

**PERCEPTIONS OF FATHERHOOD: BIRTH FATHERS AND  
THEIR ADOPTION EXPERIENCES**

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**Doctor of Philosophy**

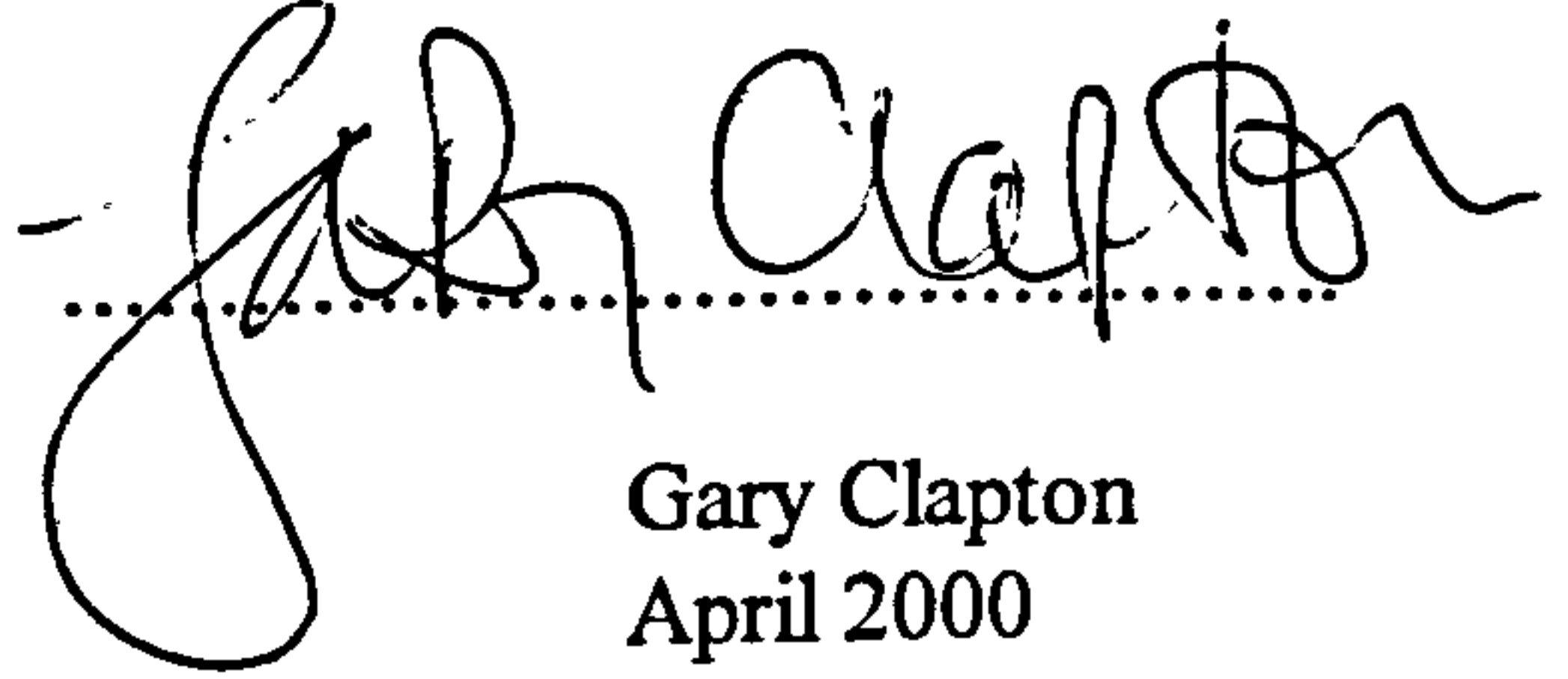
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## DECLARATION

Except where specific reference is made to other sources, the work of this thesis is the original work of the author. It has not been submitted in whole or part for any other degree.

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "Gary Clapton". The signature is written over a horizontal dotted line. The letter "G" is large and loops down below the line.

Gary Clapton  
April 2000

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## ABSTRACT

Very little is known about men whose children have been given up for adoption. This thesis explores the experiences of thirty men – ‘birth fathers’. The findings of the thesis offer an insight in respect of another relatively unexplored subject – the factors and dynamics involved in men’s perceptions of themselves as fathers. The experiences of the respondents provide a point of entry to contemporary discussions concerning fatherhood.

Information relating to the experiences, thoughts and feelings of the respondents was collected in a series of in-depth qualitative interviews. The interviews covered the period before the birth of the child and the men’s experiences of the birth, the adoption and immediate post-adoption events. Data was also gathered relating to the men’s thoughts about the children and the place of the adoption experience in their lives. Expectations, motivations and precipitating factors relating to a wish for contact with the adopted child were also discussed. In ten cases, where meetings had taken place with their (now adult) children, the experience of meeting and subsequent contact with a son or daughter was explored.

A central theme that emerged from the data was that the respondents’ experiences of the adoption had been long lasting and felt to be detrimental. The events of the time were reported as having been impactful and to have retained an emotional salience in their subsequent lives. For a majority, their adopted child had a continued existence in their thoughts. Many of the respondents reported an ongoing sense of ‘connectedness’ with the child – some described this as paternal in nature. It is suggested that there are some commonalities between men and women’s experiences of being a birth parent. This finding invites a discussion of conventional notions of maternity and paternity.

It is argued that the data and findings from the respondents’ experiences suggest that conventional notions of fatherhood are limited in that they generally refer to a father’s activities with his child. The men in this study did not have experience of parenting yet many described feeling like fathers in respect of the adopted child. The thesis explores possible origins and bases of this paternal sense. The thesis suggests an expanded notion of fatherhood that would include men’s self perception of fatherhood. Fatherhood may not only be viewed as something that is done but also something that may continue to exist when the father and child are substantially apart – in the case of the respondents, the two parties had never been together.

The conclusion of thesis returns to an earlier discussion relating to the existence of negative assumptions and stereotypes regarding fathers. These appear at government, public and professional levels. The conclusion also discusses features of current post-adoption research and practice and identifies some problems of terminology that point to underlying assumptions in relation to men and women, and in respect of adopted people and birth parents. The implications for the way that we think about kinship are also discussed. Some suggestions for further research are made e.g. for a critical sociology of the birth parent experience.



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**INTRODUCTION****Statement of the Question**

The subject of this study is birth fatherhood – here ‘birth fathers’ is the term used to describe men whose children have been adopted. ‘Birth mothers’ is the equivalent term for women in these circumstances – the reason for the term and other versions are discussed below.

Birth fatherhood was not the original focus of the study, but rather one that developed. A brief discussion of how, in the course of the study, the central theme of this work was clarified and of how the respondents were chosen will help to contextualise both my approach to the question of fatherhood and my findings.

The origins of the study lie in a mixture of professional and personal interest. In 1994 I met with a daughter whom I had last seen 25 years earlier as a six-week old baby, just prior to her adoption. I was aware that our contact was one of many which were and are being sought by adopted people and their birth mothers, fathers or other relatives (Campbell, Silverman and Patti, 1991; Feast, 1994 and Post-Adoption Social Workers Group, 1987). I knew therefore that I was probably only one of many men who sought or who welcomed contact with their biological or ‘birth’ children. A curiosity about these other men led me to search for their accounts in the professional, and indeed in any, literature.

Initially I was mainly searching to find some wider resonances for my own experience of and feelings about contact. However, almost simultaneously, this search developed into what is as much a professional and academic as a personal journey. I sought to discover men’s motivations for contact. What had moved them to seek or to welcome meeting and contact from children that they had fathered but not parented? What were their hopes and fears? Before and at meeting, and during any subsequent

contact, how did these fellow 'birth fathers' understand their relationship with the adopted child - now an adult?

In pursuing this curiosity I initially discovered only anecdotal accounts from men in such circumstances (Argent ed., 1988; Feast, 1994; Pannor, Massarik and Evans, 1971; Tugendhat, 1992). These accounts further stimulated my curiosity and my research proposal came into being.

Originally this research study sought to interview men involved in meetings with their adopted children. Two factors then occurred which gave shape to the study's final form. The first was a necessary process of 'ranking' my series of questions about the meetings. Initially the important issue seemed to be the reason(s) that the men had sought or welcomed such contact. The more this question came into focus, the more it seemed to beg a larger one regarding the nature and understanding of biological fatherhood and of conventional - 'social' - fatherhood. Here were men whose only connection with a child appeared to be a biological one. What would be their motivation for actively seeking or at least inviting a meeting with a child they had never parented - apparently a person with whom they had no current social connection? The question of fatherhood - as it applied to the respondents - became central to the research aims and outcomes.

The second factor that helped shape the study was a practical one. I soon discovered that very few agencies could cite many examples of men who had been involved in later-life contact with their adopted children. I was aware of research on women ('birth mothers') who had had children adopted and their desire for knowledge of the child (e.g. Bouchier, Lambert and Triseliotis, 1991). Here were examples of biological parents' experiences of adoption and life afterwards. Interestingly, at this time I accepted without question women's desire for and involvement in later-life contacts with their adopted children. Considering this disparity - that I regarded women's motivations to seek reunion as understandable but men's puzzling - also furthered my



interest in this area of study. It added a gender dimension in that comparisons would be possible – if sufficient respondents could be found.

The lack of men to interview who had experienced contact was the practical factor that gave the study the shape it has today. This problem was resolved with reference to the central question that had emerged. Why had the men sought or welcomed contact? It seemed that those who were seeking contact could just as fruitfully be asked the same question - 'why do you want to meet your child?' I reasoned that in some ways men who had had contact may have had their recollections of initial motivations affected by the nature of the ensuing relationship. On the other hand, men who were actively seeking or inviting contact with their adopted children might be able to talk informatively to the question of what motivated them in respect of a hoped-for meeting with their child. Accordingly the number of potential respondents was enlarged to include both those who had had contact and those who would like to achieve this.

A central question and themes were now clearer. What would motivate men to seek contact with an adopted child? How had they felt about: the child at the time of the adoption; in the years since; and for some at least, had there been a change in feeling to make them want to see a child they had originally decided not to parent? What did they want or hope from contact? These became the questions I would invite my respondents to answer.

As already indicated it had become apparent that men's accounts of either their adoption experiences or their motivations in seeking contact with their adopted children were few, relative to the (small but growing) body of knowledge relating to women whose children had been adopted. This reinforced my questioning of my own differential expectations of men and women in this situation. These were of the order that it was 'natural' to expect that women would suffer feelings of loss in relation to an adopted child, but that men would 'naturally' not suffer similar feelings of loss, nor seek any later-life meeting. Both these factors suggested the possibility of untested



assumptions regarding men and women that may be present in the literature on 'birth parents' and indeed on parents. These assumptions could include the acceptance that it was natural for a woman to have 'maternal' feelings for the child that had been adopted alongside feelings of puzzlement that a man in similar circumstances could feel 'paternal'. It is interesting that maternity as a biological fact in itself is widely assumed to be inherently associated with maternal feeling, whereas paternity as a biological fact is assumed to be divorced from paternal feeling (Sarre, 1996; Seel, 1987; Richards, 1982). Might such assumptions lie behind a lack of interest in pursuing research among such men? Harper (1993: 28) draws attention to the lack of attention to the paternal role and feeling when she asks, 'could it be that the focus in adoption has always been on the relinquishing mother?'. Clearly the focus has been on the mother. The interesting question is why? And what, if anything, might be lost because of this?

Thus another aspect of my study fell into place. By studying the literature on birth mothers I would explore the extent to which notions in respect of the maternity and paternity were bounded by a biological determinism that worked to perpetuate stereotypes. Such stereotypes promote acceptance that whilst 'normal' men in these circumstances forget about their adopted children, 'normal' women never do. In other words - in respect of birth parents - motherhood is not problematised and the presence of feelings and thoughts of fatherhood may be ignored and therefore not studied or compared.

The research on birth mothers had shown that biological mothers could continue to feel a parent-like connection with their children (e.g. Weinreb and Cody Murphy, 1988). What would research amongst birth fathers show? This question should have a wider significance in relation to gender and parental roles resonant with broader social concerns. Concretely the question is relevant given current concerns about the role of men and fathers (Burgess, 1997; Burghes, Clarke and Cronin, 1997; The Guardian 11 September 1999; Federal Interagency Forum on Children and Family Statistics, 1998; Milligan and Dowie, 1998; Williams and Roberston, 1999).

Lastly, in view of the subject and the possible light shed by charting the experiences of the respondents, a final aim of the study would be to look at implications for professional practice in the adoption field. In view of the dearth of information on the male birth parent in adoption - 'still a shadowy figure' (Tugendhat, 1992: 23) - documenting the experiences of men who had had a child adopted would inform adoption theory, policy and practice.

This account of the early stages of the study has focused upon my choice of respondents, both as a means to elucidate the connection between the project's germination and the study's final form. It also explains the thinking behind the choice to study such a unique group of men.

What now follows is a less process-orientated introduction to the study. My early thinking led inexorably to the need to explore the state of contemporary thinking on fatherhood. In what way would the circumstances of the study's potential respondents be found to 'fit' or otherwise with wider social understandings of paternity?

## **Fatherhood**

Fatherhood is now a central concern to policy makers (Burghes et. al, 1997). At a societal level there is 'public intrigue with the positive and negative aspects of fatherhood' (Marsiglio, 1995a). Matters such as what constitutes fatherhood are under the 'public gaze' (Lewis, 1995; Moss ed., 1997) including such issues as men's financial and emotional involvement with their children. There are popular stereotypes of men as cruel or absent fathers; debate continues as to the various meanings of the term absent fathers (Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams, 1999) and the extent to which the description of fecklessness is accurate as applied to young unmarried fathers (Burgess, 1997; Freeley, 1999). Despite a widespread interest, the subject of



fatherhood remains a canvas upon which there are more ideas and opinions than empirical research.

Although there has been a growth over the past twenty-five years (Tanfer and Mott, 1998), the overall knowledge base on fatherhood and fathers remains small (Edwards, 1998; Gersick, 1975; Lewis, 1986; Shapiro et. al, 1995). Research findings are lacking in consensus about the nature and meaning of fatherhood (Clarke and Popay, 1998) and those findings that do exist are mixed (Marsiglio, 1995a). Furthermore, Clarke and Popay note that 'the actual meanings and definitions attached by men to fatherhood and their personal experiences of fathering are unclear from the literature' (203). They go on to remark that 'Although there has been a ground-swell of research and empirical studies, we still have little knowledge of how most men perceive fatherhood' (ibid.). This comment on the paucity of the existing research on fathers and fatherhood is echoed by others. Burgess and Ruxton (1996: v.) suggest that the private lives of fathers remain 'largely hidden.' See also Burghes et al (1997).

Much of the existing research has explored what fathers do - or do not do - (Lewis, 1986). Relatively little exists in respect of what being a father is and how men perceive of themselves in this capacity – where fatherhood fits in a man's identity and men's perceptions of themselves as fathers. In this study I review the research on fathers and suggest such research has mainly been concerned with what they do with their children i.e. on how men actively parent. Research has rarely explored matters prior to this point e.g. how men become fathers (La Rossa, 1986; Lewis, 1982; Lewis, 1986; May, 1982; Scott-Heyes, 1982) or sought to examine fatherhood as a concept (McKee and O'Brien, 1982). Roopnarine and Miller (1985: 50) argue that the exact beginning of fatherhood is ambiguous and that: 'Few studies have explicitly examined fathers' transition to parenthood, and none has focused on the impact of pregnancy'.

The question of what **fatherhood** is then, and the meanings that are lent to it by men, has been somewhat occluded by the more technical question of what **fathers do**. Men have rarely been asked what they think fatherhood consists of, neither, in the

main, have researchers explored the various dimensions of fatherhood other than its practical expression in 'hands-on' parenting. This study seeks to redress this imbalance. It does this with a unique group of men who, by definition, are unable to discuss what they do as fathers - rather the respondents in this study have spoken to and convey what they believe fatherhood means to them. So who are the respondents in this study?

As indicated in my earlier discussion of the process of clarifying and consolidating the study's main themes, the subjects of the present study are a group of men who mostly consider themselves to be fathers yet who have never cared for the child in question. Many of the respondents had never seen their son or daughter even at birth. Clearly a different experience to that of birth mothers. These men are the fathers of children given up for adoption. I have used the term 'birth fathers' as it is the one most recognised in professional and statutory literature (e.g. Department of Health and Welsh Office, 1992) i.e. it seeks to avoid more emotive descriptions such as natural or real father. The majority of the respondents in this study had had no contact with their child yet they thought of the child in ways, that I will show, are consonant with a parental capacity.

My case study of the experiences, behaviours and thoughts of this group is designed to and necessarily sheds light on fatherhood as a whole. In particular the world of men's consciousness of fatherhood is explored. Where this feeling of being a father began for the respondents, how it developed, what sustained it over decades and what factors revived, it is examined in depth. Furthermore, in the case of those respondents who have had later-life contact and begun relationships with their children, I present findings as to what occurs when the social worlds of birth father and adopted child meet.

The study looks at the apparent conundrum of men whose only contribution to a child has been a biological one yet who think of themselves as more than someone who participated in the act of fathering i.e. conception. The experiences and perspectives



of many of the respondents challenge much of contemporary thinking in that there is a convention that holds that fatherhood can only be expressed socially i.e. through acts of fathering (e.g. Seel, 1987). The question has up-to-date relevance e.g. in the light of recent discussions concerning the setting up of registers that would facilitate the later-life meetings between sperm donors and children (Blyth, 1999; The Guardian editorial, 14 October 1999). Furthermore, additional light on the question of what may constitutes fatherhood may inform other contemporary debates that are taking place in relation to the responsibilities of fathers/men and the policies of government organisations e.g. the Child Support Agency (CSA). The idea that there might be more to being a father than providing either money (the CSA) or donating sperm is a central theme of this study.

Policies of governments directly pose the issue of a variety of definitions of states of fatherhood – the biological, legal, social, or biological and social (Lewis, 1994; Sarre, 1996). Moreover which one or ones at anyone time underpins assumptions and policy-making? In their discussion of the various states of fatherhood Burghes et al (1997) ask simply ‘who is the child’s father?’ Is it the economic provider as defined by the various elements of child financial support legislation or it is the active parent as defined by the Children’s Acts of England and Wales (1989) and Scotland (1995)? Which states of fatherhood should realistically be utilised by policy-makers?

