

Discourse About Adoption in Adoptive Families

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Forty intact families with adopted children between the ages of 13 and 19 engaged in semistructured discussions of their feelings and experiences as adoptive families. Microanalysis of the discussions showed that family members tend to confirm and tend to avoid disagreeing with one another's assertions about these emotion-laden issues. Nonetheless, three types of correlational analysis showed that pressure to conform with parents' "party line" was a relatively minor factor for the adolescents: (a) Feelings expressed in the open family discussion corresponded with the same individuals' privately expressed feelings, much more so in the adolescents than in their parents. (b) Mothers and fathers tended to acknowledge disadvantages of adoption more than their adopted adolescents did, and the concordance between the two parents was high, both openly and privately. (c) "Acknowledgement versus rejection of differences" did not emerge as a unidimensional continuum among parents, whereas among children it was a strong unitary dimension of variance. Low acknowledgement is not necessarily a matter of denial, but high acknowledgement may be a coping strategy for adolescent adoptees whose development has been difficult for various reasons. Children whose families reported more problems (of all kinds) had extremely low self-esteem scores and expressed greater interest in their biological roots.

Prospective studies have generally concluded that the family environment is a crucial factor in adoptees' adjustment (Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1985; Stein & Hoopes, 1986; Witmer, Herzog, Weinstein, & Sullivan, 1963). Although school and behavior problems are more prevalent in adopted children during the elementary years (Bohman & Sigvardsson, 1980; Brodzinsky, Schechter, Braff, & Singer, 1984), most adopted children do *not* show any such problems, especially by adolescence. What distinguishes their family environments from those who do have developmental difficulties? This study pursues a variable Stein and

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Hoopes (1986) found to predict adjustment, self-esteem, and school performance: self-reported "openness of family communication about adoption issues."

For more than 20 years, the clinical literature has cited an untested hypothesis about adoptive parents' difficulty in being open to such discussions. There are indications that some parents impose upon themselves and their children an implicit eleventh commandment, "Thou shalt insist that adoption is no different from the biological parent-child relationship" (e.g., Kent & Richie, 1976; Kirk, 1964; Lifton, 1975; Sorosky, Baran, & Pannor, 1978). Following the advice of most agencies and authors, they tell their children at an early age about the adoption; but only by perfunctorily disclosing the fact, then closing discussion. Adopted children need the story retold continually as their understanding develops and leads to new questions (Brodzinsky, Singer, & Braff, 1984).

Kirk (1964), on the basis of questionnaires completed by a widespread sample of adoptive parents, distinguished two alternative "coping strategies," which he called "acknowledgment of differences" and "rejection of differences." Many social workers, child psychologists, and family therapists regard the no-differences coping strategy as tantamount to denial. If obeyed, it forces children to repress their normal curiosity about roots, leading to "genealogical bewilderment" (Brinich, 1980; Sants, 1964; Stone, 1972). Virtually all authors—clinicians (e.g., Kent & Richie, 1976; Sorosky et al., 1978) as well as researchers and personal chroniclers (e.g., Kirk, 1964; Lifton, 1975)—suggest that honoring such a prohibition leaves adoptees no room to express grief, anger, and fears about loss, abandonment, or rejection; or to work through their doubts about the adequacy of their bonds with the adoptive family. Thus parents who excessively downplay the differences between adoptive and biological relationships may impair their children's inner security and self-esteem. But that hypothesis has not been tested.

One purpose of the present study was to see whether such an "acknowledgment versus rejection of differences" continuum exists among the current generation of adoptive parents. In order not to equate the rejection end of the continuum with the defense mechanism of denial, we shall simply refer to *high* versus *low distinguishing* (between their own experiences or feelings and those of biological families). A second purpose was to see whether manifestations of those intrapsychic coping strategies might be found in the ways different

parents communicate with their adolescent adoptees. Kirk had mailed questionnaires to parents. We (a) interviewed our informants in person, (b) interviewed their adolescent adoptees, and (c) observed them in family discussions as well as questioning them privately. Third, we hoped to test the long-standing hypothesis: Is a failure to acknowledge differences associated with more problems, either in adopted adolescents' adjustment or in the family as a whole?

Our conceptualization of the parent-child discourse was guided by the possible connection between two areas of work on parent-child discourse: on the clinical side, Kirk's and similar hypotheses about parental imposition of attitudes and, on the normative side, the analysis of "parental frames" in cognitive, social, and linguistic interaction with infants and toddlers (Kaye, 1982). A specific hypothesis was suggested by both areas of literature: Some parents (who "reject differences," in Kirk's phrase) create discourse frames in which their children are unlikely to acknowledge differences and disadvantages due to adoption. Such frames should be manifested by children acknowledging or denying differences, conditional upon what their parents have just said. There should be a positive contextual effect upon assertions that agree with the parents, a negative contextual effect upon disagreements, or both. The hypothesis could be disconfirmed in either of two ways: (a) if we found neither a positive contextual effect upon agreements nor a negative effect upon disagreements or (b) if the adolescents had as great an effect upon their parents' assertions as vice versa.

Regardless of the direction of effects in a discussion between parents and adolescents, the literature suggests two additional predictions: A concordant dimension of high versus low distinguishing should be found among families, and more problems should be found among low-distinguishing families.

METHOD

Subjects

Two large agencies inserted fliers in mailings to adoptive parents, with postage-paid return envelopes for families willing to be contacted further regarding a study of "communication in adoptive families." A random sample of adoptive families cannot be obtained for this type of study; our method netted a closer approximation than most previous studies to a "representative range" of adoptive families. However, we

sampled a restricted population. Only maritally intact, racially homogeneous families with at least one child adopted before age 2 and now between 13 and 19, living within 90 minutes of Chicago, were asked to respond. The sample consisted of the first 40 white families who responded and whose schedules were amenable to ours. Besides those explicit criteria, the sample was biased in favor of acknowledgment, because parents had remained on their adoption agency's mailing list, all children had been told about their adoption, and all members of the family were willing to be interviewed. Our aim was to describe processes of family communication associated with high versus low distinguishing, comparing families within this population.

In each family, the oldest adopted child was designated the "target" child. In 20 families, 1 or 2 other children were present, aged 11 to 19. Of these 26 siblings, 20 were adopted. Of all 66 children, 32 were male; 18 of the 40 target children were male.

