

Community attitudes toward birth fathers were examined using 82 exploratory qualitative interviews and 706 survey respondents in Canada. Community attitudes were more positive toward birth fathers raising their children over adoption, when birth mothers were unable or unwilling to parent the child. Overall, respondents considered birth fathers choosing adoption as responsible, caring, and unselfish. However, women disproportionately considered birth fathers choosing adoption as irresponsible and uncaring. Men considered these fathers too young, unable to provide, or powerless against the birth mother and her wishes. We consider implications for practitioners working with birth fathers dealing with adoption decisions and offer suggestions for further research.

Birth fathers and adoption

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Adoption, as a social institution, separates social parenting behavior from the biological role ([Bartholet, 1993](#); [Kirk, 1964](#)). Historical studies on adoption reveal that children usually are placed for adoption by their mothers rather than by their fathers, and the gender-neutral terms of *biological parent* and *birth parent* used by state and adoption authorities have masked this fact ([Sachdev, 1991](#)). The birth father of children placed for adoption has also been absent in the research literature, and, when he does appear, his position has stood in marked contrast to the birth mother's.

In the evangelical reform period (early 1900s), birth fathers of adoptees were "rogues, scoundrels, and unscrupulous cads" ([Kunzel, 1993](#), p. 22) who lured women into sex. No marriage at all was preferable to unwed mothers entering "a marriage based on lies and deceit" ([Kunzel, 1993](#), p. 33). The reverse image emerged in the 1950s, when the biological or "putative" father was portrayed as the victim of a neurotic "sexual delinquent" who used him to achieve her unconscious desire for a child ([Spensky, 1992](#)). If even told about the pregnancy, he was often advised to remain uninvolved and was rarely consulted about the decision to place the child in an adoptive home ([Carp, 1998](#); [Kunzel, 1993](#)). Only in the last two decades have most jurisdictions in the United States and Canada required unwed birth fathers to formally relinquish parental rights before adoption can be legalized ([Griffith, 1991](#); [Sachdev, 1991](#)).

Policymakers and practitioners have categorized unwed fathers in general as "troubled fathers" or "fathers who cause trouble" and have made attempts to improve relationships between these fathers and their children ([Day, Lewis, O'Brien, & Lamb, 2005](#), p. 348). Despite these efforts, birth fathers of adopted offspring tend to be viewed as peripheral actors in their children's lives ([Clapton, 1997](#); [Crean, 1988](#); [Daly, 1988](#); [Dienhart & Daly, 1997](#); [Nock, 1998](#)). Within the adoption triangle itself, their role is questionable. [Sachdev \(1991\)](#), for example, considered the attitudes toward birth fathers of 300 randomly selected adoptive parents, birth mothers, adoptees, and adoption personnel. He noted that these respondents "shared the prevailing stereotypical view of the birth father as being a 'Don Juan' (i.e., he sexually exploited a young innocent girl) and 'phantom father' (i.e., evading responsibility for the support and care of the mother and child)"(p. 137).

Historically, then, birth fathers have been ignored or invisible, compared favorably or unfavorably to birth mothers, or subject to stigmatization.

Analytic perspectives on fatherhood

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Family scholars are increasingly focusing on gender as a social construct in research on fatherhood and fatherhood involvement in the family ([Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000](#)). Fatherhood, as a social construct, embodies cultural meanings about masculinity, and gender, as a social construct, is a constituent element of social structures like class and race ([Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998](#); [Fox & Murry, 2000](#)). Whereas much research has examined how value and privilege are withheld from women based on their gender, less attention has been given to these processes with men. For example, [Heimer and Staffen \(1995\)](#) have described how nursing practices in newborn intensive care units intentionally and unintentionally prevented young, unwed fathers from caring for their newborn infants.

Various scholars have argued that the gender identity of women is reinforced through mothering behavior and that notions of femininity and mothering are entwined ([Arendell, 2000](#); [Chodorow, 1989, 1990](#); [Glenn, 1994](#); [McMahon, 1995](#)). Within Western society, constructions of womanhood and motherhood rest on the two assumptions that motherhood is *essential* to women and that real motherhood is based on a biological connection ([Roach, 1992](#)). [Arendell](#) has described an *intensive mothering* ideology that situates mothers within biological nuclear families as absorbed in nurturing activities. Women who are not mothers either by choice or through reproductive impairment are stigmatized for their failure to fulfill their biological destinies (see, e.g., [Miall, 1985, 1986](#); [Veevers, 1980](#)).

