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Communicative Openness in Adoption, Knowledge of Culture of Origin, and Adoption Identity in Adolescents Adopted From Romania

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Communicative Openness in Adoption, Knowledge of Culture of Origin, and Adoption Identity in Adolescents Adopted From Romania

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Eighty adolescents (39 male, mean age = 15.74 years) adopted from Romanian institutions in early childhood rated their own and their adoptive parents' communicative openness, their knowledge of Romanian culture, and positive and negative feelings concerning birth parents, being placed for adoption, and being adopted. Adolescents were moderately comfortable talking about their adoptions but perceived their parents to be very comfortable. Nearly 40% reported no familiarity with Romanian culture. Youth with more familiarity with Romanian culture were more communicatively open and had more positive adoption identities. Greater communicative openness was also associated with more positive adoption identities. Gender and age at adoption differences are reported.

KEYWORDS adoption, communicative openness, ethnic identity

INTRODUCTION

Within adoption theory and practice, considerable importance is placed on open communication as a way of supporting adoptees' development of positive views regarding their birth parents, relinquishments, and adoptions (Jones & Hackett, 2007). Positive views about these matters are theorized to reduce the adopted child's sense of rejection and loss (Brodzinsky, 2005)

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and, hence, contribute to a healthy identity as an adopted person. Despite the significance afforded to communicative openness in adoption, it has rarely been empirically investigated in relation to perceptions of adoptees that bear on their adoption identities. This is particularly true as concerns intercountry (IC) adoptees, whose adoption identities must potentially account for cultural/ethnic backgrounds that are different from those of their adoptive parents. In the present study, in a sample of youth adopted from Romania by Canadian families, we investigated adolescents' communicative openness, knowledge of culture of origin, and aspects of adoption identity including their feelings about their birth parents, relinquishments, and adoptions.

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Communicative Openness in Adoption

The concept of communicative openness derives from the seminal work of Kirk (1964), who identified two patterns in adoptive parents' understanding of the differences between adoptive and birth families: rejection of the idea that there are differences between adoptive and birth families (RD parents) and acknowledgement and embracing differences (AD parents). Kirk noted that RD parents are likely to avoid discussion of their child's origins and be less empathic toward the birth family whereas AD families acknowledge and accept their child's connection to two families and are more empathic to the birth parents. In so doing, AD parents are thought to provide a healthier environment that allows for continuity in adopted children's personal histories, which in turn enhances their senses of self and adoption identities (Kirk, 1964).

These ideas have been elaborated on by Brodzinsky (2005, 2006) and others (e.g., Grotevant, Perry, & McRoy, 2005; Wrobel, Kohler, Grotevant, McRoy, 2003) in developing the concept of communicative openness, which refers to "a willingness on the part of individuals to consider the meaning of adoption in their lives, to share that meaning with others, to explore adoption-related issues in the context of family life, and to acknowledge and support the child's dual connection to two families" (Brodzinsky, 2005, p. 149). Although the degree of communicative openness within an adoptive family is assumed to result from reciprocal influences between parents and adopted children, from a developmental perspective it is presumed that the attitudes and behaviors of the adoptive parents create the initial context that supports children's subsequent communicative openness or lack thereof (Brodzinsky, 2005; Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005).

The empirical evidence, though sparse, generally supports the hypothesis that more open communication patterns facilitate more positive adoption identities. For example, positive associations have been found between communicative openness and young adult adoptees' recollections of

family cohesion and closeness in childhood and adolescence (Sobol, Delaney, & Earn, 1994), adult adoptees satisfaction with their adoptions (Howe & Feast, 2000), and preteen adoptees' self-esteem (Brodzinsky, 2006). Further, Hawkins et al. (2007) reported that adolescent adoptees who were happy with the amount of adoption-related communication in their families had higher levels of self-esteem at age 15 and felt more positively about being adopted and about their birth parents giving them up than those who were not happy with levels of communication in their adoptive families.

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Knowledge of Culture of Origin

An interesting feature of the sample studied by Hawkins et al. (2007) is that the majority (62%) of the adolescent participants were IC adoptees with cultural/ethnic origins that differed from those of their adoptive parents. Within the literature on transracial and IC adoptions, the ethnic identities of adoptees are receiving increasing attention (e.g., see Scherman & Harre, 2008; Vonk, 2001), a trend that has probably been influenced by the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that knowledge of one's culture of origin is a fundamental right of the child (see Westhues & Cohen, 1998). This position is acknowledged in the 1993 Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect to Intercountry Adoption, which indicates that eligibility to adopt internationally should include the ability of parents to facilitate the child's identity development including "his or her ethnic, religious, and cultural background" (Article 16, No. 1b).

Fostering the ethnic/cultural identities of IC adoptees requires what Vonk (2001) has called culturally competent parenting, which entails, among other things, encouraging and enabling adopted children to learn about and participate in their cultures of origin. Hawkins et al. (2007) did not address their participants' knowledge of their culture of origin (Romanian) or how such knowledge may have related to communicative openness or have contributed to their identities as adopted persons. However, it seems likely that greater communicative openness in the families of IC adoptees would be associated with more culturally competent parenting. Indeed, interest in and willingness to explore the meaning of adoption and support one's child's dual connection to two families would seem to be a necessary, though possibly not sufficient, condition for pursuing culturally competent parenting. Moreover, given the emphasis on the importance of ethnic identity for IC adoptees (Scherman & Harre, 2008; Vonk, 2001) one would expect adoptees' greater knowledge of culture of origin to be related not only to greater communicative openness but also to a more positive identity as an adopted person.