It is hoped that the research will contribute to these questions and the various Family Law and socio-legal debates regarding the status and responsibilities of fathers not married to the mothers of their children. For example the putative father, at present in UK legislation, has no locus in adoption proceedings. If life-long thoughts of attachment to an unseen child can persist and a concomitant feeling of responsibility can exist independent of social fathering, then a number of stereotypical assumptions regarding men’s seeming ‘fecklessness’ or forgetfulness vis-à-vis their children may have to be re-evaluated. However Pickford (1992: 140) suggests that ‘as the law stands, it may be a matter of pure chance whether the unmarried father of a child whose mother does not want to continue as a carer has the opportunity to intervene’.

The respondents' lives and thoughts furnish a rich opportunity to explore the above questions concerning the provenance and nature of fatherhood. However the respondents' experiences as birth fathers of adopted children also provides the opportunity to address specific research lacunae in the field of adoption theory, policy and practice. It is to this I now turn.

## **Adoption, Birth Parents and Fatherhood**

### **Adoption Today**

The UK Government has expressed a renewed interest in adoption as a means to secure permanent families for children and adoption has been described as fast becoming a major political battleground (Community Care 1 July 1999 and 13 April 2000). In wider society, adoption stories are never far away from the news and have cultural expressions in television soaps, plays and on film (Clapton, 1996b). In my article (ibid.) it is argued that the numbers affected by adoption are considerable and far exceed the number of adoptions in any given year. For instance if the adopted person, their birth and adoptive parents are included in calculations then the number of people immediately affected by an adoption are five for every adoption. This figure does not take into account other relatives such as birth and adoptive siblings and birth and adoptive grandparents. A brief look at the figures can make the case for this view.

The peak of all UK adoptions that took place at birth was in 1968. Then, fifteen babies in every thousand were adopted by people who were not biologically related to the child (Howe, Sawbridge and Hinings, 1992). The year after (1969) saw the peak of all UK non step-parent adoptions when eighteen babies per thousand live births were adopted (Grey, 1971). Tables One and Two below present figures relating to adoptions and live births in England and Wales and Scotland. The rise and fall of 'out-of-family' adoptions of infants and the 1968/1969 peak can clearly be seen.



**Table One****Adoptions in England and Wales 1963 –1992 as a Proportion of Live Births**

	All adoptions	Live births	Adoptions of infants under twelve months *	Adoptions of infants under 12 months by non-parents – ‘stranger adoptions’ **
1963	17,782	854,055	9896	9714
1968	24,831	819,272	12,641	12,408
1973	22,647	675,953	6026	5822
1978	12,121	596,418	2816	2786
1983	9029	629,134	1962	1907
1988	7390	693,577	1235	***
1992	6859	673,467	661	

Sources: Cols. 1-5 Registrar General’s Statistical Review of England and Wales, OPCS

\* The figures in this column represent all adoptions, including those by step-parents.

\*\* Whilst the figures in this column may include adoptions by non-parental relatives such as grandparents, the vast majority consist of out-of-family adoptions.

\*\*\* From 1985 onwards the annual figure for non-parental adoptions of infants is not available (OPCS letter 7 September 1995).

**Table Two****Adoptions in Scotland 1963 – 1993 as a Proportion of Live Births**

	All adoptions	Live births	Adoptions of infants under twelve months *	Adoptions of infants under 12 months by non-parents – ‘stranger adoptions’ **
1963	1683	102,691	not available	Not available
1968	2155	94,786	1332	1318
1973	1900	74,392	925	919
1978	1356	64,295	401	394
1983	1164	65,078	291	288
1988	868	66,212	132	131
1993	805	63,337	72	34

Sources: Cols. 1-5 General Register Office for Scotland, Population Statistics Branch.

\* The figures in this column represent all adoptions including those by step-parents.

\*\* Whilst the figures in this column may include non-parental relatives such as grandparents, the vast majority consist of out-of-family adoptions.

Howe et al. (1992) calculate that at a conservative estimate there are a half-million birth mothers in the UK and argue that a figure of 600,000 is more accurate. Tugendhat (1992) puts the figure at three-quarters of a million. Using the conservative figure, if the key parties in the adoption triangle are included (adopted child, adoptive parents, at least one birth parent - the mother), then a suggested figure for those who have experience of adoption would be roughly one in twenty-five of the population. Some have put the potential figure for those affected by adoption as low as one in nine (Natural Parents Group, 1993) or even one in five of the population (Talk Adoption, 1999). A measure of the public interest in adoption is indicated by the media coverage of reactions to the Minister for the Home Office's advocacy of adoption for single mothers in May 1999 (e.g. Community Care 3 - 9 June 1999, The Guardian 26 May 1999, The Independent 31 May 1999, The Scotsman 27 May 1999). A factor that lends controversy to the subject of adoption and makes it a sensitive issue is that adoption can trigger deeply held beliefs in relation to who should or should not be a parent. Therefore the controversial nature of adoption, and the numbers who are directly touched by it, go to ensure a societal interest that is rarely far below the surface.

Within the adoption profession there are two main controversies. These issues both turn on pressure for less secrecy in adoption. This trend has its roots in firstly findings in the USA (e.g. Sorosky et al, 1978), New Zealand (Iwanek, 1987) in relation to the detrimental effects of "extreme secrecy" in adoption (McWhinnie, 1994: 10). Secondly, parallel in time to the US and New Zealand findings, research findings in respect of the negative long-term effects of adoption on birth mothers have emerged (Deykin, Campbell and Patti, 1984; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). Thirdly, in the UK, the publicity surrounding the introduction of the 1975 Children Act and specifically, Section 26, which gave adopted people in England and Wales access to their original birth certificates (although this right had always been available in Scottish legislation) resulted in substantially more adopted people becoming interested in tracing their birth parents. For example, between 1961 and 1970 in Scotland an



average of 42 people per annum took advantage of their right to apply for their birth certificate (Triseliotis, 1973). However between 1996 and 1999 an average of 367 people a year personally called at New Register House in Edinburgh to see their Original Birth Entry (General Register Office, 1999). If those who apply to New Register House in writing for a copy of their original birth entry are taken into consideration then it may be supposed that the number of adopted people taking an interest in their origins has increased in the region of tenfold. In terms of England and Wales the figures are not dissimilar. The England and Wales equivalent of the 1961-70 Scottish figure of 42 would be seven times this i.e. approximately 300. However in 1983, 2,745 adopted people applied for their original birth entry in England and Wales (Howe et al, 1992: 102.).

A consequence of this upturn in adopted people's interest in their origins is that birth parents and supporting organisations have begun to voice a wish for similar reciprocal rights to those of adopted people. This is specifically in relation to access to identifying information (Coleman and Jenkins, 1998: 13-14; Mullender and Kearn, 1997: 159; Natural Parent Network, 1998; NORCAP, 1998). In this respect McWhinnie (1994) identifies a civil rights-based element in the trend toward openness among birth parents i.e. for parity with the rights of adopted people.

In relation to adoption practice there are two main elements involved in the pressure for less secrecy in adoption. These are firstly greater access by birth parents to records and help in later-life tracing and contacting their children that had been adopted. Secondly, there is a campaign for more openness at the point of adoption. Both issues are controversial. In Sachdev's review of the openness debate (1991a: 241) he notes that 'experts' range between belief in total openness (e.g. visitation rights for the birth mother) and a labeling of openness as 'dangerous practice'. Surveys of birth mothers have identified various sympathies in relation to positions along the continuum from secret to open adoptions. These range from the argument for total openness by Wells (1993 (b)) to a rejection by birth mothers of outright openness (Hughes and Logan, 1993). In respect of the second issue, that of later-life contact -

'reunions' - between birth parents and the children that were adopted, McWhinnie suggests that the promotion of birth parent rights has been at the expense of consideration of the needs of the adopted person (1994: 8). Both debates have been marked by calls for greater research concerning the various standpoints of the parties involved. Triseliotis (1991 (b): 47) remarks that empirical evidence is lacking with regard to the outcomes of more open adoptions and McWhinnie (1994:17) calls for greater study of the long term outcomes of reunions between birth parents and their adopted children. So what is the extent of our knowledge in respect of birth parents' views and experiences?

## **Birth Parents**

In these debates within the adoption profession and in wider discussions such as reactions to government calls for increases in the number of adoptions, the voice of birth parents - i.e. the views and experiences - has been cited. This has drawn on a growing body of the research (Bouchier et al, 1991; Condon, 1986; Deykin et al, 1984; Hughes and Logan, 1993; Wells, 1993a and 1994; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). Brodzinsky (1990) provides a useful summary of much of the birth parent research, particularly in relation to adjustment following 'surrender' of children for adoption. Brodzinsky criticises the research on the grounds of sampling bias, questionable viability and reliability of measures. Notwithstanding these reservations she concludes that there is now considerable evidence to suggest that the birth parent experience produces 'profound and protracted grief reactions, depression and an enduring pre-occupation with and worry about the welfare of the child' (1990: 304). Two British studies - Bouchier et al (1991) and Hughes and Logan (1993) - confirm the findings in Brodzinsky's review of the data generated by the research in North America and Australia. Findings such as those in North America and the UK have begun to challenge some of the certainties of previous adoption practice e.g. that birth mothers can and should put it - the adoption - behind them and get on with their lives (Howe et al, 1992); Powell and Warren, 1997). The identification of continued parent-like feelings and thoughts amongst birth mothers serves to problematise



recommendations such as those of Rowe (1977) who appears to sharply divide biological parenting from social parenting: 'A differentiation of parenting from the act of giving birth is probably an essential part of genuine acceptance of adoption' (92). Seven years after this, emergent findings from birth mother experiences showed that feeling like a parent is an emotion that cannot be simply shut off in such circumstances (Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

The weight of birth parent research has also generated an official move to include a role for birth parents in UK adoption legislation e.g. a Department of Health and Welsh Office consultation document (1992: 2) acknowledged 'a growing recognition of the need to involve birth parents in the adoption process'.

However it is the case that the experiences and views of birth parents have been drawn from studies that have dealt with birth mothers. The experiences of birth fathers have not informed debates and the opinion-forming process.

### **Birth Fathers**

The nature of birth fathers' experiences remains unknown. Thoburn's extensive literature survey for the Department of Health and Welsh Office (1992) is a key source of references on the subject of adoption yet her work is only able to cite one piece of research in respect of birth fathers (Deykin, Patti and Ryan, 1988). This study took place in North America and deals with the immediate post-adoptive experience and the birth fathers' subsequent adjustment. My own extensive inquiries have discovered only one other research study (Cicchini, 1993) carried out in Australia.

The lack of a knowledge base in relation to birth fathers has been noted by researchers and professionals. Thoburn (1992) repeats a thirty-year old and regular call for a study of the views and experiences of birth fathers (Bouchier et al, 1991; Brinich, 1990; Deykin et al, 1988; McCroy, 1991; McWhinnie, 1994; Menard, 1997; Mullender, 1991c; Mullender and Kearns, 1997; National Association of Mental

Health, 1960; Sachdev, 1991b; Triseliotis, 1991 and Tugendhat, 1992). Typically, Thoburn asks “what are the reactions of biological fathers of adopted children?” (168). Professional practitioners in adoption echo this. Bouchier et al (1991) call attention to ‘the neglected perspective of birth fathers’ (16) and Spiers and Patterson (1994: 37) ask ‘If adoption is a “life-long process” for the birth mother what does it mean for the birth father?’

The missing birth father experience and perspective has been noted in debates e.g. on openness in adoption McCroy (1991: 82-84) and Spiers and Paterson (1994: 35) make calls for the discussion to be informed by greater research knowledge. On the face of it, the notion that there might be a birth father experience is at one and the same time obvious; after all it takes two to make a baby, and not so obvious. It is women who become pregnant, carry the child and go through the physical experience of childbirth. Birth fathers cannot ‘give up’ a baby in a physical or biological sense of the phrase. They do not carry a baby for nine months; their bodies do not change. So what may be the place of birth fathers in adoption?

In the circumstances of conception, the difference between men and women is that whilst both share a biological and genetic contribution to the child, women have the added developmental dimension of pregnancy and parturition. It is popularly assumed that men’s connection to the child begins and ends with the physical participation in conception, if not followed by assumption of the social role of father. Voices from the research community have begun question such a popular assumption:

Although a principal protagonist in the existence of the adopted child, the birth father is often viewed as an illusory entity whose only link with the child is his involvement in the biological event.

Sachdev, 1991b: 131

Others have put the matter in stronger terms. March (1995: 110) refers to a ‘disregard’ of birth fathers and ‘worker resistance’ (535) to birth father involvement in the adoption process. Deykin et al (1988: 241) note a ‘negative attitude held by some adoption agencies’. Brinich (1990: 59) suggests that negative stereotypes may



be at work in relation to how birth fathers are viewed. She makes the case for a study of birth fathers from a psycho-analytical perspective and goes on to disagree with what she suggests is “stereotypical” in the view that, whilst motherhood is achieved during pregnancy, fatherhood is gained with the act of socially parenting a child.

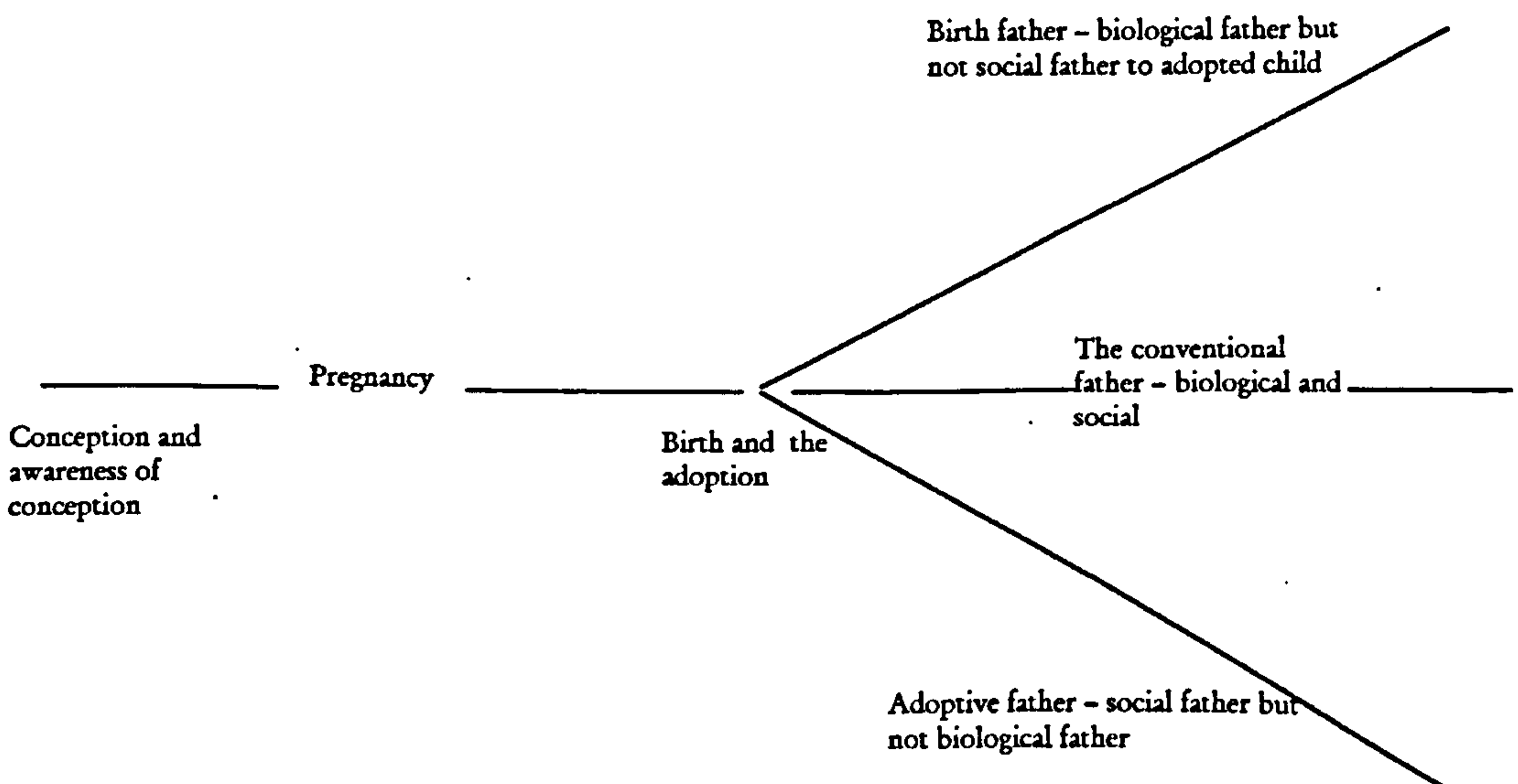
So where does the act of adoption place the birth father in real terms? How does the adoption and the adoptive process delineate fathers?

### Adoption and Fathers

The nature of adoption separates two, normally co-existent, categories for men. These are **biological fatherhood** and **social fatherhood**. For a man who is aware of his birth fatherhood, adoption represents an interrupted or suspended convention. The birth parent research, concentrated as it has been on women’s experiences, has not included any substantial reference to the father of the child that was adopted. So where might such a man feature in the process of pregnancy, childbirth and adoption?

These questions can be sharpened by a figurative depiction:

**Figure One**



It is suggested that knowledge regarding the trajectory or life course of the birth father (top line) is virtually non-existent. It appears that the sum of our knowledge of birth fathers consists of the research in North America and Australia referred to above and a small body of anecdotal literature and selected quotes (Argent ed., 1988; Clapton, 1996a; Feast, 1994; The Guardian 11.5.95; Griffith, 1991; Hilpern, 1998; Pannor et al, 1971; Silber and Speedlin, 1983).<sup>1</sup>

It seems therefore that a body of opinion and practice - writings, specialist expertise, knowledge base, advice and information ('do's and don'ts') is evolving that has its research and theoretical roots in the experiences of only one of the people involved in the adoption process - the birth mother. For instance in relation to the matter of later-life contact, at present adoption practice is proceeding on the basis of only birth mothers' desire for such meetings (Department of Health and Welsh Office, 1992: 121).