Although scholarship on these issues has tended to characterize the prevailing mothering social construct as detrimental to women, it also accords value and privilege to women in terms of their connection to their children. In contrast, this gendered understanding of women tied to their children in an essentialist manner is not extended to men. Rather, scholarship on fatherhood has considered the historical variability of fatherhood constructs and practices, ranging from breadwinner to moral leader to nurturer ([LaRossa, 1997](#); [Marsiglio et al., 2000](#)). These social constructions have been linked to cultural images of mothering and fathering ([Cherlin, 1998](#); [Lamb, 1998](#)), fundamental shifts in family life such as women's increased labor force participation ([LaRossa, 1988](#)), the increasing diversity in life course and residency patterns, and "... stakeholders' vested interests in emphasizing particular images of fatherhood and paternal involvement" ([Marsiglio et al., 2000](#), p. 1175).

With few exceptions, the generic cultural image of fatherhood reflects the assumption that fathers and children are biologically related ([Marsiglio, 1993](#)). However, there are little data that address whether, in the wider community, this biological connection translates into an "essential" connection between fathers and children similar to that for

women ([Griswold, 1999](#)). Rather, theoretical approaches to fathering have emphasized the unique role that interpersonal and social *contexts* play in men's assumption of fathering behavior ([Day et al., 2005](#); [Doherty et al., 1998](#); [Marsiglio, 2004](#)). For example, as [Arditti, Acock, and Day \(2005\)](#) argued in their research on incarcerated fathers, if attributes of the potential father are stigmatized, this may create barriers to assuming, enacting, or continuing in the father role.

Little is known about how the community views birth fathers as potential single parents or how they are viewed when they make an adoption plan for their children. Given the stigmatized status of unmarried birth fathers in general, it is an empirical question whether interpersonal and environmental factors act as barriers to their responsible fathering behavior. In this paper, we review community attitudes toward the nature of fatherhood as instinctive or learned, reported in an earlier paper comparing biological and adoptive fathers ([Miall & March, 2003](#)), and then examine (a) approval for a birth father raising his child alone versus adoption by a married couple, (b) community perceptions of why birth fathers transfer their parental rights to adoptive couples, and (c) the family values expressed by community members in their attitudes toward the rights, responsibilities, and motives of birth fathers who make an adoption plan. We use [Vogt's \(1999, p. 15\)](#) definition of attitude—"a positive or negative evaluation of and disposition toward persons, groups, policies, or other objects of attention. Attitudes are learned and relatively persistent." We draw on our exploratory qualitative study of 82 respondents in two eastern Ontario cities and a Canada-wide survey of 706 respondents. We also consider relevant survey research conducted in the United States.

A note on publishing from a single data set

This research was part of a larger Canadian study of adoption that was funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada ([Miall & March, 2003, 2005a, 2005b](#)). Using [Fine and Kurdek's \(1994\)](#) recommendations for publishing from a single survey data set, we produced a primary article comparing biological or birth mothers and fathers with adoptive mothers and fathers ([Miall & March, 2003](#)). Identical research questions were used in the interviews and survey examining birth parents and adoption decision making. Our data on birth mothers did not diverge from established scholarship on women and motherhood, so we focused on the changing meanings ascribed to birth mothers over time, related to adoption, and in the community ([March & Miall, 2005](#)). However, our data on fathers were sufficiently important to other literature to warrant their publication in this paper. We address the issues of fatherhood as an "essence" or "instinct," and consider support for birth fathers as single parents and when they make an adoption plan. These two papers are considered "secondary articles"; that is, they contain specialized analyses of data from the primary article on biological and adoptive parents (Fine & Kurdek, p. 378).

Methods

 

Study design and sample descriptions

Methodologically, we used a two-stage research design—an exploratory qualitative study to establish meanings underlying the social constructs of birth parents, and a Canada-wide telephone survey to establish the extent of support for these social constructs. A complete description of the methods and sample sociodemographic characteristics are provided in [Miall and March \(2003\)](#).

In Phase 1, we completed 82 exploratory qualitative interviews (41 males and 41 females) in two eastern Canadian cities. Our pretested, semistructured interview schedule combined fixed alternative and open-ended questions, and interviews lasted 1 to 2 hr. Although 9 interviews were conducted by telephone, 73 were done in the participants' homes. The interviews were audiotaped and then transcribed. In Phase 2, a Canada-wide random sample of 706 respondents (287 males and 419 females) aged 18 years and older was selected using Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing. In 2000, the year our interviews and survey were completed, 98% of Canadian households had at least one telephone ([Statistics Canada, 2003](#)).

