ABSTRACT. We explored factors that influence parental involvement in adoption dialogues in 66 internationally adoptive, heterosexual couples with 4- to 7-year old children. Correlates of adoption involvement varied by parent sex. Mothers were more involved in talking about adoption than fathers, but adoption involvement was also correlated within couples. Emphasis on the difference between biological versus adoptive parenting, quality of the marital relationship, and child characteristics were differentially associated with maternal and paternal involvement. Findings suggest an intricate interplay between the marital and co-parental dynamics that shape the early communication process within adoptive families.
INTRODUCTION

For more than 40 years, adoption researchers have been calling for a more refined analysis of the process by which adoptive families address the topic of adoption, moving beyond the “what” and “when” of adoption disclosure to the “how” and “why” of family conversations as they unfold across childhood (Brodzinsky, 2005). Despite long controversy over how the topic of adoption should be handled in early childhood, there is still little research on how this process unfolds in families. The focus of this study is the identification of factors that influence how internationally adoptive couples engage in these early conversations with their child and how their beliefs about adoption and characteristics of their marriage impact that undertaking.

Adoptive parents shape this narrative-building process that is so important to their child’s adjustment, identity, and sense of belonging (Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2003). Longitudinal findings in domestically adoptive families have demonstrated that greater access to details and disclosure of the adoption facilitates (1) parents’ ability to handle the topic confidently, securely, and coherently with their children and (2) successful integration of adoption into children’s identity and relationships by adolescence (Wrobel, Van Korff, Grotevant, & McRoy, 2005). In international adoptions, disclosure of the identity of birth parents is rare and confidential adoptions are most common, yet internationally adoptive parents make myriad choices about how extensively they discuss the adoption story and birth country or share whatever birth parent or early caregiver information they have with their child. Differences in physical appearance in transracial adoptions provide a frequent reminder of the absence of a biological connection, which can be acknowledged or avoided. Styles of adoption communication in internationally adoptive families may be a significant protective factor in adoption outcomes (Juffer & van IJzendoorn, 2005; McGuinness & Pallansch, 2000).

Marital and Co-parenting Partnerships in Adoptive Families

In the current study, we focus on the adoptive family microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1992), which is composed of four interacting subsystems:
the spousal subsystem and characteristics of the relationship between intimate partners; the co-parenting subsystem and the way two parents collaborate to address parenting issues; and the two parent-child subsystems that are influenced by the individual characteristics and perspectives of each parent and a specific child (Schoppe, Mangelsdorf, & Frosch, 2001). The link between marital relationship quality, effective parenting, and successful child outcomes has been well established (Belsky, Rovine, & Fish, 1989) and makes the interdependence of marital and co-parenting subsystems in the adoptive family an intriguing prospect in attempting to identify familial protective factors.

Although the potential for infertility to result in unresolved losses that create liabilities after adoption has predominated in the literature, a variety of studies have suggested that individuals and couples may be strengthened by these experiences (Ceballo, Lansford, Abbey, & Stewart, 2004; Golombok, Cook, Bish, & Murray, 1995). The collaborative problem solving, decision making, and arduous requirements and logistics necessary for an adoption may build a greater tolerance for conflict and a sturdier sense of unity (Leon, 2002). Achieving parenthood in some nontraditional way (e.g., adoption, assisted reproductive techniques) has been associated with increased parental engagement (Harris & Ryan, 2004), lower parenting stress (Golombok et al., 1995), and a more equal balance between father-child and mother-child interaction (Holditch-Davis, Sandelowski, & Glenn Harris, 1999). International adoption, in particular, was found to accentuate the positive co-parenting partnership, promote attentive parenting, and increase feelings of family cohesion and a positive view of adoption (Levy-Shiff, Zoran, & Shulman, 1997). Differences between domestic and international parents in problem-focused and support-seeking coping were more pronounced for fathers, favoring the internationally adoptive.

**Roles of Mothers and Fathers in Adoption Communication**

Sex differences have been noted in parental patterns of communication about adoption. Wrobel et al. (2003) have described mothers as “communication brokers” consistently communicating with their children about adoption regardless of the level of openness in their adoptive situation and regardless of child characteristics. Fathers have been found to be more involved when children were younger and more curious about their adoption and in particular when the (domestically) adoptive situation was more fully disclosed, presumably because the birth mother’s salience becomes a prompt for fathers to communicate about adoption. Gendered dynamics
in framing the family adoption dialogue might be especially salient during the preschool years, as patterns are set within the family for who talks with whom about what (Freeark et al., 2005). We explore mothers’ and fathers’ reported engagement specifically in adoption communication with their young children and the correlates of their respective levels.