All target children had been placed with the parents before the age of 5 months; 80% when less than 2 months old. In all cases, the parents (like Kirk's subjects) had experienced prolonged difficulty in conceiving or in carrying a baby to term.

Fathers' reported annual income at the time of our interview ranged from \$20,000 to \$220,000 (median: \$60,000), and mothers' ranged from \$0 to \$75,000 (median: \$4,000). (These income levels are representative of the population of white adoptive families in the United States, by this stage of their lives.) With the exception of one mother, all parents were at least high school graduates; 60% of the fathers and 50% of the mothers had college degrees.

Procedure

All interviews took place in the families' homes. The family discussions, a modified revealed-difference procedure,¹ consisted of seven parts. An interviewer presented each question to the family, checked that it was understood (for example, did the youngest child know what *biological* meant as opposed to *adopted*?), and left the family alone to discuss it. The family was to decide whether they agreed on an answer or preferred to say that some members felt one way and others another way. In either case, they were to talk about *why* they felt as they did and only then call the interviewer back for the next question.

The seven questions, listed in Table 1, were always presented in the same order. The first was a baseline question having nothing to do with

TABLE 1 Questions Asked as Separate Parts of Family Discussion

- (1) What are the three things you like best, that you do together as a family? What does each person like to do alone, or some of you without the others? What are some things you all do together that you don't like?
- (2) Tell the story of how Mom and Dad adopted [*Target*].
- (3) Would your family life have been different over the years if you had all been one another's biological parents and children?
- (4) Have other people ever treated you differently because of their attitudes about adoption?
- (5) Do you think any of your feelings about yourselves or about one another are different in any way from what they might be if you had all been one another's biological parents and children?
- (6) Besides what you have already said, are there any other ways life has been *harder* for any of you because of being a member of an adoptive family?
- (7) Besides what you have already said, are there any other ways life has been *easier* for any of you because of being a member of an adoptive family?

NOTE: Each question, typed on a card, was left with the family when the interviewer left the room.

adoption. Families spent 3 to 15 minutes on that and 1 to 10 minutes on each of the other six questions. In sum, most family discussions lasted between 20 and 45 minutes.

Afterward, each parent and target child was interviewed privately by one interviewer or the other. Subjects filled out a standard 10-item self-esteem instrument (Rosenberg, 1979). Then the interviewer administered a questionnaire similar to Kirk's (1964). Most items concerned feelings about the adoption experience (e.g., "Do you ever feel uncomfortable talking about adoption?") and were rated by the interviewer on a 5-point scale.

Transcription and Coding: Family Interviews

The transcriber was ignorant of the adoption literature and of all information about the families except their taped family interviews. Listening to the stereophonic cassette with earphones and a foot pedal, she typed directly into an IBM-PC computer. A transcribing manual ensured consistency. One or the other of the authors then listened to the complete tape while correcting the transcript at the computer.

The use of stereophonic recording, two backup tapes, and full

checking of every transcript resulted in high reliability. "[Inaudible]" occurs once per three or four transcript pages. One interview was transcribed independently by a different person and checked by the author who had not checked the first transcript. The products of these two separate applications of our transcription procedure agreed .96 with respect to sequence of speaking turns and .91 with respect to interruptions.²

The next step was to code the transcripts, directly on the computer screen. We developed an elaborate coding manual, applying successive drafts of it to transcripts until two coders' independent codings consistently agreed better than .90 on every category. Then, with the final version of the manual, the following three-step coding process was employed: One investigator coded all transcripts; the other checked all (printed) coded transcripts and marked every disagreement or question (about 11% of all entries made by the first coder, including keyboard-entry errors); then both discussed every such questioned item and jointly decided upon the correct code, creating a final version of the coded transcript. Thus the ultimate reliability, after conferring on every transcript, was higher than the .90 that could have been achieved by individual coders. We confirmed this by recoding one family that had been coded 4 months earlier; the agreement was .94.

Our coding system tapped three aspects of the speaking turns: discourse process, adoption topic, and level of distinguishing. Some turns received no code at all; some received several, but most received just one topic code with a level code. The "process" codes P, Q, and X (Table 2) could be followed immediately by a letter indicating the other speaker toward whom the process remark was directed; if no particular addressee could be inferred, no second letter was used. Adoption-related statements were coded with one of eight categories, briefly defined in Table 2. These "topics" codes A, B, D, H, I, O, R, and S could be followed immediately by a number from 1 to 6, indicating level of distinguishing between adoptive and biological families (Table 3); or they could stand alone if an issue was referred to without distinguishing.³

All codes formed a string of characters attached to the whole turn, though each component of the string was often based upon only part of the turn. None of the 11 codes was assigned more than once within the same turn unless the qualifying suffix—addresses or level—changed. For example,

R5QMR2 Our relationship is the same as if you were my birth mother [R5], don't you think [QM]? Though we might be a little closer [R2].

TABLE 2 Brief Definitions and Exemplars of Coding Categories

Process codes	
P	comments or injunctions about the <i>process</i> of discussion ("Read the question again.")
Q	<i>queries</i> more specific than the interviewer's ("Why?")
X	<i>terminating</i> discussion when others appear to have more to say ("We're getting long-winded.")
Topic codes	
A	<i>adoption</i> decision, application, waiting, getting baby, and so on ("We waited exactly 9 months."—A5)
B	<i>biological</i> parents, background, possible search, and so on ("I can fantasize that John Lennon was my father."—B6)
D	<i>developmental</i> tasks ("You kids have had a lot more trouble in the area of self-confidence."—D1)
H	<i>heredity</i> versus environment ("We would all have had blue eyes."—H3)
I	<i>inability</i> to give birth ("I was 32 by then, and they said it might take several years."—I2)
O	<i>others</i> ("It upset you that time your friend teased you."—O1)
R	<i>relational</i> feelings ("You three are that much more special to us."—R6)
S	<i>child's self-concept</i> and sense of roots ("This is who I am, right here."—S5)

R5QM Our relationship is the same as if you were my birth mother [R5], don't you think [QM]? I wouldn't feel any different [second R5, ignored].

The same level could occur more than once within a turn if a new issue was raised; there is an example in Table 3 (O3B3).

Finally, we stripped out the words of each turn, leaving only the codes, and transmitted the 40 sequential files to an IBM mainframe computer where they could be analyzed using CRESCAT, a system for the microanalysis of sequences of events (Kaye, 1977).