Using themes identified in our interviews, we constructed and pretested a questionnaire. We clarified ambiguous terms and questions and randomized the order of questions to avoid eliciting patterned response sets on, for example, the importance of motherhood for women and fatherhood for men. By varying the order in which questions were asked, we minimized potentially biasing effects. The final questionnaire, conducted in English and French, contained 45 questions. The telephone interview lasted 15–20 min.

Respondents in both samples tended to identify themselves as White, older, well educated, in the lower-middle-class to upper-middle-class income range, married, and reported that they had raised children. The generalizability of results in terms of ethnicity, social class background, and education should be interpreted with these sample characteristics in mind. However, our sample characteristics are typical of most volunteer samples ([Palys, 1997](#)), are representative of the population of Canadians most likely to vote or become involved in political actions affecting social policy decisions ([Frank, 1994](#)), and share characteristics with the couples who are most likely to adopt children.

The final response rate for the Canada-wide survey was 56% ([Miall & March, 2003](#)). Given disparities in regional population sizes, weights were used to compensate for unequal probabilities of selection at the provincial and household levels using the 1991 Canadian Census, the one most recently available. For results based on the total sample and with a confidence level of 95%, the error attributable to sampling and other random effects was ± 3.5 percentage points.

Research questions

Using data from the qualitative interviews, we report on community attitudes toward (a) the importance of fatherhood as a role for men, (b) whether the desire to father a child is instinctive or learned, (c) whether the birth father should raise his child versus adoption

by a married couple, (d) why respondents think birth fathers decide to transfer their parental rights to adoptive parents, and (e) whether respondents thought a birth father would have the same feelings for a child he had not raised as for one he had. (Did the experience of actually parenting a biologically related child make a difference in the feelings a birth father had for that child?). Some questions asked in Phase 1 were not replicated in Phase 2, given constraints imposed by differing methodologies. These are noted as the questions are discussed.

Using data from the Canada-wide survey, we again report on community attitudes toward (a) the importance of fatherhood as a role for men, (b) whether the desire to be a father is instinctive or learned, and (c) whether respondents approve or disapprove of birth fathers who make an adoption plan. We also replicate questions from the [Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute \(1997\)](#) U.S. survey on adoption issues. In this survey, a representative sample of 1,554 adults of 18 years of age and older, including an oversample of 50 African Americans, living in the continental United States were interviewed by telephone. Sample data were weighted, using parameters from the most recently available Census ([Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997](#)). Interviews took place between July 7 and August 8, 1997. Margin of error was ± 3 percentage points, 95 times out of 100.

The questions replicated explore people's attitudes about whether birth fathers "putting their child up for adoption" are considered (a) responsible or irresponsible, (b) caring or uncaring, and (c) unselfish or selfish. Attitudes toward birth mothers on these issues are discussed in [March and Miall \(2005\)](#). The complete survey instrument is presented in [Miall and March \(2002\)](#).

Data analysis and interpretation

In qualitative research, "the researcher is the instrument of both data collection and data interpretation" ([Patton, 1990](#), p. 54). Further, researchers may filter data through interpretive stances influenced by personal biographies and interests. As coresearchers, we shared a similar age, gender, social class, race, and educational background. We were married, had parented children, and had held similar academic positions. Trained as qualitative methodologists in the Chicago tradition, we had both worked in adoption research for over 15 years. Work of C.E.M. focused on women and involuntary childlessness, adoptive mothers, and community attitudes toward adoption. Work of K.M. focused on birth mothers, adult adopted persons, and adoption reunions. We brought similar stocks of knowledge or common-sense constructs and categories to the research project. Neither of us had specific expertise in the study of fathers and fatherhood.

It is important to state in advance that we maintained a *neutral* stance with respect to our data collection and analysis, as much research on fathering has been identified as motivated by political or ideological agendas ([Day et al., 2005](#)). Researchers adopting a neutral stance do not set out to "prove a particular perspective or manipulate the data to arrive at predisposed truths" ([Patton, 1990](#), p. 55). The results presented in this paper

reflect our consensual understanding of the data based on this principle. Given the exploratory nature of the study, the generation rather than the testing of hypotheses was our goal.

To avoid gender bias in data collection, we hired three female and two male interviewers as we felt that respondents would be more candid with interviewers of the same gender. We employed full-time sociology graduate students who were familiar with the area of gender and trained in qualitative and quantitative methodologies.

