Adolescent Attitudes and Knowledge of Open Adoption

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10/16/03

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Executive Summary

The purpose of this study was to answer the following three research questions: First, how aware are students 14-17 years of age at Marshall School of the option of open adoption for a teenage pregnancy? Second, what percent of students in this age group would be supportive of an open adoption decision for a peer? Third, are those adolescents who are informed about open adoption more supportive of open adoption than those who are not?

The sample consisted of ten high school students, one male and nine female, from the religion class at Marshall School, a private college preparatory school, in Duluth, Minnesota. The students ranged in age from fourteen to sixteen years. Nine of the students were Caucasian and one of the students was African American.

A closed and open-ended survey with items from a survey developed by Daly (1994) and items generated by the authors of this research based on their review of the literature was distributed to the students. It was designed to answer the three research questions.

Results showed that the majority of the students rated themselves low on their knowledge of open adoption, yet regardless of their knowledge on open adoption, the students reported that they would be supportive of their peers in their decision to place the child from an unplanned pregnancy for open adoption.

There were several limitations to this research. First, there was a lack of cultural and ethnic diversity amongst the sample. Second, due to the restricted number of students in the Marshall School religion classes, the sample size consisted of only ten students. The need for parental consent also limited the number of students eligible to participate in the study. Lastly, the survey instrument was not tested for reliability or validity. Due to these limitations it is not possible to generalize the survey results to a larger population.

This study produced six suggestions for further research regarding open adoption. First, utilize a larger sample size in order to obtain statistical significance and also generalize results to a larger population. Second, use a random sample of the high school students at all five Duluth high schools. Third, conduct a separate study on the difference between what adolescents say and what they actually do. It could be that the students would like to think they would be supportive of their friends in any circumstance. Yet, the question is, "Would they truly be supportive of open adoption in the event that a friend were to become pregnant?" Fourth, survey birthmothers who have previously placed their child(ren) for open adoption to study the perceptions of the birthmothers regarding the supportiveness of their friends through the placement process. Fifth, survey friends of birthmothers to study their perceptions regarding how supportive they believed they were to the birthmothers in placing the child in an open adoption. Sixth, further research could be conducted to determine how the lack of knowledge on open adoption impacts the decreasing rates of children in domestic placements.
Adolescent Attitude and Knowledge of Open Adoption

Introduction to Research Topic

Within the past thirty years, there has been a dramatic drop in children placed for adoption in the United States and there have been major changes in the adoption process. Adoption has progressed from the parties involved not sharing identifying information to a range of interaction between birthparents, adoptive parents, and the adoptee. Although individuals today have various options for a pregnancy outcome, the numbers of individuals placing their children for adoption continues to decline (Adoption.com, 2002). More specifically, of teenage pregnancies that resulted in live births, less than one percent choose to place their children for adoption (Adoption.com, 2002). There may be many reasons for the decline in the number of adoptable infant children. This paper examines two potential reasons for the decline in adoption: (1) pregnant teens may not be aware of open adoption options and (2) peers may not be aware of open adoption and therefore not supportive. The literature suggests that adolescents rely on peer support in making decisions (Berk, 1999). When adolescents have knowledge of their options regarding adoption and they receive support, they are in a better position to make a well-informed decision. This study will focus on knowledge of open adoption and peer attitudes towards the option of open adoption among teens ages 14-17 years.

Literature Review

History of adoption. Since open adoption is a current movement in the field of adoption, it is critical to examine the roots of open adoption. Adoption is not a new concept. Many ancient cultures including Egyptian, Babylonian, Greek, Roman, and Asian as well as tribal cultures in Africa and Oceania practiced adoption dating as far back as 2285 BC (Carp, 1998; Kadushin, and Martin, 1988). Today there are significant differences between forms of
adoption. For example, some cultures informally arrange adoptions among extended family (Kadushin and Marti, 1988). Parents who have too many children give some to relatives and close friends who have no or too few children. This flexibility allows for shared parenting rights and obligations between the adopted family and the biological family, and enables adopted children to maintain relationships with their biological families (Carp, 1998). Typically in Western societies, such as the United States, traditional adoption involves complete termination of parental rights and sealing of records containing information about the child's biological parents.

Carp (1998) contends that in America during colonial times, adoption was not necessarily practiced in the traditional way described above. Instead a form of foster care was in place. This practice involved an apprenticeship, by which children of all classes were placed in families to learn a trade or a craft in hopes of moving up the economic ladder. For example, merchants apprenticed their adolescent sons to lawyers, doctors, or silversmiths. As the Industrial Revolution progressed, so did the increase in urban and rural poverty from which humanitarian and religious child welfare reformers emerged. With the pressure from these reformers, the United States began to privatize child welfare and turned to large-scale private institutions such as almshouses and orphanages to reduce the expense of social welfare. These institutions were expected to reform, rehabilitate and educate the tenants.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, child welfare reformers began to consider the benefits of raising children in a family environment as opposed to an institution. This fresh perspective was largely influenced by moral values that conflicted with the housing of delinquent, abandoned, neglected and impoverished children in almshouses shared with adult criminals, and the mentally ill (Carp, 1998).
Reverend Brace, the secretary of the Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in New York, developed a plan for rescuing impoverished immigrant children. He sent them out west to be cared for, educated and employed by Christian families (Gish, 1999). He used orphan trains to decrease the cost and increase the time efficiency of placing the children in adoptive homes. Other east coast charities joined the trend of shipping orphans by train. From 1849 to 1929 Holloran (1993) estimates nearly 200,000 children were placed with families in the midwest, south, and far west of the United States.

