Physical and psychological presence and boundary ambiguity for all parties to adoption

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Physical presence

- The extent to which a person is physically present, available and interactive in a relationship

- In adoption, can be equated with contact.
  - **Low** = No/very little contact + low communicative openness (adopters)
  - **High** = Direct or indirect two way contact + high/moderate communicative openness (adopters)
Psychological presence

- The symbolic existence of an individual in the perceptions of family members (Fravel, 1995)

OR

- The extent to which an individual is ‘in the heart’ or ‘on the mind’ of another.

- May be positive or negative (valence)
Boundary ambiguity

- Occurs when psychological and physical presence are incongruent
- Always present to some degree for all parties in adoption
- Varies over time
- ‘Can contribute to family stress and impaired emotional health for all concerned’ (Fravel, 1995)
Reduced boundary ambiguity
(young person)

My mum always says after a visit (to birth mother) ‘you’re like two peas in a pod’ [laughs]

And how is that for you?

It’s a bit strange, seeing people who look like me. It’s quite nice in a way because like my best friend she really looks like her mum

- Psychological presence high
- Physical presence high
- Positive valence
Increased boundary ambiguity
(Young person)

I still feel mixed, completely mixed, like a roller coaster, sometimes I’ll be upset that I can’t see her. I’d really like to meet this person. But then I have in the past become incredibly angry, ‘why did you give me up for adoption?’ and all that and it’s just like, yeah, just confusion

- Psychological presence high
- Physical presence low (no contact)
- Negative valence
Boundary ambiguity

Young person

Thinking

Feeling

Doing

Boundary ambiguity reduced/increased

Valence
positive /negative

Adopter

Birth relative
Reduced boundary ambiguity: adoptive parent thinking

- The birth relative(s) have a positive role for my child
  For Lydia there was a piece of the jigsaw puzzle missing, and meeting (birth mother) has put that piece into place so I hope she can have a more fulfilled life as an adult because there isn’t still that question

- BUT, I am the parent of my child
  You are always their parent, even if they’ve got another parent. Because you are there to look after them all the time
Reduced boundary ambiguity: birth relative thinking

- The adopters are the parents of the child. I think when she was younger, she was mine. But as she’s grown up and I’ve seen how she is with them, obviously they’re her Mum and Dad. I’m not. I gave birth to her but I’m not her Mum (Birth mother)

- BUT I can have a positive role for the child
  A child wants to know where it’s coming from and where it wants to go. And maybe that’s what she’s got from us (Birth grandparent)
Reduced boundary ambiguity: young person thinking

- My adopters are my parents
  I adore my mum now, she’s so lovely and I couldn’t imagine life without them. It’s not thinking back ‘my life could have been like that’ because all I see is now
  (Adopted young person)

- My birth relatives have a different (positive) role for me
  I’ll ring her once a week or she’ll ring me. Helping me with my work and stuff
  (Adopted young person speaking about birth grandmother)
Reduced boundary ambiguity: feeling (all parties)

Positive and empathic

That side of her birth family are alright people. They’re decent people who just life went a bit wrong for. (Adopter)

For me she’s been very warm and accepting. Very open. (Birth relative)

I know my birth dad wanted to really make an effort to look after me and I respect him for that. (Young person)
Realistic appraisal of strengths and limitations

After I met her that was when I thought that the was worst idea, letter contact, because you put them on a pedestal and then you meet them and she’s an absolute crazy woman.

I was just going on what I’d been told really…so I was thinking of her as this person that didn’t really want me anymore… Then I knew that she didn’t give me up because she chose to, it was because she wasn’t in a mentally safe place where she could actually cope with me.
Reduced boundary ambiguity: doing (all parties)

- Active participation in contact (direct and indirect)
- Internet/Facebook
- Positively associated rituals
- Tangible reminders of each other
Messages for practice

For all parties, pre and post placement:

- Assess levels of psychological presence of the other party
- Promote positive valence (empathy) and realistic appraisal of strengths and difficulties
- When planning/supporting contact, promote thinking, feeling and doing that reduces boundary ambiguity