In the present study, we examined self-reported communicative openness, views of parents' communicative openness, knowledge of culture of

origin, and feelings about birth parents, relinquishment, and adoption within a sample of adolescents adopted from Romanian institutions by Canadian families. On the basis of previous findings that girls express greater interest in exploring adoption issues than boys (Wroebel, Ayers-Lopez, Grotevant, McRoy, & Friedrick, 1996), we anticipated that girls would self-report greater communicative openness. To test the suggestion that greater pre-adoption adversity may make communicative openness more difficult or stressful (Hawkins et al., 2007), we examined differences in communicative openness among groups with varying lengths of institutional deprivation prior to adoption. Regardless of sex or length of pre-adoption adversity, we expected greater communicative openness to be associated with more positive and less negative feelings about birth parents, relinquishment, and adoption. We also anticipated positive associations between adolescents' exposure to Romanian culture and indices of communicative openness and positive feelings about birth parents, relinquishment, and adoption.

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METHODS

Participants

Since 1992, we have been following a sample of children drawn from the population of all children adopted from Romania by families in British Columbia, Canada, in 1990 and 1991 ($N = 142$). One hundred thirty-one (92%) were contacted and of those, 75 met the criteria for inclusion in the research, which included being adopted from an "orphanage" or certainty on the part of the adoptive parents that if they had not adopted their child, he or she would have gone to such an institution. This latter group included children adopted from maternity hospitals ($n = 17$) or from desperate birth parents ($n = 4$). In all cases, pre-adoption rearing conditions were characterized by deprivation. The longitudinal participants have been assessed four times. At the most recent phase of data collection when they were approximately 16 years old, we expanded the sample by recruiting another group of Romanian adoptees from across Canada, all of whom were adopted from institutions. Recruitment occurred through postings on adoption websites, in newsletters, and through word of mouth.

Participants in the present study included 80 (39 male) adolescents (mean age = 15.74 years; $SD = 2.25$ years), 36 were longitudinal participants (20 male; mean age = 14.95, $SD = 2.55$, range = 10–20 years), and 44 were participating for the first time (19 male; mean age = 16.69, $SD = 1.33$, range = 15–21 years). Males and females did not differ in age (males = 15.85 years; females = 15.63 years). Age at adoption ranged from 2 weeks to 68 months ($M = 18$ months; $SD = 16.63$ months). The sample was divided into 3 age-at-adoption groups based on cutoffs shown to be meaningful in previous research (see Kumsta, Rutter, Stevens, & Sonuga-Barke, 2010).

Twenty-six participants were adopted prior to 6 months of age ($M = 2.14$ months; $SD = 1.39$ months), 35 were adopted between the ages of 6 and 24 months ($M = 16.31$ months; $SD = 4.79$ months), and 19 were older than 24 months at the time of adoption ($M = 41$ months; $SD = 12.07$ months). Approximately half of each group was male. A one-way analysis of variance revealed non-significant differences among the three groups on age at assessment (F (2, 77) = 1.15, $p = .32$).

Measure and Variables

Participants completed a questionnaire designed to assess their views and feelings about communicative openness, knowledge of culture of origin, their birth families, being placed for adoption, and being adopted. The items used in the present study can be found in the Appendix. This questionnaire was included in a larger package of measures that was delivered to the participants and returned to the researchers via mail.

Data Reduction

A principal components confirmatory factor analysis (oblique rotation) was performed on 14 items from the questionnaire that were intended to tap adolescents' perceptions of their own and their adoptive parents' communicative openness and their exposure to Romanian culture. Specifying three factors yielded a solution that accounted for 65% of the variance, with all items loading on their expected factors (see Table 1). Scores for "communicative openness–self" (items 1, 2, 3, and 4; Cronbach's alpha = .87), "communicative openness–parents" (items 5, 6, 7, and 8; alpha = .74), and "exposure to Romanian culture" (items 11a–f; alpha = .86) were formed by summing respective items.

Four additional items asked respondents to indicate on 3-point scales (not at all, a little, a lot) the degree to which they felt four negative emotions (anger, sadness, confusion, and hurt) and four positive emotions (understanding, love, respect, and curiosity) in relation to their birth mothers and birth fathers. Two similar items asked about feelings regarding being placed for adoption and being adopted. For these items respondents rated, on 3-point scales, the negative emotions of anger, sadness, confusion, and hurt and the positive feelings of understanding, respect, happiness, and thankfulness. For each item, ratings of positive emotions were summed to produce the following composite scores: positive feelings for birth mother (alpha = .79), birth father (alpha = .80), being placed for adoption (alpha = .86), and being adopted (alpha = .58). Ratings of negative emotions were summed to produce negative feeling scores regarding birth mothers (alpha = .72), birth fathers (alpha = .80), being placed for adoption (alpha = .80), and being

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TABLE 1 Factor Loadings for 14 Items From the Adoption Questionnaire ($N = 80$)

Item	CO–Self	CO–Parent	Exp Rom Cult
How comfortable are you talking about:			
Your adoption?	.68		
Your background in Romania?	.94		
Your birth mother?	.94		
Your birth father?	.80		
How comfortable are your parents talking about:			
Your adoption?		.62	
Your background in Romania?	.31	.42	
Your birth mother?		.92	
Your birth father?		.88	
How much have you:			
Read books on Romania?			.67
Attended Romanian cultural events?			.85
Joined a Romanian cultural group?			.84
Discussed Romanian culture with your parents?			.74
Learned Romanian language?			.82
Learned Romanian songs, stories, etc.?			.76

Note. Factor loadings < .30 are suppressed. CO = communicative openness; Exp Rom Cult = exposure to Romanian culture.