Three features of this study are of special utility in studying family problems, transitions, and phases in the life cycle: (a) the comparison of individual and group interviews structured around an issue central to the members' identity and cohesion; (b) the direct transcription and coding onto a microcomputer, automated checking for reliability and continuity, and transmission of sequential files for microanalysis—steps

TABLE 3 Levels of Distinguishing

(1)	unqualified high distinguishing of <i>disadvantages</i> or <i>costs</i> of adoptive relationship ("I would feel closer to you, and we might not fight as much."—R1)
(2)	mild or qualified distinguishing of disadvantages or costs ("It's just this little teeny question in the back of my mind; I don't know where I come from."—S2)
(3)	mentions difference without clear advantage or disadvantage ("Our relatives wanted to know what kind of family the baby would come from."—O3B3)
(4)	denies remembering, or ever thinking about it; or explicitly refuses to answer ("How would I know, I wasn't born."—A4)
(5)	asserts <i>no difference</i> ("Isn't it how you're raised that determines who you are?"—H5Q)
(6)	asserts <i>advantages</i> of adoptive relationship ("You didn't have to go through labor."—I6)

that reduced processing time and human errors, making a complex coding scheme practicable with a corpus of nearly 16,000 speaking turns; and (c) the availability of software that allowed us to ask any question at all about patterns in the sequence of codes, rather than imposing one particular mode of analysis. Conditional rates of particular kinds of verbal acts offer a way of analyzing family discussions in terms of the contextual influence of members upon one another's expressed views.

This study differs from most observational research on family interaction in focusing upon discourse concerning personally significant feelings, rather than a neutral task. Although not without precedent, this approach is rarely taken; probably because it demands the development of an entirely new coding system for each type of interaction and topic to be discussed. Focusing primarily upon process rather than content variables enables investigators to test whether defects in communication processes are at the heart of a given dysfunction (e.g., schizophrenia: Mishler & Waxler, 1968), but not hypotheses about the effects of content upon process and vice versa. The latter can now be done microanalytically, as was not practical a decade ago.

Questionnaire Data Reduction

Rosenberg (1979) reports a range of reliability coefficients from .85 to .92 for his Self-Esteem Scale (though we used a simpler way of reducing

the items to a global score); the instrument's reliability and validity with adopted adolescents or their parents is unknown.

Three interviewers were involved in questioning subjects privately: the authors and a graduate student in clinical psychology (two of whom visited each home). Reliability was checked by all three raters independently filling out questionnaire forms from tape recordings of the same subjects. Agreement between the second author and the assistant, measured at different times in the course of data collection (on fathers, mothers, and children), was 98.2% exact agreement, 100% within 1 point on the 5-scales. All the derived variables listed below deviate in these pairs of independent codings by less than one-tenth of each variable's standard deviation; for most variables, the two independently derived final values were identical.

The first step was to reduce about 50 items of information per person to a meaningful but small set of variables. Decisions were based both on Kirk's dimension of acknowledgment versus rejection of differences and on an initial exploratory factor analysis. The criteria for combining items into a composite variable were as follows: (a) Separate questions were combined only if they had been intended to assess the same dimension; (b) items were not combined unless they correlated with one another consistently among the fathers, among the mothers, and among target children; and (c) the same formula (e.g., mean of the same four items) had to be used to compute fathers', mothers', and (when applicable) children's comparable variables. Only brief explanations of these variables will be given here.⁴

Individual variables. Thirteen items on the parent questionnaire and three on the child's rated difficulty or disadvantages of adoption as compared to biological parentage. All these items intercorrelated, and those referring to the early years after adopting did not emerge as a distinct factor from those referring to recent years. Hence they were reduced to a single variable, "life was harder."

Four items combined to assess each person's reported "discomfort" in the family discussion just completed and in discussing adoption in general.

Most subjects reported experiencing at least one type of problem over the years. For each problem type recalled, they were asked to rate the degree to which it may have been due to being an adoptive family. The measure "problems due to adoption" was the mean of those ratings.

How much each person claimed to know about the target's biological parents was assessed by checking up to 13 types of information (name,

religion, ethnicity, etc.), and totaling the checks as "know about biological parents." Sixteen items adapted from Kirk (1964) assessed the degree of curiosity, thinking, and talking with other family members about the biological parents. The latter did not emerge as distinct factors; therefore, all 16 items were averaged as "think about biological parents." A separate, single-item variable was each parent's guess as to what extent the "child wonders about birth parents."

Other single items in the interviews were the degree to which "child talks" with each parent when concerned about things in general; and how "parents would feel about search," that is, if the target were to decide some day to search for the biological parents. In addition to being asked how they thought their parents would feel about that, children were asked how likely they "probably will search."

A ninth individual variable was "self-esteem," obtained as described above.

Family variables. "Education" was the sum of the two parents' years of formal education. Two variables characterized the family structure: "number adopted" and "number biological" children. "Target's age" and "sex" also entered the analysis.

Family and developmental "problem types" (total out of seven possible; school, behavior, interacting with other children, marriage, health, emotional, and "other") was originally distinguished from "therapy" (five defined levels of involvement with professional help, reported by parents only); but the two measures were so highly correlated that for present purposes we combined them, and then agreement was so high (.76) that they were summed across father, mother, and target to yield a single index, "family problems."

RESULTS

The analyses of basic discourse variables, such as who speaks most and who interrupts whom, are omitted from this article because they do not bear on its specific hypotheses. Available from the authors, they may be of methodological interest to investigators of family interactions.⁵ First we shall look at the parents' and target adolescents' levels of distinguishing, then at differences among families.