Therefore the following questions pose themselves. How does birth parenthood affect men and women? Does it effect men differently from women? What - if any - is the influence of adoption in the lives of men? Is contact with an adoptive child sought and

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<sup>1</sup> It should be borne in mind that the bifurcation that is depicted here as taking place in a conventional father life course (with adoption producing birth father and adoptive father trajectories) has similarities with a division that may exist in situations where conventional fathers become non-resident fathers i.e. when social contact with the child is either maintained or lost. The case of fathers in the latter category - who are fathers without children - may be said to be analogous with the condition of birth fathers in adoption. Thus the contemporary relevance of studying fathers without children. In this case the respondents' experiences and perceptions of themselves may inform the discussion concerning fathers in a variety of types of situations in which fathers have no contact with their children. See later chapters for the development of this discussion.

experienced differently by men and women? Is being a birth parent a universal experience or is it gendered? The present study addresses these questions as the second half of its overall project. An exploration of birth father experiences and an opening out of the data and findings from these experiences to allow a discussion of the nature of fatherhood and men's perceptions of this and fatherhood's place in a man's identity, is the unifying theme of this project.



**THE STUDY DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY****Introduction: Statement of Researcher Position**

In as much as personal circumstances shape research interests and questions my own position in relation to the study topic is germane. As already indicated in my opening chapter, I am a birth father and at the time of commencement of the study my twenty-four year old adopted daughter and I had been in contact for five months. I am also a professionally qualified and practising social worker working in the adoption field. Where they have impinged upon the study methodology, my personal and professional circumstances are noted and discussed.

**Study Design and Methodology**

The purpose of the study's design and methodology was to provide a coherent framework within which the following aims could be pursued:

- A chronicling and evaluation of the experiences and views of birth fathers – 'their characteristics, personal and social circumstances, motivation, attitudes and current psychological adjustment' (Bouchier et al, 1991: 11);
- an exploration of respondents' thoughts and feelings in respect of the child that was adopted;
- an examination of one example of biological fatherhood not accompanied by social fatherhood;

- By studying birth fathers and comparing them to the picture emerging from research on birth mothers, to produce an exploration of the extent to which 'birth parenthood' might be a gendered experience.

## **Study Design**

Given the nature of the research aim I decided that the work would best be carried out as **qualitative research of an exploratory nature**. This is for the following reasons.

The choice of a qualitative approach to the research design was determined by my aim to seek out and interview a hitherto uncharted group of people in order to gain some insight into their experiences and perspectives. A quantitative study approach was not proposed for fundamental reasons. These were:

(i) the subjective nature of the data that was sought – insight concerning the experiences, thoughts, feelings, concerns, emotions of birth fathers – meant that findings would have to be inferred from it and implications and conclusions developed without the use of statistical procedures and other means of quantification (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 17);

(ii) the nature of the whole population of birth fathers was unknown - potential respondents would be contactable only by an act of their own volition – for most there would have been no official requirement to be named on a birth certificate or in adoption proceedings. Most respondents would be reached via agencies with whom they were already in touch and they would elect to participate in the research. No sampling frame therefore existed;

(iii) the exploratory nature of the study - there was no knowledge base in existence in relation to birth fathers of adopted children. Birth fathers are a virtually unknown

quantity; the research was therefore designed to generate and develop theory rather than test it (Strauss and Corbin, 1990: 13).

In view of the above it was well nigh impossible to construct an effective sampling frame in relation to the birth father experience nor were standardised data collection methods feasible. In these circumstances the choice of qualitative research is signalled because:

Qualitative research is concerned with individuals' own accounts of their attitudes, motivations and behaviour.... Although qualitative research is about people as the central unit of account, it is not about particular individuals per se; reports focus rather on the various patterns, or clusters, of attitudes and related behaviour that emerge from the interviews.

Hakim, 1987: 26

Therefore a qualitative approach appeared to be the best fit for the nature of the subject and the proposed aims and objectives.

Whilst working on this proposal (and throughout the project as a whole), certain categories of theoretical enquiry began to emerge from discussions and the research literature. My reading of the accounts of birth mothers suggested that the adoption experience was a fundamental one which may have long-reaching consequences for identity, psychological well-being and attitudes e.g. to subsequent parenthood. Findings such as these form a dominant perspective in the discourse. However, though the research commonly refers to birth parents, it pertains to birth mothers only because of a lack of research on birth fathers. In general it is more typically the experience of women that has been invisible to social researchers and the experiences of men have been overgeneralised to include all humanity. In this instance, it seems that the reverse may be in operation; i.e. the experiences of birth fathers were less visible and those of birth mothers were being extended or assumed to represent all birth parents.

Therefore existing research on birth mothers presented as an obvious comparison for my research. An object being to determine whether, and how, the two sets of experiences (birth mothers and birth fathers) may be similar. Thus the study would



address existing lacunae in the body of knowledge relating to birth parents and it might prove possible to shed some light on the question of whether aspects of birth parenthood may be gendered.

In the early stages of research design, an internal comparison between the experiences and feelings of men who had not had contact with their adopted children (20/30) with those who had (10/30) was considered. This did not prove possible because within the group of twenty men who had not had contact there was only one man who was not actively seeking this. The others in this sub group were all engaged in seeking or had invited contact with their children. The inability to identify birth fathers that were not seeking contact is therefore a limitation of the study. This is because the study's findings are not able to incorporate perspectives from this - probably larger - group of birth fathers. In other words the data is derived from a limited population of birth fathers – those who had either indicated that they were open to contact or those who were actively seeking this. In so far as they can be considered as not having sought contact, the perspectives of the four men who were unexpectedly contacted are separately explored. It should be noted that the existing research on birth mothers is characterised by the same limitation. This is that the participants have been drawn from birth mothers who have come into later-life contact with various post-adoption services, often in search of the possibility of contact, with some having gone on to achieve this (Edwards and Williams, 2000; Kalmuss, Namerow and Cushman, 1991, Triseliotis, 1991 ed.).

Other comparisons within sub-groups of respondents proved more possible. One involved the sub-group of men who had had contact with their child. Within this particular group of ten respondents there were discernible differences. A primary one was in relation to how contact had come about. Half the group (5/10), although they had indicated a wish for contact, had not been actively engaged in seeking contact with their child – their son or daughter had taken the initiative in establishing contact. The other five men in this sub-group had been active in bringing about contact with

their child. The data arising from this and other differences within the respondent group is discussed in Section Three where findings are presented.

Theoretical categories began to emerge in the early stages of research design and preparing for the interviews. Such categories included fatherhood 'retained' i.e. a sense of a bond described by the respondents as a retained and continuing feeling of connectedness in respect of the child. Other categories that began to appear included fatherhood 'encountered' – in the case of the birth father who encounters his previous (but unknown to him) paternity then develops a relationship with the child for whom he is the biological (but not social) father. Also suggested was a category of fatherhood 'frozen' i.e. the birth father for whom any paternal feelings appeared to cease at the point of adoption and who had had no subsequent contact. Additionally, the issue of **states of fatherhood** - that fatherhood was not as monolithic or unitary a concept as it appeared to be at first sight - began to emerge. It became clear that there were biological, legal, social or psychological states of fatherhood (and combinations of these). How these categories pertain to the respondents is discussed in the literature review that follows.

I drew on the grounded theory approach to methodology (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Strauss, 1987; Strauss and Corbin, 1990) to assist in clarifying and generating broader theoretical categories and concepts from readings of the existing literature and as the data began to emerge. In considering the most useful methodological approach that would suit this study's aims, the grounded theory approach seemed the best fit:

**...the strongest case for the use of grounded theory is in investigation of relatively uncharted water, or to gain a fresh perspective in a familiar situation. [emphasis added]**

Stern, 1995: 30

'Grounded Theory' or theoretical generation, is a means of working towards theory from data. This is distinct from the approach (associated most closely with the practice of quantitative research) which sets out to test or prove a theoretical



hypothesis. The applicability of the method is put well by Henwood and Pigeon (1993: 22) in their discussion of Grounded Theory:

A number of interrelated features... mark out the differences between grounded theory and the hypothetic-deductive method. These include the assumption that the relationship between theory and data will at first be ill-defined; acceptance of the need to be tolerant of, and indeed seek out and explore, ambiguity and uncertainty in this relationship when constructing a category system that is both relevant to the problem and fits the data; and the exhortation to researchers to avoid premature closure or fixing of theory whenever new insights might arise.

Glaser and Strauss (1967) argue for the definition and creation of conceptual categories that are inductively produced during data analysis. In relation to my research, some of these categories have already been suggested e.g. 'fatherhood retained'. This is the grounded theory method in operation: 'Theoretical sampling requires only collecting data on categories, for the generation of properties and hypothesis' (1967: 69). These categories assist in the generation of substantive and formative theory. Glaser and Strauss suggest the following distinction between these two types of theory. Substantive theory may be developed for an empirical area of enquiry (e.g. the emergence of a distinct birth father perspective on later-life contact with the child and access to birth records). Formal theory would be developed for a conceptual area of sociological enquiry e.g. the respondents' experiences and perceptions of fatherhood.

Glaser and Strauss (1967: 34) suggest that absolute formative theoretical clarification is not possible at the outset: 'substantive theory generated from the data must be formulated, in order to see which of diverse theories are, perhaps, applicable for furthering additional substantive formulations'. Formal theory formation, if possible, follows this. In the course of this research an example of this process was the emergence of reports of thoughts and feelings towards the unborn child, and also, once the child had been born, in the months and years following the adoption. Such an emergent grouping suggested the formation of a category of substantive theory in respect of feelings of birth fathers towards the child that was adopted. This in



turn has enabled me to suggest - in more formal theory terms - the existence of an emotional connectedness or bond that the majority of the respondents experience in relation the child. This is described as akin to a form of attachment to their adopted child. Strauss' term 'successfully evolving interpretations' (1987: 10) provides a good description of the incremental process of data exploration and the generation of main themes. An important element in the evolving process of theory generation in the research involved hypothesising and discussion of emergent main themes. Some of this took place by means of presentations to my doctorate supervisors. These consisted of summaries of data and tentative data codings for discussion and review. Such presentations took place after data had been gathered from five interviews and at the ten and twenty interview marks. Thus data analysis coincided with data collection. This in turn affected the collection of additional data (Strauss 1987, Strauss and Corbin, 1990). For instance during the data collection, a core category of 'thoughts of the child' emerged. Interviews that took place after the emergence of this core category developed the relevant item by asking the respondent how he now pictured the child in his mind's eye. This is an example of how the grounded theory method worked in practice and assisted the theoretical sampling of the data (Denzin 1994, Strauss, 1987).

### **Study Methodology**

Birth fathers (like birth mothers) are likely to be a diverse group of people who may have little else in common with each other save for biological fatherhood and the fact that their child had been adopted. Some may have had knowledge of or had participated in the adoption process. The degree of this knowledge and participation is variable. Any group of birth fathers will have a number of potential variations in experience and awareness. This will include:

- (i) birth fathers with no knowledge of conception, birth and adoption of child;

- (ii) birth fathers with knowledge of conception and pregnancy and experience of birth and the adoption.

There are birth fathers that have been contacted by their adopted children and those who have not. There will be those men whose experience of the adoption (if they participated in the process) is recent and those for whom the adoption is many years in the past. All of the above categories (including that of the birth father who did not know of his status but is subsequently made aware of this by contact from his adopted child) suggest variations in the experiences of being a birth father that might apply to potential respondents. Other sub-categories would also be possible e.g. those men who had gone on to (biologically and socially) father subsequent children and those who had not.

The research aim was to describe and discuss as much of the birth father experience as possible. In the light of the above diversity of circumstances and acknowledging that there would be differentiation within the study population, I decided that the research methodology would constitute the approach of a Case Study of a group of twenty five - thirty birth fathers.

I decided to carry out the study using the following research instruments:

- (i) A series of **semi-structured in-depth interviews** with a group that eventually increased to thirty birth fathers. See Appendix A for the eventual questionnaire format;
- (ii) as a means of adding to the interview-generated data I also undertook a **secondary analysis of documents** written in the voice of birth fathers. These were **accounts by birth fathers** of their feelings and experiences which have been reported in anecdotal form in a small number of publications e.g. Argent ed., (1988), Feast (1994), Feast et al (1998) and Tugendhat (1992). I also undertook a search of existing specialist literature such as 'house' magazines,



particularly those that would be likely to carry birth father-related material – NORCAP News published by NORCAP (The National Organisation for Counselling Adoptees and Parents) and Natural Parent News published by the Natural Parents Network. This secondary analysis included documents written in the voice of others about birth fathers - for example this has included reports by adopted people of their meetings with their birth fathers (e.g. Tabak, 1990) and birth mothers' views of birth fathers (e.g. Sachdev, 1991b).

I also felt it would be useful to interview a small group of adopted people who have met or had contact with their birth fathers to obtain a different perspective on birth father responses and behaviours. This did not prove possible after a group of adopted people agreed to meet with me but declined to be recorded.

The findings from secondary analysis are incorporated in the literature review;

- (iii) a literature review drawing on three bodies of work. These bodies of work consisted of the literature on fatherhood and those relating to birth parents – studies of birth father and birth mother experiences.

The review of the fatherhood literature is accompanied by a discussion of attachment theory and its relevance to the study. The relevance of attachment theory emerged 'late in the day'. However in keeping with the grounded theory method, there has been a continuous literature review and insights from some writers on attachment have been useful in generating an important data category – one which involved the respondent's reports of a connection with the child (Strauss, 1987).

The birth parent literature review is preceded by examination of the changing context of adoption policy and practice in respect of birth mothers and birth



fathers – this assists in contextualisation of the various birth parent experiences that are reported.

There then follows a discussion of the two existing studies in respect of birth fathers' experiences. The first birth father study took place in North America (Deykin et al, 1988) and the other was carried out in Australia (Cicchini, 1993). During the course of the literature search a further work which described the experiences of birth fathers was identified (Mason, 1995). This defined birth fathers more widely (some of the participant-birth fathers has been involved in divorces as a means of separation from their children, rather than adoption) however it is included and the reasons for this are discussed. The birth father research-based section concludes with a reference to a study of parents who have been separated from the children not necessarily involving adoption. This study is included for two reasons. Its findings are relevant and interesting in that a) they address the experiences of fathers who have been separated from their children after, in some cases, no or minimal social parenting and b) in the fathers' reports of feelings of guilt and loss, there appears to be some similarities with those of birth fathers in this study. The relevance of this study of parental-loss is discussed in the literature review. The discovery of this study came after my interviews had been completed. However, as in the case of the development of an interest in writings on attachment (see above), a continuous literature review has ensured that my data analysis and codings has been open to modification.

The review of birth father literature then proceeds to discuss non-research based documents such as anecdotal accounts of birth fathers' experiences and findings from third party reports in respect of birth fathers' behaviour - see (ii) above – and notes and comments from writers that refer to birth fathers. The review of writings on or about birth fathers concludes with the presentation of some figures relating to the numbers of birth fathers registered on three UK adoption contact registers.

The third body of work that is discussed in the literature review is the research on birth mothers. This is explored for what it may tell us about the women's experiences of the adoption process so that we may have a point of reference (albeit gendered) for the respondents' reports. The findings from studies of birth mothers are also discussed as a means of identifying what may be gender aspects in the two sets of experiences. Similarities as well as differences were sought. Research and theoretical constructs in the birth mother literature e.g. bereavement theory are also evaluated for their usefulness in exploring birth father experiences of adoption.

## **Study Strategy**

### **Cohort Qualifications**

Four qualifications were decided in relation to the potential respondent cohort. The first two encompass a conventional notion of adoption.

(i) that respondents had been associated with baby adoptions i.e. children up to the age of one year as distinct from the adoption of children of an older age. Although the numbers of baby adoptions have been falling and the numbers of children adopted at an older age rising, it is those in the former group (baby adoptions) that have been the focus for the vast majority of interest and work to date. This has come about as a result of various factors. These include the changing climate in favour of less secrecy in the adoption process, changes in legislation relating to birth records (The Children Acts of 1975 and 1989, England and Wales) that have led to adopted children, now adult, seeking and making contact with their birth parents. Researching birth fathers in an analogous position to birth mothers in the existing birth mother research ensures that the two sets of experiences can be better compared. In other words, a key methodological cohort qualification – experiences in which a baby was adopted – is



common to both birth mothers in the existing studies and the respondents in this one. Furthermore, the theoretical question of whether or not there is any sense of fatherhood relinquished - and whether something of this remains for the birth father - would be skewed and the research over-expanded by 'allowing in' those fathers who had participated to some degree or another, in raising a child that had subsequently been adopted. An exception to the above could be a case of the birth father of a child that was adopted at over a year old - so long as that father's contact with the child had ended at the birth or soon after;

(ii) that adoptions of the respondents' children had taken place outwith the family circle or close relatives i.e. the adoptive parents were not known to the respondent and consequently the respondent would have no knowledge of the child's upbringing or welfare. This form of 'in-house' adoption includes step-parent adoption, adoption by grandparents or uncles and is officially referred to as 'non-agency adoption'. This constitutes a significant proportion of the overall adoption figures. Thoburn cites research from a survey of five Courts that indicates that 26% of 844 applications to adopt came from in-family sources (Thoburn, 1992: 152). In Scotland this figure is higher: 45% of all Adoption Orders (Scottish Office, 1993: 8). The latest figures published by the General Register Office for Scotland (1999) give step-parent adoptions as a majority of adoptions.

One eventual respondent was exempt from the disqualifying category of step-parent adoption. In the case of this man, his daughter was the subject of a step-parent adoption by his ex-partner and her husband. After the respondent had volunteered to be interviewed I decided to include him in the study cohort on the grounds that he had not seen his daughter apart from a one-off visit in the hospital following her birth. Her adoption took place some years later. Before this and after, he had had no contact with or knowledge of his daughter. Therefore he was included in the study on two grounds - his child was subject to an adoption order and he had had no contact with her since her birth;



(iii) that at least a year had passed since the adoption of the child. In order to adequately gauge the long-term effect of adoption in the lives of women a previous study of birth mothers had put a time limit of eight years since the adoption (Bouchier et al, 1991). I surmised that interviewing birth fathers whose child had been adopted only a year previously might effect the ability to compare birth mother and birth father experiences. However the reasons for setting a shorter time lapse of a year between adoption and interview were that this would compensate for the anticipated lack of contactable birth fathers (Mullender and Kearn, 1997: 148). As it transpired the most recent adoption amongst those who offered to be interviewed was fourteen years previous to the time of the interview. Undoubtedly interviews with men whose child was adopted only twelve months previously would be different from those in which the time lapse constituted some decades - the latter being the position of the majority of this study's final cohort;

(iv) excluded were those birth fathers who were involved in litigation i.e. those engaged in contesting adoption orders. Those who had been involved in litigation were not ineligible so long as the proceedings were over. This particular dimension of the birth father experience - the experiences of men who had officially opposed the adoption proceedings - provided an additional point on the spectrum of birth father experiences. It applied to three of the eventual respondents. To interview those who were contesting an adoption would be to run the risk of turning one set of data (present day thoughts and feelings) into birth fathers' contemporary experiences of challenging adoption orders – a matter for another research study.