We analyzed the data ourselves, separating male and female responses to questions. To reduce precoding bias, we read the "gendered" responses for each question at least twice before taking notes. Using [Glaser and Strauss' \(1967\)](#) constant comparative method, we reread the responses and made notes in the margins about significant remarks or observations, carefully documenting the reappearance of words or phrases within and across interview transcripts. The manifest content of responses reflected in simple sentences or strings of words was sorted into categories. Then, we established themes that reflected the clustering of words around a more general idea. We discussed the development of themes and concepts with research associates to check whether, on the face of it, they made sense and were clearly evident as recurring regularities in the data ([Berg, 2001; Lofland & Lofland, 1995](#)). We conducted descriptive quantitative data analysis using SPSS ([SPSS Inc., 1999](#)) statistical software.

Results

 

Research questions from qualitative interviews

First, we briefly review our findings first reported in [Miall and March \(2003\)](#) on the importance of fatherhood as a role, the nature of fatherhood as instinctive or learned, and the feelings of birth fathers for children they have not raised. We then report new data on community attitudes about (a) whether birth fathers should raise their children, why respondents think birth fathers transfer their parental rights to adoptive parents, and (b) the relevance of perceptions of the nature of fatherhood for these attitudes.

Representative quotes are limited, given space constraints, and percentages are provided for information purposes only, given the nonrandom sample.

The importance and nature of fatherhood. As reported in [Miall and March \(2003\)](#), the majority of male (55%) and female (73%) respondents considered fatherhood a very important role for men. A majority also believed that the desire to father a child was learned rather than instinctive (45% of males and 41% of females). Other respondents felt it was either a combination of the two or instinctive.

Notably, few differences in response based on gender were noted in open-ended questions. Most men and women thought fathers created family stability by complementing mothers' nurturing roles. They also viewed fathers as family providers

and emphasized the different qualities fathers brought to parenting such as discipline and playfulness. Although men were thought to possess an innate desire for fatherhood, expressed as a biological drive to "pass on the genes," respondents did not consider the role of biological fatherhood or parenting as important for men as biological motherhood and parenting were for women. Respondents felt that men needed prompting to make the decision to produce a child, that fatherhood involved a conscious decision to parent, and, ultimately, that men learned to be fathers by parenting children.

[Marsiglio et al. \(2000\)](#) have argued that conceptions of fatherhood and fathering practice are linked to cultural images of motherhood and mothering. Most respondents in our interviews also discussed the relevance of fatherhood and characteristics of fathering in relation to women's roles as mothers and wives. Similar types of referencing to fatherhood did not occur when motherhood was considered ([Miall & March, 2003](#)).

From our interview data, it seems that fathers are perceived to enact their role and demonstrate their emotional attachment to children through learned parenting behavior rather than by an intuitive response based on biological disposition. This stands in contrast to our earlier findings that motherhood is perceived as instinctive and creates an essentialist link to children ([Miall & March, 2003](#)).

The learned nature of fatherhood, parenting, and bonding. In response to a question exploring feelings a birth father would have for children he had not parented (e.g., who were placed for adoption), the majority of men (57%) and women (65%) believed that he would feel differently about children he had not raised than about those he had ([Miall & March, 2003](#)). We concluded that support for the learned basis of fatherhood influenced this attitude. Presumably, the lack of contact between a birth father and a child placed for adoption would make it difficult for him to become emotionally attached as he would have no opportunity to *learn* to be, or act as, a father to the child.

Birth father parenting versus adoptive placement. We were also interested in whether this notion that fatherhood is learned would affect attitudes toward birth fathers as single parents, and asked, "If a birth mother cannot or does not want to raise her child, is it better that the child be raised by the birth father or by an adoptive mother and father?" A majority of men (76%) and women (84%) thought it was better for the birth father to keep and raise his child.

However, respondents paid little attention to the primacy of a *biological* father-child bond. One woman and two men noted a birth father's inherent right to keep and raise a child born to him, but only one woman and one man mentioned biological father-child bonding. Generally, respondents replied, "If the father wants to, it should be given to the father," "Yes, but it's totally up to the father," or "Providing the father is prepared to take the responsibility."

In terms of birth mothers, the most prominent theme identified was the primacy of the biological mother-child bond. Respondents felt that a woman had an inherent right to keep and raise a child born to her ([March & Miall, 2005](#)). Unlike the birth mother who,

by nature, was seen as compelled to keep her child, the birth father was seen as having a rational choice in the matter.

