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"Siblings must stick together": Chilean parents' perspectives on sibling group adoption and post-adoption contact

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ABSTRACT

The inseparability of siblings is a key child rights principle, however, many children adopted from care are separated from siblings. Through a self-administered survey, we examined Chilean adoptive parents' perspectives on sibling group adoption and post-adoption sibling contact. We examined types and frequency of contact and a thematic analysis approach was used to analyze open-ended responses. Although most adoptive parents favored keeping siblings together, few had initiated post-adoption sibling contact. Barriers included misinformation, professional discouragement, questioning developmental appropriateness, and hesitancy to contact birth families. The implications for research and practice are explored.

Introduction

Sibling relationships are generally considered foundational lifelong relationships (Krebs, Singer, & Stearns, 2014). Siblings are not specifically mentioned in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) but Article 8 establishes that States Parties respect the right of the child to preserve their identity, including nationality, name, and family relations, with the latter including sibling relationships (Committee on the Rights of the Child, 2013). In addition, in 2021, the Committee reaffirmed that states should ensure that siblings stay together when possible and, when separated, have regular contact, provided this is safe and in their best interest. To date, the UNCRC has been ratified by all but two countries, providing a global framework for child-centered practices and policies. Some situations require the separation of siblings and this creates tension between the right to family relations, which is part of the right to identity, and the best interest of the child, which may require individualized care apart from siblings (Levy, 2022).

In particular, adoption alters a child's kinship network, including siblings who will need to renegotiate their relationship, whether placed for adoption together or separately (Meakings, Coffey, & Shelton, 2017). Given increased openness about adoption, particularly in the past decade, the separation of birth siblings is emerging as a concern for adoption research, policies, and practices across the globe. Much adoption legislation supports joint sibling placements as part of a child's best interests. In Chile, current Adoption Law (No.19.620, 1999), the Adoption Bill law (in parliamentary discussion) and the PRI`S Technical guidelines (SENAME, 2019) establish the principle of the inseparability of siblings, implying that priority should be given to keeping them together and, if this is not possible, they should be able to maintain their bond after adoption. Unfortunately, administrative child welfare data in Chile do not currently track sibling relationships, such as the presence of siblings in other placements or formal numbers of adoptions of sibling groups. In parallel, Chilean sibling groups have traditionally been adopted abroad through intercountry adoptions as a means of keeping siblings together as historically sibling groups were considered "priority adoptions" that were harder to place domestically. Notably, adoption of sibling groups is becoming more common in Chile, although siblings may continue to be separated at various points between initial removal and permanence.

Today, most Chilean adoptions are actively contested by the child's birth family. Indeed, in the last decade, more than 80% of cases of termination of parental authority (necessary prior to adoption) were due in part to parental incapacity rather than relinquishment (SENAME, 2020). This has impacted the profiles of adopted children in multiple ways because many are part of a sibling group and, since contested processes take longer, many are older when they are legally free for adoption. At the same time, contested adoptions and the strong stigma surrounding birth families create resistance to the introduction of post-adoption contact, given that the process leading to adoption is often controversial.

Despite the principle of sibling inseparability, it is only recently that Chilean adoption professionals have promoted the adoption of sibling groups or post-adoption contact between separated birth siblings. As the number of inter-country adoptions has dramatically decreased over the past 15 years, new adoptive policies in Chile focus on domestic adoptions from care and prior-itize the inseparability of siblings. For example, a few years ago, the strength-ening of professional support for post-adoption contact between birth siblings was included in complementary technical guidelines of the PRI, a specialized program in Chile that prepares children for adoption (SENAME, 2019). These new guidelines state that it is particularly important to place siblings together when there is an existing sibling bond. In these cases, part of the pre-adoptive process should include strengthening sibling relationships and preparing the group for adoption, as well as preparing the prospective family for the

adoption of a sibling group (SENAME, 2019). In the event that the separation of siblings is determined to be in the children's best interest, efforts should be made to maintain their bond while in care. In these cases, it is important to give the children an opportunity to voice their opinions, explain the reasons for separation, and ensure that the professionals (particularly therapists) who have had contact with each sibling are able to give their opinions (SENAME, 2019).

The topic of sibling relationships in adoption is relevant given the principle of inseparability of siblings and is as yet understudied in Latin America. The only study so far to explore the sibling relationship in adoption in Chile focused on the reunions of adult domestic adoptees with birth siblings (Salvo Agoglia, Gesteira, & Clemente, 2023). Since contact in adoption is a relatively new concept in Chile, systematic studies on sibling group adoptions and post-adoption sibling contact are lacking (Salvo Agoglia & LaBrenz, 2023). In light of Chile's new child protection legislation and an imminent modification of its adoption law, it is important to explore how families have experienced the adoption of sibling groups and post-adoption contact among siblings. Thus, this article presents a first approach to the experiences and attitudes of adoptive families toward sibling adoption and post-adoption contact between siblings.

Dilemmas about sibling relationships in adoption: sticking together or apart?