Four men volunteered to be interviewed and were seen however the data arising from their experiences was excluded. This was on one or more of the grounds to which I have already referred. In one case it transpired during the interview that one man's child had been adopted after a number of attempts by social workers to rehabilitate his daughter with him and her mother. Thus he had had experience of seeking to parent her and this excluded him from the study cohort. One man had had no physical contact with his adopted child since birth but he had seen her and had had irregular

up-dates as to her development and welfare. A third man's child was eventually step-parent adopted by his wife's husband after a number of previous attempts at reconciliation between the birth father and the birth mother - these included parenting of the child in question. The fourth man did not see his child at all having split up with his partner before the birth. However data from this interview was excluded on the grounds that the child was never officially adopted. The last case raises a wider question relating to a central aspect of the research aims - an exploration of biological fatherhood.

In this man's case, his experiences and those of the other three who were excluded, would be relevant to the aim of exploring biological fatherhood. The circumstances in these four cases would be analogous to other experiences e.g. those of men who become divorced during their wife's pregnancy and never have contact with the child. Relevant too might be the experiences of men who have had to leave before the birth of their child and return after a prolonged absence e.g. soldiers in wartime. The circumstances of the men in such diverse groups would furnish potentially highly relevant material in respect of how we might better understand men's consciousness of fatherhood. However, as discussed in then introduction to this work, the circumstances of how the identification of a potential cohort came about was determined by the investigative starting point - the adoption of a baby and its long-term effect on the lives of men involved in this. Additionally, I reasoned that the study findings, when bounded by these conditions, would provide a properly delineated contribution to a specific body of literature, practice and policy concerning a very distinct population - birth parents of adopted children.

## **Access**

There is no straightforward means of contacting birth fathers who have had a child adopted. There is no requirement that unmarried fathers - the vast majority of birth fathers - be registered on a child's birth certificate. Also some men may not know that they are birth fathers e.g. they may be unaware of the pregnancy, birth, adoption



or all three (as was at least one respondent). Consequently such men may not appear in agency files and records. The problems in identifying birth fathers that may be willing to be interviewed can be seen in figures relating to birth parent use of post-adoption services. One agency cited 96% of their birth parent service users as being women (Howe, 1990). Previous birth father responses to explicit calls for help have also been negligible (Powell and Warren, 1997; Tugendhat, 1992). In the light of this I decided to discuss with a number of post-adoption agencies how best to reach birth fathers. I received offers of assistance from seven UK post-adoption agencies. Four helped by means of directly identifying potential respondents and three organisations allowed me the use of their publications in which to advertise. I also decided that more help might be forthcoming if I were to make it clear that I was a birth father, both in the advertisements and via the post-adoption agencies. I did this because I surmised that birth fathers may be more willing to be interviewed by someone who had some understanding of the experiences that they had gone through (Wells, 1994). Furthermore, the agencies with whom I liaised suggested that the birth fathers with whom they worked generally expressed a sense of isolation because services were predominantly geared towards the needs of birth mothers. Birth mothers made up the vast majority of their service users e.g. the agencies with whom I spoke ran groups for birth parents however these were usually attended by only birth mothers and normally run by women. It was felt that birth fathers might not only be more willing to be interviewed by both a man and a birth father but also they may find it easier to speak and therefore foresee some personal benefit from the interview.

The agencies that assisted did so as follows. The choice of who to contact was the decision of the four respective agencies. In interviews with the directors and staff involved I provided the research parameters as discussed above. Following this, potential volunteers were identified by means of professional judgement within the agency. For instance some men were at crucial and demanding points in their lives e.g. revealing the adoption to present partners. The professionals in touch with them felt that any interview concerning being a birth father would be detrimental to whatever process in which the birth father (and others in his life) was engaged. Aside from



setting out the study aims and some particular geographical considerations, I had no involvement in this internal agency selection of possible volunteers. I was assured that most birth fathers 'on their books' were not excluded.

Potential respondents were contacted in the first instance by means of a letter seeking their co-operation. This letter was written by me and sent by four agencies in the UK. After-Adoption based in the north west of England, and three main agencies in Scotland that provide the bulk of post-adoption services for birth parents and have contact with birth fathers - whether in touch with their children or not. These were Barnardo's in Glasgow, Scottish Adoption in Edinburgh and Family Care in Edinburgh. The latter organisation has an international remit through its provision of the Adoption Contact Register for Scotland (international by virtue of the fact that people affected by adoptions in Scotland may be living in any part of the world). Therefore I restricted Family Care's mailing to UK resident-only birth fathers.

Three England-based publications carried successful appeals for potential respondents. These were the bulletins and magazines of the Post-Adoption Centre (London), NORCAP and the Natural Parents Network. The Guardian (a UK-wide daily newspaper) carried a reference to my wish for potential birth father respondents however nothing came of this.

In addition to the above efforts, any future study that intended to reach a greater number of potential respondents could be enhanced by an approach to the custodians of the two English adoption contact registers.

### **Main Research Instruments – The Questionnaire and The Semi-Structured Interview**

Those birth fathers that agreed to be interviewed were interviewed as a means to explore the nature of their thoughts concerning the child that was adopted and build a picture of birth father experiences.

The questionnaire items and prompts attempted to gain a sense of the adoption experience for the respondents and to explore what it was that the birth fathers said that they felt and thought about their child. Other matters included the circumstances of the adoption e.g. nature of relationship with birth mother and how the decision to adopt was arrived at. The birth and adoption experience itself were also included e.g. the extent of the birth father's participation in this process. An enquiry as to whether or not the respondent had experienced feelings of fatherhood at any of the various points during the process was incorporated in the questionnaire. The nature of the respondent's social and emotional life since the adoption e.g. mental health, subsequent relationships, and his experiences of parenting other children were also included. Finally the respondents were asked about their thoughts on the question of contact with their child; whether there had been contact and if so, their experience of this. The respondent's views on searching and access to adoption records were also sought. 'Hard' data was also collected e.g. age of respondent; age at time of adoption; sex of child; length of relationship with mother and whether this continued post-adoption, and length of time since contact with the child (where this had occurred).

## **The Questionnaire**

A first draft of the questionnaire was derived from studying the Scottish study of birth mothers (Bouchier et al, 1991). The Bouchier et al questionnaire had been adapted from one used in an earlier Australian study (Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). I decided to retain the previous questionnaires' 'Life Course' approach to gathering my data. This took the form of inviting the birth mother to talk through the chronological stages of her experience from the pregnancy and adoption to her life at the time of the interview. The merit of this approach was that it allowed a broad picture to be built up that would relate to the place of the adoption in the lives of the birth mothers. This approach was utilised in the case of the respondents in this study in that the respondents were invited to tell their story from the beginning through to the present day. In her discussion of the value of the Oral History approach, Yow (1994: 172)



notes that 'the oral history interview, by requiring the narrator to discuss developments over time, can elicit information on the subjective interpretation of a life.' This corresponds with an objective of the research which was to gain access to birth fathers' inner-worlds.

Some major additions to the original questionnaires by Bouchier et al and Winkler and van Keppel were made. Neither of these previous questionnaires had enquired as to their participants' reactions to their pregnancy, or to the birth. Furthermore neither questionnaire had asked whether the birth mother had felt like a mother (in respect of the child that was adopted) at the various points in her life. It appeared that this had been taken as a given. An advantage of having male respondents was that it provided the opportunity for an exploration that would be uncontroversial and conventional in the case of fathers but had been omitted in the case of birth mothers. This was an exploration of matters such as reactions to the news of pregnancy and the birth and whether or not (in the case of the men) they had felt any sense of fatherhood. Writing this now at the end of this study, it seems that questions such as these may be universally asked of both men and women. It appears from the research on women who have had a child adopted that no one has asked whether or not or at which point they felt like mothers.

In keeping with the research aim to explore the nature of the respondents' connection with the child, a number of specific items were added in order to help clarify their thoughts regarding the child e.g. how and in what ways had they thought of the child? If they wished contact with the child, why was this? Those who had had contact were also asked how they now regarded their relationship with their son or daughter. Neither the Winkler and van Keppel (1984) or the Bouchier et al (1991) questionnaires had sought this information. Nor had such data concerning either the participants' thoughts of the child or their evaluation of the relationship been gathered by the two existing pieces of the birth father research (Cicchini, 1993; Deykin et al, 1988).



My questionnaire was also adjusted to reflect the different biologically gendered experiences of birth mothers and birth fathers e.g. of pregnancy and presence or not at the birth. Other items were introduced arising from my identification of possible gaps in the birth mother literature such as the relative lack of knowledge of the relationship between the birth father and mother before and after the birth and adoption. I also added an item that related to whether or not the respondents had participated in the adoption arrangements. It seems too that the birth father's participation (or not) had not been explored in any of the previous birth parent studies. Therefore I decided to explore the question of the men's behaviour at the time of the adoption e.g. whether they participated in naming the child and whether or not their names were on the child's birth certificate.

### **Time Table**

I carried out four pilot interviews in Spring 1996. Two took place involving birth mothers and two were with birth fathers. These pilots were held on the basis of interviewee participation in the process i.e. after the interview, feedback was sought as to the relevance, form and order of the particular questions. This occurred in the case of three of these pilot interviews. The fourth took place with myself as interviewee. A fellow professional who I did not know well carried out the interview. The purpose - given my birth father status - was to gain experience of how intimate and challenging the questions could be and have a gauge of the level of any distress that the interview may cause. The pilot exercise was successful in that among other things I was able to emotionally 'budget' for debriefing time after the interviews.

I also adjusted some questions to give the respondent a fuller opportunity to self-report. Piloting the draft questionnaire helped to identify the various life scenarios that required the question 'flow' to be diverted from the central scenario and re-commence at a later point. For instance one set of questions did not apply to those respondents who had not seen the child. In this case it was necessary to omit items that related to whether the respondent had held or fed his child. Another digression in the

questionnaire flow was made for those men who had had contact with their child. In the latter case the respondents were asked to retrospectively consider how they had felt and thought about the child prior to contact. This was distinct from those men whose interview would flow directly from the adoption to the child in their mind to date i.e. the ones who had had no contact.

A fruitful innovation during the pilot stage was the decision to invite the respondents to try to describe the place of the adoption in their lives. They were asked to rate this on a scale and talk to the question. The impetus for this came from the Winkler and van Keppel (1984) and Bouchier et al (1991) questionnaires which had asked for the birth mothers to rate the place of the adoption in their lives in the twelve-month period after the adoption. I felt that a longer term orientated and more open-ended question might gain greater access to any data concerning the nature of the respondents' senses of fatherhood. I believe it has.

Interviewing began in August 1996 and, for all but one case, finished in September 1997. The majority took place in the respondents' homes. Five interviews took place in the offices of Family Care, a post-adoption counselling agency in Edinburgh. One was held privately in the backroom of a pub.

Those birth fathers that were unable to be interviewed were asked to complete the questionnaire by post as an alternative. This took place in the case of three men. I was unable to visit two of these men because their area of the UK had been included in an earlier set of field visits and I could not return because of financial considerations. The third man was a resident of Canada. Unfortunately this interview was excluded from the study on the grounds that his experience did not encompass the formal adoption of his daughter.

Information regarding appropriate counselling services was provided post-interview when the respondent raised this.



## **The Interviews and the Study Methodology: Some Reflections on Process, Interviewer Effect and Social Context**

### **The Interview Process**

Typically the interview process was emotionally charged. This was evident in a number of ways and suggested that the adoption experience had emotional salience for the respondents – in nearly all cases decades after the event. I discuss the question of emotional salience in full later, however for a number of respondents the interview process - how they behaved during it, our interaction - provides some evidence of how their thoughts on the adoption experience were accompanied by deeply-held emotions. This became apparent after the first three interviews. I sought to be helpful in providing for the expression of these thoughts and emotions and was conscious of the balance to be struck between collecting data and probing aspects of the respondents' lives that remained emotionally painful. The interviews were between two and three hours in duration and audio-taped. Generally the questionnaire lay between respondent and myself. When hard data such as age of respondent; sex of child was provided I would tick a box. Open-ended questions were where the tape came into its own in that I was able to put down my pen and concentrate wholly upon the narrative and the narrator. Transcripts adhered to the questionnaire format with the responses to the open-ended items providing the bulk of the typed material.

If respondents commented upon the interview process after the interview's end when the tape was switched off, I included these comments in field notes. Field notes were prepared on all the interviews. These were drafted within a day of the interview's completion and typed out within a week. They contained a brief account of the facts that the respondent has reported, the circumstances in which the interview was held, his demeanour during interview and my thoughts of where - or not - the interview data coincided with any emerging categories or themes.



In our correspondence to arrange the interviews three men warned that they might become distressed during the session.

During the interview seven out of twenty eight men (the two other interviews were conducted by post) had external support for the interview - either a partner was present or was 'hovering' in a nearby room. Others asked for the interview to take place in the pub or had had a few drinks before the session. Six men began the interview by expressing their relief over being able to "tell the whole story", often for the first time:

*"...it's a bit of me that I have allowed nobody else to get close to. I mean this two and quarter hours is the most in all those 30 odd years that I've ever had. I've never talked about some of the things in terms of feelings that I've shared here today."*

Twelve men cried during the interview. Others became agitated e.g. one respondent became angry when vividly recounting what he perceived to have been the negative attitude of a social worker at the time of the adoption: *"I was very angry. I felt really angry. It still makes me feel angry even thinking back on it"*.

For some of the men the process of the interview seemed to help order their thoughts and give voice to hitherto unexpressed feelings. One man said:

*"I tend to keep things to myself actually. I don't particularly share them. So I think as we've talked I was probably a bit more internally hung up about it during those college days than maybe I've said."*

In the words of another: *"I never spoke about it to anyone then, know what I'm saying, but this is great talking to you about it. I don't have anybody that I can really talk to."* During the end of the interview one respondent said that:

*"I don't go about saying this to people. What I think I keep to myself. I mean there is things that I have turned around and said about prison I haven't went into in this depth with A (partner who was present during the interview). This has been on my mind all week."*

At the interview's conclusion and as I was leaving his house, one man called up to his partner to say that he "*was alright*". Another man asked for a copy of the tape because he felt that the interview had enabled him to express all that he felt and that it now contained the "*full story*". Others asked to be kept in touch in respect of my findings.

Two men wrote to me after the interview conveying that they had felt it to have been a helpful experience. These letters too have assisted in providing an insight in respect of birth fathers' thoughts and emotions. One wrote:

*"It may seem strange but thanks for the interview. I am sitting here in my office at my wp with tears streaming down my cheeks. Odd isn't it what we keep inside. You have certainly set me thinking and questioning just how much of my behaviour over these years might have been conditioned by the adoption of Louise and me feeling that I had abandoned my charge."*

Whilst the helpfulness of the interview in terms of providing an outlet for held-back emotions is evident from this letter and the comments of a few others, it cannot be assumed that a majority of the respondents felt the same in their evaluation of the interview.

In at least three cases the events of my initial contact, arrangements for the interview and the interview itself gave rise to family discussions about the adoption. Two men talked over the adoption events with their mothers. One man told his son (that he had given up for adoption) with whom he now had contact. I was informed by this birth father that he (the son) had expressed envy at his father's opportunity to tell his story.

It seems then that the interview process had a 'ripple effect' in that not only was the birth father emotionally moved during the interview, his wider family (partners, parents, children) were also drawn in to the overall experience. Either by their being present, thereabouts or in discussion before and after the interview.



As already noted, the knowledge that I too was a birth father may have been an important factor in the men's willingness to be interviewed therefore the respondents knew this of me at the outset of the interview. Apart from acknowledging this briefly at the beginning of the interview any discussion of my own experiences was postponed until the interview was concluded. I did signal before we started that we could share experiences afterwards should the respondent wish to do so. It may be that this offer, and a shared status as birth fathers, helped establish a less censorious atmosphere during the interview. Findings from studies of birth mothers had indicated successful recruitment of respondents by researchers who had been open about their own birth experiences (Powell and Warren, 1997; Wells, 1994).

My training and experience as a social worker were not matters that came up directly, however social work interviewing skills assisted me during moments of distress and when the respondent needed sensitive prompting to further develop his account (Dienhart, 1998: 211 –212). The respondents' accounts sometimes included expressions of extreme disfavour concerning many people including the birth mother, relatives and professionals associated with the adoption e.g. hospital staff and adoption professionals. I believe that my professional training allowed me to remain neutral and thus avoid either expressions of disapproval or approval. This subjective combination of clinical distance and personal empathy seemed to benefit the conduct of the interview.<sup>2</sup>

Until the interview the adoption experiences, their thoughts and emotions in relation to their child had been a private matter for the majority of the respondents. Most had had no sense of anyone else 'out there' that thought and felt similarly to them. The interview process changed this by firstly providing the respondents with a forum in which thoughts and feelings could be voiced and secondly, indicating to them that

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<sup>2</sup> However such was the impact of the expression of the respondents' emotions and their correspondence or lack of correspondence with my experience as a birth father, that when the interview had concluded I was often left emotionally drained and sometimes upset. Once after being involved in facilitating the expression of one man's bitterness (and feeling it), I felt depressed for some hours after and that night failed to sleep properly.



there were some other men who had similar feelings and who had undergone similar experiences.

It seems then that the interview was an important event for many of the respondents. It gave them a space in which to recount events in their lives that they deemed to have significance and salience. Hitherto these events had rarely been explored in such depth. It also seemed that the facilitative tone offered some understanding as regards the respondents' accounts of e.g. being distressed or disenfranchised. The insight gained in sharing an unarticulated but significant event in their lives seemed to be valuable for some of the respondents. As noted above this may not have been so in all cases.

This leads to the next area in this discussion of interview process. This is the question of interviewer effect on the respondent.