Many respondents clarified this element of choice by stressing the birth father's acceptance of responsibility as a sign of his "caring" about the child. For example, one woman remarked, "Yes, because if he wants to accept responsibility, then that means he cares enough." Another claimed, "By coming forth and saying he wants to raise the child, he already expresses a love and that makes him the ideal candidate." In comparison, a man observed, "If the father wants to and is able to do that, then I would say everything should be okay. As long as he's got the child's interests in mind."

Men and women in this sample expressed concern about the birth father's ability to parent alone. As one man remarked, "It's a big decision for a man to take on his own. I mean, if I were to have ... want to try and raise my kids by myself without the wife, it would be a big decision." However, only women contrasted the birth father's parenting role against his labor force role. A focus on the contradictory demands of single fatherhood and male career goals led several women to select adoption over the birth father's right to keep and raise his child. As one put it, "I don't think a man has enough time when he's working. Most men are career-oriented." Another said, "Adoption provides more security ... who's going to look after the child while he's out working?" One woman concluded,

When a father needs to be the breadwinner, he would be out working all the time. So, if he was a single father, the child would be in daycare. Now, there's a lot of good daycares. But, if you've got a choice between full-time daycare and full-time parents, I would definitely take full-time parents.

Only one man in our sample suggested that age might be a factor in choosing adoption as the better option. "I'm thinking of high school kids. They're not responsible enough."

To conclude, our respondents supported a birth father raising his child but did not base this support on a biological father-child bond. Rather, emphasis was placed on the birth father accepting responsibility for his child as a sign of his caring, a form of *paternal claiming* identified by [Marsiglio \(2004\)](#). In his study of stepfathers, Marsiglio argued that paternal claiming is a readiness "to provide for, protect, and see a stepchild as though the child were his own [and] reflects a state of mind and relationship orientation" (p. 23). Our respondents seemed to indicate that a similar process was involved when birth fathers accepted responsibility for their biological children. Biological paternity was not sufficient reason. Respondents indicated that the birth father had to actively take on the responsibility to be considered the father and engage in parenting to learn the fatherhood role.

Birth father motivations for adoption placement. We also asked respondents why they thought birth fathers decide to transfer their parental rights to adoptive parents. Notably, several respondents laughed, although men laughed less frequently than women. Analysis revealed that laughter usually occurred in conjunction with the word "responsibility" and implied that the answer to the question was an obvious one. Typically, respondents would

say, "They just don't want to deal with the responsibility [laugh]," "A lot of them do it to shun responsibility," or "To get out of the financing [laughter]." Taking a more negative view, one woman remarked, "My opinion about them isn't too great. Because ... sometimes they don't know and sometimes even if they know, honestly, they don't care."

A minority of women discussed the birth father's position relative to the birth mother's. Unlike the birth mother who could not escape her pregnancy or the emotional bonds it created, the birth father could "run away" from both. As one woman put it, "This is a sarcastic answer. I would think it was easier for them. They haven't borne that child. And, it's easier for men to walk. They have less invested ... from emotions right through to the physical end." When participants discussed the reasons why they thought birth mothers placed their children for adoption, most respondents characterized placement as a "selfless" act. In contrast, women tended to view the birth father's transfer of parental rights as a symptom of self-interest ([March & Miall, 2005](#)).

Women in our sample also perceived the birth mother's situation as a multicomplex one, emphasizing economic hardship, emotional problems, and age as potential reasons for placement ([March & Miall, 2005](#)). Men, however, were more descriptive of the birth father's position and offered additional possibilities for his placement decision. This distinction is noteworthy because our women tended to be more expressive than the men in their responses to other questions. Moreover, unlike the women, nearly one third of the men believed birth fathers had little choice in the matter of adoptive placement. As one man replied, "They don't have any rights if they're not married to the mother." Another said, "It's more the mother's decision, I mean, you did not carry it in your belly for nine months. That's a really hard one to fight." A third noted, "Depending on how close the father is to the mother. If it was one of those accident things, he would just run away." These men saw the birth father–birth mother relationship as a key factor affecting the birth father's transfer of parental rights.

Some men also discussed insufficient biological father–child bonding. As one observed, "It's probably easier for fathers to do that. They don't have the ... real bonding. That bond has to be learned. Guys can break that tie easier." Others mentioned the birth father's lack of finances, low education, or inadequate family support. A few also noted, "It would be a matter of not caring probably or not wanting to take responsibility."