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adopted (alpha = .60). Participants responded to two additional items, one regarding familiarity with Romanian culture and the other concerning the appropriateness of the amount of adoption-related discussion in their homes (see items 9 and 10 in Appendix).

The list of variables derived from the adoption questionnaire and examined in this study can be found in Table 2.

RESULTS

Descriptive Data

Adolescents' Communicative Openness

The four items comprising the "communicative openness–self" scale were first examined individually to determine the frequency of each of the three possible responses (see Table 3). In response to the item "How comfortable are you talking about your adoption?" 27% ($n = 22$) of participants indicated that they were "not at all comfortable" and 73% ($n = 58$) indicated that they were "somewhat comfortable." It is noteworthy that not a single participant endorsed being "completely comfortable" talking about his or her adoption despite a considerable number indicating that they felt "completely comfortable," and relatively few indicated feeling "not at all comfortable" talking about their background in Romania, their birth mother, and their birth father

TABLE 2 Descriptive Statistics for Non-Categorical Variables

Variable	Mean (Standard Deviation)					
	Total	Male	Female	<6 mo	6–24 mo	>24 mo
CO–self	8.73 (2.28)	8.72 (2.34)	8.76 (2.24)	8.73 (2.46)	9.00 (2.32)	8.22 (1.93)
CO–parents	10.80 (1.64)	10.79 (1.51)	10.85 (1.78)	11.00 (1.32)	10.88 (1.74)	10.33 (1.85)
Exp Rom cult	4.13 (3.46)	4.15 (3.79)	4.10 (3.17)	3.38 (3.31)	4.22 (3.64)	5.00 (3.25)
Pos birth mother	8.91 (2.42)	7.96 (2.57)	9.65 (2.03)	8.30 (2.68)	9.03 (2.47)	9.47 (1.85)
Neg birth mother	5.90 (1.88)	5.29 (1.51)	6.40 (2.02)	4.95 (1.32)	5.90 (1.72)	7.29 (2.13)
Pos birth father	7.18 (2.53)	6.56 (2.48)	7.79 (2.47)	5.76 (2.44)	7.48 (2.57)	8.46 (1.71)
Neg birth father	6.52 (2.41)	6.00 (2.26)	7.04 (2.49)	6.33 (2.82)	6.22 (1.89)	7.29 (2.84)
Pos placed for adoption	9.88 (2.49)	9.47 (2.63)	10.21 (2.35)	9.43 (2.71)	10.03 (2.55)	10.19 (2.10)
Neg placed for adoption	6.00 (2.20)	5.58 (2.09)	6.36 (2.26)	5.15 (1.69)	6.19 (2.22)	6.73 (2.52)
Pos being adopted	10.19 (2.15)	9.52 (2.54)	10.76 (1.59)	10.05 (2.42)	10.68 (1.51)	9.44 (2.28)
Neg being adopted	5.28 (1.74)	5.13 (1.87)	5.39 (1.65)	4.90 (1.30)	5.19 (1.75)	6.00 (2.14)

Note. CO = communicative openness; Exp Rom cult = exposure to Romanian culture; Pos birth mother = positive feelings about birth mother; Neg birth mother = negative feelings about birth mother; Pos birth father = positive feelings about birth father; Neg birth father = negative feelings about birth father; Pos placed for adoption = positive feelings about being placed for adoption; Neg placed for adoption = negative feelings about being placed for adoption; Pos being adopted = positive feelings about being adopted; Neg being adopted = negative feelings about being adopted.

TABLE 3 Frequency and Percentage of Responses to the "Communicative Openness–Self" and "Communicative Openness–Parent" Items

Item	Not at All Comfortable	Somewhat Comfortable	Completely Comfortable
How comfortable are you talking about:			
Your adoption?	22 (27%)	58 (73%)	0
Your background in Romania?	9 (11%)	19 (24%)	52 (65%)
Your birth mother?	12 (15%)	29 (36%)	39 (49%)
Your birth father?	19 (24%)	31 (39%)	30 (37%)
How comfortable are your parents talking about:			
Your adoption?	1 (1%)	18 (23%)	61 (76%)
Your background in Romania?	2 (2%)	10 (13%)	67 (85%)
Your birth mother?	3 (4%)	17 (21%)	60 (75%)
Your birth father?	9 (11%)	20 (25%)	50 (63%)

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(see Table 3). The composite "communicative openness–self" scores based on these four items ranged from 4 to 11 (possible range, 4–12) with a mean of 8.74 in the full sample (see Table 2). Analysis of variance (ANOVA) indicated that "communicative openness–self" scores did not vary by sex (F (1, 78) = .006, p = .94) or age at adoption (F (2, 77) = .70, p = .50).