### **Interviewer Effect**

Robson (1993: 237) argues that:

The presence of the interviewer opens the door for factors to do with the interviewer: her skills, experience, personality and degree of involvement in or alienation from the research to name but a few.... Interactions between the interviewer and interviewee can also be influential; differences or similarities in class, ethnic origin, gender, age and status can effect rapport and the extent to which the interviewee seeks to please, or reacts against, the interviewer.

Were respondents seeking to please? It is difficult to answer this. Most respondents seemed pleased to be interviewed. However there seems to be no evidence that would suggest that, for instance, respondents' expressions of a sense of connection with the child were an artefact of the interview process. The suggestion of attachment in relation to how the respondents' regard their connection with the child has only emerged after considerable data analysis. Rather than a product of interviewer effect, the feelings of many of the respondents seemed to be made explicit by the interview. Therefore, feelings of attachment and fatherhood may have been heightened by the

interview process - not created. It is my impression that the interview acted as a conduit for emotions and thoughts that were already held by the respondents. The wish to 'tell their stories' was already present for many e.g. one man who had seen my advert in a magazine wrote asking to be interviewed so that he could get the opportunity to speak of his feelings for his daughter.

Yow (1994: 118) has some helpful comments to make on the effects of the interview on the narrator. She suggests that:

The process of reflecting during an oral history interview can be a way to understand anew some things that happened and a means of coming to accept things that have hurt. Each person is creative in the way that she or he weaves from various life experiences – both the pleasant and the devastating – a whole cloth. Recording the life story gives the narrator not only formal encouragement, but also a way of doing this.... Furthermore the narrator learns something from the interviewer. He or she gets a perspective that was not there before.

This understanding would seem to be the most helpful in describing both content and process of the interview at the level of interviewer-interviewee interaction.

Perhaps a greater effect on respondents' narratives - at the point of interview - is that of the influence of contemporary social attitudes to fatherhood. It is to this that I now turn.

### **Societal Context**

In a study that invites the narrator to present a retrospective life review, the narrator's weighting, impressions and manner of presentation of an issue may shift over time (Yow, 1994: 172). Such shifts are inevitable as processes such as maturation and the effect of other life experiences e.g. loss and parenthood, work to change attitudes to questions such as obligation and responsibility (Cicchini, 1993). In some respects it is self-evident that respondents' experiences - such as subsequently becoming fathers and parenting a child - will have an influence on their narratives and produce the possibility of varying narratives in respect of the same events depending upon when the narrative took place. I sought to 'get a window on a changing world' (Yow:



1994: 172) by asking the respondents to compare their feelings at a given time e.g. after the birth with their feelings at the point of interview. This helped me explore the nature and longevity of feelings of distress and loss in matters such as the latter case. Unlike the possible impact of individual and family experiences on the narrator, the wider influence of shifting societal and cultural attitudes to fathering was not a matter that was encompassed in the interview itself. However it is a consideration in the evaluation of the study methodology. Just as it is self-evident that subsequent parenting experiences can colour and shift elements in narratives, so too is it clear that the narrators exist in a social and cultural context in which attitudes to fathers and paternal involvement have changed over the thirty years since many of the adoptions.

A recent work on fatherhood (Lupton and Barclay, 1997: 94) has noted that 'Participants in any research study will take up particular ways of expressing their opinions and recounting their experiences that are inevitably shaped through social and cultural processes and meanings.' This study's respondents were no different. If the respondents had been interviewed at the beginning of the nineteen seventies instead of the late nineteen nineties, the cultural and societal norms then may have produced less emphasis by the respondents on their notions of fatherhood than exists within their narratives today. Burghes, Clarke and Cronin (1997: 55) put this succinctly:

Because of shifts in fatherhood, fathers may have been reluctant in the past to admit to too much involvement in child care and domestic activities; now they may be reluctant to admit too little.

If this is the case with the respondents, then the data is not invalidated or untruthful. Rather the data is seen and assessed as the respondents' truths now, looking back over lives that incorporate both subsequent influential experiences and societal changes. The societal changes in respect of expectations of paternal involvement in child care are outlined in the next chapter.

Inevitably then the respondents' autobiographies are 'social products that are highly contextual' (Lupton and Barclay, 1997: 94). The extent to which shifts in social



mores have affected recall in each of the respondents is unknowable. What can be said is that norms now held by the respondents may have changed because of such shifts.

Notwithstanding these considerations the narratives consist of birth fathers' versions and interpretations of important experiences in their lives and the lives of a number of others - the birth mother and the child to name two. Additionally, how the narratives are told, as we shall see, tells us much about a presently unknown group of people and how these birth fathers evaluated not only external events, but also themselves:

Human memory selects, emphasizes, rearranges and gives new colour to everything that happened in reality; and, more important, it endows certain fundamental episodes with a symbolic meaning, often to the point of turning them into myths, by locating them at a focal point of the explanatory system of the self.

Hankiss, 1981: 203

In the light of the paucity of research on birth fathers it is understandable that the experience of interviewing birth fathers has not been discussed. However, it is surprising in view of the potential for such a discussion to contribute additional data relating to an understanding of birth mothers' experiences, that a greater discussion of some of the methodological issues referred to above is absent in the relatively more extensive literature on birth mothers.

Finally this discussion of methodology would not be complete without drawing attention to a significant characteristic of the cohort. This is that the respondents' life experiences, offer a naturally occurring laboratory in which to study a set of behaviours, thoughts and feelings that are not the product of artificial design i.e. constructed purely for research purposes (Hakim, 1987: 109-110; Robson, 1993: 119-120). The study capitalises on something that already exists; students have not been involved in complex challenges, nor have other people - fathers and their children – been artificially separated and then studied. The respondents' real-life experiences form the natural environment for investigation. This study then constitutes something of a **natural experiment**.

In other words questions posed by 'biological fatherhood' – whether or not it exists, its meaning and dimensions - can be explored in circumstances as they have been (and are) actually experienced by the study group. A merit of the present study then is that it has achieved and works with a natural experiment – the life experiences of thirty birth fathers.



## **SECTION TWO: INTRODUCTION**

### **FATHERHOOD, BIRTH FATHERS AND BIRTH MOTHERS: A REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

This section consists of three chapters that review the literature relating to fatherhood, birth fathers and birth mothers.

The first provides an overview of the research and literature relating to fatherhood. This has been an extensive review but it is not exhaustive. I have sought out main themes and discussions that are germane to this study. The chapter seeks to identify insights from studies of fathers that will provide tools to explore and theorise the experiences of birth fathers. It is suggested that some work on the development of a sense or consciousness of fatherhood provides a pointer to explore the experiences of birth fathers who have never parented the child they have given up for adoption. It is also suggested however, that the existing body of work relating to fatherhood is mainly concerned with fatherhood as an activity. There is much less attention given to an understanding of men's perceptions of fatherhood and how this may develop. There remains no consensus what being a father may mean for a man. This is a theoretical challenge that is addressed in this study's exploration of birth father experiences. Birth mothers have no locus in law and social reality vis-à-vis their biological child yet it has been shown that they experience a lasting connection with their child. What if there was some evidence for something akin to this connection in respect of the birth fathers in this study? What might this say about our understanding of fatherhood? It is suggested that any such insight on fatherhood would be significant in the light of the continuing debates relating to the roles and responsibilities of fathers and their relationships with their children.

The second chapter discusses the existing research on birth fathers. It is argued that the little research there is (whilst offering valuable insights into the feelings of birth fathers) is atheoretical in nature. Because of this lack of a theoretical framework, it

neither contributes to any understanding of fatherhood nor helps explain why it is that the men in question report deep and long-held beliefs and thoughts in respect of the child that was adopted.

The final chapter reviews the literature on birth mothers and discusses the findings that have emerged in relation to the long-term effects of adoption, the sense of loss experienced and birth mothers' reports of an enduring connection with the child. It also critiques the birth mother research and identifies a number of questions for future research.

## **SECTION TWO: CHAPTER THREE**

### **FATHERHOOD TODAY: POLITICS AND KEY THEMES IN THE RESEARCH**

#### **A Recent History**

There has been a major shift in societal attitudes to fathers that has taken place since the nineteen fifties. It is generally agreed that a more involved form of parenting is expected of men (Burgess, 1997; Burghes, Clarke and Cronin, 1997; Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink and Holden, 1999; Geiger, 1996; Hearn, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Pasley and Minton (1997: 121) note that ‘men today are being asked to become more involved in the care of their children’. Recent studies of fathers have found a congruence between this greater societal endorsement of a more involved type of fathering and the child care practices of fathers (Geiger, 1996; Dienhart, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Doherty (1997: 220) observes that ‘there probably has never been a time when more fathers were involved in the daily nurturing of their children’. This is the present societal and cultural context, in respect of expectations of fathers. The experiences of the respondents in this study began in a different period.

Fifty years ago societal expectations of fathers – during pregnancy and childbirth, their involvement in childcare and domestic tasks - were less. For instance in the nineteen fifties, fathers were typically excluded from the birth of their children (Davidoff et al, 1999: 209). Men were expected to play the role of breadwinner, whilst women’s part was to be that of the homemaker (ibid.: 197). Davidoff et al (ibid.: 210-211) cite an influential text of the time that placed the mother as sole parent in the author’s discussion of family life: the child was ‘her [the mother’s] infant’ (Bowlby: 1953: 15). Leading child development theorists such as Bowlby and Winnicott may have reflected the social and gender conditions of the time wherein most women were at home and most men at work. However it has been suggested



(Blendis, 1982: 199; Lewis, 1986; Sarre, 1996) that the views of such theorists were influential in setting expectations of fathers and mothers:

...researchers of paternal behaviour might do well to enquire why it was that such major developmental theorists as Winnicott (1957) and Bowlby (1951-53) accounted for fathers merely as useful supporters of mothers.

In his discussion of the 'core assumptions that guide thinking about gender and family', Cohen (1993: 2) remarks that:

...the dominant, though not exclusive, cultural image of the twentieth century father has been the "father-breadwinner model" (Pleck, 1987) wherein fathers were the ultimate sources of both morality and discipline but physically, socially and emotionally removed from the family by their concentration on work.

These ideas have continued throughout the nineteen sixties and seventies. Twenty years ago Lewis (1982: 51) wrote of 'the dislocation of males from the world of child rearing [that] occurs as a natural course of events'.

Burgess (1997: 70-71) cites a later work of Lewis (1986) which provides figures to the effect that in 1970, 40 per cent of UK fathers of very young children came home to a sleeping child during the week. Lewis is then quoted: 'whilst today only 25 per cent of employed fathers are not home before 7pm. and babies may be staying up later - especially when mothers work, too.' Irrespective of whether reality has changed in terms of men's involvement in child care and the various obstacles to this (Edwards, 1998), ideas that endorse father's greater involvement in pregnancy and child care have increased substantially over the last fifty years. These brief comments on changing societal notions of father's behaviour bring the discussion to the present day.

## **Fatherhood Today**

The end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a period of renewed interest in fatherhood. Whilst social and cultural ideas about what fathers in general are expected to do have shifted to expectations of greater involvement, other discourses have emerged. Currently, 'fathers and fatherhood are in vogue' (Burghes, Clarke and Cronin, 1997) and popular culture has a 'fascination' with fatherhood (Dienhart, 1998).

The discussions often have a controversial edge (Marsiglio, 1995a). The media have gone through a period of referring to fathers as either new men or feckless - 'dead-beat dads' is the USA version of feckless fathers (Bradshaw, Stimson, Skinner and Williams, 1999; Burgess and Ruxton, 1996; Sarre, 1996). Often fathers have been characterised as either 'heroes or villains' (Burgess, 1997; Burghes et al, 1997; Mason, 1995). 'Fatherhood at Crisis Point' is a typical media statement (The Observer 21 April 1996). The Guardian (16 June 1999) described the tone of these discussions as something of a 'moral panic'. Predictably more heat than light has been generated by media discussions yet they form a social backdrop and inform popular attitudes to fathers and fatherhood.

Much of the time there been a negative element in the popular discourses about fatherhood (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Burghes et al, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995a; Milligan and Dowie, 1998; Speak, Cameron and Gilroy, 1997). Comments and speeches of UK government figures have sometimes contributed to these negative elements (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Sarre, 1996). However governments in the UK and the USA have also moved to support fathers, particularly those who are young and unmarried (DOH, 1999; Griswold, 1998). It has been suggested that the subject of fathers and fatherhood is high on the government agenda (Burgess and Ruxton, 1996; Moss ed. 1997; Speak et al., 1997).

Government and public attention has often concentrated upon certain types of father. These include unmarried fathers, teenage fathers, non-resident fathers and biological



fathers. Each type has its own individual discourse, however negative discourses may overlap as in the case of young unmarried fathers - 'the feckless boys' in the words of Melanie Phillips (The Observer 26 April 1998) - living apart from the mother and child (Speak et al, 1997). The findings of Speak et al (1997) in relation to the circumstances of young unmarried fathers in Newcastle and similar work of others (Rolphe, 1999), have provided a better informed and more positive picture. This included evidence of young unmarried fathers' feelings of commitment to their children and the material obstacles that serve to prevent expressions of this.

'Absent fathers' is another group of fathers that has come in for substantial discussion - non-resident fathers is probably a less pejorative and more accurate term (Simpson, McCarthy and Walker, 1995). As is the case in discussions of young unmarried fathers a number of negative generalisations have featured in public discourse. In the case of non-resident fathers, an oft-quoted statistic is that of the '40% rule' (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Burgess, 1997; Hill, 1998; Milligan and Howie, 1998). However, as in the case of young unmarried fathers, subsequent research has called into question negative generalisations.

The '40% rule' is a conclusion drawn from research into the proportion of fathers who are said to lose contact with their children after separation (Bradshaw and Millar, 1991). This research and similar findings in the USA (Furstenberg and Cherlin 1991, Furstenberg, Nord, Peterson and Zill, 1983) pointed to the prevalence of diminishing contact between fathers separated from their partners and who were no longer resident with their children. In brief it appears from the research findings that over 40% of fathers lose contact with their children after separation or divorce.

Burgess (1997: 192) has described conclusions drawn from these findings as the 'myth of the disappearing dad' and has questioned the methodology of the UK research. For instance she points out that the research asked the lone parent (with custody) about the circumstances of the absent one, thus omitting the absent parent's version of contact arrangements. Burgess cites new research that is engaged in



interviewing both mothers and fathers: 'Perhaps the truth is not so much that, after divorce, perfectly nice fathers totally disappear, as that men who were peripheral at the outset tend to remain so.' (193). Burgess and others (Blankenhorn, 1995; Kruk, 1993; Seltzer, 1991) provide alternatives to any crude interpretations of research that connects negative assumptions about fathers and evidence of diminishing contact between many non-resident fathers and their children. For instance it is noted that poverty can influence lack of contact – fathers most prone to disengage from their children are the poorest and least well educated, with unemployed fathers leading the list (Burgess, 1997: 200). Attention is also drawn to the belief that may be held by some fathers that a 'clean break' is in the best interests of the child (Blankenhorn, 1995: 292) - a view prevalent among professionals according to Burgess (op. cit. 198) - and men's devaluation of themselves as parents. Finally, recent work by Bradshaw and others (Bradshaw et al, 1999) on the basis of a study of over six hundred non-resident fathers, has re-evaluated the original Bradshaw and Millar (1991) research findings. The new findings provide evidence of 'a much higher level of contact than that derived from studies of lone parents [i.e. the parent resident with the child]' (1999: 81). The reasons for the apparent discrepancy between the findings in 1991 and those of the 1999 study include the earlier study's emphasis on contact as seeing the child. The authors of the 1999 study point out that this 'may be, with hindsight, too imprecise a definition of contact' (82) i.e. the first study omitted to include contact by phone, e-mail and letter.

When the various discourses on fathers and fatherhood are examined the paucity of our standings of fatherhood becomes clear and various confusions and contradictions come to light (Burghes et al, 1997). These are chiefly concerning the respective positions of the social and biological father, the social father only and the biological father. It has been suggested that government policies have not been coherent. For instance the Children's Act (England and Wales) 1989 appeared to automatically confer paternal obligations upon the social father (unless a biological father applied for parental responsibility) and yet two years later the Child Support Act (1991) seemed to suggest something different. The CSA seemed to regard the biological

father as the father who is responsible (financially speaking) for the child (Burghes et al, 1997; Sarre, 1996). Sarre (1996: 43) notes that a similar lack of coherence appears in the UK 1979 Law Commission Report on Illegitimacy. In the same document, both 'Biological links were supported by the promotion of automatic parental responsibility, and social links were supported by the recommendations on AID [artificial insemination by donor]'. Sarre (1996: 44) goes on to suggest a theme 'that arises time and time again, of whether fatherhood should be defined biologically or socially' and concludes that in this matter 'policy makers have varied on which fathers have been dealt with' (ibid.). Policy makers may be reflecting a wider set of contradictions because in law 'there is no one fatherhood' (Collier 1995: 184). See also Burghes et al (1997:33-42) and Lewis (1994: 2) who notes that 'it is possible to be any one, or any combination of these types of father [biological, social or legal] in different legal systems.' Additionally new complexities and diversities such as advances in reproductive technology have 'forced an appraisal of what constitutes fatherhood in our society.' (Sarre, 1996: 41).

As we shall see in the following chapter the literature on fatherhood has burgeoned and the research community has sought to address the question of fatherhood. Questions about the function of fathers are a regular feature in the literature. Kraemer (1995), Lamb (1996) and Williams (1998) all ask 'what are fathers for?'. 'What is a father?' asks Daniels (1998) and Burghes et al (1997) pose the question 'what do we really know of fathers and fatherhood?'. Despite this growth in interest in what fatherhood might consist of, as we shall see, there is little consensus in the literature as to the nature of fatherhood (Burghes et al, 1997; Pasley and Minton, 1997; Tanfer and Mott, 1998). In some respects then this lack of research consensus mirrors the wider public, legal and policy lack of clarity indicated above. Furthermore, the research that has taken place has a number of limitations.

Three such limitations are methodological. These are firstly that the research has generally not explored men's definitions of what they consider to constitute fatherhood. Secondly, the research has been mainly confined to men who either are, or intend to be, both biological and social fathers and finally the majority of the



research on fathers tends to focus upon what fathers do with their children i.e., fathering as an activity.