Levels of Open Distinguishing

About 84% of the average family's speaking turns in Questions 2 through 7 warranted one or more of the eight topics codes: This

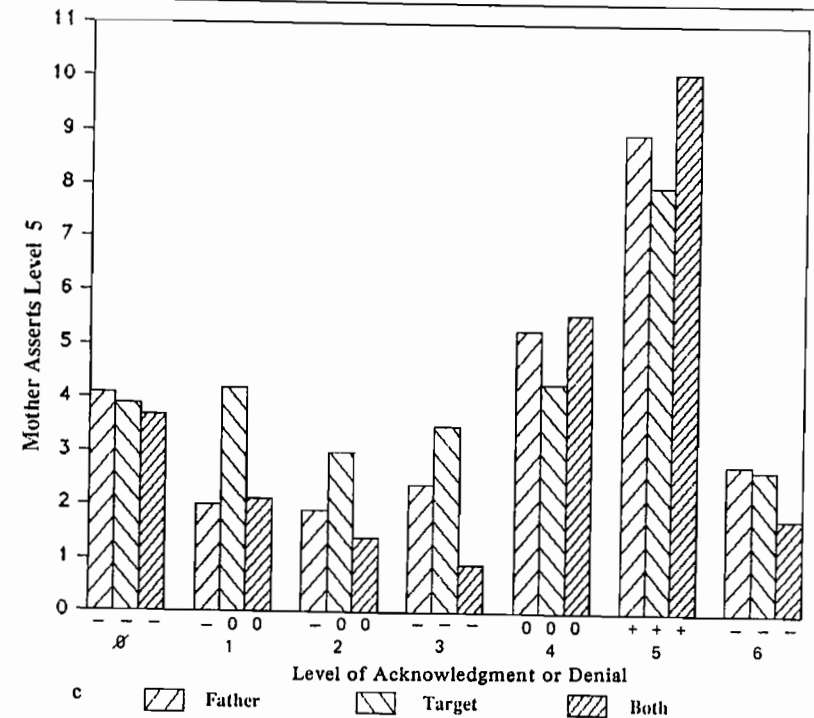
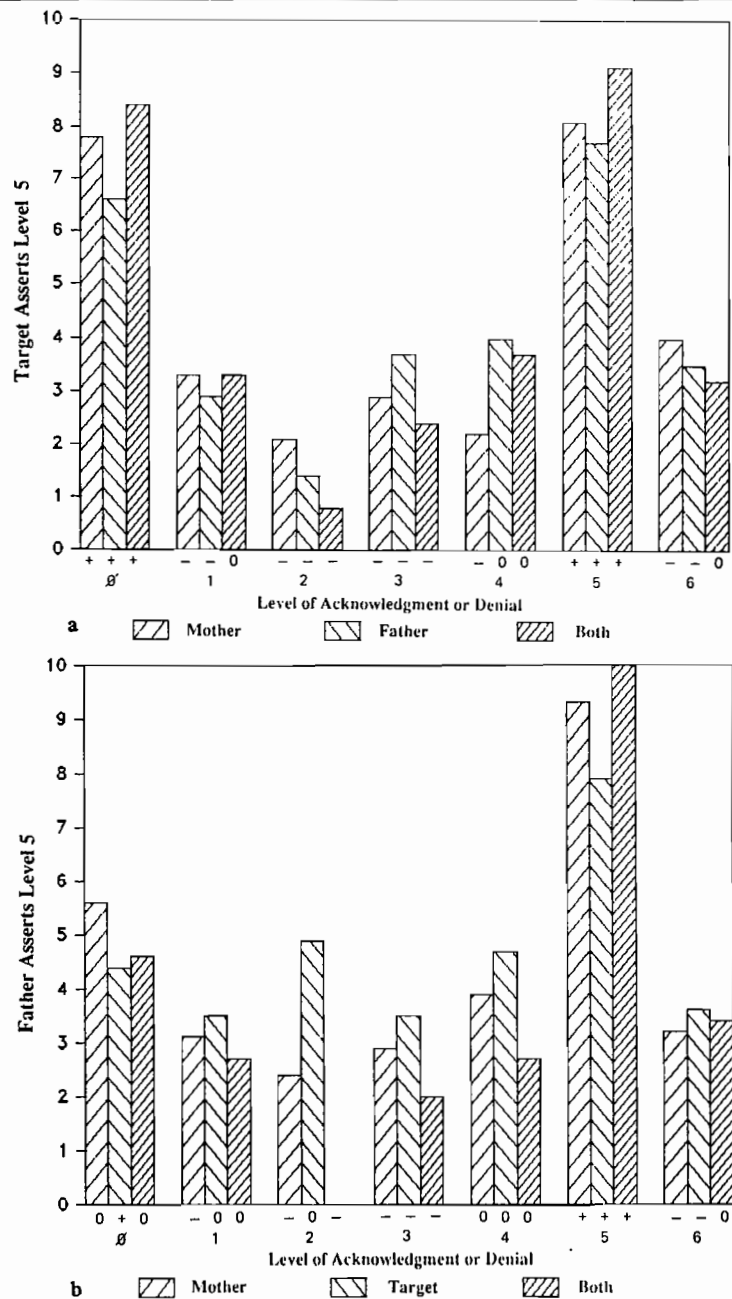


Figure 1 Frequency of (a) target, (b) father, and (c) mother asserting Level 5 (no difference between experiences in adoptive family and what they would have experienced had they been a biological family), measured as a percentage of all speaking turns by the family, conditional upon the levels most recently asserted by the other two principals in the discussion. Levels below each bar show results of chi-square with 1 df, $p < .05$ (in most comparison, $p < .01$ or $p < .001$). A plus sign indicates greater than under other conditions; a minus sign indicates less than under other conditions; a zero indicates chi-square not significantly different.

Fathers and mothers were influenced as much by their children's assertions as children were by their parents'. This is shown in Figure 1 for assertions of no difference and in Figure 2 for disadvantages associated with adoption. Figure 1a shows the rate of Level 5 assertions by target children, per all family members' speaking turns, as a function of the level of distinguishing most recently evinced (within the same question) by each parent. Each time a new question was posed to the family, each member was considered at Level 0 until one of his or her statements was coded 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, or 6 (regardless of topics code). Thus

Figure 1

there was a period of time in which mother's level was 0, then a period of time in which it was, for example, 2, then a period of time in which her level was, perhaps, 5, then 2 again, then perhaps 3, then 6, and so on. The rate of target children's 5s was computed within each of the seven distinct "level frames" (0 through 6) mothers could provide. These rates, across all parts of all 40 interviews, are shown by the leftmost of each triad of bars in Figure 1a. The center bars in the figure show the same 554 assertions of no difference by the 40 target children, but this time as a function of the levels established by their fathers. The right (darker-shaded) bars show the effects of father *and* mother upon the children's likelihood of a 5, whenever the parents were in agreement with one another with respect to their coded levels of distinguishing. (Parents happened to agree a majority of the "time," measured in speaking turns: 53% of the average discussion consisted of contexts when the two parents had most recently asserted the same level.⁷ The chance occurrence of these contexts of parental agreement, based on the frequencies of each level by each parent, would be 21.6%.)