Carp (1998) researched the first American adoption laws and found they can be traced back to the interest of middle-class farmers who wished to increase the size of their families for farm labor. In 1846, the state of Mississippi was the first to enact general adoption statutes. These statutes were influenced by civil law from the Napoleonic Code, which merely provided a legal procedure to validate and make public record of private adoption agreements (similar to creating a land deed). Only five years later Americans developed a new conception of childhood and parenthood, reflected in the 1851 Massachusetts Adoption Act. It is known as the first modern statute established for the welfare of the adopted child and enforced judicial supervision of adoptions. It emphasized the needs of the children and supported the parent’s egalitarian rights of guardianship.

The Department of Commerce and Labor Children’s Bureau provided the state legislature with guidance and education and was critical in adoption law reformation. The Children’s Bureau guided the practice of adoption officials, caseworkers, the roles of birthparents, adoptees, and adoptive parents through published studies such as Adoption Laws in the United States (1925), The Work of Child-Placing Agencies (1927), The ABC of Foster-Family Care for Children (1933), and Problems in Adoption (1941). The investment of time and resources by the
United States Children's Bureau into the welfare of children made the bureau experts on issues of child welfare and thus the agency was influential with "lawyers, social workers, researchers, the public[s]...view of independent adoptions and the importance of state licensed agency adoptions" (Carp, 1998, p.24).

From 1940 to 1970 considerable changes came about in adoption policy and its practice due to the Children's Bureau increasing attention on adoption and the Child Welfare League of America's (CWLA) development of adoption standards before World War II. During this time there came an increasing demand by childless couples to adopt, matched by an increase in the numbers of children available for adoption (Carp, 1998). More liberal attitudes in regards to race also influenced the adoption movement. Medical breakthroughs in physical sterility allowed for more accurate diagnosis early in marriage. The demands of childless couples for adoption outweighed the number of children available for adoption. Carp reported (1998), "by the mid-1950s one expert estimated that of the four and a half million childless couples, fully one million was seeking the approximately 75,000 children available for adoption" (p.29).

Carp (1998) makes several observations related to adoption patterns in the United States. First, between the years 1946 and 1953 there was a high demand for adoptive children, which led to the international adoption movement. Second, organizations such as the American Branch of International Social Services brought 5,814 foreign-born orphans and abandoned children into the United States for adoption. Many parents were rejected by U.S. adoption agencies because they did not fit the criteria for adopting; as a result these parents sought to adopt internationally where the adoption standards were not as restrictive. Third, this sharp increase in international adoptions encouraged policy makers to examine the standards of potential adoptive parents to consider factors including age, housing, income, and families with children with a more flexible
attitude. Fourth, the baby boom and the steep rise in illegitimacy of the 1940s and 1950s dramatically changed adoption as well as innovations in contraceptive technology, changes in cultural values, and constitutional law during the 1960’s and 1970’s. Fifth, the demand for women’s reproductive rights in the 1960’s created a sexual revolution bringing about the development of the birth control pill, intrauterine device (IUD) and increased sterilization rate of women to control family size. In 1973, the Supreme Court’s decision of Roe v. Wade legalized abortion allowing thirteen million legal abortions to be performed during the next decade. Increased numbers of unwed mothers were deciding to keep and raise their children with the support of social and financial assistance. Sixth, Aid for Families of Dependent Children and Medicaid benefits greatly impacted the numbers of children available for adoption. Prior to the 1970’s almost “80 percent of infants born out of wedlock were relinquished for adoption, during the 1970’s only [about] 12 percent of such children were released” (Carp, 1998, p.200). The changing demographic trend of adoption and the progressive receptiveness towards illegitimacy of the early 1970’s paved the way for the renewed concept of open adoption, which allows for and encourages the exchange of identities and ongoing contact between the birthparents and the adoptive parents.

Open adoption became prevalent by way of the adoption rights movement (ARM) in the late 1970’s through the 1980’s (Carp, 1998). The awareness and advocacy of open adoption, as opposed to traditional adoption, also known as closed adoption, was headed by a small group of birthmothers who organized themselves into support groups to grieve for the children that they placed into closed adoption. The dramatic decline in the number of Caucasian infants available for adoption encouraged social workers to pay heed to birthmother’s requests to be included in the decision of the adoptive parents for their child or children.
Activist birthmothers began to wage an ideological campaign to pressure social workers to experiment with open adoptions where the birthparent could choose the adoptive parents. Many birthmothers craved information about the children they had given up for adoption. The Adoption Rights Movement (ARM) inspired many birthmothers to join in organized protests and demands that adoption records be opened (Carp, 1998).

The research on open adoption. The open adoption movement began in the 1970's. This movement evolved because members of the adoption triad: adoptees, adoptive parents and birthparents believed the secrecy accompanying confidential adoptions harmed children (Rompf, 1993). Carp (1998) reports that in March 1975 the concept of open adoption was advocated by adoption activists and was formally studied by social science researchers. By the late 1980's, adoption activists secured support from the Child Welfare League of America (CWLA) and compassion from the commercial press. Open adoption became a major topic in the social work community exemplified in articles that summarized and evaluated open adoption theory and practice. The mass media eventually brought the topic of open adoption to the attention of the general public through adult magazines such as Newsweek and also through nonfiction books allowing the reader to explore the issue of open adoption.