The preponderance of heat over light in public discussions of what constitutes the various types of fatherhood and the respective obligations that come with these, a lack of coherence in policy attitudes towards social and biological fatherhood, and what Bradshaw et al (1999: 228) refer to as a 'remarkable reassertion of the obligations of biological fathers' are features that point to a need to explore the issue of biological fatherhood. The issue would seem to be worthy of considerable research interest. Is this the case? The next chapter evaluates the present state of fatherhood research with this question in mind.

## **The Research**

There is an initial observation arising from reading the research and literature on fathers. This is that the public debate has generated more heat than light and is often not informed by existing research (Speak et. al, 1997). Clearly there is a role for a body of research to inform the debate however, one of the first aspects that impresses in relation to the sizable literature on and many studies of fathers is a concern with what fathers do (or do not do). The further one moves away from studies of fathering as an activity and towards what feeling like a father may consist of, the less there exists. There is little in the literature that explores men's sense or perceptions of fatherhood i.e. 'the actual meanings and definitions attached by men to fatherhood' (Clarke and Popay, 1998: 203). With this in mind, I explore the literature on fatherhood in the following discussion. Because, as the data will show, the respondents report feelings of bonds and attachment to the child that was adopted, I also examine writings on attachment theory for assistance in explaining how the birth fathers in this study might have come to report feelings of a bond with their children.



## **Key Themes in Fatherhood Research and Literature**

Over the past twenty-five years, the literature and research focusing on fatherhood has burgeoned (Dienhart, 1998; Geiger, 1996; Kruk, 1993; Marsiglio, 1995a; Tanfer and Mott, 1998). In 1975, Lamb remarked that fathers were ‘the forgotten contributors to child development’ (1987:xiii). Up until then other writers noted the scarcity of social science research on fatherhood (Barber, 1975; McKee and O’Brien, 1982; Richards, 1982). From the eighties onward research and writing on fatherhood has gathered speed (Lamb, 1981; Lewis, 1986; Lewis and O’Brien, 1987, Marsiglio, 1993).

Four key themes are presented and discussed in this review of the literature. These are:

- when fatherhood might begin
- the perceived differences between ‘fathering’ and ‘mothering’ a child and the related question of men’s ability to nurture and raise children
- experiences of expectant fathers
- an exploration of the roots of consciousness of fatherhood.

*- When Might Fatherhood Begin?*

The popular convention was voiced in The Guardian: 'most men embark on parenthood nine months later than their womenfolk' ('Baby Blues... For Dad' 27.9.95). This attitude is reflected in the academic discussion where it has been suggested that for men, substantive fatherhood begins at birth once the man becomes able to physically care for the baby (Daniels and Weingarten, 1982; Greenberg, 1985; Lewis, 1986; Rossi, 1977; Seel, 1987).

Interestingly, some of the adoption literature also suggests this gulf or a vacuum between conception and the appearance of a child (Hodgkins quoted in Tugendhat, 1992; Departmental Committee on the Adoption of Children, 1970; Sawbridge, 1980). Rowe (1977: 92) appears to introduce an artificially sharp divide between being a biological parent and a social one when she recommends that 'a differentiation of parenting from the act of giving birth is probably an essential part of genuine acceptance of adoption'. The implication being that parenting is what is done after birth.

Other writers (e.g. Diamond, 1995a; La Rossa, 1986) have argued that the process of becoming a father begins before conception. Although these writers do not make it explicit, this view presumably relates to men in stable relationships as is clear from the respective texts. Others have remarked that the exact beginning of fatherhood is 'ambiguous' (Roopnarine and Miller, 1985: 50).

Overall, Burgess (1997: 120) reports the majority view. This suggests that fatherhood begins when there's something to do "becoming a father has meant becoming a social father more than a biological father". It is when the terminologies of fathering, mothering and parenting are explored that we find an inherent 'pro-natalist' (Cheal, 1991; Owens, 1982: 79) tendency that underlines the conventional opinion that fathers (and fatherhood) come into their own only when their child is born thus enabling them to act as fathers. However, an effect of this concentration on

what men do in social interaction with a child 'obscures other aspects of fatherhood' such as thoughts and emotions (Dienhart, 1998: 28).

*- To Father A Child, To Mother A Child*

In the conventional usage of the word, a man 'fathers' a child only in respect of participation in the act of conception. Conventionally, fathering a child is typically put thus: 'Fathering my son took a couple of glasses of wine and a raise of the eyebrow' (Matthew Engels in The Guardian Weekend 29 May 1999). In this sense the term fathering is not regarded as associated with caring, being committed and any emotional bond with a child unborn or otherwise (Seel, 1987). Conventionally speaking a man is not engaged in 'fathering' his children when he takes them to school or nurses their various ailments. In doing these things he may be described as 'parenting' but even this term is clumsy when applied to men's actions with their children (Ross, 1982a). In order to show how conventional thinking regards men, researchers have pointed to the difference between women who look after their children and men who 'baby-sit' the children when their partner goes out (Hawkins et al, 1995). Sarre (1996:1) suggests that whilst maternity and motherhood are established, the concept of paternity is 'more tenuous'. Sarre (ibid.: 5) also points to a 'conflation' between parenting, nurturing and mothering that, from a terminological standpoint, constructs both men and women in a biological essentialist framework that associates women with a proclivity and ability to care - with the converse being the case for men (see also La Rossa, 1986).

Richards (1982: 57) argues that:

Many questions about the ways in which the distinct male and reproductive physiology may (or may not) give rise to differing expectations and experiences of parenthood for men and women remain to be explored.

The bulk of research and writing on fathering and fatherhood over the past thirty years has sought to question the powerful social convention and stereotype that: 'while notions of paternity often embody an idea of the acquisition of property,



maternity is more related to concepts of giving and fulfilment' (ibid.). The notion that parenthood is equated with motherhood only (Dienhart, 1998; Williams and Robertson, 1999) has been the concern of many writers since at least the early 1970s.

Since Rutter (1972: 125) commented that 'a less exclusive focus on the mother is required. Children also have fathers!' researchers have made the point that a child's 'chief bond' can be with a father. Kruk (1993) provides a useful survey of the academic research into men's capacity to bond with their children. Burgess (1997) also provides a useful historical overview of the literature on men's child caring activities. Recent British research on young unmarried non-resident fathers also confirms men's ability to feel a paternal commitment in spite of the constraints of physical distance and lack of day to day familiarity (Speak et al, 1997).

However this field of the research on fatherhood and fathers' activities (which comprises the bulk) has a number of shortcomings. It has been pointed out that fathers' private lives remain largely hidden and that there are only limited accounts of fatherhood from fathers themselves (Burgess, 1997; Burgess and Ruxton, 1996; Burghes et al, 1997; Clarke and Popay, 1998; Dienhart, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997). Additionally it has been suggested that the research tends not to have an adequate theoretical framework (Lewis, 1986; Richards, 1982). Another source of criticism is that the existing research has tended to concentrate on the activities of fathers after birth e.g. the part that men can play in their children's childhood and adolescence. The research has therefore tended to exclude the experiences of expectant fathers (Hawkins et. al, 1995; Lamb, 1987; Lewis, 1986; Scott-Heyes, 1982). The research has also omitted a psychological perspective relating to men and their wish to have children (Diamond, 1995b; Lewis, 1982).

A few writers have also observed that the singular world of men's consciousness of themselves as fathers has been neglected and that the agenda for fatherhood has not been set independently of motherhood (Burghes et al, 1997; Richards, 1982). It has been suggested that in writings on fathers, there is a pro-natalist or biologically

essentialist tendency that tends to view fathers as male mothers (Dienhart, 1998; Lupton and Barclay, 1997, Richards, 1982) or motherhood as something that men can aspire too but cannot achieve, e.g.:

It is unusual for children to be closer to fathers than mothers because they are made inside their mothers. We men are not equal, we are a secondary parent.

Sebastian Kraemer, child and family psychiatrist,  
The Observer 21 April 1996

It seems therefore that the general research on fatherhood is limited in the insights it may offer. Firstly, there is a paucity of knowledge regarding the totality of men's experience from awareness of pregnancy and conception to birth and beyond. Secondly, there is little that explores the inner-world of fathers, especially fathers-to-be. Because of these research lacunae our thinking on fatherhood is limited as to any insight regarding the possible constituents or elements that may create and sustain a sense of fatherhood.

The result of this absence in fatherhood studies suggests a corollary and a shortcoming. If we are only able to describe and define fathers by what they do, without an accompanying understanding of what a sense of being a father and fatherhood is, then when fathers do not do, it may be imagined that they have automatically stopped feeling like fathers.

The next discussion reviews the existing research on the inner worlds of fathers-to-be and associated writing on consciousness of fatherhood.

#### *- Pregnant Men/Expectant Fathers*

The literature on expectant fatherhood and in particular discussion of any pre-birth consciousness of fatherhood is scarce. What exists is either selective, focusing as it does upon pathological reactions to pregnancy, or marital relations, is concerned with men's transitions to adulthood, or scarce. The overall scarcity of work on expectant fathers is a regular observation (Gurwitt, 1995; La Rossa, 1986; Lewis, 1986; May,



1982; May, 1995; McKee and O'Brien, 1982; Richards, 1982; Scott-Heyes, 1982). The selectivity of some studies has been noted in their concentration on men's abnormal or pathological reactions to pregnancy (Beail, 1982; Lewis, 1982; 1986; Richman, 1982; Scott-Heyes, 1982). Other studies have been confined to the man's role as husband and partner and not specifically as a father (Lewis, 1986; Richards, 1982).

Discussion of the subject of transition to parent-to-be and readiness for fatherhood is also limited in that it does not appear to address the question of fatherhood in relation to the unborn child. Here the research seems mostly concerned with the male's emotional and psychological transitions to adulthood and maturity. From the perspective of psychological growth, much is made of pregnancy (for men) as containing potential for individual development. May (1995: 93) argues that 'the processes of psychological and social adaptation during pregnancy are probably as significant in men as they are in women'; see also Gurwitt, 1995; Lewis, 1986; Roopnarine and Miller, 1985. In this vein of pregnancy as a psychological growth time for a man, Richards (1982) advances an 'objects relation theory' that posits the desire to father as an aspiration to create the position of father as distinct from any wish to have a father-son/daughter relationship with a child. Other studies describe men (as expectant first-time fathers) reporting having grown up, become more responsible, mature and having an opportunity for emotional involvement (Lewis, 1986; May, 1995; Owens, 1982; Seel, 1987). It seems then that when the literature has addressed expectant fathers' inner-worlds, it has tended to concentrate on personal and psychological growth as distinct from any attention to possible developments in the father's relationship with the unborn child.

However, Lewis (1982: 67) has challenged any notion of a specific male 'pregnancy'. He observes that 'men necessarily experience pregnancy and birth through their wives'. However this view contrasts with those of others. Krampe and Fairweather (1993) suggest a 'biological essence' to the fatherhood experience. Mead (1962: 53) notes that 'expectant fathers often have certain biochemical responses during their wives' pregnancies.'. Others acknowledge difference e.g. the lack of biological



immediacy (Diamond, 1995a: 269). However it is also argued that the father's 'protective agency' (e.g. the provision of a 'timely and nurturing holding environment'- Diamond 1995b: 245) is an equally meaningful counterpart to the mother's initial devotion as distinguished by 'maternal biological contact, feeding and attunement' (Diamond, *ibid.*: 246).

Therefore there is a scarcity of research insights in terms as to the consciousness of expectant fathers vis-a vis any relationship with their unborn child (May, 1995; Mercer, Ferketich, DeJoseph, May and Sollid, 1988b) and in particular, how birth fathers might experience a connection to their adopted children. Diamond (*op cit.*) suggests the existence of a unique male response to pregnancy that is manifested in psychological and emotional changes and related to the unborn child. As already noted, such a notion has been questioned (Lewis, 1982; Richards, 1982) however it offers a theorisation of the roots of a consciousness of fatherhood. Therefore I will now examine this contention in some depth.

#### *- A Theory of Consciousness of Fatherhood*

There have been suggestions of a unique relationship between father-to-be and unborn child. Researchers on expectant fatherhood have pointed out that expectant fathers seek to practically forge a special relationship with the unborn child via 'nesting' activities, and shopping for baby goods (Lewis, 1986; Richman, 1982). Others have identified a deeper emotionally empathic responsiveness - a 'watchful protectiveness' (Diamond 1995b: 251). This, it is suggested, develops and helps to provide a good beginning for the father's infant child. This is seen as part of an expectant father's 'protective agency' (*ibid.*: 246) that, taken together with the provision of material necessities, reflects what is described as the 'psycho-biological instinctual basis of fathering' (Benedek, 1970a quoted in Diamond, 1995a: 269).

Diamond, (1995a, 1995b) draws on the work of Wolson (1995b) to outline a concept of the expectant 'holding father' in possession of an 'adaptive grandiosity' (this entails the father's projection of his 'special, ideal self' onto his child as well as a capacity to

differentiate himself from his baby). This 'ideal' father is then placed to develop and maintain an empathic sensitivity with his baby and his wife as separate individuals. Diamond (1995a: 270) cites Benedek's theory of an instinctive 'psychobiology' of fatherhood:

fatherhood (i.e. the male's role in procreation) has instinctual roots beyond the drive organisation of mating behaviour. She [Benedek – GC] believed these roots included both his function as a provider and a capacity to develop **fatherliness** ties that render his relationship to his children a mutual developmental experience.

emphasis in original

Such a capacity for 'fatherliness ties' make for a situation where, Diamond (1995a: 279, emphasis in original) suggests, 'a father's actual **attachment and relationship** to his infant commences long before labour and delivery.'

The idea of a connection felt by the father to his unborn child is touched on elsewhere. Although their discussion is concerned with fathers (as distinct from expectant fathers), Hawkins et al (1995) echo Marsiglio's use of Erikson's concept of 'generativity' - a learning to care for others. Erikson (1982b) saw nurturing one's children as an important developmental task. In the course of its completion individuals learn to be less self-centred while developing the need to be needed by others. Hawkins et al. (1995) use the notion of generativity to develop a theory of healthy psychosocial fatherhood that is able to encompass a full nurturing role in the care of children. Marsiglio (1995b) takes this further by suggesting, in relation to the **expectant** father, that engaging with the generative task helps lay the basis for attachment with the unborn child.

This work of Diamond (1995a and 1995b), Hawkins et al (1995) and Marsiglio (1995b) on the instinctual basis of fathering and the ability of expectant fathers to form a relationship with the unborn child, is a synthesis of previous research. Diamond cites Benedek, 1970a; Ehrensaft, 1987; Greenberg, 1985; Greenberg and Morris, 1974; Pruett, 1987; Shapiro, 1987; 1993a. It is also a development of contemporary theorising in relation to expectant fathers.



As will be shown in this thesis, I have found evidence of attachment and bonds felt by the respondents towards their children. Not only was this evidence in the form of reports of life-long feelings of connectedness to the child but, in the interview situation, the behaviour of many of the birth fathers evidenced considerable affective attachments in respect of the child that was adopted. This central finding, and the above references to attachment and ties in the literature on fatherhood, prompted me to explore the work of attachment theorists for its possible contribution to understanding fathers' connections with their children. In particular was there anything that might explain the puzzle of strong attachments to people with whom the respondents had had no contact? Could attachment theory help explain the position of birth fathers who have no experience of social fathering yet report attachment to the child that was adopted?

### **Attachment theory and fatherhood**

Attachment theory is a specific body of work that has its origins in the work of John Bowlby (1969, 1973, 1980) and Mary Ainsworth (1967, 1978) (Bretherton, 1991). Early writings on attachment theory arose out of the work of Bowlby (1953) on maternal deprivation (Bowlby, 1984; Rutter, 1995). The focus of attachment theory is the infant and how, in its interactions with a main caregiver, the infant develops an attachment towards the caregiver.

Three characteristics distinguish attachment from other relational bonds. These characteristics are shown by the infant and they are firstly, proximity seeking in which the child will seek to remain within the protective range of the caregiver. Secondly, a secure base effect – the presence of the attachment figure fosters security in the child and thirdly, separation protest which is derived from any threat to continued accessibility to the attachment figure with active attempts to ward off the separation (Holmes, 1993; Rutter, 1981). Attachment theory is first and foremost concerned

with children's psychosocial development' (Howe, Brandon, Hinings and Schofield, 1999: 13).

Ainsworth's work (1969, 1978) developed the theory in her study of the security of the attachment of infants. Ainsworth's use of the 'Strange Situation' demonstrated that attachment was essentially a system that was activated when the child came under stress. The 'Strange Situation' was a laboratory procedure in which the care-giver – in the original experiments, usually the mother - left and returned to the room leaving the child behind in the presence or absence of a stranger. The child's discomfort, distress and behaviour were measured during the caregiver's absence and on the carer's return. Findings were then advanced in respect of the nature of the child's attachment to primary and secondary attachment figures. Work was also carried out with fathers and it was found that 'infants could form strong attachment to persons assuming very few care-giving duties, such as fathers' (Geiger, 1996).

This child-specific quality of attachment differs from the attachments that adults form in that the relationship between child and its attachment figure is that of care receiver to care giver. In this case, the care includes ingredients that – generally speaking - only a relatively helpless infant requires from a caregiver e.g. needs such as feeding and protection. As found by Ainsworth, the child's attachment behaviour is triggered and exhibited whenever its attachment to the caregiver is threatened (Bowlby, 1969). In this sense attachment is 'a protective mechanism' (Aldgate, 1991: 11) which is singular to the infant. An important characteristic of attachment theory is its ability to locate the roots of certain adult behaviours in a childhood experience of attachment or lack of it: 'attachment security remained a key feature of relationships throughout the whole of life' (Rutter 1995: 555; see also Bowlby, 1980: 442).

Attachment theory appears on first sight to offer generally little in an exploration of how fathers make attachments. This is because of its focus upon the child and, predominantly, the child's interactions with its mother - there is an absence of a focus on fathers in the literature (Andry, 1962; Bowlby, 1965; Holmes, 1993; Howe, 1995;



Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Mckee and O'Brien, 1982). The work of Rutter, in Maternal Deprivation Reassessed (1972), was important in highlighting an – up until then - emphasis on mothers to the detriment of attention to fathers and the child's ability to form an attachment to its father.

An additional limitation of attachment theory is that it is empirically driven – it rests on observable behaviour. This limitation is conveyed in the following quote from Bowlby (1984: 3):

The point of view from which this work starts is that it is believed that observation of how a very young child behaves towards his mother, both in her presence and especially in her absence can contribute greatly to our understanding of personality development.