Although only one man mentioned teenage fatherhood as a reason for adoptive placement, women made frequent references to problems associated with teenage motherhood ([March & Miall, 2005](#)). Men did mention the birth father's age when discussing the issue of responsibility. Unlike older men who were considered more willing and able to accept paternal responsibility, young men were regarded as unable to understand the full implications of fatherhood. As one man noted,

I think that has a lot to do with age. When you asked the question about women, I never thought about age ... whether they were 16 or 20 or 24. I thought if you wanted to give the child up for adoption, it would all have to do with where you were in your life. ... Men ... I think ... in their early years, the level of maturity is just [laughs] ... not so

much thinking about being a father. But, thinking about "I don't want to be in a family kind of thing"... when you're young.

Canada-wide telephone survey

First, we briefly review our findings on participants' beliefs about the importance of fatherhood as a role for men and the nature of fatherhood as instinctive or learned, as reported in detail in our earlier paper ([Miall & March, 2003](#)). Then, we discuss new results on whether respondents approve or disapprove of birth fathers who make an adoption plan and whether participants think that birth fathers putting their child up for adoption should be considered (a) responsible or irresponsible, (b) caring or uncaring, and (c) unselfish or selfish (questions replicated from [Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997](#)). A complete discussion of these results for birth mothers is provided in [March and Miall \(2005\)](#).

The importance and nature of fatherhood. In the Canada-wide survey, 80% of participants considered the role of fatherhood as very important to the role of men in general. The majority of men (57%) and women (63%) also considered the nature of fatherhood to be learned. In both the interviews and survey data, therefore, the majority of men and women considered fatherhood learned, although variations were noted in levels of agreement by gender.

Attitudes toward adoption decisions made by birth fathers. Given the strong support in the qualitative interviews for birth fathers raising their children rather than developing an adoption plan, we asked our respondents to indicate whether they approved or disapproved of birth fathers making an adoption plan. The majority (63%) of men and women in our survey either strongly approved (27%) or somewhat approved (36%) of birth fathers who "put their children up for adoption" (Institute Survey wording). This result was not that different from the Donaldson Institute result, which reported that 30% of respondents strongly approved and 33% somewhat approved. However, within our sample, women (33%) were significantly more likely than men (18%) to strongly approve ($p < .001$) and men (43%) were significantly more likely than women (32%) to somewhat approve ($p < .05$). Notably, men (24%) were also significantly more likely than women (15%) to somewhat disapprove of birth fathers making an adoption plan ($p < .05$), although no significant differences emerged for strong disapproval (16% of men vs. 20% of women).

In terms of their attitudes toward birth fathers who had, in fact, made an adoption plan for their children, a majority of our men and women expressed approval of birth fathers, although men were slightly less likely than women to do so.

Attitudes toward birth fathers as responsible, caring, and unselfish. The majority (71%) of our sample felt that a birth father who put his child up for adoption was being responsible rather than irresponsible, as did 66% of the Donaldson Institute respondents ([Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997](#)). However, in our sample, women (76%)

were significantly more likely than men (62%) to support this notion ($p < .01$), with nearly 38% of men regarding birth fathers as irresponsible.

The majority (72%) of our respondents also thought that a birth father who put his child up for adoption was being caring rather than uncaring as did 68% of the Donaldson Institute respondents ([Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute, 1997](#)). Again, our women (78%) were significantly more likely than the men (64%) to support this notion ($p < .01$), with over one third of men considering birth fathers uncaring if they made an adoption plan for their child.

The majority (68%) of our sample also thought that a birth father who put his child up for adoption was being unselfish rather than selfish, as did 68% of Donaldson Institute respondents ([Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institution, 1997](#)). Again, women (76%) in our sample were significantly more likely than men (55%) to support this notion ($p < .01$), with 46% of men characterizing birth fathers as selfish.

In [Table 1](#), measures of association for other sociodemographic variables are provided. In terms of support for birth fathers making an adoption plan, the less education and income respondents had, the more likely they were to disapprove of birth fathers ($p < .001$ and $p < .01$, respectively). Older respondents were more likely to view birth fathers as irresponsible than younger respondents ($p < .01$). However, the more education and income, the greater the likelihood of viewing birth fathers as responsible ($p < .001$), caring ($p < .001$), and unselfish ($p < .05$). In terms of marital status, married/common law respondents were more likely to view birth fathers as caring ($p < .05$) and unselfish ($p < .001$). Finally, respondents who were parents were more likely to view birth fathers as unselfish than were respondents who were not parents ($p < .05$).

To conclude, the majority of respondents favored the birth father raising his child over adoption by a couple when the birth mother was unable or unwilling to parent the child. Although a majority of our survey respondents indicated that they believed that birth fathers were responsible, caring, and unselfish when they made an adoption plan, women in our qualitative interviews were more likely to characterize birth fathers as irresponsible and uncaring.

