that few adoptive families receive suggested long-term adoption support services (Atkinson & Riley, 2017; Brodzinsky, 2015).

Exploring the impacts of openness education may help guide future legislative action regarding openness training requirements. Additionally, an enhanced understanding of open adoption can better guide nonprofit adoption programs' education efforts (e.g., Henney et al., 2003). In this study, Olivia discussed how, as an adoptee who is also an adoptive parent now, the agency she worked with trained prospective adoptive parents to understand that, while "everyone can be a good [parent], not everyone can be a good adoptive parent," suggesting that adoptive parents help adoptees feel comfortable having conversations about their similarities with their birth families and "being okay with supporting [adoptees] in [their] thoughts and feelings."

Nonprofit executives, program officers, and staff members can learn from this study to provide more and better professional support. Improved structural openness training is needed, ensuring that adoptive parents understand how and why openness benefits adoptees. Adoption-specific, attachment-based and trauma-informed servic-

es may also help adoptees better address challenges and grief (e.g., Atkinson & Riley, 2017; Penner, 2023). Furthermore, family communication training may help adoptive families better meet the needs of adoptees (e.g., Horstman et al., 2016).

Limitations and Future Research

This study, while offering valuable insights into the lived experiences of adult adoptees, is not without limitations. Analysis was exploratory in nature and, thus, not intended to be generalizable. Sampling limitations include the small selection of interviews of only U.S. adoptees who were mainly female (84%). Nor did it include participants who lived in a foster-care setting for an extended period of time or were adopted later in childhood. In fact, research calls for additional care and oversight for visits between those who are adopted later in childhood and their biological family members (MacDonald, 2021). For children who experienced abuse and neglect, visitation may not be appropriate. Loxterkamp (2009) calls for important nuance when considering visitation:

> ...the predicament emerging from such cases of early maltreatment is that contact, the very thing that is meant to provide a remedy for harm, can itself be harmful and the likely cause of enduring emotional and psychological damage, even when it appears to be going well or well enough. …Clear and detailed plans won't be adequate safeguards and written agreements won't prevent misunderstandings if there is unawareness of the significance of certain harmful aspects of contact. (p. 429)

Parents and social workers who support children in this category should proceed carefully to ensure that any visitation or contact that takes place is not creating risk for additional harm.

The authors acknowledge that their personal experiences as either adoptive or foster parents, as well as the podcast's focus on open adoption, may have influenced the framing of the study. To mitigate these biases, the authors 1) examined interview data to identify the challenges and possible risks of open adoption and possible benefits of closed adoption; and 2) selected interviewees with diverse experiences to capture a variety of perspectives.

Although the study sample is both small and not representative of the adoptee population, the cohesive nature of the individual groups is notable. No outliers were noted, although participants who experienced communicative openness at the mid-levels, including Isabella, Miranda, Lucy, Vanessa, Danielle, and Amber, demonstrated more variance in communicative openness than participants at the higher and lower ends of the spectrum. Participants experiencing mid-level communicative openness shared both experiences of communicating with adoptive parents about adoption (some through reading adoption books during childhood, others through occasional conversations regarding adoption) as well as experiences of feeling alone, unable to share feelings, and uncertainty about reactions adoptive parents may have. Future research examining how mid-level communicative openness differs from higher and lower openness in a larger sample may be helpful in better understanding how this group may differ. Additional research is needed to explore how communicative openness correlates with the development of identity and connection with both birth and adoptive family members. Further exploration of how psychological safety connects

to familial relationships, and particularly adoptive family relationships, will further benefit the conversation surrounding communicative openness.

Well-informed adoption programs at nonprofit agencies rely on research to better guide both policy and practice, enabling adoption professionals to tailor practices to best support adoptee needs. This study did not directly explore the relationship between the adoption agency and the lived experiences of the adoptees, but the findings are useful for adoption professionals at nonprofit adoption agencies. Additional research is needed to determine how the discussion and treatment of birth parents impacts adoptee perceptions of self and connections with both birth and adoptive families.

Conclusion

As openness continues to become more prevalent in adoptions, an enhanced understanding of how openness best serves adopted individuals can better direct policy in this arena (Grotevant, 2020). The findings in this study reiterate the importance of both structural and communicative openness in adoption relationships. In particular, the importance of communicative openness was emphasized by the findings in this study.

A more informed understanding of how psychological safety is established and maintained in homes and families can improve training and education for adoptive parents, with the ultimate goal of offering more support for children and their families. Based on this study, there seems to be a connection between communicative openness and psychological safety in adoptive families. Additional research is needed to explore this connection further.

Social workers, curriculum developers, and trainers at nonprofit organizations and adoption agencies can assess the health of their openness training for prospective adoptive parents based on a few criteria. A good goal is for the prospective adoptive parent to come away from trainings understanding:

1. The benefits of open adoption for their adopted child
2. The difference between structural and communicative openness (to address future changes in structure or communication frequency with biological family members)
3. How to address their concerns about openness (this may require agency involvement, or referral to additional resources)

Post-adoption support can help families navigate challenges and prevent adoption disruption as well (Bryan et al., 2010). Adoption agencies can host adoption support groups, or refer families to local resources.

Adoption openness education and prospective caretaker trainings aimed at helping adoptees connect with birth families as well as culture and heritage will likely also support stronger connections and bonds with adoptive families. Additionally, this study indicates that greater support is needed from adoption professionals. Adoptee-focused education and training throughout the licensing process will better equip adoptive parents and caretakers to best meet the needs of the children in their care.

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Appendix: Interview Protocol

This Appendix outlines the questions that podcast participants were asked over the course of their interviews. Not all questions were asked in each interview. Questions were selected from this list according to the subject's individual experience in adoption. Podcast hosts also utilized professional judgment to ask questions not included on the list, as relevant to the conversation.

1. Did you grow up with an open or closed adoption?
    a. How do you think this affected your childhood and adulthood?
2. How did your adoptive family talk about adoption while you were growing up?
3. What do you wish your adoptive family and/or community had known in retrospect?
4. What has helped you in working through any emotions or challenges related to your adoption experience?
5. Were there ways your adoptive family helped you connect with your culture/heritage?
6. What would you hope adoptive families would do to support adoptees in connecting with their birth families or cultures?
7. What have you struggled with regarding adoption and what do you wish others understood?
8. Do you have any thoughts on how adoptive parents can better support adoptees and biological parents?
9. What are some of the biggest challenges you feel the adoption community faces? Any thoughts on solutions/changes?
10. (If applicable) What has the reunification process looked like for you?
    a. How has finding your first family affected your sense of identity?
    b. What has helped you in working through the complicated emotions during reunification?
    c. What are your thoughts on helping adoptees navigate biological family relationships?
    d. What would you hope adoptive families would do to support adoptees in searching?