Therefore attachment theory is grounded in how **infants** make attachments; is generally orientated to the **infant-mother** relationship and has traditionally not addressed the infant's attachment to its father. Finally it is empirically driven i.e. it is predicated upon observation of **social interaction**. It seems then that on this basis an explanation of how birth fathers may make and hold attachments to absent children is not obviously apparent in the main body of work on attachment theory.

However there are a few writings on attachment that have made the point that attachment theory can be used to explain how adults make attachments. Whilst not the same as the specific attachment that an infant may form (Rutter, 1995), it is suggested that the process by which attachments are made in adulthood may have commonalities with that of infant-primary care giver attachment formation (Bowlby, 1979). Interest in how adult attachments may be formed is growing (Crowell and Treboux, 1995) and there have been calls for further research (Ainsworth, 1991; Rutter, 1995; Weiss, 1991). However, as for the main body of work on attachment, at present there appears to be nothing in the literature on adult attachment that concerns the process of how paternal attachment may occur.

Notwithstanding this research lacuna, the concept of bonds formation in attachment theory is worth considering for its potential relevance to expectant and new fathers in the formation of attachment to their child.

To distinguish between infants' attachments and parents' attachments to their children, the term 'bonds' is often used (Ainsworth, 1991; Fahlberg, 1991). Bowlby (1979c) used the phrase 'affectional bonds' to describe the connections that adults may develop with each other (Ainsworth, 1991; Holmes, 1993) and there have been calls for more research in this area. For instance, Ainsworth (1991:40) notes that 'we still know remarkably little about the processes involved in the formation and maintenance of the bond, or even the criteria that mark its establishment'. Before I discuss the little that exists on the theme of the formation of paternal bonds, it should be pointed out that Bowlby (1984: 377) and Rutter (1995:556) have sounded a note of caution. These writers have counselled against any crude extension of attachment theory to explore the nature of parental bonds with children. Rutter (ibid.) remarks:

...there is a problem in the wish of many adult attachment theorists to extend attachment concepts to sexual relationships and to parents' relationships with their young children...an absolutely key feature of secure attachment relationships in early childhood is that they provide security. This is not obviously present with respect to parent-child relationships. Of course the relationship is a strong committed one and it does have features in common with attachments, but it is not identical.

Other writers have acknowledged this but have sought to identify what may be commonalities between the conventional concept of infant attachment and that of adult attachment (Ainsworth 1991, Weiss 1991). Weiss (1991: 75) uses the phrases 'attachment bond' and 'attachment relationship' to make the distinction between the bonds that adults form and the attachment formation process that is unique to infants.

Other writers on attachment theory have suggested parental bonding may begin pre-birth. These suggestions have primarily been made in respect of the bond that a woman may form with the unborn child e.g. through a process of interdependency an



interpersonal connection between expectant mother and child is formed (Fahlberg, 1991: 20).

However, Ainsworth (1991) and Weiss (1991) further the discussion of the formation of parental bonds by addressing the paternal experience in respect of a father's connection with his child. Ainsworth (1991: 40) notes that:

The tendency has been to consider the bond of father to child as somehow less deeply rooted than the bond of mother to child. During the past ten years or so, however, there has been active research into father-infant interaction that suggests that fathers can and sometimes do perform a care-giving role and presumably become bonded to their infants.

Ainsworth's reference relates to the social interaction of father and infant, however she follows this by asking 'Does paternal behaviour have the same kind of biological underpinning as maternal behaviour? (40). Ainsworth seems to suggest here that the formation of a father's bonds with his child may begin prior to the conventional phase of commencement i.e. in social interactions after birth. Although he does not differentiate between mothers-to-be and fathers-to-be, Howe (1995: 52) also raises the possibility of bond-formation without social interaction when he refers to 'Many developmental psychologists (who) believe that parents, too, are biologically disposed to bond with their child...'.

Although Weiss too does not differentiate between mothers and fathers, he usefully explores the onset and depth of parental bonds. In his exploration of the 'bonds of adult attachment' Weiss (1991: 74) concludes that:

The development of parental attachment to immature children seems to occur suddenly and to persist strongly. Unsystematic observation and interview suggest that adults who may have no sensed need for a relationship with children for many years may, in a very brief time, develop very strong investment in newly born children. Loss of a child seems regularly to give rise to a state of grief in which separation protest is intermeshed with protection drives. This state is remarkable for its persistence.

Here, Weiss is referring to the parents of children who have died at or soon after birth. However, it is suggested that the work of both Weiss (1991) and Ainsworth (1991) points to the possibility of a long-lasting bond felt by a father towards his child and that this may be in place either before birth or formed very quickly after birth.

Furthermore Ainsworth (1991: 37) usefully shifts the focus from any interaction between those who may bond with each other (either pre- or immediately post-birth) to the individual who experiences the sense of a bond. She suggests that 'relationships are dyadic, whereas affectional bonds are characteristic of the individual'. Ainsworth (1991: 38) goes on to describe how this bond may be manifested in the individual:

In an affectional bond there is a desire to maintain closeness to the partner. In older children and adults that closeness may to some extent be sustained over time and distance and during absences, but nevertheless there is at least an intermittent desire to re-establish proximity and interaction and usually pleasure – often joy – upon reunion. Inexplicable separation tends to cause distress and permanent loss would cause grief.

According to Ainsworth then, a bond can be an individual experience that may be felt in absentia i.e. without the presence of the other party. If this is so, then is it possible that a bond felt by a father in respect of a child can be formed without social interaction and be retained in the thoughts, emotions and psychology of the father? It seems therefore that attachment theory, and particularly the notion of bonds developed and felt without social interaction, provides some pointers with which to understand how men may perceive of themselves as fathers. In particular how the birth fathers in this study come to report a sense of attachment to their child – an affectional bond in the words of Ainsworth (1991) and Bowlby (1979c).

This review of the literature on fatherhood and attachment theory has indicated that our knowledge of the inner world of fathers is sparse. Furthermore, nothing in the research on fatherhood or parental bonding specifically explores the circumstances of birth fathers. This study of birth fathers then has a potential contribution to make on at least two counts. Firstly, to our understandings of the potential impact of



fatherhood on men, in particular, whether observed attachments in fathers are due to biological, or pre-birth social or psychological processes, or whether they are due more to early caring behaviour. Secondly, a contribution may be made to attachment theory in respect of how adults form bonds.

In the case of birth fathers, the circumstances of their lives without the child may be examined. What, for the respondents in this study, has biological fatherhood - without the conventional social parenting experience - meant to them? In this respect the life experiences of the respondents may be seen as something of a natural experiment when only one intervention has occurred – they are biological fathers. In other words, in terms of the trajectory of birth fatherhood – the biological but not social father – that was outlined in Chapter One, what might continue when biological fatherhood does not combine with social fatherhood? What is the real life experience of being a birth father?

Before we go on to explore these experiences, it is necessary to establish what we already know of the experiences of birth parents – birth mothers and birth fathers.

# **INTRODUCTION TO CHAPTERS FOUR AND FIVE ON BIRTH FATHERS AND BIRTH MOTHERS**

## **Birth Parents and Adoption Policy**

Before the existing research on birth fathers and birth mothers is discussed in the following two chapters it is necessary to acknowledge that men and women have been treated in a gender-specific manner throughout the history of adoption law, policy and practice. Accordingly birth parents will have gendered accounts of their experiences of the adoption process. Furthermore, whilst the gender of the unmarried mother or father continues to remain a factor in adoption, there have been social, legal and policy shifts that are worth noting.

The following brief discussion helps to set birth parents' research and accounts in an historical context. A majority of the accounts of birth fathers in this study place the adoption of the child in the nineteen sixties, therefore I have chosen to look at various perspectives on birth parents that date from about this period. It is probably the case that the - predominantly negative - perspectives of the nineteen sixties regarding unmarried mothers and fathers had changed little from those that existed in previous decades (Howe et al., 1992; Davidoff et al, 1999; Petrie, 1998).

## **The Changing Context of Adoption Policy and Practice: Gender, Power and Birth Parents**

It has been suggested that, in respect of the three parties in adoption, the interests and needs of the child and of the adoptive parents have come before those of birth parents (Logan, 1996; Ryburn, 1996; Watson, 1968). However, with regard to the respective positions of birth mothers and birth fathers, shifts have occurred in adoption policy and practice and these are worth briefly tracing. I site this discussion in the period when most of the respondents' accounts begin. This is broadly between



the 1950s and the 1970s, with most of the adoptions of the respondents' children having taken place in the late 1960s. During this period, as noted in chapter one, the numbers of infants being placed for adoption rose to a peak in the UK in 1968 when 27,000 children were placed for adoption. I begin with the position of birth mothers.

In the nineteen fifties and nineteen sixties the predominant attitude was that of social censure directed towards all unmarried mothers. This censorious attitude also embraced birth mothers (Bouchier, Lambert and Triseliotis, 1991; Brodzinsky, 1990; Edwards and Williams, 2000; Farrar, 1997; Howe, Sawbridge and Hinings, 1992; Petrie, 1998; Powell and Warren, 1997; Wadia-Ells, 1996). Such illegitimacy brought forth societal condemnation, prejudice and stigma. In the middle of the so-called swinging sixties, Scarman (1968: 1) remarked that unmarried mothers were:

...subjected by society to the black sheep treatment. Sometimes rejected even by their own families, they almost always have difficulty with their neighbours and they lose the normal comforts of society.

Women who conceived children 'out of wedlock' were seen as transgressing societal mores and norms. In post-World War II UK society, expectations of women were that they play a role that maintained notions of the nuclear family - with the gender inequalities that this entailed. For instance, women were expected to be mother, wife and housekeeper and men were designated economic providers (Davidoff, Doolittle, Fink and Holden, 1999; Williams, 1998). Birth mothers faced social opprobrium because of the illegitimate nature of the pregnancy but also experienced condemnation arising from their involvement in having their child adopted. Mullender and Kearn (1997: 4) remark that 'the attitudes which have prevailed towards women having children outside marriage [are] the attitudes which have also shaped adoption'.

Birth mothers were treated as children (Watson, 1968), publicly humiliated by being sent to institutions such as mother and baby homes that were run by restrictive and morally disapproving regimes (Bouchier, Lambert and Triseliotis, 1991; Edwards and Williams, 2000; Forgotten Mothers, BBC2, 1997) or 'sent to aunts' miles away from

home and family (Farrar, 1997; Petrie, 1998; Wadia-Ells, 1996). The reactions and attitudes of the birth mothers' parents often also reflected negative social responses to unmarried mothers (Bouchier, Lambert and Triseliotis, 1991; Howe, Sawbridge and Hinings, 1992; Wells, 1993b).

The attitudes of many professionals in the health and welfare services also reflected societal attitudes towards unmarried mothers and birth mothers in particular. At the point of birth, women whose babies were to be adopted were often advised not to look at their infant (Bouchier et al, 1991; Farrar, 1997; Weinreb and Murphy, 1988). Baran, Pannor and Sorosky (1977: 58) interviewed mental health staff and were told that birth mothers had 'sinned, suffered and deserved to be left alone.' During this period there were many dedicated personnel involved with birth mothers who believed that what they were doing was for the good of the birth mother (Triseliotis, 1991). However the majority of accounts of birth mothers' experiences provide evidence of widespread social censure and even bigotry directed towards them (Powell and Warren, 1997; Shawyer, 1979).

Notwithstanding such social condemnation and treatment, during the time of the pregnancy and birth, birth mothers were the centre of attention (Connolly, 1978). However this was often not so much in their own right but as the provider of an adoptable child. In birth mothers' accounts of these times, they report that they were treated as the primary client in so far as professionals envisaged the end result being the placement of a baby with a childless - married - couple (Platts, 1968; Ryburn, 1996; Watson, 1986). Altogether then, despite being the focus of considerable attention, birth mothers report feelings of vulnerability and helplessness (Bouchier et al, 1991). In this sense it is the needs of birth mothers that were the least considered of all the parties involved in adoption during this period (Howe et al, 1992).

In terms of legal rights, birth mothers in adoption - and unmarried mothers in general - held primary rights over their children (Sarre, 1996). As sole guardian of the child, the birth mother's certification was (and is) sufficient to register a child's birth - the



unmarried father was and is under no duty to do so (Burghes et al, 1997; Scarman, 1968). Similarly, the birth mother's consent to adoption was generally sufficient to complete the adoption proceedings (Grey, 1971; Ryan, 1996). Birth fathers had no rights in these proceedings. Seen within the context of the reports of experiences of powerlessness, isolation and pressures from family, professionals and society, it may be suggested then that the birth mother was often not in a position to make an informed choice. As women, birth mothers' ability to exercise rights and choice was constrained by the attitudes of the time and any formal rights rendered negligible by feelings of disenfranchisement produced by the process of being a birth mother in the nineteen sixties and seventies. Birth mothers were therefore not able to exercise their existing legal rights in any way other than to endorse what they perceived to be inevitable - the adoption of their child.

In this respect then it is suggested that the birth mother's position reflected the inequalities of gender and power for women as a whole during this period (Davidoff et al, 1999; Wilson, 1977). Although birth mothers were at the centre of attention by virtue of their status as mothers of children being placed for adoption, it may be suggested that adoption policy and practice of the time contained elements of gendered inequality that rendered birth mothers powerless as women and as mothers.

Since the early 1970s a gradual change in adoption policy and practice has occurred in keeping with changing social attitudes to 'out of wedlock' pregnancies (Logan, 1996; Powell and Warren 1997). As wider options have been made available to pregnant women e.g. abortion (Davidoff et al, 1999) and increased financial and other supports to unmarried parents, social stigma and pressures have lessened. The result of these changes has been less babies available for adoption (Edwards and Williams, 2000; Howe et al, 1992; Mullender and Kearn, 1997; Shaw and Hill, 1998; Wadia-Ells, 1996). Adoption policy and practice changed (perhaps as a result of this) and practices such as more openness in post-adoption contact and greater birth parent choice in identification of prospective adoptive parents have grown (Baran and Pannor, 1990; Cooper, 1993; Wadia-Ells, 1996). Contributions to the changing status

of birth mothers have also included greater knowledge of birth mothers' experiences and views (Howe et al, 1992; Powell and Warren 1997, Wells 1993b).

Although societal and professional attitudes towards birth mothers have shifted considerably from the those that were in place thirty and forty years ago they have not universally changed (Logan 1996), yet the literature suggests that there has been significant shifts. Notwithstanding this shift it is suggested that the position of birth fathers in adoption has not, until very recently, altered significantly in the UK (although there have been more significant developments in the USA – see below). As is the case in respect of attitudes towards birth mothers that mirror societal opinions relating to unmarried women who become pregnant, it appears that wider attitudes toward unmarried fathers find an expression in views about birth fathers (Mason, 1995).

In the historical context of adoption policy and practice, birth fathers have either been given little attention or have been the subject of negative professional views. Thirty five years ago, Anglim (1965) noted such attitudes:

It seems to me that we have gone so far afield in this area [the 'natural father'] that, more often than not, we offer to the child, a choice of two images of his father - both of which are sadly inadequate. The first, coming from limited knowledge and understanding of him, and often accompanied by silence or embarrassment, suggests that there is something very wrong with this parent - the fact that much is known about the mother and little about the father would seem to indicate that she took responsibility whereas he shunned it, that the mother was the victim and the father the villain. This, albeit negative image, is at least, an image. The second choice is no image at all. It sometimes appears that we have actually been guilty of contributing to a myth that suggests that a child born out of wedlock has only one natural parent - that his concern about why he was given up and any future questions he will have will be about his mother.

Throughout the intervening period similar observations have been repeated by Platts (1968) and by Watson (1968), Pannor, Massarik and Evans, (1971), Cheetham (1977), Connolly (1978), Cole and Donley (1990), Sachdev (1991b) and Menard (1997). Baran and Pannor (1990: 324) go as far as to suggest that adoption agencies



have 'seen the birth father as an intruder and sought ways to avoid involving him in the decision-making process'. The literature also refers to professionals, who in comparison with others involved, hold 'the strongest negative opinions about putative fathers' (Cole and Donley, 1990: 285) and who give 'short shrift to involvement with birth father' (Schechter and Bertocci, 1990: 63). On the other hand, there is also evidence of sensitive adoption practice with birth fathers. Sarre (1996: 45) notes that 'paternal origins are more frequently recorded than in the past'. There are also examples of agencies that have re-orientated practice to incorporate work with birth fathers - as in the case of the Vista Del Mar Child-Care Service in the USA in the late nineteen sixties (Pannor et al, 1971).

Irrespective of any localised policy and practice changes, legally, the birth father in UK adoption legislation has no legal standing (Burghes et al, 1997). In the USA, birth fathers have been gradually accorded greater rights since the early nineteen seventies (Baran and Pannor, 1990; Brodzinsky, 1990; Doherty, 1997), however definitions of these rights vary at state level (Menard, 1997). Supreme Court decisions has generally involved issues in respect of the adoption of older children (ibid.). In the UK there is growing acknowledgement of the need for changes in legislation in respect of unmarried fathers (Bradshaw et al, 1999; Burgess and Ruxton, 1996; Burghes et al, 1997; Pickford, 1997). For instance discussions have included the possibility of extending automatic parental responsibility to those unmarried fathers that jointly register the child's birth with the mother (Sarre, 1996). However it remains the case that in respect of key decisions such consent to adoption that the birth father's position in law is not on the same footing as that of the birth mother. Whilst there is a trend for UK courts to equate the position of unmarried fathers with that of married fathers, it appears, according to (Pickford, 1992: 140) that: 'it may be a matter of chance whether the unmarried father of a child whose mother does not want to continue as a carer has the opportunity to intervene'.

Neither birth mother or birth father felt that they had power in the circumstances of adoption forty and thirty years ago. Within this situation the birth mother was

accorded a central focus yet her needs were not. Additionally, although she had legal power, invariably, birth mothers felt that they were presented with only one option - adoption. The birth father was rarely involved at all because of attitudes that either saw his participation as irrelevant to the adoption proceedings or regarded him in a negative light. The birth father also has had no legal rights in adoption.

On paper then birth mothers have historically been accorded more power than birth fathers. A closer examination suggests that the power accorded birth mothers has been empty in practice and conferred as a result of the centrality of birth mothers' biological position in the adoption process. Thus adoption policy and practice has reflected wider societal gender roles for women and women based upon biology rather than social equity.