Although this definition of frames ignores real time and is only one of several possible ways of computing conditional effects in the discourse, what matters is that we used the same definition for all three participants as framed by one another's assertions; and we can compute a baseline for each. Because target children's turns containing a coded level of 5 constituted 5.7% of all speaking turns in our corpus of interviews, that rate can be taken as the average likelihood of hearing a child assert no difference at randomly chosen points in a family discussion, without regard to what other family members are saying. Rates significantly higher than 5.7% in Figure 1a indicate that parents' assertions tended to elicit no-difference comments from their children, and rates significantly lower than 5.7% indicate that parents' assertions tended to *suppress* children's no-difference comments. Statistical significance was tested for each bar on the graph by chi-square with one *df*, comparing the rate of children's 5s in *that context* with children's 5s in *any other context*. (The fact that we compared all seven contexts obviated any possibility of these results reflecting autocorrelation within the time series.)

Clearly, both fathers' and mothers' assertions of no difference tended to elicit agreements from the children, although target children also tended to say no difference at the opening of each new question, before parents had yet committed themselves (Level 0). Parents' distinguishing (Levels 1, 2, 3) tended to suppress the children's likelihood of saying no difference. The effect of both parents simultaneously maintaining the

same level was only a little stronger than that of either parent alone.

But the effects of mother and target child on *father's* likelihood of saying no difference (Figure 1b) and of father and target child on *mother's* likelihood of saying no difference (Figure 1c) were much the same as the effects of parents on children.

A similar set of effects emerged with respect to acknowledged differences. In this case we used the combined category "unqualified distinguishing *or* qualified distinguishing" (Level 1 or 2), because the frequencies of occurrence of those two levels were too low to be analyzed separately (see Table 4). Figure 2 shows that both mother and father tended to mention disadvantages of adoption in the context of one another's and their child's high distinguishing and to avoid doing so when the spouse or child was asserting no difference. The children, however, showed only a modest tendency to imitate their mothers' (or both parents') distinguishing and to avoid distinguishing when their mothers were asserting no difference.

Because this analysis of conditional rates was based on pooling all families,⁸ and because we have already reported a good deal of correlation among family members in expressing particular levels of distinguishing, one might wonder whether Figures 1 and 2 reflect an artifact of the correlations shown in Table 5. Perhaps family members who all expressed low distinguishing throughout their sessions contributed to the apparent mutual suppression of distinguishing, whereas those who did more distinguishing in general contributed to the apparent mutual enhancement of distinguishing. This was not the case. We split the 40 families into two groups, at the median of the sum of father's, mother's, and target's "open distinguishing." Repeating the analysis described above, we got virtually the same results on each of the two subsamples. Members of high-distinguishing families had the same moment-by-moment effect on one another's likelihood of expressing Level 5 as low-distinguishing families had. Members of low-distinguishing families had the same moment-by-moment effect on one another's likelihood of expressing Level 1 or 2 as high-distinguishing families had.

Factors besides group pressure might also produce a tendency toward consensus: for example, any demographic characteristics or events in the family's history that jointly shaped their views on the matter in question. However, the number of adopted children in the family, the number of biological children, the target child's age and position in the sibship, the age at which he or she was told about being

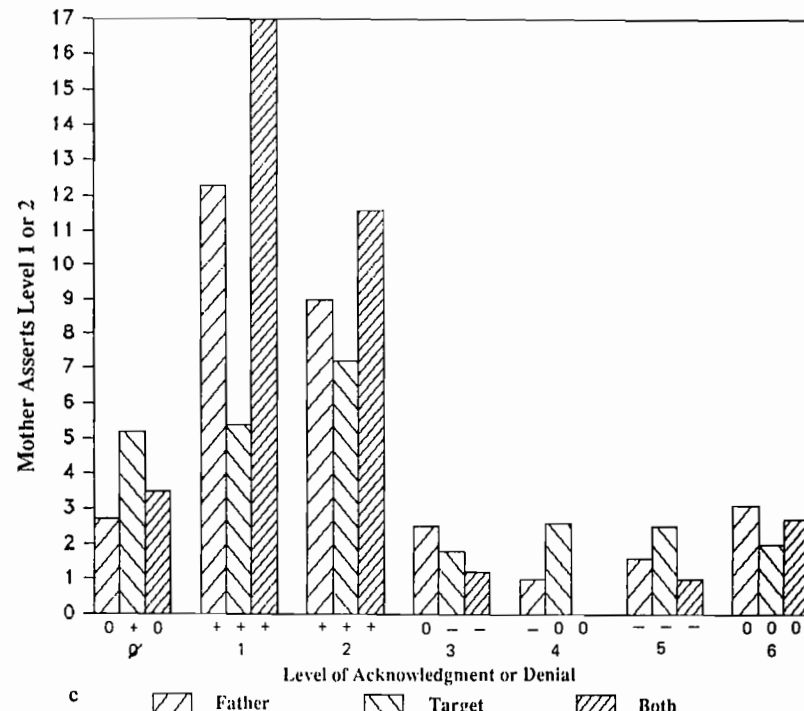
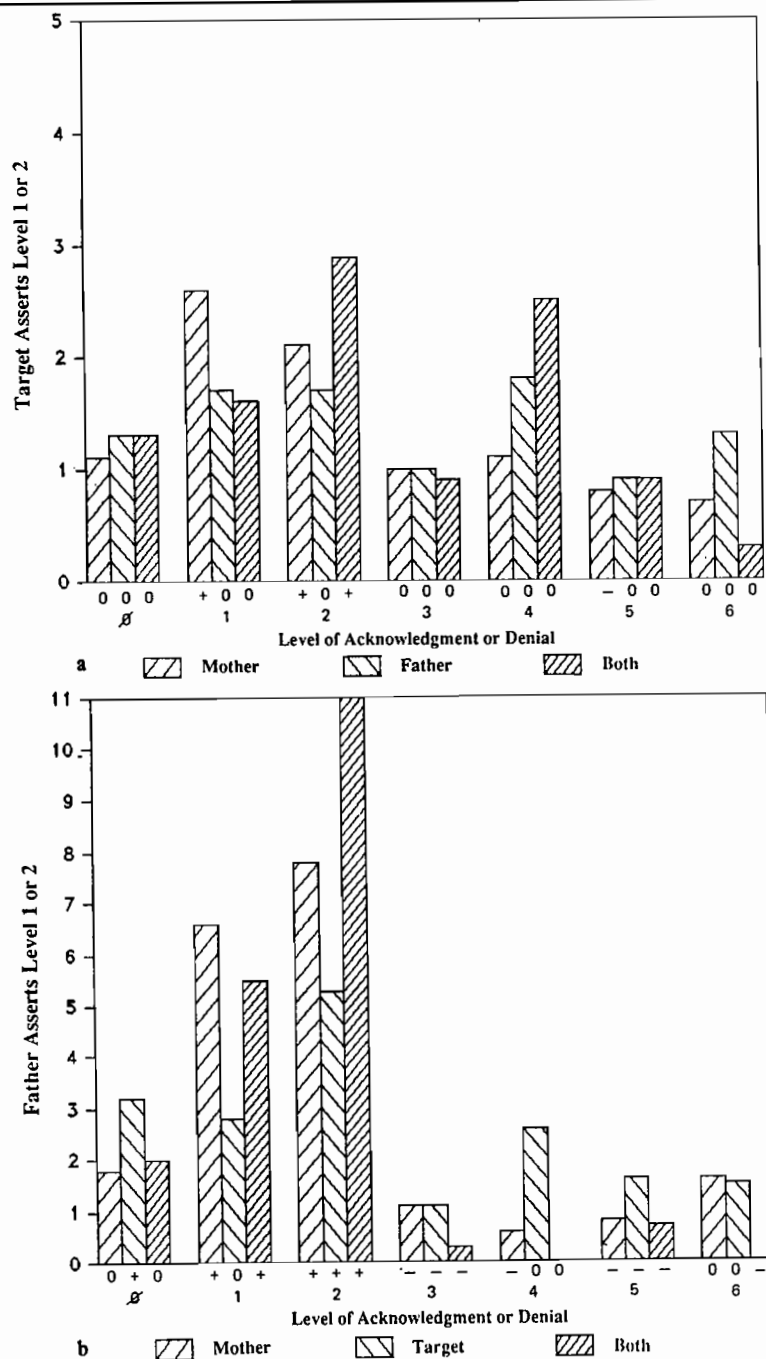