The amount of contact between birthfamilies and adoptive families varies depending on the type of adoption. In closed or confidential adoptions there is no contact between the birth and adoptive families (Wrobel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy and Friedick, 1996). Semi-open or mediated adoption occurs when a third party mediates the information between the families (Wrobel et al, 1996). Open or full-disclosed adoptions allow the families to have direct ongoing contact with each other (Wrobel et al, 1996).
Until recently, the arguments for and against open adoption have been based upon mostly clinical and anecdotal evidence (Gross 1993). Critics of open adoption argue, "the adoptive child's identity conflicts will be intensified and become unresolved; the biological parents will intrude upon the adoptive family and impede their own grieving process and the adoptive parents bonding with their child will be compromised" (Gross, 1993, p. 270). Advocates of open adoption reflect a different perspective and hold that open adoption lightens the grieving process for birthparents after relinquishment and reassures birthparents of the wellbeing of the child (Curtis, 1986). The argument for open adoption is that it reduces the fear of relinquishment for birthfamilies and opens the relationship between the birthparents and adoptive family, which positively affects the child (Lee and Twite, 1997). It is thought that the adoptees will have images of their birthparents and will develop healthy self-identities (Wrobel et al, 1996). The advocates for open adoption also point to the fact that 14 percent of adults raised in traditional adoptive homes are in counseling regarding the search for their birthparents (Lee and Twite, 1997).

Much empirical research on the topic of open adoption resulted in positive outcomes for all members of the adoption triad (Gross, 1993). Even though there are benefits in open adoption for birthparents and adoptive parents, the focus must be on what is best for the adoptees and how they benefit from a relationship or lack of contact with the birthparents.

Since the open adoption movement is relatively new, longitudinal studies focusing on the effects on children are in the beginning stages. A study by Worbel et al (1996) on open adoption has reported positive effects for the adoptee in the areas of general self-worth, satisfaction with the level of openness, and curiosity about birthparents. This group studied a nationwide sample of 190 adoptive families and their adopted children between the ages of 4 and 12. Older children
in the study were in the process of developing a personal identity. Information on one's past is important to complete this task. Results of the study found that children who believed there were barriers to gaining information about their birthparents were less satisfied with the level of openness with their birthparent. Children with less information about their birthparents tended to wonder about their health, well-being and what they look like. In contrast adoptees with more contact were curious about what their birthparents were doing since the last contact. If birthparent information was excluded or withheld from a child and the child was later exposed to the information, the child would question whether the information given about his or her birthparent was correct and would wonder if more information has been withheld. The child would thus desire a more open exchange of information in regards to the birthparent. Wrobel et al (1996) also stated, “Overall it does not appear that providing information about a child's birthparents will confuse the child about the meaning of adoption or lower the child's self-esteem” (p. 2372).

A study by Lee and Twaite (1997), looked at open adoption, adoptive mothers and their attitudes towards birthparents, adopted children and parenting. The sample included 238 adoptive mothers who answered a mailed survey. The authors’ overall conclusion was that the adoptive mothers who had contact with the birthparents prior to the birth reacted more favorably towards the birthparents and to the child. Adoptive parent's knowledge of the child's birthparents demystifies the child's heritage and genetics. Adoptive parents are also less likely to believe the child has inherited a flawed genetic endowment. Lee and Twaite (1997) conclude that this positive view of the child helps develop a more positive, accepting and nurturing response to the child.
Lauderdale and Boyle (1994) researched birthmothers' experiences in open and closed adoption. They developed descriptions of relinquishing birthmothers from the data they collected from interviews with 12 birthmothers over an 18-month period. A birthmother in an open adoption was described as "The Grateful Giver" (Lauderdale & Boyle, 1994, p. 216). These women described an attachment to their pregnancies, which led to earlier prenatal care, healthier eating, avoidance of drugs and alcohol, and reported an overall positive attitude towards the pregnancy. The women also reported more sense of control in the relinquishment decision and sought support for their pregnancies. After relinquishment was complete, the birthmothers in open adoption were able to, "come to terms with the loss of the relinquished baby...this was demonstrated by their ability to move on with their lives, return to work, form new relationships, and complete their education" (Lauderdale & Boyle, 1994, p. 216). The birthmothers who participated in a closed adoption study reported a very different picture. The author described this group as "The Reluctant Givers" (Lauderdale & Boyle, 1994, p. 216). This group was not as attached to their pregnancies and often times concealed the pregnancy, moved to other cities, and/or changed jobs. Many even denied they were pregnant by ignoring the pregnancy signs, viewing pregnancy as a disease state, and seeking prenatal care late or not at all. The birthmothers who placed their child in closed adoptions felt the adoption process was beyond their control. As a result, they had difficulty coming to terms with the loss of their child.

Empirical research suggests most open adoptions can be a positive experience to all members of the triad, but there continues to be controversy around open adoption (Gross, 1993). The general public view on adoption and the social support given to pregnant mothers plays an influential role as to whether someone decides to enter the adoption process (Gross, 1992 & Rompf, 1993). There have been two large-scale public opinion surveys on how the general
public feels about adoption. Rompf (1993) executed an opinion poll of 646 people on their views of adoption. Rompf concluded that almost three-fourths of the respondents had a favorable opinion about open arrangements.

Another study conducted by the Princeton Survey Research Associates (1997) found more complexities in the general public view on adoption by surveying 1,554 adults. They concluded:

Most say adoptive parents are generous and lucky, but some believe they would have been luckier still to have their own child. Adopted children, the majority said, are well adjusted and secure, but some think adopted children are insecure, poorly adjusted and more prone to behavioral and academic problems than other children. Lastly, many Americans support birth parents decision to place children for adoption, but a notable minority disapproves of decision to do so, and some even see it as irresponsible or hardhearted. (p. 1)

They also noted that the adults surveyed are divided as to whether or not it is better for a pregnant teenager to place her child for adoption. Slightly more believe the baby is better off adopted than raised by the birthmother. On openness in adoption, one in five adults felt it was not a good idea for birthmothers to maintain contact with the children that they have relinquished.