Adolescents' Perceptions of Parents' Communicative Openness

In contrast to their own levels of (dis)comfort talking about their adoptions, the large majority of adolescents (76%) perceived their parents to be "completely comfortable" and only one participant perceived his or her parents to be "not at all comfortable" talking about the adoption (Table 3). A similar pattern was seen in adolescents' perceptions of their parents' comfort in talking about their background in Romania, birth mother, and birth father, with most adolescents indicating that their parents were "completely comfortable" with these topics. The composite "communicative openness–parents" scores based on these four items ranged from 6 to 12 (possible range, 4–12) with a mean of 10.80 in the full sample (see Table 2). A paired samples t-test indicated that adolescents perceived their parents to be significantly more communicatively open than they were themselves (t (79) = 9.07, p < .001). ANOVA tests found adolescents' perceptions of their parents' communicative openness did not vary by sex (F (1, 78) = .001, p = .98) or age at adoption (F (2, 77) = .973, p = .38).

Related to communicative openness, adolescents were asked whether they felt the amount of discussion about their adoption that went on at home was "not enough," "about right," or "too much." The vast majority of adoptees (81%; n = 65) reported that the amount of discussion was "about right"; 9% felt there was "not enough" and 10% indicated that there was "too much." Chi-square analyses revealed no systematic relationship between sex (χ^2 (2) = 2.85, p = .24) or age at adoption (χ^2 (4) = .63, p = .96) and satisfaction with the amount of discussion about adoption in the home. ANOVA tests, however, revealed significant differences in "communicative openness–self" scores (but not for "communicative openness–parent" scores; F (2, 77) = 1.59, p = .21) among youth who felt the amount of discussion about their adoption that went on at home was "not enough," "about right," or "too much" (F (2, 79) = 7.50, p = .001). Those who felt there was "too much" discussion had significantly (p < .05) lower "communicative openness–self" scores (M = 6.12) than those who felt there was "about right" (M = 9.12) or "not enough" (M = 8.14) discussion.

Familiarity With and Exposure to Romanian Culture

Of the 76 adolescents who responded to the question "How familiar are you with Romanian culture?" 39% (n = 30) indicated "not at all" and 61% (n = 46) indicated "somewhat." None indicated that they were "very familiar" with

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TABLE 4 Number and Percentage of Adolescents Reporting Each Level of Exposure to Romanian Culture

	Not at All	A Little	Somewhat	A Lot
Read books	20 (25%)	46 (58%)	12 (15%)	1 (1%)
Attended cultural events	44 (56%)	22 (28%)	13 (16%)	0
Joined a cultural group	55 (70%)	20 (25%)	4 (5%)	0
Discussed the culture with parents	27 (34%)	24 (31%)	20 (25%)	8 (10%)
Learned the language	40 (50%)	32 (41%)	7 (9%)	0
Learned stories/songs, etc.	44 (56%)	25 (32%)	8 (10%)	2 (3%)

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their culture of origin. Chi-square tests indicated no sex (χ^2 (1) = .71, p = .40) or age-at-adoption (χ^2 (2) = .61, p = .74) differences in how adolescents responded to this question.

Consistent with their self-reported familiarity with Romanian culture, very few adoptees claimed "a lot" of exposure to Romanian cultural activities; nevertheless, most had been exposed to Romanian culture in one way or another (see Table 4). The composite "exposure to Romanian culture" scores ranged from 0 to 12 with a mean of 4.31. ANOVA tests indicated that "exposure to Romanian culture" scores did not vary by sex (F (1, 78) = .005, p = .94) or age at adoption (F (2, 77) = 1.19, p = .31) (see Table 2) but did significantly differ (F (1, 74) = 4.69, p = .03, d = .51) between the adolescents who reported being "not at all" and "somewhat" familiar with Romanian culture, with the latter reporting greater exposure (M = 4.87) than the former (M = 3.17).

Adoptees' Feelings About Their Birth Parents

Table 5 displays the frequency with which adoptees endorsed feeling various levels (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, and 3 = a lot) of negative and positive emotions in relation to their birth mothers and fathers. A sizeable proportion

TABLE 5 Number and Percentage of Adolescents Reporting Each Level of the Positive and Negative Emotions in Relation to Their Birth Parents

	Birth Mother			Birth Father		
	Not at All	A Little	A Lot	Not at All	A Little	A Lot
Anger	55 (75%)	17 (23%)	1 (1%)	38 (63%)	12 (20%)	10 (17%)
Sadness	28 (38%)	39 (53%)	6 (8%)	31 (51%)	22 (36%)	8 (13%)
Confusion	34 (47%)	25 (34%)	14 (19%)	23 (39%)	19 (32%)	17 (29%)
Hurt	47 (66%)	19 (27%)	5 (7%)	36 (63%)	12 (21%)	9 (16%)
Understanding	12 (17%)	28 (39%)	31 (44%)	28 (48%)	19 (33%)	11 (19%)
Love	15 (21%)	27 (39%)	28 (40%)	27 (47%)	18 (31%)	13 (22%)
Respect	12 (17%)	23 (33%)	35 (50%)	27 (46%)	19 (32%)	13 (22%)
Curious	15 (21%)	26 (36%)	31 (43%)	19 (32%)	19 (32%)	22 (37%)

of the sample reported having no negative feelings for their birth mothers. However, a small number reported feeling "a lot" of anger (1%), sadness (8%), confusion (19%), and hurt (7%). Similarly, most adolescents reported feeling "a lot" of the positive feelings in relation to their birth mothers, but a minority reported feeling no understanding (17%), love (21%), respect (17%), or curiosity (21%). In relation to their birth fathers, more adolescents reported feeling "a lot" of anger (17%), sadness (13%), confusion (29%), and hurt (16%) and "not at all" understanding (48%), loving (47%), respectful (46%), or curious (32%).