**PARENT AND CHILD CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE ADOPTION DIALOGUE**

*Parental Cognitions About Adoption*

Adoptive parents’ beliefs about differences and similarities between adoptive and biological families have been of interest since Kirk (1964) originally observed the potential influence of acknowledgement of difference (AD) versus rejection of difference (RD) on family interaction. Kirk found AD parents to be more satisfied in their role as adoptive parents, think more about the birth parents, and communicate more openly and be more empathic toward their child’s feelings. Empirical findings on this difference have been limited and mixed and have prompted consideration of a developmental, family life cycle perspective on the optimal parental stance on difference (Brodzinsky, Smith, & Brodzinsky, 1998). While parents of infants and toddlers might reject difference in the service of establishing family unity, if they continue to disavow difference as their children grow older and more curious about adoption, an RD stance might impede open and honest parent-child communication.

*Child Contributions to Adoption Communication*

While early adoption conversations may be framed by the parents, discussion may quickly evolve in directions guided by the child’s reactions and responses (Wrobel et al., 2003). The child’s responsiveness and ability to articulate reactions and questions in reply to the parent’s statements shape the co-construction of the adoption story in terms of its content and emotional tone. We investigate the relationship between child characteristics—age, verbal ability, and sex—and the extent of parental engagement in the unfolding dialogue. Age is relevant because adoption understanding grows according to a systematic progression that parallels general cognitive development and determines the type of questions and comments that children may have in the course of early conversations.
The child’s verbal expressiveness affects the type of feedback parents receive. Children who are able to articulate questions and concerns in words communicate in a way that facilitates parental understanding of the child’s grasp of the information and reactions to it. Less verbal children may be harder for parents to read. When parents have an understanding of the child’s emotional experience and cognitive understanding, they may meet the child’s needs more confidently and successfully. Given that the expression of curiosity depends on verbalization, language ability may play a key role in father-child engagement around adoption.

We consider child sex because early parent-child conversations about adoption may play to a number of areas of strength for young girls more so than for young boys (Freeark et al., 2005). Girls develop mastery in several areas of language ability earlier, verbalize more, and provide more information when talking about a shared past event. Parents elaborate more in their narratives with daughters than they do with sons (Reese & Fivush, 1993). Girls are better at recognizing, communicating, and reconciling conflicting emotions (Brown & Dunn, 1996), and they also show more frequent and sophisticated mental-state talk (Hughes & Dunn, 1998). Wrobel et al. (1996) provided evidence that children’s reactions and the family climate around sharing of adoption information might differ for families of girls and boys. The goal of our study is to investigate differences in mothers’ versus fathers’ involvement in adoption conversations as well as the parental, marital, and child characteristics associated with higher levels of adoption dialogue involvement. We hypothesize the following:

1. There will be a sex difference in parental involvement levels whereby mothers are more involved in the adoption dialogue process than their husbands.
2. Parental cognitions about adoption, namely the acknowledgement of difference between adoptive and biological family experiences, will be associated with higher levels of involvement in the adoption dialogue.
3. Given links between marital satisfaction and father involvement reported in the family literature (Volling & Belsky, 1991), we hypothesize that more satisfied husbands and wives will take part in conjointly approaching discussion of the adoption story, rather than leaving it solely under the purview of the mother. Marital satisfaction will be associated with higher levels of parental involvement in the adoption dialogue.
4. Child characteristics, particularly age, sex, and verbal abilities, will play a role in determining the level of parental adoption involvement. Parents of girls and of more verbally expressive children of either sex will be more engaged in adoption communication. Mothers will be more involved regardless of child age, and fathers will be more involved with children in the upper end of our age range of 4 to 7 years.

**METHODS**

**Sample**

Participants were 66 heterosexual couples with internationally adopted children aged between 4 and 7 years and placed as infants. Eighty families were recruited into the larger project, but only 67 were two-parent heterosexual couples meeting demographic criteria (i.e., adopted before 1 year of age with no significant developmental delays). Inspection of variable score distributions showed that one mother’s scores varied as much as 3 to 9 standard deviations from group means. This outlier family was excluded from the analyses.