This survey of adults does not take into account the adolescent's perception of adoption for resolving a teenage crisis pregnancy. A study done by Daly (1994) looked at the decline of adoption among teenagers from 14 percent in the 1970s to less than 3 percent in 1992. Daly concluded that overall the public view of adoption is favorable. There was a high level of uncertainty on the individual level in regards to how parents and peers would feel about choosing
an adoption plan for themselves. In light of the other available options of parenting and abortion, parents rarely discuss adoption with their teenage children. Also, the teenagers were uncertain about where to go to get adoption information, saw the process as complicated, and questioned its legality. Custer (1993) found that adolescents were uncertain about adoption. Custer interviewed twenty-one unmarried pregnant adolescents and found four themes that played a part in their considering adoption. These themes were “social sanctions, a low level of knowledge, anticipated psychological discomfort and lack of support from helping professionals” (p.891).

The adolescent who does decide to make an adoption plan for her child has characteristics that can be compared to those who decide to parent. Donnelly and Voydanoff (1991) surveyed 177 pregnant or newly postpartum adolescents to distinguish the factors associated with releasing for adoption. Based on the data the researchers formulated a profile of an adolescent who places her child for adoption and found:

Her attitudes on adoption and child rearing, also, reflect her decision to release for adoption. She is likely to have relatively favorable attitudes toward adoption. She expects that raising a child now would be a commitment she would likely regret and she thinks parenting, as an adolescent would not be much fun. She is likely to have thought a lot about what she will be doing in the future, she has plans to continue her schooling and she believes that ideally women should become mothers in their 20s (p.408).

Mech (1986) conducted a survey of 320 pregnant adolescents on communicating about adoption and highlighted several points counselors should consider when discussing adoption options with pregnant teens. First, adolescents have a limited ability to plan ahead and to anticipate the consequences of their decisions. Second, adoption is an abstraction and discussing
adoption requires techniques that make abstract ideas more concrete. Lastly, there is a need to
develop and implement a systematic mechanism that counselors can use to ensure that adoption
is routinely included in decision making.

Adolescents and decision making. When discussing options for a teenage crisis pregnancy, it is essential to consider the cognitive and emotional level of the adolescent. In the event of a teenage crisis pregnancy the adolescent is required to: problem solve, plan for the future, think abstractly, and comprehend the possible consequences of her decision. To compensate for the deficits in cognitive abilities, the adolescent will seek out peers, family and other significant individuals to help in the decision-making process. The level of cognitive and emotional development and peer support are significant influential factors in the decision-making process of adolescents (Berk, 1999).

In Berk's book Infants, Children and Adolescents (1999), the author discusses Piaget's final stage of development, the formal operational stage, when adolescents develop the capacity for abstract, scientific thought. During this stage, adolescents learn to utilize formal operational problem solving, a strategy in which the adolescent begins with a general theory of all possible factors that could affect an outcome of a problem. From the possible factors they deduce specific hypotheses, which adolescents test in an orderly fashion to find out which ones work in the real world. Piaget observed that adolescents seek relevant evidence and alternative views. He also observed that they are willing to alter their beliefs in accord with these views, making progress towards rational thinking. However, cognitive development is not complete at adolescence.

Going through these mental and physiological changes, adolescents begin to become more self-conscious and more highly involved in the importance of their own thoughts,
appearance, and behavior. Berk (1999) contends that they acquire a distorted image that contrasts what they think of themselves with what others think of them. They tend to believe that they are the focus of everyone else's concerns and attention. During this stage of life, the adolescent's world opens up to imagining "an alternative family, religious, political and moral systems," and the curiosity to explore them (Berk, 1999, p.573). Everyday decision-making comes as a challenge due to the teenager feeling over-whelmed by the variety of options. Efforts to choose between possibilities repeatedly breaks down and many adolescents resort to making decisions based on habit, act on impulse or do not make a decision at all.

Adolescents begin to spend less time with their family and more time with their peers (Berk, 1999). The development of close friendships provides opportunities to explore the self, develops a deeper understanding of other, helps find support for dealing with the stresses of adolescence, and improves the adolescent's attitudes toward school. Peer pressure plays an important role in the emotional and social development of the teenager, yet surprisingly, this is not a period when adolescents give in blindly to the suggestions of their peers. Peer conformity varies with age, situation, and a need for social approval. Due to an intense concern about what their friends think of them, youth in the early adolescent stage are more likely, than younger or older individuals to be influenced by peer pressure. Feelings of competence and worthiness amongst his or her adolescent peers largely influence the adolescents' decision making.

Berk (1999) proposes that while peers have a greater influence on more day-to-day matters such as dress, music, and choice of friends during the teenage years, parents have a significant influence on teenager's values and educational plans. Yet the parent's parenting techniques largely determine the amount of influence they have on their adolescent child. He maintains that if the parents tend to be either overly restrictive or provide too little monitoring,
the teenagers will tend to rely more on peers for advice about their personal lives and their futures. At this age they are more willing to disobey and disregard their parent's rules.

*Teenage pregnancy.* Adolescent pregnancy has been an American concern for generations. The Alan Guttmacher Institute (1999) reported, "the overall U.S. teenage pregnancy rate has declined 17 percent in 1990 to 117 pregnancies per 1,000 in 1996 women aged 15-19 to 97 per 1,000" (p.1). The 1950's and 60's showed the highest rates of teenage pregnancy (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998). Both the development and availability of contraception and legalization of abortion in 1973 contributed largely to the declining birth rate amongst teens (American Academy of Pediatrics, 1998). Although the rate has declined, teen pregnancy is still recognized to have significant physical, psychological, social, and generational consequences.