Figure 2 Frequency of (a) target, (b) father, and (c) mother asserting Level 1 or 2 (expressing difficulties or disadvantages about adoption as against what they might have experienced had they been a biological family).

adopted all failed to correlate with father's, mother's, or target's open distinguishing scores. Education did correlate with all three: The better educated the parents, the more all family members mentioned differences or the less they tended to deny them ($r = .35, .31, .36$ for fathers, mothers, and targets, respectively; $p < .05$, two-tailed).

Private Distinguishing, Family Problems, and Self-Esteem

Fathers and mothers differed in a consistent direction on only three of the nine variables drawn from the private interviews. Mothers claimed to know slightly more about their children's biological parents than fathers did (paired $t = 2.3, 39 df, p < .05$). Mothers also acknowledged thinking, wondering, and talking about the original parents more than fathers did ($t = 2.1, p < .05$). And mothers judged the

Figure 2

target children's likelihood of coming to talk to them higher than fathers did ($t = 2.3, p < .05$), which was confirmed by the children ($t = 2.8, p < .01$). The only consistent difference between parents and children was in self-esteem: Mothers and fathers were each a few points higher than their target adolescents ($t = 4.3, p < .001$; $t = 2.8, p < .01$).

Family concordance. The fact that there were few consistent differences between family members does not necessarily mean that they agreed within each family. Table 5 shows a moderate degree of family concordance on whether life had been any harder or easier than it would have been had they all been biologically related, and on their comfort in discussing the topic. In self-esteem, however, there was little or no significant intrafamily concordance. Parents did tend to have similar feelings about the possibility that their children might some day search for the biological parents, but their feelings bore no relation to how the children thought the parents felt, and none to the children's prediction about whether they *would* search. (The latter two variables were, surprisingly, completely uncorrelated.) The bottom line of Table 5 shows that adolescents' self-reported degree of interest in the lost parents was no secret from their adoptive parents.

Problems. The more adopted children in a family, the more family problems ($r = .34, p < .01$). Other variables related to the continuum of problems are listed in Table 6, target's age having been partialled out of the correlations. Target children in "problem" families had lower self-esteem, expressed discomfort in talking about adoption, thought their own and their parents' lives had been more difficult than if they had been biologically related, and more frequently thought about their birth parents. They also expressed such feelings in the family discussion, reflected in the variable open distinguishing. However, they rated themselves as less likely to talk with their mothers about things that worried them.

In addition to considering their family's problems as being more related to adoption, both fathers and mothers in these problem families thought and talked about the child's biological parents more and felt less comfortable talking about adoption. Fathers (but not mothers) thought their children were less likely to come to them with worries (child talks), than did fathers in families with a smoother history.

Self-esteem. The mothers' self-esteem scores correlated with few other measures, and the fathers' scores correlated with none. Consequently, we have no confidence in the validity of this instrument as a

measure of general self-esteem in the parents—at least not when administered after a family discussion of adoption issues. As a measure of *adolescents'* sense of self, the Rosenberg test did appear to have criterion validity in this context, that is, as a measure of the children's state of self-esteem *immediately following a family discussion about adoption*. It was significantly related to seven of the eight variables measuring feelings or opinions in the individual child interviews (Table 6). Every indication of problems in the family—reported problems and therapy, lack of communication, a sense that life had been harder due to the adoption—was a predictor of low self-esteem in the adopted adolescent. More surprisingly, children with low self-esteem had acknowledged more differences and disadvantages in the family discussion. In addition, each parent's frequency of thinking about the biological parents was associated with low self-esteem in the target child (father: $r = .45$; mother, $r = .30$). Adolescents' interest in searching for their biological parents was related to several of the variables associated with problems and with low self-esteem.