The mean age of mothers was 42 (SD = 5.4) years and of fathers was 43 (SD = 6.7) years. The children included 31 girls and 35 boys; mean age at assessment was 5.5 years (SD = 1.2 months). Eighty percent of the families had adopted transracially, with 57% of children born in Asia, 21% in Latin America, 19% in Russia and Eastern Europe, and 3% born in India. Ninety-six percent of the parents were Caucasian. The sample was middle- to upper-middle class. Eighty percent of both mothers and fathers had at least a 4-year college degree. Total household income for participating families ranged from $30,000 to more than $200,000 annually (median income category = $80,000–$90,000).

**Data Collection and Procedures**

The study used a convenience sample recruited through flyers and announcements targeting adoption agencies and workshops, adoptive family groups, newspaper advertisements, and referrals from participating families. After determining eligibility, interested families were mailed a packet of questionnaires and an informed consent document and asked to complete them individually. Families were scheduled for a 2-hour laboratory assessment; parents were interviewed together, while the target child
was interviewed separately. Parent interviews were conducted by trained graduate students. Analyses are based on parent self-report measures and interview data and child verbal fluency assessments.

**Measures**

**Parental Adoption Involvement**

Adoption involvement was scored from parent responses to questions in the Couple’s Adoption Interview (Rosenblum & Freeark, 2000), a semi-structured, open-ended interview (averaging 45 minutes long) that asks parents to describe past dialogues with the child about adoption; parents’ beliefs about their child’s understanding of adoption; parents’ goals for their child’s understanding; and specific examples of interactions with their child regarding adoption. Questions included “What are your thoughts on the best way for an adoptive family to handle the subject of adoption with young children?” and “Can you tell me what you remember about the way the earliest conversation(s) [about adoption] came up and what was said?” Each interview was videotaped and coded from the videotapes by two trained research assistants using a detailed coding system focused on the content of the parents’ responses to each question. The coding system was narrowed down to those items that provided the best reflection of both mothers’ and fathers’ views and approaches to adoption conversations. Each parent was assigned a score of 0, 0.5, or 1 for each of the 6 items (1 indicated the highest level of active engagement in addressing the topic with their child). Two of the questions (italicized), with sample answers for high (=1) and low (=0) scores, follow:

“How actively should the topic be addressed?” 1 point: “I try to drop little pebbles [about adoption] into the conversation that don’t have to go anywhere. And sometimes she wants to talk about them and sometimes she doesn’t, but I sort of issue little opportunities or invitations to see if she’s interested.” 0 points: “If it’s pushed too far it’s my feeling that it begins to sound like it’s strange. . . . From time to time it comes up.”

“Who do you think should take the lead?” 1 point: “I’m pleased with the way we’ve done it. We keep telling the story from very early on with picture books and stories. We take the prompt from her questions. We’re honest and straightforward and don’t tell her more than she needs to know.” 0 points: “We try not to make a huge point of it; it’s just a fact of life. We never wanted it to be a surprise to him. We don’t go out of our way to say ‘adoption.’”
Interrater reliability was established in 40% of the interviews (32 of the total sample of 80 families); two independent raters established greater than 80% agreement for each item. Scoring discrepancies were resolved by review of the tape and either consensus by coders or a final decision by one of the senior authors. After establishing initial reliability, periodic double coding was conducted to minimize rater drift. An adoption involvement score, summed across all items, was computed separately for each parent. Internal consistency values (Cronbach’s alpha) for maternal and paternal adoption involvement scores are included in Table 1.

**Child Characteristics**

We considered three child characteristics: age (in months), sex, and verbal fluency. Standard scores from the Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT) (3rd edition) (Brownell, 2000) reflected verbal fluency. This age-normed referenced measure (mean = 100, SD = 15) is well standardized and assesses language expression in children aged 2 to 12 years; strong evidence of reliability and validity is outlined in the manual. Scores ranged from 65 to 145, with a median score of 106.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
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<td>Adoption Beliefs Scale</td>
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<td>Parenting subscale</td>
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<td>Family subscale</td>
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<td>Intimate Relations Scale</td>
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<td>Maintenance</td>
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<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td>.57</td>
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<td>Conflict</td>
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</table>
Parent Characteristics

We considered two parent characteristics that might influence adoption involvement: adoption beliefs and marital satisfaction. Self-report data from mothers and fathers were used to assess both.