Young, Martin, Young & Ting (2001) completed a longitudinal study of 25,000 female students utilizing questionnaires and achievement tests. They examined whether pregnant teens have lower locus of control, of personal efficacy, and if they perceived their life options to be more limited compared to adolescent females who did not get pregnant. On the three levels, the females who had a pregnancy showed a lower perception of control in their lives.

For psychosocial development the American Academy of Pediatrics (1998) identified a pattern of problems for the mothers, fathers and the children of teen parents. Mothers reflected a pattern of school interruption, persistent poverty, limited vocational opportunities, separation from the father of the child, divorce and repeated pregnancies. Fathers of infants born to adolescent mothers reflected a similar pattern of poor academic performance, high school dropout rates, limited financial resources and reduced income potential. The American Academy of Pediatrics reports, nearly two thirds of teenage mothers have partners older than 20 years of

Each year 19 percent of females ages 15-19 who have sexual intercourse will become pregnant (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999). Outcomes of teen pregnancy include: 14 percent of the pregnancies result in miscarriages, 30 percent in abortion, and 56 percent result in birth (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999). Many teens who chose abortion felt they were not mature enough to have a child, were concerned about how their lives would change, and were having financial problems (The Alan Guttmacher Institute, 1999). Of teenage pregnancies that resulted in births, less than 1 percent chose to place their children for adoption (Adoption.com Family, 2002). The study did not examine the aspects of peer support in adolescent adoptions.

Despite the positive research on open adoption for the adoption triad, and the public support for an adoption decision for a teenage crisis pregnancy, adoptions among teenagers continue to decline. There has been relatively little research on why the option of open adoption is not used more often by adolescents. Researchers are finding, through self-report, that more adolescents are choosing to parent or have an abortion than place their child for adoption. Pregnant teenagers fear social sanctions, lack of support, and lack of knowledge concerning the adoption process (Custer, 1993). Peer support is essential in the development of adolescent identity, but there has been relatively little to no research done to evaluate adolescent knowledge of open adoption, peer support for open adoption, and the relationship between knowledge and support.
Significance of Topic to the Social Work Profession

Social workers who provide services to adolescents may do so in the form of advocacy, education, supportive case management, and counseling. It is crucial for teenage crisis pregnancy counselors, school social workers/counselors, adoption agencies, and high school health curriculums to fully educate their clients on the varying options for a teenage crisis pregnancy.

Research Questions

This study focuses on the relationship between knowledge of open adoption and the level of peer support for open adoption among teens ages 14-16 years old. The study attempted to answer the following three research questions: (1) How aware are students 14-16 years of age at Marshall School of the option of open adoption for a teenage pregnancy? (2) How many students in this age group would be supportive of an open adoption decision for a peer? (3) Are those adolescents who have knowledge of open adoption more supportive of open adoption than those who are not knowledgeable?

Methods

Population and sample. The population studied in this research consists of male and female adolescents ages 14-16. The sample (n=10) was drawn from the freshman religion classes at Marshall School, a private college preparatory school, in Duluth, Minnesota. The age range of the sample was fourteen to sixteen years; one student was fourteen years old, five were fifteen, and four were sixteen years old. Considering this population is under the age of eighteen and is thus regarded as a vulnerable population, it was necessary to obtain permission from the University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board (IRB) to carry out this study. The IRB directed us to gain parental consent and student assent to participate in the survey.
Ten out of thirty possible high school students who volunteered returned a parental consent form, signed the student assent form, and participated in this research, one male and nine female students. Nine of the students were Caucasian and one of the students was African American. Out of the ten students, six knew a person who had been adopted, seven knew adoptive parents, and one knew a birthmother who placed her child for adoption.

The response rate was low for two possible reasons. One, the school year was coming to a close and according to the teacher who assisted the researchers of this study, much work was left to be done on behalf of the teacher himself as well as the students. Thus the attention and energy of the students and teacher were directed towards other priorities necessary for the completion of the school year. Second, the researchers of this study did not distribute the parental consent forms to the students; the teacher did. Due to the fact that the researchers did not meet with the students, they were not able to stress the value of the students’ participation in this study. Also the students did not have the opportunity to connect with the researchers and ask questions regarding the study prior to obtaining parental consent. A discussion with the researchers might have increased the level of student interest in the study, which may have encouraged them to be more influential in seeking parent permission.

Research Design. This research design included an anonymous survey (Appendix A) of 10 freshman students in the religion class at Marshall School. Our survey instrument is exploratory in design. In the review of the literature, only Daly (1994) immerged as having worked on a survey on adolescent perceptions of open adoption. A survey was compiled by the researchers of this study that included eight questions (numbers 9, 10, 20 through 25, Appendix A) from the survey developed by Daly’s (1994) research on adolescent perceptions of adoption. The questions that were selected from Daly’s survey related directly to the focus of this study,
specifically knowledge of open adoption and support for open adoption. A literature review was conducted by the authors of this paper to aid in the development of the remaining twenty-one questions. Neither Daly’s survey nor the survey developed by these researchers, which included some of Daly’s survey questions, has been tested for reliability and validity.

The authors attempted to pilot the survey, but due to limited time before distribution of the survey only one volunteer was located and utilized. The volunteer was thirteen years old and female. She read through the survey and offered feedback in regards to comprehension of the language used and questions asked. Her feedback was utilized in the development of the final survey form.

The survey questions were designed to elicit information in three areas: knowledge of open adoption, peer support for open adoption, and demographic information. Some survey questions were designed to provide additional related information. However, these additional questions were not used because they were tangentially related to the specific research questions of this study.