Tests of sex and age-at-adoption differences in feelings for birth mothers and fathers were conducted on the composite positive and negative scores. Generally speaking, girls reported stronger feelings than boys (see Table 2). Differences were statistically detectable for "positive feelings–birth mother" (F (1, 66) = 8.84, $p < .01$) and "negative feelings–birth mother" (F (1, 61) = 5.89, $p < .05$). The trend in age-at-adoption differences was for stronger feelings to be associated with older age at adoption (Table 2). Age-at-adoption differences were statistically detectable for "positive feelings–birth father" (F (2, 55) = 5.20, $p < .01$) and "negative feelings–birth mother" (F (2, 60) = 7.73, $p < .001$). Youth adopted at ages younger than 6 months reported feeling significantly ($p < .05$) less positive about their birth fathers (M = 5.76) than those who were adopted at ages older than 24 months (M = 8.46). Youth adopted between 6 and 24 months of age did not significantly differ from either of the other groups in positive feelings for birth fathers ($M = 7.48$). On "negative feelings–birth mother," youth adopted before the age of 6 months ($M = 4.95$) and between 6 and 24 months ($M = 5.90$) did not significantly differ, but both these groups reported significantly ($p < .05$) lower negative feelings for birth mothers than the group adopted at ages older than 24 months ($M = 7.29$).

Bivariate correlations indicated non-significant associations between positive and negative feelings about birth mothers (r (66) = .24, $p = .06$) and birth fathers (r (53) = .13, $p = .34$).

Adoptees' Feelings About Being Placed for Adoption and Being Adopted

Table 6 displays the frequency with which adoptees endorsed feeling various levels (1 = not at all, 2 = a little, and 3 = a lot) of negative and positive emotions in relation to being placed for adoption and being adopted. The majority of participants did not hold negative feelings about either being placed for adoption or about being adopted. Nevertheless, regarding being placed for adoption, a small number reported feeling "a lot" of anger (9%), sadness (15%), confusion (16%), and hurt (9%) and "not at all" understanding (14%), respectful (14%), happy (23%), or thankful (11%) about being placed for adoption. The majority of participants also endorsed strong ("a lot") positive feelings about being placed for adoption and about being adopted

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TABLE 6 Number and Percentage of Adolescents Reporting Each Level of the Positive and Negative Emotions in Relation to Being Placed for Adoption and Being Adopted

	Placed for Adoption			Being Adopted		
	Not at All	A Little	A Lot	Not at All	A Little	A Lot
Angry	51 (73%)	13 (19%)	6 (9%)	59 (84%)	8 (11%)	3 (4%)
Sad	33 (45%)	29 (40%)	11 (15%)	50 (70%)	18 (25%)	3 (4%)
Confused	40 (56%)	20 (28%)	11 (16%)	41 (59%)	23 (33%)	6 (9%)
Hurt	45 (66%)	17 (25%)	6 (9%)	54 (77%)	11 (16%)	5 (7%)
Understanding	10 (14%)	15 (20%)	49 (66%)	11 (15%)	20 (27%)	43 (58%)
Respectful	10 (14%)	21 (30%)	40 (56%)	8 (11%)	23 (33%)	39 (56%)
Happy	16 (23%)	17 (24%)	37 (53%)	7 (10%)	23 (32%)	43 (59%)
Thankful	8 (11%)	18 (24%)	49 (65%)	7 (9%)	10 (13%)	58 (77%)

but, again, a small number reported feeling "a lot" of anger (4%), sadness (4%), confusion (9%), and hurt (7%) and feeling "not at all" understanding (15%), respectful (11%), happy (10%), or thankful (9%) about being adopted.

Again, tests of sex and age-at-adoption differences in feelings about being placed for adoption and being adopted were conducted on the composite positive and negative scores. Trends in sex and age-at-adoption differences on these scores were similar to those for feelings about birth parents (Table 2), with girls and participants who were older at the time of adoption tending to report stronger feelings. Sex differences were statistically detectable for "positive feelings–being adopted" (F (1, 66) = 6.02, $p < .05$, $d = .58$), with girls expressing stronger feelings. There were no statistically detectable differences among age-at-adoption groups.

Bivariate correlations indicated non-significant associations between positive and negative feelings about being placed for adoption (r (65) = –.17, $p = .17$) and being adopted (r (64) = –.04, $p = .75$).

Associations Among Variables

Does Familiarity With and Exposure to Romanian Culture Positively Relate to Adolescents Reports of Their Own and Their Parents' Communicative Openness?