Acknowledgment versus rejection of differences. The seven individual variables hypothesized as related to an underlying dimension of high versus low distinguishing did constitute a unitary dimension among the adolescents, as indicated in Table 7. All 21 linear coefficients in the matrix are positive, and 17 of the 21 are significantly so. The variable discomfort was linearly correlated with all six of the others, leading us to conceive of the variable as acknowledging some discomfort with the topic of adoption. (Kirk, 1964, had suggested the opposite, that rejection of differences would lead to discomfort discussing adoption issues.)

Clearly this cluster of acknowledgment variables is no manifestation of a *problem-preventing* strategy, because five of them as measured in the children, and three as measured in both parents, were positively associated with a history of family problems (Table 6). To explore this further, we split the sample into a low-problems group and a high-problems group (using the median, $N = 20$ in each group) and ran the correlation matrix in Table 7 separately for each group. Of the original 21 predicted correlations, 15 were significant among the targets from high-problems families, whereas only 5 of the 21 were significant among targets from low-problems families. Most important, the same five distinguishing variables still correlated significantly with problems even within the high-problems group.

TABLE 6 Variables Related to Problems and Self-Esteem

	Target	Mother	Father
Family problems^a &:			
open distinguishing	.35*		
discomfort	.32*	.40**	.29 ^b
life was harder	.44**		
problems due to adoption	.62***	.31*	.25
think about birth parents	.45**	.41**	.29
I talk with mother	-.31*	NS: talks with me	
I talk with father	NS	talks with me: -.38*	
self-esteem	-.47**		
Self-esteem &:			
open distinguishing	-.37*	.27	
discomfort	-.28		
life was harder	-.58**		
problems due to adoption	-.45**		
think about birth parents	-.42**		
I talk with mother	.50**	.35*: talks with me	
I talk with father	.26	talks with me: NS	
will search	-.39*		

a. Target's age, which correlated positively with *family problems*, was partialled out of these coefficients. Age accounted for little variance in the other variables, and partialling age out did not affect the pattern of correlations; hence the values shown in other tables are all zero-order coefficients.

b. Some $p < .10$ are included in this table to show consistency with corresponding, more significant correlations in other columns.

*.01 < $p < .05$; **.001 < $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (39 *df*, two-tailed).

We conclude that the intercorrelations shown in Table 7 were due primarily to children who had experienced more than the median degree of problems over the years. There was no evidence of variability in openness versus denial, such as might have been inferred either if the distinguishing dimension had emerged regardless of problems or if it had been uncorrelated with problems within the high-problem subsample.

Among the parents (with regard to whom Kirk originally postulated the dimension of acknowledgment versus rejection of differences) the cluster of variables was far from unidimensional. Only 10 of 42 coefficients were significantly correlated (Table 7), and 11 of the nonsignificant ones were in the negative (theoretically wrong) direction. We conclude that these seven variables essentially measure different things, and perhaps not even the same dimensions among mothers as among fathers. There is no underlying dimension of distinguishing in

TABLE 7 Predicted "Acknowledgment" Variables

	Open Dist	Think BP'S	Know BP'S	Problems Due	Life Harder	Discomfort
Child						
will search		.62***			.39**	.48***
discomfort	.52***	.56***	.28*	.54***	.69***	
life was harder	.48***	.53***		.79***		
problems due to adoption	.34*	.51***	.30*			
know about birth parents	.31*	.44**				
think about birth parents	.43**					
Mother						
feel if child searches	.29*		.28*			
discomfort						
life was harder						
problems due to adoption		.35**	.27*			
know about birth parents		.40**				
think about birth parents						
Father						
feel if child searches	.32*					
discomfort	.31*	.47***		.48***		
life was harder						
problems due to adoption		.27*				
know about birth parents						
think about birth parents						

*.01 < $p < .05$; **.001 < $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$ (39 *df*, one-tailed).

general among parents, although there definitely appears to be such a dimension among adolescent adoptees.

Unlike what was true of the children, the pattern of few correlations among those variables was the same for parents in low-problems families as for parents in high-problems families.

Sex differences. Girls and mothers did more "open distinguishing" than their male counterparts (girls > boys, $t = 2.4$, 38 *df*, $p < .02$; mothers > 5.1, 39 *df*, $p < .001$). But no sex differences were found in the various measures of *private* distinguishing: The individual interviews elicited no consistent differences between girls and boys, between mothers and fathers, or between what the parents said about target girls and target boys.

The fact that girls did significantly more distinguishing than boys in the context of family discussions, yet scored no higher on any of the six forms of distinguishing manifested in the private interviews, raises the question whether boys simply speak with less candor in family discussions. If that were the case, boys' "open distinguishing" should

correlate less well with problems and with the private distinguishing variables from their interviews than girls' "open distinguishing" did. This was not the case. The pattern for boys alone, or for girls alone, was not substantially different from what appears in Table 7 for both sexes combined. Therefore, although the sex difference indicates elevated levels of open distinguishing by the girls, variability among the boys was related to family problems and to private acknowledgment of differences in the same way as among girls.

Mixed versus all-adopted families. One-third of the families in this sample had biological children. The number of biological children (0, 1, or 2) was not systematically correlated with any other variables.

DISCUSSION

Our conclusion runs counter to the widely held hypothesis about adoptees' denial and suppression of ambivalent feelings, implied by the phrase "rejection of differences" (Kirk, 1964). We contend that when adolescent adoptees deny having many feelings of difference or disadvantage about adoption, they may simply be telling the truth. Acknowledging differences, on the other hand, does appear to be a coping strategy for the adolescent adoptee whose family has experienced many problems over the years. All adoptees, to be sure, experience fundamental differences in their ability to conceptualize themselves in relation to significant others, some of whom have vanished without a solid trace. Many experience occasional hurts and embarrassments caused by a social stigma and other people's cruelty. But the form that acknowledgment takes in some adolescents, extending so far as to blame most of their family's problems on this one aspect of themselves—being adopted—is excessive. The association we found between a history of problems and an interest in the birth parents reflects an overemphasis on that aspect. It would seem more reasonable to describe such interest in the birth parents as a strategy for coping with the personal meaning of those problems than to assume the opposite, that other adolescents' lack of interest in the birth parents is a matter of denial.

Adopted adolescents' open distinguishing—defined here as telling their parents that they believe their lives have been harder in some ways or that their feelings about self and parents might be different from those of biological children—turned out to be consistent with what the children said privately and was more strongly predicted by a reliable checklist report of problems over the years than by the contextual pressure to agree.