Historically, full and closed adoptions tended to be shrouded in secrecy, leading many birth siblings to grow up apart and often even unaware of the other's existence (Lifton, 2002). Although some country-specific policies require child welfare systems to make efforts to keep siblings together in foster care and adoption, many countries have yet to develop clear policies and practices regarding the preservation of sibling relationships and post-adoption contact. Due to the legal, theoretical, and new empirical frameworks that support the principle of sibling inseparability, several experts have advocated for requirements to place siblings together in care unless the best interests of one sibling or another provide compelling reasons for not doing so (Jones, Henderson, & Woods, 2019). Many experts have also called for the preservation of sibling relationships and ties when children are brought into out-of-home care and adopted separately (Groza, Maschmeier, Jamison, & Piccola, 2003; Thomas & Scharp, 2017).

Researchers have overwhelmingly found that sibling group adoption can improve children's outcomes as keeping siblings together can help preserve family ties and provide a greater sense of stability, belonging, and self-worth as compared to separation, which deprives adopted individuals of this support network (Silverstein & Livingston Smith, 2009). Moreover, it contributes to the development of social and emotional skills (Jones, 2016) and, because

siblings act as reference figures, enables adopted individuals to know more about their cultural, personal, and family history (Silverstein & Livingston Smith, 2009). In parallel, researchers have consistently found that youth overwhelmingly want to be adopted with siblings and maintain their relationships (Herrick & Piccus, 2005).

Yet, several reports suggest that the majority of children adopted from foster care are separated from at least one sibling (Stand Up for Siblings, 2020), with some estimates indicating that as many as 70% of adopted children are separated from at least one of their siblings when in foster care or adopted (Jones, 2016). This reflects barriers that include difficulty in finding adoptive parents who match the needs of sibling groups (Frost & Goldberg, 2020). This shows that, despite best efforts, the loss of sibling relationships remains a common experience among children in public care (Jones, Henderson, & Woods, 2019).

There are also reasons why a child may not be adopted jointly with siblings. In some cases, there are half-siblings who may have the extended family as placement options (Hegar, 2005). In other cases, the birth mother may have had a previous child adopted before the current child was born, in which case the siblings may never have lived together and may not even be aware that the other exists (Hegar, 2005). In others, the siblings may enter foster care together, but lack options for placement with the same foster family (Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018). Moreover, there may be cases in which the siblings have very different needs, impeding placement together (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2019; Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018).

The process of considering, preparing for, and then adopting a sibling group is complex, yet little research has focused on adoptive parents' transition to parenthood after adopting a sibling group from care (Frost & Goldberg, 2020). Some research has found that adoptive parents' stress increases (Waid & Alewine, 2018) and that family functioning decreases (Erich & Leung, 2002) with the size of the sibling group adopted. In a study of adoptive families at risk of dissolution or disruption, Selwyn (2019) found that sibling relationships were cited as a source of stress by adoptive parents and concluded that assessments need to pay more attention to sibling dynamics and interventions to improve sibling relationships. Indeed, being "outnumbered" was cited as a source of stress among parents who had adopted sibling groups (Frost & Goldberg, 2020). However, not all findings related to the impact of adopting a sibling group have been negative; Waid, Kothari, Bank, and McBeath (2016) found that children placed with siblings had better psychological adjustment than those separated, and Meakings, Coffey, and Shelton (2017) concluded that birth siblings could be a source of comfort in adoptive families. As Selwyn (2019) concluded, the challenges and benefits of sibling group adoption vary across families and warrant more in-depth assessment and accompaniment.

In addition to potential added stress and challenges for families that adopt a sibling group, adoptive parents may also face barriers when trying to engage in post-adoption contact with siblings that were not placed together. Neil, Young, and Hartley (2018) found that, although 88% of adoptive parents knew of their child having at least one birth sibling living elsewhere, only 37% of the children placed within the previous five years had experienced indirect (two-way) or face-to-face sibling contact. Consideration of sibling post-adoption contact is often limited to blood relations and may exclude some whom the child considers a sibling. Furthermore, just as there are barriers to sibling group adoption, there are also barriers to maintaining relationships post-adoption among siblings not placed together. Notably, adoptive parents may lack information about their child's biological siblings (Wojciak, McWey, & Waid, 2018). Even in cases where the adoptive family has information about the birth family, a number of researchers have reported hesitancy among adoptive parents to engage in contact (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). Despite children's desire for contact with their siblings and its benefits, one study found that, over the years, the frequency of contact tended to diminish among siblings not adopted from care together (Cossar & Neil, 2013). Consistently, Soares, Ralha, Barbosa-Ducharne, and Palacios (2019) reported that Portuguese adopted children identified losses related to their pre-adoption life, particularly that of their birth family, including parents and siblings.