Correlation analyses revealed non-significant associations between "communicative openness–self" and "exposure to Romanian culture" (r (80) = .10, $p = .36$) and between "communicative openness–parents" and "exposure to Romanian culture" (r (80) = .00, $p = 1.00$). However, ANOVA tests (see Table 7) indicated that adolescents who reported being "somewhat" familiar with Romanian culture had a higher mean "communicative openness–self" score (F (1, 74) = 4.85, $p = .03$, $d = .50$) than adolescents who reported being "not at all" familiar with Romanian culture. Mean scores for "communicative openness–parents" did not differ between these groups (F (1, 74) = .33, $p = .57$, $d = .14$).

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TABLE 7 Mean Differences in Communicative Openness (Self and Parents) and Adoption Identity Variables Between Groups Varying in Familiarity With Romanian Culture

	Not at All Familiar		Somewhat Familiar	
	Mean	*SD*	Mean	*SD*
CO–self*	8.07	2.69	9.20	1.78
CO–parents	10.90	1.67	10.67	1.67
Positive birth mother**	7.91	2.58	9.56	2.07
Negative birth mother	6.05	2.17	5.82	1.75
Positive birth father**	5.89	1.93	7.88	2.52
Negative birth father	6.33	2.61	6.71	2.38
Positive placed for adoption	9.36	2.66	10.16	2.45
Negative placed for adoption	6.35	2.35	5.78	2.13
Positive being adopted**	9.14	2.78	10.70	1.61
Negative being adopted	5.67	2.28	5.00	1.32

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; CO = communicative openness; Positive/Negative birth mother = positive and negative feelings about birth mother; Positive/Negative birth father = positive and negative feelings about birth father; Positive/Negative placed for adoption = positive and negative feelings about being placed for adoption; Positive/Negative being adopted = positive and negative feelings about being adopted.

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Does Greater Familiarity With and Exposure to Romanian Culture Relate to More Positive and Less Negative Feelings About Birth Parents, Being Placed for Adoption, and Being Adopted?

ANOVA tests revealed a consistent trend for those who were "somewhat" familiar with Romanian culture to feel less negatively and more positively about their birth parents, being placed for adoption, and being adopted than those adoptees who reported being "not at all" familiar with their culture of origin (see Table 7). These differences were statistically detectable for "positive feelings–birth mother" (F (1, 61) = 7.64, $p < .01$, $d = .71$), "positive feelings–birth father" (F (1, 50) = 8.56, $p < .01$, $d = .87$), and "positive feelings–being adopted" (F (1, 63) = 8.23, $p < .01$, $d = .68$). Bivariate correlations revealed non-significant associations between "exposure to Romanian culture" scores and positive and negative feelings about birth mothers (positive, $r = .17$, $p = .18$; negative, $r = -.02$, $p = .86$), birth fathers (positive, $r = .19$, $p = .17$; negative, $r = -.01$, $p = .93$), being placed for adoption (positive, $r = .12$, $p = .33$; negative, $r = -.08$, $p = .54$), and being adopted (positive, $r = .002$, $p = .98$; negative, $r = .11$, $p = .39$).

Do Perceptions of Greater Communicative Openness Relate to More Positive and Less Negative Feelings About Birth Parents, Being Placed for Adoption, and Being Adopted?

Adolescents' perceptions of their own and their parents' communicative openness were significantly correlated with each other (r (80) = .50, $p <$ .001) and with feelings about their birth parents, relinquishments, and

TABLE 8 Correlations Between Self and Parent Communicative Openness and Adolescents' Feelings About Birth Parents, Being Placed for Adoption, and Being Adopted

	CO–Self	CO–Parent
Positive birth mother ($n = 66$)	.34**	.24
Negative birth mother ($n = 63$)	–.25*	–.25*
Positive birth father ($n = 56$)	.15	.10
Negative birth father ($n = 55$)	–.16	–.12
Positive placed for adoption ($n = 68$)	.22	.31**
Negative placed for adoption ($n = 67$)	–.48***	–.46***
Positive being adopted ($n = 66$)	.20	.12
Negative being adopted ($n = 67$)	–.33**	–.10

Note. *$p < .05$; **$p < .01$; ***$p < .001$; CO = communicative openness; Positive birth mother = positive feelings about birth mother; Negative birth mother = negative feelings about birth mother; Positive birth father = positive feelings about birth father; Negative birth father = negative feelings about birth father; Positive placed for adoption = positive feelings about being placed for adoption; Negative placed for adoption = negative feelings about being placed for adoption; Positive being adopted = positive feelings about being adopted; Negative being adopted = negative feelings about being adopted.

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adoptions (see Table 8). "Communicative openness–self" significantly correlated with positive feelings for birth mother (r (66) = .34, $p < .01$), negative feelings for birth mother (r (63) = –.25, $p < .05$), negative feelings about being placed for adoption (r (67) = –.48, $p < .001$), and negative feelings about being adopted (r (67) = –.33, $p < .01$). "Communicative openness–parents" significantly correlated with negative feelings for birth mother (r (63) = –.25, $p < .05$), positive feelings about being placed for adoption (r (68) = .31, $p < .01$), and negative feelings about being placed for adoption (r (67) = –.46, $p < .001$).