The Adoption Beliefs Scale (Talen, Pinderhughes, Groze, Swartzman, & Chen, 1996) measured perception of differences between biological and adoptive family experiences. It includes 35 items assessing parents’ views about their child’s functioning (e.g., “My adopted child feels just as secure as a non-adopted child”), family functioning (e.g., “Our adoptive family copes with problems better than non-adoptive families”), and parenting experiences (e.g., “My adopted child needs ‘special parenting’”) as compared with those of biological families. A 5-point scale ranges from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5). Alphas for each subscale for maternal and paternal reports are included in Table 1. Talen et al. (1996) reported adequate internal consistency for three subscales (.82–.88) and found scores to vary in relation to characteristics of the adopted child, type of adoption, and parents’ adoption satisfaction.

The Intimate Relations Scale (Braiker & Kelly, 1979) assessed the quality of the marital relationship. The measure consists of 24 items and is designed to assess four aspects of close relationships: maintenance, love, conflict, and ambivalence. A 9-point scale ranges from “not at all” (1) to “very much” (9), indicating the degree to which each item describes the respondent’s experience of his or her marriage. The measure yields 4 factors and a total positive intimate relationship score. The Maintenance subscale assesses the individual’s efforts to maximize rewards and reduce costs encountered in the relationship (e.g., “How much time do you and your partner spend discussing and trying to work out problems between you?”). Love measures the degree of interdependence (closeness, attachment) an individual feels toward his or her spouse (e.g., “To what extent do you have a sense of ‘belonging’ with your partner?”). Conflict taps disagreement (e.g., “How often do you feel angry or resentful toward your partner?”), and Ambivalence reflects the respondent’s uncertainty about their investment in the relationship (e.g., “How confused are you about your feelings toward your partner?”). Internal consistency values for each subscale are included in Table 1. Previous research has demonstrated adequate internal consistency (.61–.92), test-retest reliability, and external validity of the measure (Porter, Wouden-Miller, Silva, & Porter, 2003).
**Data Analysis Plan**

We utilized paired-sample *t*-tests to identify mean level differences between mothers and fathers in adoption beliefs, marital satisfaction, and adoption dialogue involvement. Correlational analyses were employed to examine bivariate associations between maternal and paternal measures. Hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted to examine the contribution of child and parent characteristics to parental involvement in adoption conversations; regression analyses were conducted separately for maternal and paternal involvement.

**RESULTS**

**Differences in Mothers’ and Fathers’ Involvement, Adoption Beliefs, and Marital Satisfaction**

As predicted, mothers were significantly more involved in adoption dialogues than fathers. However, couples’ respective levels of involvement were significantly correlated (*r* = .55; *P* < .001) (Table 2). There were no significant differences in mothers’ and fathers’ adoption beliefs scores; neither sex placed greater or lesser emphasis on differences between the experiences of adoptive families and those of biological families. Mothers’ and fathers’ adoption beliefs were significantly intercorrelated, with the exception of the Family Scale. Maternal adoption beliefs, particularly the Parenting subscale, were associated with maternal adoption involvement; fathers’ adoption beliefs were unrelated to adoption involvement.

As shown in Table 2, there were significant differences with regard to marital satisfaction. Mothers reported higher levels of maintenance and love in their marriages and had higher overall positive intimate relationship scores than fathers (7.46 vs. 7.15; *t* = −4.24; *P* < .001). Fathers reported higher levels of ambivalence about their marital relationships, but there was no difference between mothers’ and fathers’ reports of conflict. Mothers’ and fathers’ reports of the quality of the marriage were also highly intercorrelated. For mothers, two dimensions of marital quality were related to their adoption involvement: love was positively related and ambivalence was negatively related. For fathers, two different dimensions of marital quality were related to adoption involvement: maintenance positively and ambivalence negatively.
### Table 2: Means (SDs) and Correlations Between Adoption Involvement, Child Age, Verbal Fluency (EOWPVT), Intimate Relations Scale (IRS), and Adoption Beliefs Scale (ABS)

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<th>9</th>
<th>10</th>
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<tr>
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<td>.55&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>−.27&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>−.19</td>
<td>.24</td>
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<td>−.26</td>
<td>−.35&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>2. Child age</td>
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<td>−.08</td>
<td>−.20</td>
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<td>.35&lt;sup&gt;b&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>−.16</td>
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<td>−.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>4. ABS-child</td>
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<td>−.22</td>
<td>.43&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.82&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.69&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>−.21</td>
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<td>−.14</td>
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<td>.25&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>6. ABS-family</td>
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<td>−.15</td>
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<td>.68&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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<td>−.09</td>
<td>.01</td>
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<td>.48&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>.53&lt;sup&gt;c&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
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Mother, mean (SD): 3.78 (1.35)  2.06 (.74)  2.40 (.96)  1.97 (.56)  6.42 (1.23)  8.34 (.58)  3.90 (1.18)  1.70 (.74)