For this reason, in cases where a decision is taken to separate siblings at adoption, post-adoption contact can provide opportunities for the preservation of relationships, providing there are sufficient conditions and support (Child Welfare Information Gateway [CWIG], 2019; Cossar & Neil, 2013; Neil, 1999). Therefore, encouraging active child participation in identifying and maintaining contact with siblings can help preserve significant relationships (Herrick & Piccus, 2005). Post-adoption contact may take different forms, such as letters, virtual exchanges, or in-person meetings (Greenhow, Hackett, Jones, & Meins, 2016; Neil, 2009). Practitioners and agencies play a key role in supporting or discouraging post-adoption contact (Neil, 2002). For example, in the United States, there is no current formal federal system for evaluating, encouraging, or monitoring post-adoption contact. Post-adoption contact and agreements vary among families, agencies, and counties. Thus, policies related to post-adoption contact may also impact efforts to preserve relationships. In parallel, advances in social media and technology have led to increased informal or unregulated contact between youth and family members, creating additional challenges to ensuring that youth are supported as they interact with family or other individuals from their lives prior to adoption (Greenhow, Hackett, Meins, & Meins, 2015). Therefore, there is a need to train practitioners and prospective adoptive families to preserve connections with

the child's origins, particularly when there are siblings (Meakings, Coffey, & Shelton, 2017; Waid & Alewine, 2018).

Finally, while much research has found sibling group adoption and post-adoption contact to be beneficial, it is worth noting that there are cases where it may not be in a child's best interest to maintain contact. For example, in some cases a child may have experienced abuse perpetrated by a sibling (Ward, Moggach, Tregeagle, & Trivedi, 2022). There may also be cases where siblings may have a trauma bond that could be exacerbated by ongoing contact (Herrick & Piccus, 2005) or where a child expresses a desire to stop contact (Mandelbaum, 2011). Therefore, in cases where contact is not beneficial or possible, consideration should be given to what other information the child needs about their siblings (Cossar & Neil, 2013). While Cossar and Neil (2013) recognized the importance of transparency and information sharing with the child about their birth family (including siblings), little is known to date about what type of information may be shared and in what ways.

The Current study

This study explored perceptions and experiences of sibling group adoption and post-adoption sibling contact among adoptive parents in Chile. This study was exploratory as the authors were unable to locate any prior research on the adoption of sibling groups in Chile. The research questions were divided into two main areas: 1) motivations and experiences of adopting a sibling group; and 2) experiences related to post-adoption contact between birth siblings. The research questions specific to each area were: 1a) What motivates parents to adopt a sibling group? and 1b) What experiences of sibling group adoption have Chilean families had?; and 2a) What are parents' experiences of post-adoption contact between their child and birth siblings? and 2b) What barriers to and facilitators of post-adoption contact between birth siblings do parents identify?

Methods

Data for this study came from a larger, exploratory sequential mixed methods research project (Creswell, 2014). This larger study comprises two main phases: 1) measure development; and 2) survey application. In the first phase, we developed a survey for adoptive parents, the TransformAdopción Survey, in three stages. In stage one, the research team designed the survey's sections and questions based on a review of the literature and surveys on the subject carried out in other countries. The team included two doctoral-level researchers – an expert in qualitative methods and adoption and an expert in quantitative methods – and a research assistant. In the second stage, the proposed survey was reviewed by five expert judges, who were selected by

the research team based on their standing as experts on survey research and/or adoption. All the expert judges had at least ten years of experience in their respective areas. They evaluated each question on its relevance, comprehensibility, adequacy of the response alternatives, and whether it was well placed in the section, providing feedback to improve the survey. In the third stage, the survey was adjusted based on the experts' feedback and cognitive interviews (Miller, Chepp, Willson, & Padilla, 2014) with six Chilean adoptive families. Through these interviews, it was possible to homogenize thematic and conceptual aspects and to check the logical sequence of the questions. The final version was revised several times to ensure the proper functioning of the online survey, especially skip patterns and display logic.

In the second stage of the study, the refined survey was applied to families who had adopted at least one child in Chile within the past 20 years. TransformAdopción was an online cross-sectional survey that was guided by a descriptive quantitative-qualitative approach (Couper, 2000). It consisted of 128 questions divided into ten thematic sections and one final section with four open-ended questions. Most questions had close-ended responses in the form of nominal or ordinal multiple-choice alternatives and also incorporated an open-answer option (such as "other" or "comments"), which gave participants the opportunity to add information. The aim was to collect information about the experiences and backgrounds of Chilean adoptive families over the past two decades, the profiles of adoptable children, challenges and support needs, adoption services, post-adoption contacts, and origins searches, among other topics.