DISCUSSION

In this study, we explored communicative openness, familiarity with and exposure to culture of origin, and indices of adoption identity including feelings about birth parents, relinquishment, and adoption from the perspectives of adolescent IC Romanian adoptees. Certain descriptive aspects of our study were similar to that of Hawkins et al. (2007), who also examined communicative openness in a sample of adolescent IC Romanian adoptees. It was striking that although in our sample not one youth reported feeling "completely comfortable" talking about his or her adoption, Hawkins et al. (2007) found that close to two-thirds of their sample reported no difficulties in talking about their adoptions. Indeed, Hawkins et al. also reported larger percentages of youth than were found in the present sample who were completely comfortable talking about their birth mothers (Hawkins et al., 56% vs. present sample, 49%) and their birth fathers (Hawkins et al., 57% vs. present sample, 38%).

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These differences between our findings and those of Hawkins et al. (2007) may be due to methodological factors. In the present study we asked participants, "How comfortable are you talking about your adoption?" whereas Hawkins et al asked, "Do you find it difficult to talk about your adoption?" Although similar, the former question is worded positively while the latter is worded negatively, possibly influencing adolescents to interpret them somewhat differently. Moreover, in the present study adolescents responded to an individually completed questionnaire, whereas in the Hawkins et al. study, participants responded to the questions of an in-person interviewer; adolescents may have felt more comfortable admitting to discomfort in talking about their adoptions on an anonymous questionnaire than to an interviewer who was interested in discussing with them that very topic. Interestingly, although the majority of participants in the study by Hawkins et al. claimed to have no difficulty talking about their adoptions, the authors themselves noted, "there were some difficulties in interviewing the young people, as some of the adoptees have difficulty in talking about issues" (p. 153).

In contrast to findings concerning adolescents' own communicative openness, results of the two studies were nearly identical concerning adolescents' perceptions of their parents' communicative openness and their own satisfaction with the amount of adoption-related discussion in their homes. In both studies, the vast majority of youth (approximately 70%) reported that they perceived their parents to be completely comfortable talking about their adoptions, birth mothers, and birth fathers. An even greater number of adolescents in each study (approximately 80%) reported satisfaction with the amount of adoption-related discussion in their homes, and in each study the proportion of adolescents reporting too much or too little adoption-related discussion in their homes was approximately 10%. Given that communication about adoption is universally recommended by adoption professionals (Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005) and is seen as morally mandatory for adoptive parents (Triseliotis, 2000), it is encouraging that so many Romanian IC adoptees perceive their parents to be communicatively open.

On the basis of previous findings that girls express greater interest in exploring adoption issues than boys (Wroebel et al., 1996), we anticipated that girls would self-report greater communicative openness than boys; however, like Hawkins et al. (2007), we found no sex differences in adolescents' perceptions of their own or their parents' communicative openness. As concerns age at adoption, Howe and Feast (2000) suggested that children adopted at later ages may find the communication process with their parents more difficult than those adopted younger. Similarly, Hawkins et al. hypothesized that greater pre-adoption adversity may make communicative openness more difficult or stressful. Nevertheless, we found no differences among groups of adoptees with varying lengths of institutional deprivation prior to adoption in either their perceptions of their own or their parents' communicative

openness. This is possibly due to the relatively restricted range in age at adoption in the present sample (the oldest age at adoption was 68 months).

Despite the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989) identifying knowledge of one's culture of origin as a fundamental right of all children and the 1993 Hague Convention indicating that eligibility to adopt internationally should include the ability of adoptive parents to facilitate the child's ethnic/cultural identity, not one participant in the present study reported being very familiar, and nearly 40% reported being not at all familiar, with Romanian culture. These findings indicate even less familiarity with culture of origin in the present sample than Westhues and Cohen (1998) found over a decade ago in their sample of IC adoptees in Canada, in which approximately 20% of participants had no knowledge of their cultures of origin and about 60% had only a superficial familiarity. Notwithstanding the self-reported lack of familiarity with Romanian culture in the present sample, most participants reported to have been exposed to at least some aspect of Romanian culture. Not surprisingly, those who reported greater familiarity with Romanian culture also reported greater exposure to it.

Generally speaking, participants in this study endorsed stronger positive than negative feelings about their birth mothers, birth fathers, being placed for adoption, and being adopted. An interesting finding, however, was the lack of association between positive and negative feelings, whether they were in relation to birth mothers, birth fathers, relinquishment, or being adopted. One might have expected youth to feel either predominantly positive or predominantly negative about each of these matters, in which case we would have seen inverse relationships between reported positive and negative feelings. Alternatively, one might have expected youth to either feel strongly about these matters or not, in which case we would have seen positive associations between reported positive and negative feelings. The lack of association between positive and negative feelings regarding birth parents, relinquishment, and adoption suggests that youths' feelings about these matters are complex and show considerable individual variation. More in-depth studies addressing potential explanations for and consequences of the variability in adoption identities are needed.

Our finding that girls tended to report stronger feelings (positive and negative) concerning their birth parents and their adoptions than boys is consistent with previous work showing that girls tend to be more interested in their adoptions and birth families (Wrobel et al., 1996), think about their biological families more (Irhammer & Cederblad, 2000), and are reported by parents to be more concerned about their birth families (Hawkins et al., 2007) than boys.