Father, mean (SD): 3.05<sup>b</sup> (1.66)  2.05 (.70)  2.46 (.79)  2.02 (.59)  6.00<sup>a</sup> (1.23)  7.96<sup>a</sup> (1.90)  3.84 (1.13)  2.18<sup>b</sup> (1.06)

EOWPVT indicates Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test. Note: Mothers r (above diagonal), fathers r (below diagonal), and mother/father correlations (on diagonal).  <sup>a</sup><i>P ≤ .05</i>;  <sup>b</sup><i>P ≤ .01</i>;  <sup>c</sup><i>P ≤ .001</i> (n = 60 or 61);  <sup>d</sup><i>P level of mother/father difference (t-test). </i>
Associations Between Child Characteristics and Parental Adoption Involvement

Correlations between child age and verbal fluency (EOWPVT) and both maternal and paternal adoption involvement are presented in Table 2. Child sex was not significantly correlated with any variables for either parent (so it is not included in Table 2). Child age was negatively correlated with maternal adoption involvement, indicating that mothers were more involved in adoption dialogues with younger children. Child verbal fluency was positively related to paternal adoption involvement, indicating that fathers were more involved in adoption dialogues with more verbal children.

Explaining the Variance in Parental Adoption Involvement: Relative Contributions of Child and Parent Characteristics

To determine the degree to which parental characteristics contributed to involvement beyond the contribution of child characteristics, we conducted a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses. Child factors were entered at the first step, then parental adoption beliefs (for mothers only), then marital relationship factors, and finally the interaction between child and marital factors. For both mothers and fathers, two subscales of the intimate relations scale were significantly correlated with adoption involvement. Because these subscales were highly intercorrelated, and in order to eliminate any potential for multicollinearity across these scales, regressions were computed separately for each subscale as a predictor. We examined both the distribution of the dependent variables and the distribution of residuals in each model to establish that they were normally distributed and therefore did not violate any of the assumptions of multiple regression.

Table 3 reports results of these two regression analyses for mothers: Model A examined mothers’ reports of marital love, and Model B examined mothers’ reports of marital ambivalence. The regression tables provide standardized beta coefficients at each step, with $R^2$ change indicated in the bottom row as new variables are entered into the model at each new step. With all predictors entered (step 4), both models were significant ($R^2 = .27$ and $R^2 = .28$ for love and ambivalence, respectively). However, only maternal adoption beliefs made a significant independent contribution to maternal adoption involvement; neither of the marital variables, nor their interactions with child age, added to the variance explained in either model.
TABLE 3. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis Predicting Maternal Adoption Involvement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Model A Predictors: Child Age and Mother’s Adoption Beliefs and Report of Marital Love</th>
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<tr>
<td>3 Love</td>
<td>.33*</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 Interactions Age X love</td>
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<td>$R^2$</td>
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<td>.23**</td>
<td>.27**</td>
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<td>$R^2\Delta$</td>
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<th>Model B Predictors: Child Age and Mother’s Adoption Beliefs and Report of Marital Ambivalence</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2\Delta$</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.14**</td>
<td>.02</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Standardized beta coefficients reported in table. *$P \leq .05$; **$P \leq .01$.

Table 4 contains results of the two regressions computed for fathers: Model C examined maintenance of the marriage, and Model D examined ambivalence about the marriage. With all predictors entered, both models were significant ($R^2 = .35$ [maintenance] and $R^2 = .21$ [ambivalence]). In contrast to the results for mothers, each step of the model contributed significantly to the variance in fathers’ adoption involvement, indicating that child verbal fluency, fathers’ perceptions of the marital relationship (both of maintenance and ambivalence), and their interactions each contributed unique variance to adoption involvement.