The survey questions were structured with categorical response options as well as a few items that call for a scaled response. The survey also allows for additional information to be written in on a few items.

Operational definitions. For the purpose of this study, adolescents are defined as individuals ranging from 14 to 16 years of age. Peer support is defined as the verbal, physical, emotional or financial support an individual receives from their age cohort. In this study it was measured by survey question number 19, which asked, “On a scale of 0 to 10 (0= NOT supportive and 10=VERY supportive), what is your willingness to support a friend in open adoption.” Teenage crisis pregnancy is defined as an adolescent individual who becomes
pregnant and is not physically, emotionally, or psychologically prepared or capable to parent a child. *Open adoption* is defined as an adoption where over time there is an open exchange of information with varying degrees of contact or communication between the birth and adoptive parents. *Knowledge of open adoption* is defined as an individual who has a basic understanding of the open adoption process, which was measured by survey question numbered 7, which asked, “On a scale of 0 to 10 (0= not knowing anything and 10=knowing a lot), rate your knowledge of OPEN adoption?”

**Data collection.** One week prior to administering the surveys, parental consent forms were given to the religion instructor at Marshall School to be distributed to the thirty freshman students in the religion class. The religion instructor was directed to inform the students of the upcoming survey and that parental consent was needed to participate in the study (Appendix B). Students were to return the signed parental consent forms the next day. The instructor also informed the student that the authors of the study would provide a candy bar to any student who brought back a signed consent form. The candy bar would be handed out even if the student did not participate in the study.

The following week, the authors of the study visited two separate religion classes on two different days to administer the survey. The ten students who came to class with signed consent forms were taken to a separate room to complete the survey. Five students participated the first day and five participated the second day. All other students remained in the classroom and continued with their class session. The authors distributed student assent forms (Appendix C) to those students who submitted the signed parental/guardian consent forms. All anonymous surveys were distributed and collected by the authors of this study. The response rate was low due to surveying one week before the end of the school year, limited time to form a relationship
with the instructor to aid in the facilitation of obtaining the parental/guardian consent forms, and the small class size.

Data analysis. The data from the survey was analyzed by coding answers to each question and entering the coded information into the SPSS data processing program. The coding process was administered by looking at each survey question and giving each possible answer a value. The individual questions and their values were entered into the SPSS program to process the responses.

The data from the first two research questions: “How aware are students 14-16 years of age at Marshall School of the option of open adoption for a teenage pregnancy?” and “How many students in this age group would be supportive of an open adoption decision for a peer?” were analyzed with histograms that show the frequency of the distribution of responses to the survey questions used to address the research questions. The third research question: “Are those adolescents who have knowledge of open adoption more supportive of open adoption than those who are not knowledgeable?” required a Pearson’s Correlation analysis between survey question number seven, which rates the student’s knowledge of open adoption, and question number nineteen, which rates the students’ willingness to support open adoption as option for a crisis pregnancy.

Results

Berk (1999) suggests that peer support is an important aspect in the decision-making process of an adolescent. The authors of this research suspected that it is important for peers to have accurate information in order for them to provide adequate support for friends who are considering adoption as an option for a crisis pregnancy. To find out the level of knowledge about open adoption among teens this study asked: How aware are students 14-16 years of age at
Marshall School of the option of open adoption for a teenage pregnancy? To examine the importance of peer support the question was asked: How many students in this age group would be supportive of an open adoption decision for a peer? Knowledge of open adoption and willingness to support a peer's open adoption decision are two separate concepts. The survey results from the question on knowledge (question 7) and the question on support (question 19) were used to answer the research question: Are those adolescents who have knowledge of open adoption more supportive of open adoption than those who are not knowledgeable?

Research Question One. Survey question number 7 (On a scale of 0 to 10, rate your knowledge on OPEN adoption: zero, not knowing anything, to ten, knowing a lot) was used to answer the first research question, “How aware are students 14-16 years of age at Marshall School of the option of open adoption for a teenage pregnancy?” The results of the student responses to survey question 7 are reported in Figure 1. Twenty percent or two students rated themselves at a zero, twenty percent or two students rated themselves at one, forty percent or four students rated themselves at three, ten percent or one student rated her/himself at six, and ten percent or one student rated her/himself at eight. The mean score of the students' knowledge of open adoption was 2.80.

Figure 1. Results of Survey Question Number 7: Knowledge of Open Adoption
**Research Question Two.** Survey question number 19 (On a scale of 0 to 10, what is your willingness to support a friend in open adoption: zero, being not supportive, to ten, being very supportive) was used to answer the second research question “How many students in this age group would be supportive of an open adoption decision for a peer?” The results of the student responses to survey question 19 are reported in Figure 2. Of the ten students, seventy percent or seven students rated themselves at ten, twenty percent or two students rated themselves at nine, and ten percent or one student rated her/himself at a six. The mean response by the students was 9.40.

Figure 2. Results of Survey Question Number 19: Willingness to Support a Friend

![Graph showing survey results](image)

**Research Question 3.** The third research question “Are those adolescents who have knowledge of open adoption more supportive of open adoption than those who are not knowledgeable?” was addressed by doing a Pearson’s Correlation with survey question number 7 (On a scale of 0 to 10, rate your knowledge on OPEN adoption: zero, not knowing anything, to ten, knowing a lot.) and survey question number 19 (On a scale of 0 to 10, what is your willingness to support a friend in open adoption: zero, being not supportive, to ten, being very supportive). On question number 7 the students reported a mean score of 2.80 which
demonstrates a low level of knowledge of open adoption. On question number 19 the students reported a mean score of 9.40 which demonstrated a high level of support for a friend’s open adoption decision. A Pearson’s Correlation was run between question number 7, which measured knowledge, and question number 19, which measured support. The Pearson’s correlation was -.14. However, it was not significant at the .05 level as the actual significance level was .69. The probability that the results were due to chance is sixty-nine times out of one hundred. Therefore, no conclusions can be drawn from this survey regarding the relationship between knowledge of open adoption (survey question number 7) and peer support of open adoption (survey question number 19).