Procedure

The data for the TransformAdopción survey was collected online in August 2021. The link to the online survey (hosted by SurveyMonkey) was circulated by different authorities and organizations: the Departamento Nacional de Adopción (SENAME) and the NGO Apoyo Adopción, both online and via direct mailing to a database of adoptive families. It was also circulated by the research team through project social media. Thus, the study used a convenience sample (Couper, 2000) of self-selected parents who adopted their children between 2000 and 2020. The survey was approved by the Ethics Committee of Universidad Alberto Hurtado. All the adoptive parents gave informed consent to their participation. The survey was in Spanish and all analyses were conducted in Spanish. The second author of this paper, who has experience in formal Spanish-English translation and is a licensed social worker, translated the findings. Of 319 respondents who consented to the survey, 301 had complete responses to the survey. Most (75.4%) were female, with an average age of 45 years (SD = 6.67). The majority had completed a college degree (38% who completed higher education and

34% who had postgraduate studies). Most of the adoptive parents (*n* = 193) reported only adopting one child from care (64.2%). Among parents who reported adopting more than one child, only 33 (11.0%) had adopted sibling groups. Among families who reported adopting birth sibling groups (*n* = 33), most had adopted two children (*n* = 28; 84.8%) and 15.2% (*n* = 5) had adopted a sibling group of three. No families in the sample had adopted a sibling group comprised of more than three children. The majority of sibling group adoptions took place from 2014 onwards (72.7%), which coincides with changes in policies and practices related to the adoption of birth siblings, such as the updated PRI guidelines and discussions with the newly proposed Adoption Bill.

Data analyses

The first and second authors of this paper analyzed both quantitative (close-ended) and qualitative (open-ended) data and present an integrated analysis and discussion of our data. In this way, we allow the quantitative and qualitative data to "speak to" each other, with the goal of achieving a fuller and more coherent understanding of the phenomena in question (Goldberg & Allen, 2015). For the quantitative analysis, descriptive statistics were calculated for all close-ended survey items related to the adoption of sibling groups and post-adoption contact. The researchers examined frequencies and percentages for demographic variables and items related to the number of children adopted, and the reasons reported for adopting a sibling group. All quantitative data were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS), version 23. The second and third authors of the study conducted all quantitative analyses and discussed the conceptualization and operationalization of variables. In parallel, the first and second authors both conducted qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The qualitative data was obtained from open-ended survey responses related to experiences of adopting a sibling group. All open-ended survey questions were exported to an Excel file. The second author of the paper conducted two stages of thematic coding (Guest et al., 2012). In the first stage, two of the authors identified underlying concepts and created codes for each open-ended response and, in the second, used a constant comparison method to group similar codes into larger themes. During both stages, the second author met regularly with the first author to discuss emerging codes, themes, and their situation in the broader context of Chilean domestic adoptions. To enhance rigor, the authors used language from the respondents in the initial coding stage (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003), reflected on their own positionality throughout the coding process (LaBrenz, Reyes-Quilodran, Padilla-Medina, Arevalo Contreras, & Cabrera Pinones, 2023a), and connected literature to each theme that emerged (Chiovitti & Piran, 2003). After completing the qualitative and

quantitative analyses separately, the authors met monthly to discuss the broader qualitative themes and how they aligned with or contradicted the quantitative findings. Within each research question that guided the study, the authors compared and contrasted the closed-ended findings with the emerging themes to synthesize and integrate the qualitative and quantitative analyses. This included grouping closed- and open-ended questions together that addressed the same overarching research question, and then comparing and contrasting the results from each item. The quotes from adoptive parents (labeled in the results as "P" with a number after) are synthesized with the close-ended response data to provide more in-depth and richer information and content.

Results

The synthesis of the qualitative and quantitative responses was grouped into two categories: 1) motivations and experiences of adopting a sibling group; and 2) experiences related to post-adoption contact between siblings.

Motivations and experiences of adopting a sibling group

To answer the first research question, parents selected their motivations for adopting a sibling group from a list. Some families also provided additional information in open-ended responses.

As seen in Table 1, the most frequently reported reason for adopting siblings was the belief that siblings should stick together (69.7%). Other frequently reported reasons included the respondent's own positive relationship with siblings (48.5%), the view that adopting a sibling group would be better for the entire family (45.5%), and the desire to have a larger family (42.4%). Notably, two of the parents (P1—adopted in 2020 and P2—adopted in 2020), who selected "other" motivations, indicated that adopting a sibling group could expedite the process because there were "fewer families interested" in sibling groups. Some parents also considered a sibling group as a way to adopt a younger child, given that few "young children" are available for adoption individually. One parent stated:

Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics: Reasons for Adopting Sibling Groups (n = 33)*

Reasons for adopting a sibling group	N	%
The professionals motivated me to adopt a sibling group.	9	27.3
Other adoptive families encouraged me to adopt a sibling group.	4	12.1
I have siblings and I feel that it is an important experience and bond for every child.	16	48.5
I believe that children who have siblings should stay together.	23	69.7
I wanted to have a larger family with more than one child.	14	42.4
I thought that, if I adopted them together, it would be the best for the whole family.	15	45.5

Note: Percentages do not sum 100% because each alternative could be chosen separately.