Discussion

 

Researchers studying adoption maintain that, in Western culture, blood kinship still dominates as the most socially acceptable basis for family formation ([Bartholet, 1993](#); [Miall, 1996, 1998](#); [Wegar, 1997, 2000](#)). Although the mother-child bond takes priority in adoption practice, the value given to raising children within biologically based families has resulted in birth fathers also being considered when decisions about adoptive parenting are made ([Katz-Rothman, 2000](#)). However, our research suggests that traditional constructs of motherhood and fatherhood persist in the community in

meaningful and gendered ways. We argue that these constructs may set up personal and institutional barriers to actual birth father involvement with children.

Personal and institutional barriers to paternal claiming

In this study, participants considered fatherhood to be an important role for men, reflecting men's greater involvement in parenting. However, the "essentialism" that characterizes motherhood for women was not present for men. Fatherhood was more often considered learned than instinctive and enacted in behavior. Respondents felt that, unlike birth mothers who had instinctual ties to their children, birth fathers would not bond with children they had not parented ([Miall & March, 2003](#)). Further, the gendered moral imperative to become a mother and engage in mothering behavior was not extended to fathers and fathering behavior ([McMahon, 1995](#); [Miall & March, 2003](#); [Snarey, 1993](#)).

Despite a biological connection, taking on the fatherhood role was characterized as a choice or decision rather than an entitlement. This is a form of paternal claiming, wherein the birth father undertook to be "responsible" for and to protect his child ([Marsiglio, 2004](#)). Fathers were depicted as "workers" rather than "nurturers," with their main role being to provide economic security for their families ([Marsiglio, 1998](#); [Marsiglio et al., 2000](#)). The inability of birth fathers to provide economically was offered as a rationale to support adoptive parenting.

However, in our interviews, nearly one third of male respondents observed that men are limited in influencing their children's fate and in establishing and maintaining a father-child relationship. This lack of power was linked to the strength of the mother-child bond and the mother's fundamental position of control in her child's life. Many men also suggested that birth fathers may take a less confrontational or interventionist approach once the birth mother has made a placement decision, thereby abandoning their paternal rights with less struggle than might otherwise be expected. Given this perspective, a birth father's apparent lack of interest in the adoption process might mask his true need for stronger social and institutional support than is presently provided.

However, institutional practices may create barriers to responsible fathering for unwed fathers ([Doherty et al., 1998](#)). More professional effort by social workers and family practitioners is expended to maintain the biological bond between birth mothers and their children than between birth fathers and their children ([Clapton, 1997](#); [Nock, 1998](#)). Birth fathers may be encouraged by these professionals to relinquish their parental rights or be made to feel unqualified to assume a parenting role, given gendered perceptions of their lack of innate nurturing abilities ([Ludtke, 1997](#)).

However, [Day et al. \(2005\)](#) have observed that limiting family support to mothers and children to the exclusion of fathers can close off significant emotional supports for children. Further, studies of unmarried fathers suggest that these gendered perceptions may bear little correspondence to how unwed fatherhood is actually experienced. In a follow-up study of 125 birth fathers, [Deykin, Patti, and Ryan \(1988\)](#) found that, for

many, the placement of their child for adoption remained an unresolved dilemma. Over two thirds of their subjects were searching, or motivated to search for the child relinquished for adoption, by a sense of responsibility toward the child and a desire to "get their child back."

The stigma of being a birth father

As noted earlier, unwed birth fathers have historically been stigmatized as rogues, scoundrels, unscrupulous cads, Don Juans, phantom fathers, troubled fathers, or fathers who cause trouble. In our qualitative interviews, women characterized unwed birth fathers choosing adoption as irresponsible and uncaring. Men were less judgmental, characterizing these birth fathers as either too young to understand the full implications of fatherhood or not financially capable of fulfilling their paternal responsibility.

However, the social context strongly suggests that unwed birth fathers may be subject to stigmatization, particularly by women. These birth fathers may "self-label" themselves negatively because they have learned the normative social meanings accompanying unwed fatherhood ([Miall, 1986](#)). This personal evaluation may result in birth fathers feeling a lack of entitlement to their children, particularly if they are feeling ambivalent about assuming the fatherhood role. As [Arditti et al. \(2005\)](#) have observed, if attributes of a potential father are stigmatized, this may create barriers to assuming or enacting the father role ([Marsiglio, 2004](#)).