Discussion

Interpretation of Results/Implication for Practice.

Knowledge. How aware are students ages 14-16 at Marshall School of the option of open adoption? Of the ten students surveyed, on a scale of zero to ten (zero equals not knowing and ten knowing a lot) eight rated themselves at three or below meaning they felt they had little knowledge of the concept of open adoption. Custer (1993) identified a low level of knowledge as an important area regarding adolescents’ uncertainty about adoption. Our findings support Custer’s research in that we also found a low level of student knowledge in our study. Although the students rated themselves low on their knowledge of open adoption, their answers to the questions regarding the value of open adoption were consistently supportive.

Peer support. How many students in this age group would be supportive of an open adoption decision for a peer? Of the ten students surveyed, on a scale of zero to ten (zero equals not supportive and ten equals very supportive) nine students rated themselves a nine or above, meaning that the majority of the students believed they would be very supportive of a peer
placing her child for open adoption. This is consistent with Daly’s (1994) findings that people in general have a favorable opinion about adoption, and Rompf’s (1993) findings that the majority of people are supportive of open adoption.

Relationship between knowledge and peer support. Are those adolescents who are informed about open adoption more supportive of open adoption than those who are not? Regardless of their knowledge on open adoption, the adolescents in the survey expected that they would be supportive of their peers in their decision to place the child for adoption. This conclusion, based on a very limited sample size contradicts the point of view that knowledge correlates with support. Unfortunately the researchers were not able to locate any studies published on a correlation between adolescent knowledge of open adoption and peer support of open adoption.

Limitations. There are several limitations to this research. First, there was a lack of cultural, ethnic, and socioeconomic diversity amongst the student respondents in the study conducted at Marshall School. Marshall School is a private college preparatory institution and it represents the higher socioeconomic population of Duluth high school students. Second, due to the restricted number of students in the Marshall School religion classes the sample size was limited. Third, there was a lack of sexual diversity in our study. Fourth, the population sample was drawn from a Christian religion class, which may reflect limited values in relationship to adoption. Fifth, the response rate was low. Sixth, response bias by the students is important to consider as another possible limitation, as it is not uncommon for people to answer survey questions in a way that is socially desirable. Lastly, the survey instrument has not been tested for reliability or validity. As a result of these limitations, generalizing the survey results to the larger population is not possible.
Recommendations for future research

This study produced six suggestions for further research regarding adoption. First, it would be helpful to utilize a larger sample size in order to obtain statistical significance and also generalize results to a larger population. Second, the findings from a study could be generalized more with a random sample of the high school students in more schools. Third, it would be helpful to conduct a separate study on the difference between what adolescents say and what they actually do. It could be hypothesized that the students would like to think they would be supportive of their friends in any circumstance, but it is uncertain if they truly would be supportive of open adoption in the event that a friend were to become pregnant. Fourth, birthmothers who have previously placed their child(ren) for open adoption could be surveyed to study their perceptions regarding the supportiveness of their friends through the placement process. Fifth, friends of birthparents could be surveyed to study their perceptions of how supportive they believed they were to the birthmother. Sixth, further research could be conducted to determine how the lack of knowledge on open adoption impacts the decreasing rates of domestic placements.

It is important to have a reliable and valid survey instrument for future research on adolescent knowledge of open adoption and their willingness to support a peer’s open adoption decision. To ensure greater consistency and accuracy of the survey instrument the authors of this study recommend some changes. For example, in the survey a few questions used “neutral” as a response option. The authors suggest removing this response because neutral does not offer accurate impressions of the respondents’ attitudes. Development of the differences between birthmothers and birthfathers should either be developed further, or removed from the instrument.
Conclusion

Within the past thirty years, there has been a dramatic drop in children placed for adoption. During that time, the landscape of adoption has changed with the advancement of open adoption. With open adoption being a viable option for crisis pregnancies, the research reported in this paper explored two potential reasons for the decline in adoption; 1) Pregnant teen’s may not be aware of the open adoption options; and 2) peers may not be aware of open adoption and therefore not supportive. This study focused on knowledge of open adoption and peer attitudes towards the option of open adoption among teen’s ages 14-16 years. The limited data collected in this study provides some insight into the teen’s knowledge and willingness to support a peer adoption decision. The students in this study reported a low understanding of open adoption. However, they expressed a high willingness to support an open adoption decision by a peer. This information contradicts the idea that increased knowledge is associated with increased support. A more diverse and numerous sample is needed to gain a better understanding of the relationship between knowledge of open adoption and willingness of peers to support an open adoption decision.
References


Appendix A

SURVEY

1) Respondent’s Gender:
   Male ______   Female ______

2) How old are you? ______

3) What is your race?
   ______ White  
   ______ Black or African-American  
   ______ Asian  
   ______ Latino or Spanish  
   ______ Other or Bi-racial  
   ______ Don’t Know

4) How often do you go to church, synagogue, temple, or some other place of worship?
   ______ Every Week  
   ______ Almost every week  
   ______ Once or twice a month  
   ______ A few times a year  
   ______ Never

5) Has anyone one in your family or among your close friends: (Please check all that apply)
   ______ Ever been adopted  
   ______ Adopted a child  
   ______ Placed a child for adoption

6) What is your MAIN source of information about adoption? (Please check one)
   ______ News  
   ______ Movies and entertainment programs  
   ______ Books and magazines  
   ______ Family  
   ______ Friends  
   ______ School  
   ______ Don’t know

7) On a scale of 0 to 10 (0= not knowing anything and 10=knowing a lot), rate your knowledge of OPEN adoption. (Please circle one number)

   0  1  2  3  4  5  6  7  8  9  10

8) Please define “open adoption”. 