One finding we did not anticipate was that youth adopted after 24 months of age tended to report stronger feelings (positive and negative) concerning their birth parents, relinquishments, and adoptions than did youth

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who were younger at adoption. These differences were statistically detectable only as concerns negative feelings for birth mothers and positive feelings for birth fathers, but the pattern was consistent across all ratings with the exception of that for positive feelings regarding being adopted. With a mean age at adoption of 41 months, it is possible that some adolescents in the oldest age-at-adoption group had direct knowledge and memories of their adoptions and their pre-adoptive lives, which may have contributed to stronger feelings regarding issues related to their adoptions. An interesting avenue for future research may be to explore with older adoptees the relationships among pre-adoption memories, communicative openness, and adoption identity.

In the present study, we addressed adolescents' knowledge of their culture of origin in two slightly different ways, including an assessment of their exposure to various indices of Romanian culture and a more global measure of their self-perceived familiarity with Romanian culture, and hypothesized that knowledge of culture of origin would be positively associated with communicative openness. Although we found no relationship between adolescents' exposure to Romanian culture and either their own or their perceptions of their parents' communicative openness, youth who reported familiarity with Romanian culture self-reported greater communicative openness than did youth who reported no familiarity with Romanian culture. Why communicative openness was associated with familiarity with Romanian culture but not with exposure to Romanian culture is an interesting question. It is possible that the items in the exposure measure captured only superficial ways in which participants had contact with Romanian culture. If so, the lack of association with communicative openness may not be surprising. One example of more meaningful exposure is a visit to one's country of origin. While few participants in the present study had visited Romania, it is interesting that of the 11 who had, only 2 (18%) reported no familiarity with their culture of origin as compared to 39% reporting no familiarity in the entire sample.

We further expected that knowledge of culture of origin would be positively associated with indices of adoption identity and found some evidence for this. Again, exposure to Romanian culture did not prove to be a meaningful measure inasmuch as it was not related to any index of adoption identity. However, youth who reported some familiarity with Romanian culture also reported feeling significantly more positively about their birth mothers, birth fathers, and being adopted than youth who were not at all familiar with Romanian culture. Differences that were not statistically detectable were also in the predicted direction. These findings reinforce the view put forth by the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Hague Convention concerning the importance of cultural identity and lend support to calls for culturally competent parenting (e.g., Vonk, 2001) that encourages and enables adopted children to learn about and participate in their cultures of origin. At the same time, the results underscore the importance

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of ensuring that the cultural opportunities provided for IC adoptees involve more than just superficial exposure to culture of origin and entail meaningful experiences.

A final issue we addressed was the link between communicative openness and indices of adoption identity. Our results revealed that the more communicatively open adolescents reported being, the more positively and less negatively they felt about their birth mothers and the less negatively they felt about being placed for adoption and being adopted. Similarly, the more communicatively open adolescents perceived their parents to be, the less negatively and more positively they felt about being placed for adoption and the less negatively they felt about their birth mothers. These findings are consistent with the position that an open and honest dialogue regarding adoption between adopted children and parents is beneficial for children (Palacios & Sanchez-Sandoval, 2005) and represents a healthier approach than secrecy or denial concerning adoption-related issues within the family.

The current study has a number of limitations that require mention. First, we examined communicative openness only from the perspectives of adolescents and did not consider the perceptions of their adoptive parents. Although parents can provide a valuable viewpoint on communicative openness in the family, it is likely that perceptions of adoptees are more important as concerns the link between communicative openness and adoption identity. Second, our findings are limited to adolescents who were adopted from Romanian institutions. As such, all participants in the present study had experienced pre-adoption adversity, and given the historical circumstances of their abandonments, for many little accurate information is available on their origins. It has been suggested that problematic backgrounds such as these create situations in which the ability of children to express adoption-related emotions and the attunement of parents to those feelings is especially critical to healthy adoption communication (Brodzinsky, 2005). Hence, our findings may not generalize to adoptees with more positive early rearing histories.

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APPENDIX

Adoption Questionnaire

1. How comfortable are you talking about your adoption?
2. How comfortable are you talking about your background in Romania?
3. How comfortable are you talking about your birth mother?

4. How comfortable are you talking about your birth father?
5. How comfortable are your parents talking about your adoption?
6. How comfortable are your parents talking about your background in Romania?
7. How comfortable are your parents talking about your birth mother?
8. How comfortable are your parents talking about your birth father?
9. In terms of the amount of discussion you have at home about your adoption, is it (a) not enough, (b) about right, (c) too much?
10. How familiar are you with Romanian culture?
11. Please indicate if and how much you have done any of the following: (a) Read books on Romania (b) Attended Romanian cultural events (c) Joined a Romanian cultural group (d) Discussed Romanian culture with parents (e) Learned Romanian language (f) Learned Romanian songs/stories, etc.
12. When you think about your birth mother, to what degree do you feel (a) anger, (b) sadness, (c) understanding, (d) love, (e) respect, (f) confusion, (g) curious, (h) hurt?
13. When you think about your birth father, to what degree do you feel (a) anger, (b) sadness, (c) understanding, (d) love, (e) respect, (f) confusion, (g) curious, (h) hurt?
14. How do you feel about your birth parents having placed you for adoption? To what degree do you feel (a) anger, (b) sadness, (c) understanding, (d) love, (e) respect, (f) confusion, (g) curious, (h) hurt?
15. In general, how do you feel about being adopted? To what degree do you feel (a) anger, (b) sadness, (c) understanding, (d) love, (e) respect, (f) confusion, (g) curious, (h) hurt?

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