In airing feelings about their nonstandard origins, parents and adolescents in adoptive families tend toward consensus of two kinds. First, the levels of distinguishing (relative to their counterparts in other families) by fathers, mothers, and adolescents in a family discussion correlate with one another. Second, the three family members can be seen influencing one another toward consensus, in that the likelihood of high or low distinguishing depends upon what the other speakers have most recently said. However, the moment-to-moment influence of parents upon adolescents was no greater than that of adolescents upon parents.

Clinical Applications

None of these results should be generalized to late, transracial, foreign, special-needs, stepparent, single-parent, or biological-relative adoptions. Despite recent increases in those types of families, an infertile couple adopting a newborn of the same race remains the most common situation, and the one in which the issue of emphasizing or downplaying the adoption most directly arises. (The other situations present intrinsic reminders that the child's biological roots are different.)

In the population we studied (closed adoptions of healthy white newborns by parents who remain married at least into the children's teens), the low-distinguishing parents almost completely denied being or feeling different; their adolescent children also almost completely denied such differences. But even in the relatively high-distinguishing or acknowledging families, our questions elicited mostly replies of no difference or no important differences. Acknowledgments of differences and disadvantages, though freely expressed, were outnumbered by assurances about nondifferences. (This occurred despite the recruitment bias toward "acknowledgers.") It is important for professionals serving adoptive families to recognize that a sprinkling of acknowledgments amid many assurances is probably healthy and accurate, rather than to label all such assurances as rejection of differences in a pathological sense (Kaye, 1988). In fact, it might be the case that adopted children can suffer from too much distinguishing as well as from too little.

We found no evidence whatsoever that parents' acknowledgment versus rejection of differences represents a unidimensional, pervasive coping strategy. To a far greater extent than adolescents, parents were able to isolate particular problems or disadvantages without generalizing to their lives as a whole or to their self-worth. For example, some parents managed to attribute family problems largely to the adoption

while at the same time denying that their lives or their children's had been harder in any way than the life of a biological family. Perhaps the ability to make such distinctions may be, indeed, a coping strategy. If so, it is one their adolescents did not have available to them, either because they had not yet learned it or because they were the persons most centrally involved.

In any case, it can no longer be held that denial of differences leads to problems. The more problems they had had, the *more* the parents attributed those problems to adoption and the *more* they thought about the birth parents. Without longitudinal research, we cannot assess the continuity of these variables over the years, let alone say which causes which. But if acknowledgers were engaged in an effective long-term problem-preventing strategy of working through their grief over infertility, they should have experienced fewer problems, not more than the "deniers" did.

The Adopted Adolescent's Self-Esteem

The Rosenberg (1979) Self-Esteem Scales constitute a valid instrument when administered in an emotionally neutral setting. In the present study, however, these scores may have been affected by the immediately preceding family discussions. We regard the self-esteem we measured as a state rather than a trait: The same children may have had higher or lower self-esteem in other situations.

A problem in interpreting our data is the possibility that a good self-esteem score in this context may be an adaptive manifestation of denial. That would explain the fact that higher self-esteem adolescents essentially said their lives had been no different from those of biological families; they maintained this privately as well as in the family discussion. But we believe that at least one variable related to self-esteem, problems, was a valid index of the family's history rather than a selective report of problems actually experienced by all adoptive families. If we are correct that a child's not feeling very different is an accurate report of having experienced few family problems (rather than a form of denial), then the same children's relatively positive self-esteem is probably also a true reflection, not a denial of hidden doubts about themselves. This still leaves a question we cannot answer about the adolescents with low self-esteem: Does the belief that their adoptive status caused the family problems lower their self-esteem, or do less self-assured adolescents tend to err in the direction of exaggerating the causal significance of their adoption in every family problem that arises?

Parental Frames and the Adolescent Adoptee

We know what powerful socialization tools parental frames are in early childhood (Kaye, 1982); yet we did not find the hypothesized parental frames in this domain and at this stage of parent-child interaction. By adolescence, we find family members framing one another symmetrically as they discuss the emotionally significant topic of adoption. Family systems naturally exert pressure on younger members to confirm the consensus being formed by their elders. On the other hand, it is in the nature of adolescents to question their parents' attitudes. Furthermore, parents of adolescents have a motive to join with them rather than to dispute every independent thought—the more so if they fear the children may break ranks radically. Adoptive parents have special fears of that kind (Sorosky et al., 1978).

It would be valuable to replicate the study with families whose children are younger.⁹ We would expect less symmetry than was found in our data. The moment-to-moment influences of parents' assertions upon 6-, 9-, or even 12-year-old children would be more apparent, we predict, than the influences of children's assertions upon parents'. Furthermore, a developmental perspective such as that of Brodzinsky, Singer, and Braff (1984) suggests that sensitive parents would clarify their family histories in different ways and emphasize different aspects as their children mature. The strategy of de-emphasizing differences may even serve a positive function in the early years, provided that the parents foster expression of feelings that arise over time, and provided they are not frightened by their adolescents' normal issues of distinguishing and autonomy. Longitudinal research on discourse processes in adoptive (and other) families is clearly needed.

NOTES

1. Interviewing each member first and then confronting the family with their differences of opinion (Strodtbeck, 1954) would have negated the confidentiality of each person's individual interviews.
2. All agreement coefficients are for the r_{beta} reliability of sequential coded events (Kaye, 1980).
3. The definitions given in this article are necessarily adumbrated; a lengthy coding manual is available.
4. Interview protocol and data reduction formulas are available.
5. For example, microanalysis shows children take a smaller share of speaking turns when the topic is adoption related than when discussing general family activities (Question

1); fathers and mothers interrupt one another more than twice as much; and children interrupt parents more than when the topic is adoption related.

6. The index of distinguishing was defined as $3a + 2b + c - d - 2e - 3f$, where a through f are the individual's proportions of Levels 1 through 6, relative to the total number of times that individual's utterances received a level code.

7. Question 1 is excluded from this analysis.

8. This analysis meets the assumption of the chi-square test because nearly all the families contributed to every cell, and the number of events under each condition is much larger than the number contributed by any one family.

9. It would also be valuable to counterbalance the order of the family and individual interviews. We chose the order that was more comfortable for the subjects; but did the discussions establish a "set" for the individual interviews? This would be a greater concern if we had not found such independence between the adolescents' views and their parents'.

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