> Originally, it was one child first and then we would adopt another child but, as we went through the [preparation] process, we were told that we would have to go through the entire process again for a second child. So, we decided we would be willing to receive two children. [The professionals] told us that it would most likely be siblings because they don't separate siblings, but it wasn't certain. Then we just had to wait. We were happy to be selected for two beautiful children who were siblings, one year apart. (P3—adopted in 2011)

For other families who had adopted more recently, the opportunity to adopt the birth sibling of a previously adopted child led the parents, with the support of professionals, to adopt a sibling group even when they had not initially planned to do so. One adoptive parent pointed out:

> Our first adoption was just one son. Two years later, we started a new process to adopt and we were given the opportunity, thanks to the excellent work and support of professionals, to adopt his biological sister. (Parent 9—adopted in 2015)

Parents overwhelmingly responded that sibling adoption should be encouraged (93.5%). Reaffirming this, 78.3% stated that their adoption experience had been very positive and 66.7% indicated that the arrival of their children in their lives was better than they expected. In the open-ended responses, parents largely reaffirmed their support of sibling group adoption. As one respondent stated:

> I think it is important to consider that if they maybe aren't able to be together initially in their birth family, they should have an opportunity to be together with an adoptive family. There will always be a bond between siblings and even though my son is only 10 years old, he feels like he is not the only one and that he has other siblings, although we aren't certain of their existence. (P5—adopted in 2013)

Other parents indicated a need to challenge "myths" about adopting sibling groups and to encourage more families to consider it. Another (P7—adopted in 2017) indicated that, "There are myths about it costing more, but that isn't the case. It is wonderful to adopt siblings who are 4, 5, 6, or even 7 years old. People just need to give sibling groups a chance." The idea of "taking a chance" with sibling group adoption was reiterated by another parent (P6), reflecting a need to normalize sibling adoption.

Experiences related to post-adoption contact between birth siblings

In addition to the experiences of those respondents who reported adopting a sibling group, all parents were asked questions about their perceptions of sibling adoption and post-adoption birth sibling relationships. Table 1 displays the frequencies of experiences related to post-adoption contact reported among respondents.

Among parents who had not adopted a sibling group, *n* = 247 responded to items asking if they knew about birth siblings of their child; of these parents,

only 19.4% (n = 48) indicated that their child did not have siblings. Almost half (48.6%; n = 120) indicated that their child did, indeed, have birth siblings while the remaining third (32%; n = 79) were unsure whether this was the case. Most parents reported that they would be open to adopting the birth sibling of their child if it were an option (56.7%; n = 140) while 14.2% (n = 35) indicated that they would not be open to it and 29.1% (n = 72) were unsure.

A total of 228 parents responded to the question asking if they knew where their child's birth siblings resided. Of these, 39.5% (n = 90) reported that they had no knowledge, while 29.8% (n = 68) reported that it did not apply to their child's case. The remaining parents reported knowing where birth siblings resided, including siblings who lived with the birth family (24.1%; n = 55); siblings who lived with other adoptive families (13.2%; n = 30), in residential care (4.8%; n = 11), or in non-relative foster families (1.3%; n = 3) or with a kinship foster family (1.3%; n = 3).

On whether there was any current contact between their child and birth siblings, 49.1% (n = 112) indicated that there was no contact while 28.1% (n = 64) did not know whether their child had more siblings or where they lived and 16.7% (n = 38) indicated that the question did not apply to their case. Among the few families that reported post-adoption contact with birth siblings, the level of contact varied. Six parents (2.6%) reported that their child had ongoing contact with some of their birth siblings, and eight (3.5%) reported that their child had ongoing contact with all of their birth siblings. One parent (P7—adopted in 2015) stated that they "were given cards with good wishes from their birth siblings" when they were adopted. The remaining parents who reported post-adoption contact did not specify the type of contact.

Lack of information

When families were willing to engage in contact, there were often barriers to putting this into practice. They included difficulty in tracing relatives, administrative difficulties within agencies, and lack of support for both the birth family and the adoptive family. Several parents reported not even being aware that their child had birth siblings. Often, the adoptive parents had received little to no information about their child's birth family. Even in cases where they had a name or knowledge of the existence of a birth sibling, closed adoption laws often made it difficult for them to obtain contact information. They also reported losing contact with siblings who were moving around in foster care or leaving care. In one case in which the adoptive parents had been making efforts for years to contact their daughter's birth sisters, they commented:

> We still haven't located their birth sisters. They are sisters on the dad's side and they are older. Our child's mother told us that they would be around 30 years old, but we don't

know their names or how to locate them. I would like to have contact with them but I don't know them because that information is confidential. (P8—adopted in 2018)

In some cases, the adoptive parents were aware of birth siblings of their child, but their child did not know of their existence. For example, one parent (P9—adopted in 2014) stated, "My son doesn't know he has a brother, and I don't think the other child knows either." In these cases, parents sometimes referred to developmental appropriateness (explored more in the sub-theme below) or hesitancy to communicate (explored more in the sub-theme below) as reasons for deliberately avoiding conversation about siblings. Thus, although many families lacked any information about their child's birth family, there were some cases where information was deliberately kept from children by their adoptive parents.