Further, when a birth mother makes an adoption plan, she may be signaling her lack of confidence in or disapproval of the birth father as a potential parenting partner. This may also impact a birth father's confidence in assuming a fatherhood role with his child. [Hawkins and Dollahite \(1997\)](#), for example, have argued that an emphasis on paternal deficiencies may serve as a barrier to the empowerment of fathers as caregivers. [Madden-Derdict and Leonard \(2000\)](#) have also noted that divorced fathers are less likely to remain involved in their parental role if their ex-wives are perceived to be unsupportive or disapproving of their parenting skills. As [Doherty et al. \(1998\)](#) have observed, "undermining from the mother or from a social institution or system may induce many fathers to retreat from responsible fathering" (p. 287).

Paradoxically, the respondents in our survey characterized birth fathers making an adoption plan as responsible, caring, and unselfish. Given that many women considered birth fathers irresponsible and uncaring to begin with, it may be that allowing the child to go to a "loving" adoptive home with two parents was perceived positively, that is, the "bad" father was no longer in the child's life to create "trouble." Men, on the other hand, concerned that birth fathers might not be able to provide financially for their children, might also see adoption as the responsible, caring, and unselfish thing to do, that is, the "good" father did not make trouble by attempting to keep his child.

Despite the negative connotations associated with unwed birth fathers, researchers have established that the large majority do care about their child's future and remain committed

to the mother during her pregnancy ([Nock, 1998](#); [Robinson, 1988a, 1988b, 2000](#); [Sachdev, 1991](#)).

Implications for family practice and research

Recent theoretical and empirical research has moved away from a deficit theory of fatherhood to an examination of the positive effects of fatherhood on children and the interpersonal and institutional barriers that may impede responsible fathering ([Day et al., 2005](#); [Doherty et al., 1998](#); [Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997](#)). There is also a growing realization that fatherhood involvement is important to positive child development and adjustment ([Day et al., 2005](#)). However, although adoption practice emphasizes the importance of birth fathers in adoption decision making, personal, social, and institutional barriers may limit that involvement to birth fathers relinquishing their parental rights.

In other contexts, practitioners are already attempting to develop new approaches that offer institutional support to fathers' involvement with their children. For example, in an overview of policy implications of new fatherhood research, [Day et al. \(2005\)](#) have directed practitioners to intervention strategies that were developed to promote positive fatherhood relationships ([McBride & Lutz, 2004](#); [Mincy & Pouncey, 2002](#)). As the authors note, the [National Center on Fathers and Families \(2001\)](#) has created the Fathering Indicators Framework (see also, [Gadsden, Fagan, Ray, & Davis, 2004](#)). According to [Gadsden et al. \(2004\)](#), this methodological tool allows for the design and evaluation of intervention strategies with fathers. In terms of unwed birth fathers, interventions may include offering social support for a fathering role when birth mothers do not wish to parent, or supporting greater involvement in adoption decision making through open-adoption arrangements, for example.

However, further research is needed on the paradoxes this research reveals. Although our respondents appear to support traditional kinship forms, at the same time they indicate strong support for a family form, single parenthood, and more particularly, single fatherhood, which directly challenges them. Given the exploratory nature of our qualitative interviews and the limited generalizability of our samples, more research is needed to establish the circumstances under which single fatherhood becomes the preferred choice for children in care. Age differences, for example, were identified in this research as factors impacting approval of single fatherhood. More research is also needed on how gendered stereotypes of unwed fatherhood may distort an understanding of the ways it is personally experienced and understood. Further, as noted earlier, the use of neutral terms such as *birth parent* in discussions of adoption masks the fact that birth mothers, not birth fathers, are the persons most often referred to in adoption research, policy, and practice. More attention should be paid, therefore, to whether gendered stereotypes of unwed fatherhood impact practitioner policies and practices in adoption and, if so, to what extent.

Finally, researchers should attend to how the methodology chosen may obscure or distort the issues under review. Our use of qualitative and quantitative methods, for example, generated insights that neither could have provided if used alone. Quantitative

methodologies routinely used in survey studies examine attitudes toward issues with a goal of establishing the *facts* of a situation, for example, to what extent, in statistical terms, a general population supports or does not support a particular issue. Reports of results are usually presented, in a seemingly unproblematic way, as tables derived from statistical analysis. In this paper, male and female respondents' apparent agreement on fixed alternative (yes/no) questions in the interviews was, in fact, accompanied by different explanations of why they answered the way they did, a fact we explore in some detail in [Miall and March \(in press\)](#). The use of both qualitative and quantitative methods in research on these issues, therefore, is recommended.

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