Our next set of analyses aimed to clarify the nature of the significant interactions between child verbal fluency and fathers’ perceptions of the marital relationship in predicting fathers’ adoption involvement. Children were divided into two groups based on a median split of EOWPVT scores, 65–106 and 107–145 (sample median = 106). Correlations between relevant marital subscales and adoption involvement were run separately for each group (Figure 1). For the lower child fluency group, fathers higher on
TABLE 4. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses Predicting Paternal Adoption Involvement

Model C Predictors: Child Verbal Fluency and Father’s Report of Marital Maintenance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child verbal fluency</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.28*</td>
<td>2.41***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Maintenance</td>
<td></td>
<td>.31*</td>
<td>3.21***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal fluency X maintenance</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−3.48***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.16*</td>
<td>.35***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2 \Delta$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.09*</td>
<td>.19**</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Model D Predictors: Child Verbal Fluency and Father’s Report of Marital Ambivalence

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Step</th>
<th>Predictor</th>
<th>Step 1</th>
<th>Step 2</th>
<th>Step 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Child verbal fluency</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>.81**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ambivalence</td>
<td></td>
<td>.26*</td>
<td>1.68*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Interactions</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Verbal fluency X ambivalence</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>−1.94*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2$</td>
<td></td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.13*</td>
<td>.21**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$R^2 \Delta$</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>.06*</td>
<td>.08*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Standardized beta coefficients reported in table. *$P \leq .05$; **$P \leq .01$; ***$P \leq .001$.

maintenance of their marriages were more involved in talking with their children about adoption ($r = .47; P \leq .01$); for the higher child fluency group, the correlation between maintenance and involvement was not significant ($r = .16; \text{ns}$). For the higher child fluency group, fathers who were less ambivalent about their marriage were more involved in adoption conversations ($r = −.46; P \leq .01$); for the lower child fluency group, the same correlation was not significant ($r = −.20, \text{ns}$).

**DISCUSSION**

The findings extend prior knowledge on adoptive family communication (Wrobel et al., 2003) and patterns of co-parenting (Holditch-Davis et al., 1999; Levy-Shiff et al., 1997) to an internationally adoptive sample. The results shed light on overlapping family subsystems—marital, co-parenting, and mother-child and father-child dyads—that interrelate to
FIGURE 1. Interactions Between Fathers’ Reports of Marital Intimacy (Maintenance and Ambivalence) and Child Verbal Fluency (Expressive One-Word Picture Vocabulary Test [EOWPVT]) in Relation to Paternal Adoption Involvement

![Graph showing interactions between fathers' reports of marital intimacy and child verbal fluency.]

influence parental engagement in discussions of adoption. They provide a broader familial context for understanding the interplay of forces that impact the way families develop and share adoption conversations. We focus on these subsystem findings separately before discussing their implications for family functioning and adoption practice with young adoptive families.

The Experiences of Women in Parenting and Marriage

The finding that mothers were more involved in adoption communication than fathers is consistent with general findings of higher levels of maternal involvement in children’s lives (Harris & Ryan, 2004) and with the report of Wrobel et al. (1998) that (domestically) adoptive mothers communicated more actively about adoption across all child ages and across the openness spectrum. Research in family emotion communication has consistently found that women do the bulk of the emotion work in families, meeting the needs of their children and spouses (Fitness & Duffield, 2004). Women are generally more emotionally expressive (Rauer & Volling, 2005), better than men at decoding emotions (Noller & Ruzzene, 1991), and more tolerant of feelings of sadness and vulnerability (Brody, 1999); these inclinations
may predispose mothers to pick up on and respond to cues that adoption is on the young child’s mind.

Our second hypothesis regarding an association between parental adoption beliefs and level of adoption involvement was supported only for mothers. Mothers who had stronger beliefs that the task of adoptive parenting differs from biological parenting were also more engaged in addressing the topic of adoption with their children. This association may be understood in two ways: Mothers who have this cognitive set may make a point of addressing the topic more actively. Alternatively, mothers who have been more involved in talking with their young children may become sensitized to the unique opportunities and challenges in scaffolding the child’s construction of his or her life story and in the process come to recognize that there are unique tasks in adoptive parenting. Because this finding is correlational and based on data collected contemporaneously, the direction of this effect cannot be determined. Our prediction that adoption beliefs and adoption involvement would be related for fathers was not confirmed.

Our third hypothesis, regarding the relationship between marital satisfaction and adoption involvement, was partially supported. Women’s feelings of love toward their husbands were positively related to their level of adoption involvement, while ambivalence about the relationship was negatively related. This suggests that a strong marital connection and venturing into discussion of adoption with children might go hand in hand. It seems likely that women who feel they have an engaged partner with whom to share feelings and decisions about the evolving dialogue would more willingly venture into the topic with their child. The relationship between child age and mothers’ adoption involvement indicates that mothers are more involved in helping to shape the adoption dialogue when children are younger. The significant positive association between wives’ and husbands’ adoption involvement suggests that couples either engage collaboratively in this undertaking or neither approaches it very actively.