Discouragement by professionals

One of the reasons parents gave for not initiating contact with siblings was discouragement by professionals or larger institutions. This was particularly the case among families that had adopted in the early 2000s. One parent (P10—adopted in 2013) stated, "We don't know where they wound up and the law prohibits contact with them." Another parent (P11—adopted in 2008) stated, "My children were voluntarily relinquished. The oldest just started expressing curiosity to know about his origins but, by law, he can only access that information when he turns 18."

Indeed, some parents cited misinformation about adoption laws or policies that they thought prohibited contact before their child turned 18. Other parents mentioned that some adoption professionals actively discouraged it. For example, one parent stated:

Based on my understanding from the pre-training, professionals recommend that only from 18 years on do they suggest looking for the birth family. They do know they are adopted. [The professionals] didn't give us any contact information because her birth brother reunified with his birth family and that could be very risky for my daughter. (P12 —adopted in 2017)

These factors served as barriers to ongoing contact between siblings. Indeed, another theme that emerged from parents' conversations with professionals was the idea that sibling contact could result in instability and lead to an emotional or behavioral crisis for the child. One parent noted:

At the beginning, based on the recommendation of the Adoption Unit, we did not continue the relationship with his brother or godparents. Later on, the psychologist recommended not to do it [contact] given that he was having some emotional problems and was sensitive to changes. We have received news of his brother and they mentioned the same about my son's birth brother. Then, the pandemic started and the possibility of contact got even further away. My husband was also hesitant to communicate with them

and with the godparents, given that my son was very anxious, violent, and unstable with us and especially with my older daughter. Now, we see that there was a lack of accompaniment and knowledge about the topic. We hope that, with time, we may be able to re-establish those bonds. (P13—adopted in 2018)

Similarly, another parent mentioned that the professionals quickly negated any possibility of adopting their child's siblings. This parent reported that:

When we first started the second adoption, we found out that our first son had three siblings. One of them we know for sure was adopted by another family and another was institutionalized. But when we asked if it would be possible to adopt one of the siblings, SENAME gave us a resounding no, to the point that we decided to stop insisting to avoid derailing our new adoption. (P14—adopted in 2013 and 2018)

In addition, house parents or other staff at the group homes in which the children were placed prior to adoption often discouraged ongoing contact. Another parent reported that, "[This was] based on recommendations from the group home where my daughter was. They did a closure ritual of her relationship with her older sister, who was also institutionalized" (P15—adopted in 2020).

Questioning developmental appropriateness

The third theme related to post-adoption contact that emerged was that parents questioned the developmental appropriateness of ongoing connections with siblings. Many parents indicated that they thought their child or children were "too young" to consider initiating contact with their siblings or birth family (P16—adopted in 2007). As one parent (P17—adopted in 2018) put it, "[His siblings] are with their birth mother, who voluntarily relinquished rights to the third child. I don't think it is time yet to initiate contact, because my son just turned three." Similarly, another parent considered it "illogical" to consider sibling contact among young children: "My daughter is only two years old. Therefore, I think it is illogical to think about contacting birth siblings since she is so little and she can't distinguish [the relationship]" (P18—adopted in 2019).

In some cases, the parents mentioned that their child was not old enough to initiate the process on their own, stating that they would be open to supporting their child when they were old enough to make that decision. One respondent (P19—adopted in 2020) indicated that, "We don't know where they live and, for now, I want [my daughter] to heal her emotional wounds. When she is ready and wants to look for them, we will support her." Even in cases where the parents reported having some knowledge of their child's birth family, some expressed hesitancy about initiating contact. One parent stated:

Since we had a closed adoption, we don't have any information about [the birth family]. Even if we did, given the complex background of birth families, we would prefer to delay

any contact until our children are adults, and even then only if they desire it. (P7—adopted in 2015)

Parental hesitancy to communicate with birth families

In some cases, the adoptive parents worried about the background of their children's birth families, particularly as regards factors that could have led to the child's initial removal, and even considered contact as a possible risk factor for adoption breakdown. One parent (P20—adopted in 2018) indicated, "[The siblings] live with the birth family and I don't think it would be prudent [to contact them]." This was particularly challenging when the child had siblings living with the birth family. Another parent reported:

> A birth family that didn't know how or wasn't able to take care of their child, that damaged them, but stays connected to them, can chase the adoptive parents away and ultimately make the adoption fail. I do agree that it is important to keep contact among siblings, with foster families, or godparents because they are positive people in the life of the child. (P13—adopted in 2018)

In other cases, the adoptive parents referred to characteristics of their child's case that were difficult to address and could make post-adoption contact challenging. For example, many parents indicated they had not contacted the birth family because it was "an involuntary relinquishment" (P21—adopted in 2019) and that parental rights had been terminated or that issues of "rape" in the birth family made them hesitant to engage in contact (P22—adopted in 2000; and P23—adopted in 2015).

Discussion

In Chile, the adoption of sibling groups is a gray area of policy and practice. Although legislation and technical guidelines establish the principle of inseparability of siblings, our findings highlight a need to better prepare Chilean families to adopt sibling groups and, in the event of separated siblings, address post-adoption sibling contact.