________________________________________________________________________________________
9) If someone were to ask you how to go about placing a baby for adoption, I would be able to tell them how to go about it.
   _______Strongly agree
   _______Agree
   _______Neutral
   _______Disagree
   _______Strongly disagree

10) Placing a baby for adoption seems like a complicated process.
   _______Strongly agree
   _______Agree
   _______Neutral
   _______Disagree
   _______Strongly disagree

11) In general, you approve of MOTHERS who place their children for adoption.
   _______Strongly agree
   _______Agree
   _______Neutral
   _______Disagree
   _______Strongly disagree

12) In general, you approve of FATHERS who place their children for adoption.
   _______Strongly agree
   _______Agree
   _______Neutral
   _______Disagree
   _______Strongly disagree

13) In general, when a MOTHER place her child for adoption is she being...
    (please check one from each group)
    A. _______Irresponsible  |  B. _______Caring  |  C. _______Unselfish
       _______Responsible     |  _______Uncaring   |  _______Selfish
       _______Don’t Know      |  _______Don’t Know |  _______Don’t Know

14) In general, when a FATHER puts his child for adoption is he being...
    (please check one from each group)
    A. _______Irresponsible  |  B. _______Caring  |  C. _______Unselfish
       _______Responsible     |  _______Uncaring   |  _______Selfish
       _______Don’t Know      |  _______Don’t Know |  _______Don’t Know
15) Sometimes mothers who place their child for adoption maintain contact by occasionally sending cards, letters, and visiting the adoptive family. Do you think this is a good idea?

______ Most cases
______ Some cases
______ Very few cases
______ No cases at all
______ Don’t know

16) In general, your opinion on adoption is...

______ Very favorable
______ Somewhat favorable
______ Somewhat unfavorable
______ Vary unfavorable
______ Don’t know

17) Imagine for a moment you had a child you could not provide for and you knew a loving couple who wanted to adopt the child. How likely would you be to place your child for adoption with this couple?

______ Very likely
______ Somewhat likely
______ Somewhat unlikely
______ Very unlikely
______ Don’t know

18) In reference to question 17, how likely would you place your child for adoption, if you had the option to maintain contact with your baby after placing it for adoption?

______ Very likely
______ Somewhat likely
______ Somewhat unlikely
______ Very unlikely
______ Don’t know

19) On a scale of 0 to 10 (0= NOT supportive and 10=VERY supportive), what is your willingness to support a friend in open adoption. (please circle one number)

0 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

20) If one of your friends were to become pregnant in the near future, what do you think she should do?

______ Keep the baby
______ Have an abortion
______ Place the child for adoption
______ Other
21) Why do you think a teenager would choose to place a child for adoption? (Please check all that apply)
   ______ Provide the child with two parents
   ______ They aren’t mature enough to parent at this point in their lives
   ______ So they can finish school
   ______ Financially impossible to raise the child
   ______ Parents insist on adoption
   ______ The doctor, social worker our counselor would expect it
   ______ Friends would expect it
   ______ Other options of abortion or keeping are unacceptable
   Other, please specify ___________________________________________

22) When you think of someone who places a child for adoption, which characteristics or words best describe him or her?
   ___________________________________________________________________
   ___________________________________________________________________

23) If you or a dating partner were to become pregnant in the near future, whom would you turn to for support? (please check all that apply)
   ______ Dating partner
   ______ Same sex friend
   ______ Opposite sex friend (other than dating partner)
   ______ Parents
   ______ Brother or Sister
   ______ Counselor (e.g. guidance, family planning)
   ______ Doctor
   ______ Clergy
   Other, please specify ___________________________________________

24) If an unmarried friend of yours became pregnant, and was thinking about placing the baby for adoption, how would your FRIENDS think about it?
   ______ Best possible plan for everyone concerned
   ______ Possible plan
   ______ Not a possible plan
   ______ Worst possible plan for everyone concerned
   ______ Do not know

25) If an unmarried friend of yours became pregnant, and was thinking about placing the baby for adoption, how would your PARENTS think about it?
   ______ Best possible plan for everyone concerned
   ______ Possible plan
   ______ Not a possible plan
   ______ Worst possible plan for everyone concerned
   ______ Do not know
26) Adopted children who grow up knowing their birthmothers will be confused as to whom their "real mother" is.

 ______ Strongly agree
 ______ Agree
 ______ Neutral
 ______ Disagree
 ______ Strongly disagree

27) A woman who places her child for adoption and is able to have on-going contact with the child, will eventually want the child back.

 ______ Strongly agree
 ______ Agree
 ______ Neutral
 ______ Disagree
 ______ Strongly disagree

28) Adoptive parents who have on-going contact with the birthmother, have a difficult time bonding with the child.

 ______ Strongly agree
 ______ Agree
 ______ Neutral
 ______ Disagree
 ______ Strongly disagree

29) In comparing open adoption to closed adoption, which adoption would you support if you or a friend were to become pregnant (Open adoption being that the birthparents can have ongoing contact with the child and adoptive family. Where as closed adoption do not allow for any contact by the birthparents). (Please check one)

 ______ Closed adoption
 ______ Open adoption
 ______ I do not know which one to support