For women, marital ambivalence was also positively associated with placing a greater emphasis on differences between adoptive and biological family experiences. A woman who acknowledges more ambivalence about her marriage is more likely to perceive her child, family, and parental role as differing from those of non-adoptive families. We have no way of knowing whether a wife’s ambivalence about her marriage might become projected onto adoption issues or, conversely, whether a woman’s perception that her family’s experience diverges from that of “traditional” families compromises her assessment of her marriage. A third, and less pathologizing, explanation might be that for a woman to acknowledge more ambivalence
(as men did more routinely) reflects a willingness to offer a more nuanced and balanced assessment of the relationship and perhaps of the adoptive experience as well. The interesting questions of interpretation and direction of effects remain for future investigations to address.

**The Experience of Men in Parenting and Marriage**

In partial support of our fourth hypothesis, fathers’ adoption involvement was associated with children’s verbal expressiveness, but not their age. Fathers were more likely to actively address adoption when they had children who were more verbally capable of putting their thoughts into words. While mothers may view it as their job to launch the adoption dialogue even before children are verbally sophisticated, fathers may be more likely to enter into the already established conversation when their child becomes more articulate; more verbal children may be better able to convey curiosity and their grasp of information, thus engaging their fathers.

Fathers’ acknowledgement of difference was similar to that of mothers, yet contrary to prediction, adoption beliefs were not related to paternal adoption involvement. Adoptive fathers may be spared some of the adoption-related pressures that mothers experience (Smith, Surrey, & Watkins, 1998), but they may also be overlooked and marginalized (Freeark et al., 2005).

Men who were high maintainers of their marriage were also more involved in communicating with their children about adoption. Interactions between children’s verbal fluency and marital satisfaction revealed that even with less verbal children, husbands who are high maintainers are more communicative with their children about adoption; these fathers seem to be proactively involved in family relationships in general. Conversely, the more ambivalent the husband, the less communicative about adoption, even with children who have the verbal skills needed to engage in an active dialogue on the subject.

**Child Contributions**

As predicted, child age and verbal expressiveness were factors in parental levels of adoption involvement, but it was different for mothers and fathers. The child sex hypothesis was not supported. Talking about adoption often touches on sadness, loss, and vulnerability, feelings that are downplayed in family emotional socialization with sons and facilitated with daughters (Kuebli, Butler, & Fivush, 1995); perhaps because of the emotional salience of adoption, parents address it more similarly
with boys and girls than would otherwise occur with emotional subjects in non-adoptive families. This may be more so in families more attuned to communication about adoption (e.g., the families who were motivated to participate).

Our findings also suggest that children may play an important role in engaging their fathers by virtue of their ability to communicate verbally. It may be that while some mothers feel a responsibility to initiate adoption conversations with preschoolers, some fathers may wait until they sense their child to be inviting them into the topic. Further exploration of this child-to-father influence is warranted because if confirmed it would suggest that mothers’ encouragement to children to “talk with Daddy about this” might facilitate a broader family dialogue.

**The Interface Between Marital and Co-parenting Dynamics**

Developmental research has been heavily focused on mother-child dyadic processes to the neglect of paternal contributions and acknowledgement of the family as a complex system (Phares, Fields, Kamboukos, & Lopez, 2005). Our results provide a picture of what is happening in the broader adoptive family context involving both parents and the overlapping subsystems of marital and co-parenting dyads. Their collaborative effort to address the topic of adoption seems most likely to evolve when a wife feels secure in her marriage, her husband invests time and energy in the relationship, and both spouses feel unambivalent about their bond. Such alliances promote child adjustment (Doherty & Beaton, 2004) as well as the psychological well-being of fathers (Pleck, 1997). Perhaps for some families, the task of actively addressing their identity as an adoptive family facilitates co-parenting; this possibility awaits investigation.

In this sample, for both mothers and fathers, ambivalence about one’s marriage was associated with being less involved in addressing adoption. Ambivalence was associated with greater conflict and less connection to one’s spouse for both husbands and wives. For husbands, ambivalence was associated with less effort to maintain the marriage. Either ambivalence discourages adoption discussion or adoption discussion has a positive effect on a marital partnership, reducing the likelihood of ambivalence. The presence of marital ambivalence in an adoptive couple could be an important warning sign to clinicians intervening with adoptive families. Children of maritally ambivalent parents might be doubly affected by strain in the family system—directly by their parents’ unhappiness with one another.
and indirectly by their parents’ relative disengagement from communicating about adoption.