Overall, only one in ten parents who responded to the survey had adopted a sibling group. However, despite few families having experience of sibling groups, an overwhelming majority reported an interest in adopting siblings of their child if given the opportunity. Thus, our findings suggest openness on the part of adoptive parents to consider sibling group adoption. However, only 14 families in the entire sample reported any post-adoption sibling contact. Notably, while families overwhelmingly recognized the importance of keeping siblings together, parents were less willing to maintain sibling relationships when their adoptive child's birth siblings were in other placements, particularly when they had been reunified with or never separated from their birth family. This is in line with earlier research, which found concern and hesitancy

among adoptive parents about engaging in contact with birth families (MacDonald & McSherry, 2013). Indeed, adoptive parents may be particularly hesitant to engage in post-permanency contact when adoptions have been contested due to parental risk factors or incapacity (LaBrenz, Reyes-Quilodran, Padilla-Medina, Arevalo Contreras, & Cabrera Pinones, 2023a). Given the large proportion of contested adoptions, this creates unique challenges for Chilean families. This also highlights a need for more professional guidance and accompaniment as families navigate the feasibility of post-adoption contact and how to best preserve connections that are in the child's best interest.

Parents in our sample often justified the lack of post-adoption sibling contact on the grounds of Chile's closed adoption model under which adopted people cannot access their records until they are eighteen. Families used this argument to postpone post-adoption contact with siblings or other significant members of the birth family, alluding to a lack of overall maturity before their child reached adulthood. Thus, a significant barrier to post-adoption contact among siblings was the perceived threat of having a relationship with the birth family, particularly in the context of contested adoptions in which parental rights were forcibly terminated due to maltreatment or other risk factors. These findings align with one prior study that found adoptive parents and caseworkers to mention multiple factors that should be assessed when determining post-adoption contacts, such as birth family characteristics that might create risk, and whether the contact would be a positive experience for the child (Chateauneuf, Page, & Decaluwe, 2018). In addition, our findings build on earlier research which found that professionals and child-placing agencies play a key role in endorsing (or, by contrast, discouraging) post-adoption contact (Mandelbaum, 2011; Neil, 2002). This highlights a need and opportunity to develop and provide resources and support for policies and practices that could assess the feasibility of and facilitate post-adoption sibling contact among families that adopt in Chile.

Implications for policy and practice

At the policy level, adopted children in Chile need a legislative change to enable them to maintain sibling relationships. Although current and proposed adoption laws in Chile include this, it is necessary to ensure that policies are integrated across systems. Policies should also seek to ensure that the Chilean state and its child protection system have more transparent and systematic tracking and documentation to map children's sibling and other significant relationships. While sibling group adoptions in our sample had increased over the past decade, evidencing a potential increase in sibling adoptions, there are no official statistics that track this in Chile. Therefore, agency policies should

be developed to ensure that sibling groups are tracked as they enter foster care and throughout their time in care until they achieve permanency.

Our study's findings are in line with prior calls to provide prospective adoptive parents with training on preserving connections with a child's birth family, particularly when there are siblings (Meakings, Coffey, & Shelton, 2017; Waid & Alewine, 2018). Practitioners, especially those who may work with prospective or post-adoptive families, should be trained about the importance of preserving connections as a way of promoting a child's identity development. They also should be prepared to provide competent adoption services that value ongoing sibling relationships and can facilitate post-adoption contact and connection. Moreover, they should educate and train prospective adoptive parents on the importance of preserving sibling groups when possible and on providing opportunities for ongoing contact in situations where sibling group adoption is not feasible. Given the misunderstanding of policy on post-adoption contact detected in many families in our sample, pre-placement training could include a focus on the maintenance of significant connections and the benefits of ongoing contact in a bid to increase knowledge about relational permanency among prospective adoptive families (McWey, Cui, & Wojciak, 2023).

Over half of our sample indicated that they would be open to adopting a birth sibling of their child if given the opportunity. This is in line with current adoption legislation in Chile and the PRI program's technical guidelines (SENAME, 2019). However, given the discrepancy between the percentage of parents who reported being open to sibling adoption and the percentage who had actually adopted a sibling group, clearer procedures and protocols could help practitioners to ensure that the adoptive parents of a sibling are considered first, before other potential adoptive families. Given professionals' and families' lack of information about the existence of birth siblings, specific protocols should be developed to preserve and verify information about the birth family, which can also be used to guide decision-making processes. At the same time, the active involvement and engagement of young people in the permanency planning process, when developmentally appropriate, may help practitioners identify siblings and other significant people who could form a post-permanency relational network (Butcher & Upright, 2018). This could include interventions such as the Texas Permanency Outcomes Project that include tools to use with youth to help them identify people they feel safe and comfortable with, and who they identify as important to maintain connections with. Sharing power with youth and actively including them in decision-making, when developmentally appropriate, can help to identify and build these relational networks while also ensuring that a professional evaluates the appropriateness of the suggested connections (LaBrenz et al., 2023b).