Previous research on adoptive families has identified contextual characteristics, such as the degree of openness in an adoptive situation (Grotevant, McRoy, Elde, & Fravel, 1994) or the adoption being international (Levy-Shiff et al., 1997) that may elicit greater parental engagement. Levy-Shiff et al. noted that the differences between internationally and domestically adoptive fathers was notable, a finding consistent with evidence for greater contextual influences on paternal involvement than on maternal (Doherty & Beaton, 2004). Other studies of the transition to parenthood following infertility or adoption have documented a unique impact on fathers (Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1994; Holditch-Davis et al., 1999). Understanding adoption’s impact on processes of father and family engagement remains an intriguing focus for longitudinal investigation.

In the absence of a comparison group, the role of an international adoption experience on marital and co-parenting characteristics cannot be ascertained; whether these parental strengths are shaped by the adoption process itself or are preexisting and influence a couples’ selection of international adoption, with its greater logistical challenges, awaits exploration. Recent meta-analytic findings on adopted children’s adjustment (Juffer & van Ijzendoorn, 2005) suggested that outcomes for internationally adopted children might be better than those for the domestically adopted, contrary to the authors’ prediction. Such unexpected findings are an impetus for further research to distinguish what the protective processes unique to international adoption might be.

**Limitations**

Our study involved a convenience sample, most of whom clearly felt positively about their adoptive status and were motivated to convey their experience and observations for the benefit of others; all families in this sample had their child placed with them as infants. As such, these findings may not generalize to the experiences or dynamics of all internationally adoptive families, particularly those who adopt older children. On the other hand, it is interesting that such a range of adoption involvement exists even within this motivated, homogeneous sample; it suggests that levels of adoption involvement, particularly for fathers, might range even more widely across a representative sample of internationally adoptive families.

Internal consistency values for the Adoption Involvement variable were acceptable for fathers but only marginally acceptable for mothers.
A transition from the construct of marital relationship to the co-parenting unit

(Kline, 1998). The measurement of this construct for mothers clearly needs refinement to improve its coherence, but we believe its use here is tenable, and the findings are meaningful for two reasons: first, despite the considerable amount of noise introduced into the measure by its low internal consistency, results were consistent with our other findings, and perhaps more important, they were in the predicted direction. On both these grounds, the data pattern suggests that these are meaningful results, and despite the low internal consistency of the measure, we felt it was important to report the findings because they represent an exploration of family processes in a way that is innovative for the field. Future research should aim to identify more reliable ways of measuring this construct to further elucidate the role of parental involvement in emerging family adoption dialogues.

Although the current study makes a unique contribution by considering the co-parenting unit, we have not considered birth order or other sibling dynamics as influences on family adoption conversations. Future work should also consider sibling adoption involvement along with that by parents for an even more ecologically valid assessment.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings suggest that multiple influences interweave in the early years of the adoption dialogue with marital, co-parental, mother-child, and father-child relationships to create family environments that may be either rich in co-construction and elaboration of the adoption story or sparse and obligatory. Parent-child reminiscing during early childhood facilitates the development of narrative skills and of autobiographical memory; narrative skills in turn provide children with a more sophisticated understanding and representation of events (Nelson & Fivush, 2004). Given that an adopted child’s autobiography is complex to begin with, parental assistance in building its foundation during early childhood is critical to understand. Recognizing that families function in units larger than dyads and that fathers make both direct and indirect contributions will further a thorough understanding of family strengths and vulnerabilities.

If the marital partnership, co-parenting strategies, and father engagement contribute to family stability and child adjustment, it will have important implications for adoption programming offered to families in the early years. Psychoeducational workshops that foster reflection and discussion between parents about their family’s early adoption conversations might promote a collaborative approach. Engaging fathers and addressing
parental partnerships, as well as parent-child relationships, might enhance and affirm the strengths of young adoptive families. As Ceballo et al. (2004) observed, adoptive couples may come to regard their parenting and marital partnership in a way that could model strength for families created by other means. The fact that so many adoptive families succeed at scaffolding a sound identity and healthy adjustment in their children despite the complexity of the life stories and family ties suggests that more attention is due their achievements than their difficulties.

REFERENCES


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