Although Chile's current adoption model is closed, proposed legislation to permit post-adoption contact could provide opportunities for practitioners to begin to explore strategies to preserve sibling connections. This could include life story work to highlight sibling relationships as well as placement in geographically close locations when sibling group adoption is not possible. This is particularly important as unregulated or unaccompanied contact may become more common through social media, resulting in instances in which young people may initiate contact without the knowledge or facilitation of their parents or other professionals (Greenhow, Hackett, Meins, & Meins, 2015, 2016). In fact, as technology and social media continue to expand, traditional gatekeepers of post-adoption contact such as caseworkers, judges, or even adoptive parents may face new challenges in facilitating and monitoring contact between children and family members. Therefore, having open conversations with adopted children and allowing them to have an active voice in decision-making related to contact may help ensure that they are supported if and when they interact with family members or other significant figures from their lives prior to adoption.

At a broader level, practitioners should engage in social marketing campaigns to dispel stereotypes and myths about sibling group adoption and birth families. While each child's situation requires a unique assessment that includes sibling dynamics and relationships (Levy, 2022), more psycho-education is needed to shift attitudes that have discouraged post-adoption contact and fueled the closed adoption model as the only form of adoption to date in Chile. As highlighted by our findings, adoptive families overwhelmingly report interest in maintaining sibling relationships but require guidance, structure, and accompaniment by professionals. Professionals have a unique role to play as adoption legislation and the accompanying protocols and guidelines begin to promote post-adoption contact between birth siblings placed apart.

Limitations

These results are novel because this is the first nationwide survey of adoptive parents in Chile and, indeed, Latin America. However, the study has some limitations. Given that this was the first national survey and administrative data are limited, it is not possible to determine whether the respondents are representative of all Chilean adoptive families during the period analyzed (2000–2020). The lack of official data on sibling relationships makes it impossible to determine the prevalence of sibling separation in care and adoption. In addition, the self-selection convenience sample may reflect individuals who have had continued contact with agencies or support groups and may, therefore, not be reflective of all adoptive families. In fact, prior research has found that individuals who respond to surveys related to services tend to either be extremely satisfied or dissatisfied (Han & Anderson, 2020); therefore, it is

possible that adoptive families in our sample who responded may have been positively connected to post-adoption services and/or struggling, with those with more neutral circumstances underrepresented. In parallel, given the relatively low number of respondents who reported any post-adoption contact, future research could explore whether these findings are transferable to other adoptive families in Chile. Finally, given that the survey was distributed at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, families may have been experiencing additional stress and this, or other factors, may have impacted how they perceived their needs, support, etc. For example, many therapies and interventions were abruptly shifted to remote modalities, which may have affected the services received by families in our sample.

Conclusion and future directions

Considering the findings of this exploratory study and its limitations, there are a number of areas that future research could address. First, research could examine in depth the experiences of adoptive families, professionals, and children with sibling adoption, paying particular attention to children who were adopted with siblings and those who were adopted separately. Indeed, including the voices of adopted young people and adults is important for future research. Active involvement of youth in decision-making could help share power and enable them to voice their opinions about contact (Jackson & Cooper, 2015). Understanding adopted individuals' experience of birth sibling relationships over their lifespan may help today's adoptive parents and adoption practitioners to understand more about the consequences of sibling separation and, in the case of the latter, to foster safe and meaningful sibling relationships through their work with adoptive families. these relationships can help adopted individuals to better understand their origins and identity and have the potential to support them throughout their life (Salvo Agoglia, Gesteira, & Clemente, 2023). This is key because professionals who develop relationships with families have a role to play in identifying and recording sibling connections (Jones, Henderson, & Woods, 2019; Neil, 2002). Research with adoptive youth and adults may also help clarify what type of information they had and what type of information and/or contact might have been useful to maintain significant connections. Second, it could explore the impact of COVID-19 on adoptive families in Chile, particularly in sibling adoptions or post-adoptive contacts between siblings. Finally, research could explore post-adoption contact through more informal means, such as social media. This could include professional suggestions for how best to accompany youth as they may initiate contact and reach out to family members. As social media continues to be used by youth, confidentiality and privacy, including contact information of family members, may be more widely accessible, highlighting a need to develop more opportunities to accompany youth in these processes.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributors

Irene Salvo Agoglia is researcher for clinical psychology, family and child psychotherapy. Her research focuses on child protection, alternative care and adoption, through participatory, creative and art-based methods. She has participated in 15 research projects (5 as IR) and has more than 20 indexed publications (Scopus and WoS). Outside of academia, she has been an international consultant for several organisations (e.g. RELAF, UNICEF, SENAME, FAI, among others) and regularly participates in knowledge transfer activities on child protection and adoption for government, policy makers, service users and associations. She served as Director of the Postgraduate Diploma (b-learning) "Adoption: from theory to intervention", aimed at Chilean adoption professionals (2015-2017) and member of the First Advisory Council of the Chilean Ombudsman for Children (2019-2021). She is currently a post-doctoral researcher in the AFIN Research Group, Social and Cultural Anthropology Department at the Autonomous University of Barcelona (Spain).

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