Further exploration of gender and power inequalities as they impacted upon birth mothers is beyond the scope of this work. As it has proved difficult to find any work that explores this further it may be that this is an area for future research. The same observation may be applied to the literature in respect of birth fathers, however drawing attention to an absence of gender and power discussion seems inappropriate given that it appears that there are only two pieces of birth father research in existence. It is this research and any other birth father information that is explored in the following chapter.



## **CHAPTER FOUR**

### **BIRTH FATHERS: RESEARCH, LITERATURE AND SOME STATISTICS<sup>5</sup>**

#### **Experiences of birth fathers: the research**

There is a paucity of research on non-social dimensions of fatherhood such as consciousness and men's self perception of fatherhood. In respect of expectant fatherhood, little too has been written or researched. The knowledge and understandings that exist is varied. Perspectives on fatherhood range from a view that it begins at birth when social, active fathering commences, to other standpoints that suggest a condition of expectant fatherhood that includes unique male psychological changes and the development of a bond with the unborn child that may commence at, or pre-birth.

If a perception of fatherhood can develop before birth and produce an incipient bond with an unborn child then what happens when this connection is broken when the baby is relinquished for adoption? The circumstances of birth fathers in adoption offer a natural 'laboratory' in which to explore (and test the aforementioned theories of pre-birth attachment and bonding) a relatively unresearched dimension of fatherhood - men's consciousness of fatherhood and connection to their child. However, as we shall see, just as is the case for research on birth mothers, existing research on birth fathers is largely atheoretical.

Very little research has taken place in relation to birth fathers. Thoburn's extensive literature survey for the Department of Health and Welsh Office (1992) is a key source of references on the subject of adoption and it identifies one piece of research

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<sup>5</sup> The following chapter is an extensively up-dated version of an early paper (Clapton, 1997).

concerning the experiences of birth fathers. Deykin, Patti and Ryan (1988) carried this out.

### **The North American Study 1988**

The research undertaken by Deykin et al took place in North America. It dealt with the immediate post-adoptive experience and the birth fathers' subsequent adjustment. The research explored data provided by 125 birth fathers by means of a postal questionnaire. The authors discuss their findings relating to attitudes to adoption, involvement in the adoption process, effects on subsequent marital functioning, procreation and parenting. In relation to the adoption, the findings are that those fathers who supported the concept of adoption and felt unprepared for fatherhood were involved in the adoption proceedings, whereas those who were opposed to the adoption and felt coerced by outside pressures were likely to be excluded. On the questions of subsequent marital functioning and parenting, the data suggests that having been a birth father is not a predictor of subsequent quality of marital functioning. Relatively few birth fathers stated that the adoption experience had had any impact on their parenting function. The authors draw attention to those in the study that had been excluded from the adoption processes i.e. the decision-making, planning and proceedings. They report that these respondents were 2.5 times as likely to have fathered additional children as those who had participated in the adoption. This group of 'excluees' (from the adoption process) also suffered long-lasting effects arising from the adoption.

A 'desire to search' was a common feeling of those surveyed. Deykin et al suggest that the data provides evidence that, even after extended periods of time, the surrender of a child for adoption remains a conflict-ridden issue for birth fathers. The authors report that birth fathers' search activity was highly associated with serious thoughts of taking the child back (1988: 244) and point out that this is in contrast to the feelings of birth mothers in a previous study by the same authors (1984). In that study, the authors found that in seeking contact with their adopted children, birth



mothers are motivated by more of a need for a reassurance that seeks to 'alleviate guilt and restore self-esteem through the assurance that the child was alive and well'. The 'taking-back' motivation in the participants' reasons for searching for the child, has been seen to be a gender difference of possible significance and as such has been repeated subsequently (Mullender and Kearns, 1997; Rosenberg, 1992).

Deykin et al (1988: 247) make an important reservation when they point out that the birth father study sample was drawn from adoption support and advocacy groups and make note that membership of these groups 'may be motivated by continued concern and distress over the adoption'.

This reservation is particularly important because it applies to a sample that included many men who were members or supporters of a campaigning organisation entitled 'Concerned United BirthParents' (CUB). CUB was subsequently described as 'anti-adoption' (Gould 1994: 288). Earlier work on birth mothers by the same group of researchers (Deykin et al, 1984) also drew upon CUB for help in identifying potential respondents. The research limitations produced this reliance upon CUB have been noted elsewhere (e.g. Brinich, 1990).

However it has been acknowledged that obtaining data for research in the field of post adoption experiences is predicated upon the 'visibility' and self-selection of those who have indicated a wish to be in touch with their adopted children or (in the case of adopted people) birth parents (Triseliotis, 1991a). Those birth parents and adopted people who do not seek contact or are not involved with post-adoption services e.g. counselling, are generally much harder to research. <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Recent UK research (Howe and Feast, 2000) has achieved a study comparison by identifying adopted people who search and those who have not. This involved the close co-operation of a major adoption agency and consideration of ethical issues such as locating and contacting adopted people, many of whom had previously shown no curiosity as to their birth origins or adoptive status.

The 1988 North American research does not cover either pre-adoptive experiences (reaction to pregnancy, involvement or otherwise in birth and adoption proceedings) or subsequent contact and or reunion between these men and their children.

### **The Australian Study 1993**

Subsequent to Thoburn's literature survey, a paper has been published on a second piece of birth father research that took place in Western Australia (Cicchini, 1993). This paper is not quoted in any of the recent works on adoption and was not found on recent literature searches on the Internet or via Edinburgh University's 'First Search' or 'BIDS' search mechanisms (December 1997). A colleague in Western Australia who knew of my interest sent Cicchini's paper to me in 1996.

Cicchini suggests that the only previous piece of research on birth fathers (Deykin et al, 1988) is limited in its ability to understand birth fathers' emotional experiences and concerns. This, it is suggested, is because the researchers based a key conclusion - that search activity was highly associated with thoughts of taking the child back - on the results of a single question regarding feelings of responsibility with regard to the child. Cicchini (1993: 5) argues that this item was the only one to address emotional concerns. His study is therefore different and, he suggests, more illuminating in that it seeks 'to clarify motivations behind the search'.

The Australian sample consisted of respondents who volunteered in response to articles and public appeals. Over 50 men contacted the researchers. The eventual number of men interviewed was 30.

Cicchini's findings are that a large majority of the cohort of thirty (87%) were aware of both pregnancy and adoption. A majority (66%) had minimal or no say in the adoption; in relation to this, feelings of exclusion were strong. A large majority (83%) did not see or touch the baby but a majority (60%) said they would have liked more contact with the baby. In the weeks and months immediately after the birth and



adoption, 67% of the birth fathers reported thinking about the child frequently. 13% said that this happened constantly. The adoption experience was described as “a period of crisis, emotionally disturbing, marked by feelings of confusion and ambivalence” (11). The author remarks that ‘Only one or two felt no strong feelings’ (ibid.). Long term influences of the adoption were to the effect that relinquishment “was a most distressing experience” (13). 77% of the interviewees endorsed the statement: ‘There is part of me missing’. 17% said that they felt “positive” about the relinquishment. A majority (77%) had taken active steps to search for the child. Nearly this entire latter group (96%) said the reason for searching was to ‘ease my mind my child is ok’. 91% of the same group (those searching) said that they wanted to know what the child looked like. Another 91% of the searchers said that their purpose in doing so was ‘to include child in my life’ and agreed with the item that the search was in the hope of having ‘a relationship with my child’. Only a small number of the interviewees were able to report on the effects of contact.

The author concludes that, in relation to the adopted child, a feeling of responsibility persists. An emotional and psychological feeling of responsibility is retained despite relinquishment of legal responsibility. According to Cicchini (1993: 18):

The most significant finding is that the relinquishment experience does not end at the time of adoption, but has enduring effects throughout life... These effects emerge most clearly decades later in a desire to be re-united with the child and seek assurance that the child is alright.

The Australian work is innovatory in that it seems to be the first research to explore the emotional and psychological aspects of birth fathers’ experiences. There is much here that confirms a similarity of emotional and psychological experiences between birth mothers and birth fathers e.g. the persistence of feelings of distress and loss, the disturbing emotional short term effects of the experience. Additionally it is interesting to note that a majority of the birth fathers did not have contact with the baby at the time and to note their associated wish (unfulfilled) to have been more involved with the child at birth e.g. to have held him/her.

Cicchini's findings do not include any insight into the experiences of birth fathers that have since met their (now adult) children. The vast majority of the respondents (it is not specified how many) were still searching and therefore no findings are reported in relation to any of the experiences of contact. It seems that the interview questionnaire was drafted on the assumption that contacts and relationships with (adult) children would not be explored.

### **'Out Of The Shadows: Birth Fathers' Stories' 1995**

Finally, there is a third work on birth fathers. This is a collection of 'birth fathers' stories' (Mason, 1995). Whilst valuable in its portrayal and discussion of men's accounts of the effects of separation from their children, the collection is methodologically limited. The primary drawback is that Mason presents 17 stories from too diverse a group. The publication contains accounts from men whose broad similarity with each other is their separation from their sons and daughters - only some of whom have been adopted.

Some of the men had parented their children and then either divorced or separated from the mothers of the children. Others had had intermittent contact with their children (in one case until the child was over four years old). Others had been participating in adoptions with some form of contact between themselves and their children. Nine of the seventeen men interviewed were involved in 'closed' baby adoptions i.e. there was no subsequent contact from shortly after the birth. It is this latter group that most closely fit the conditions of the present study.

A secondary limitation of the work is that data collection is not standardised and the details of the men's experiences are limited to the presentation of their stories. Their accounts of loss are moving and provide insights that invite generalisation however, without a more rigorous method of collection, the data resists anything more than broad generalisations regarding such a diverse group. In this sense then the findings



consist of impressionistic comments and therefore are not wholly applicable to birth fathers in adoption.

Nevertheless, Mason's work suggests certain similarities that chime with the two pieces of earlier research. She finds evidence of enduring care for the child, grieving over its loss, shame, guilt and damage to self-esteem. She quotes one birth father describing the year of his daughter's birth and adoption as one in which: "I felt I lost membership in the human race by giving away my own flesh and blood" (16). Mason reports damage to self-esteem and, what is to date unique in the research on birth parents, that amnesia about the pregnancy and birth, birth dates etc. is common among birth fathers.

Mason remarks that memory of these events and dates is 'unusually fuzzy and fragmented' for birth fathers. She notes that: 'Over and over the men say "I just can't remember" or it's foggy"' (14). She goes on to suggest that this amnesia is a result of initial disassociation - employed as a coping mechanism in time of crisis - that has remained in place because there has been no opportunity to talk through painful feelings and 'the long-term effects of not raising their children'. This notion of amnesia and disassociation is also briefly discussed in a paper that accompanies Mason's interviews (Reidel, 1995). This brief paper (which appears to be focused solely on fathers who relinquish their children through adoption – unlike the rest of the book) suggests that such amnesia is: 'an effort to forget painful details that trigger feelings of shame, powerlessness and failure' (264).

Mason finds that if a resolution of the grief felt by birth fathers cannot take place then several areas of their lives can be 'profoundly affected' e.g. relationships and 'realisation of goals and dreams'. Later in the same publication, Reidel (1995: 263) echoes this by noting that the birth father may compensate for having failed as a father (because he relinquished a child) and this may be manifested in:

preventing any intimacy with a woman that might lead to fatherhood again. He may overprotect subsequent birth children from loss and disappointment, or he may feel uncomfortable assuming the responsibilities of parenthood.

Despite lack of focus on men who had been involved in relinquishing a child for adoption, the impressionistic nature of the Mason's findings, and Reidel's unevidenced contentions, 'Out Of the Shadows' is of some value. This is because firstly, the majority of men in the study had been involved in relinquishing their baby for adoption. Secondly, the qualitative material generated from the respondents' accounts echoes the experiences of birth mothers reported in the research (see next chapter) and the findings from the two other studies of birth fathers in North America and Australia discussed above:

It is suggested that the three birth father studies in existence point to the salience of the adoption experience in the lives of birth fathers and the presence of an enduring sense of connection to the child.

I will conclude this review of birth father research with reference to a study that includes material on the feelings of fathers who have been separated from their children. The study concerns itself not with the nature of attachment or bonds felt by a parent in respect of a child but deals with the emotional effects on the parent when a separation occurs. It explores 'the feelings experienced by a parent when separated from his or her child' (Jenkins and Norman, 1972: 8).

### **Filial Deprivation In The Circumstances Of Separation And Parallels With The Experiences Of Birth Parents**

The Jenkins and Norman study (1972) concerned the experiences of parents who had been separated from their children as a result of having been placed in the care of statutory welfare services. It neither addresses the issue of the permanent separation of parent and child by adoption or the experience of fathers who have been separated from a child that they have never or only once seen. In other words the study's focus



includes the experiences of fathers who had had some parental contact with their children (the age range of the children was from birth to over six years old) and had the option of visiting that child in foster care. Notwithstanding this emphasis, the relevance of the work lies in the rarity of one its study areas – fathers' feelings in respect of their absent children. The findings point to a number of congruencies that seem to exist between the experience of the fathers in the study and that of the birth fathers referred to in the above three works that deal directly with birth fathers in adoption.

Jenkins and Norman (1972: 97) note that whilst:

the effect of maternal deprivation on children has been a subject for major research investigation, the reciprocal aspect of the placement transaction, referred to here as filial deprivation, has not been similarly studied.

137 fathers were interviewed (as well as 297 mothers). Jenkins and Norman (97) found that the immediate feelings of the parents on separation 'ran the gamut from sadness to relief, from shame to anger, from bitterness to thankfulness.' Whilst it should be noted that some of the separations carried with them an element of proactive volition on the part of the parents (thus explaining the existence of feelings such as thankfulness), other feelings seem to be similar to those reported by birth fathers in adoption. Jenkins and Norman found evidence of generalized attitudes of unworthiness or alienation and a sense of failure. They remark that 'parenthood is a responsibility of our culture and placement [i.e. separation] tends to be an admission that individuals have failed as parents' (104). They suggest that there is a double sense of failure; a failure in responsibility, first as a parent and then as an individual (103-104). Other feelings are in evidence and these include 'interpersonal hostility, separation anxiety with sadness and self-denigration' (267). There is also a sense of inadequacy (102) and in one case a separation 'felt like a death' (104).

As we shall see in the following chapter, the findings of Jenkins and Norman have some commonalities with reports of birth mothers' experiences. The study's discussion of the specific feelings of 88 fathers (those who were part of a pair of

mother and father so that direct comparisons could be made) is of direct relevance to this study. The mothers and fathers 'tended to report comparable feelings, with some differences in emphasis' (138). These differences are reported:

On the whole mothers tended to be heavily self-involved and typically focused on their own problems rather than the child's in relation to the placement situation. They also showed substantial hostility to other persons as well as to the agencies. Fathers expressed strong guilt and shame, were less self-involved and more child-orientated.

138-139

The 'overriding feeling' common to both mothers and fathers was that of 'sadness' (266).

As previously noted the Jenkins and Norman study deals with a different group of parents who have undergone a different type of separation than that of birth parents from their adopted children. As we have seen in respect of the literature on birth fathers above and as we shall see in respect of the research on birth mothers there seem to be a number of similarities in the types of feelings described by parents in these two differing situations e.g. guilt and shame. As we shall also see the feelings described here foreshadow those that are reported by the respondents in this study. A concept that might be common to both the respondents in the Jenkins and Norman study and birth parents is that of experiencing or suffering filial deprivation.

Before the research on birth mothers is reviewed, given the paucity of studies of birth fathers, it is necessary to extend this review wider to identify other sources of information that may shed light on birth fathers. What is the nature of the non-research based literature on birth fathers?



## **Birth Fathers in the Literature**

### **Anecdotal Accounts**

Over the years literature has featured individual accounts from birth fathers that convey their feelings regarding the adoption (Clapton, 1996a; Concerned United Birthparents, 1983; Feast, 1994; Griffith, 1991; Hilpern, 1998; NORCAP, 1998; Pannor, Massarik and Evans, 1971; Silber and Speedlin, 1983; Tugendhat, 1992; Wells, 1993a). The overall impression to be gained from the individual accounts that concern either men who are seeking contact with their adopted child or meetings between men who have had contact is one that suggests that the effects of the adoption have been long-lasting. What is also suggested is that somehow thoughts of the child have lived on in the minds of these men. One man's account of his immediate post-adoption feelings typifies many of the others:

How quickly that relief passed and was displaced by occasional totally unexpected flashes from the sub-conscious - a mixture of guilt, curiosity, the certainty of something missing.

Argent ed., 1988: 19

Argent is typical of many writers who quote birth fathers, speculate that birth fathers may well have similar feelings to those of birth mothers and call for research (e.g. Mullender and Kearn 1997).

### **Attitudes to Birth Fathers - Other Parties in Adoption**

Third party information on birth fathers appears elsewhere. Sachdev (1991b) reports on how birth fathers are perceived by other parties in the adoption process. The attitudes of birth mothers varied from hostility to grudging acceptance - in the best interests of the adopted child - of the importance of information about the birth father. The same study showed that adoptive parents were more partisan in their hostility towards birth fathers. Of all three parties - adopted children, birth mothers and

adoptive parents - the adopted children were the most positive in their regard for information sharing with their birth fathers and that adoptive parents were the most negative in their attitudes toward birth fathers.

Evidence of adopted children's attitudes towards their birth fathers has been presented elsewhere (Feast, 1994; March, 1995; Post Adoption Social Workers Group, 1987; Tabak, 1990). However, none of this provides any light on birth fathers themselves and must be viewed with reservations because the attitudes of those adopted people who are not looking for contact with either birth parent have hitherto been difficult to ascertain – see previous footnote number four. Undoubtedly this group would exhibit a broad spectrum of attitudes toward their birth parents and it is as well to be reminded that a point on this spectrum will include hostility:

I find it difficult to understand the need of those who seek to know their immediate male progenitor or what they hope to gain from meeting him. I avoid writing "father" since a father is that male person who loves and protects the children in his family, whether or not they are genetically related to him. Calling a man who just happened to be around at the time of conception "father" is as nonsensical as calling a bottle "mother".

(The Guardian May 11 1995)

In the writings that deal with search activities of adopted people there is a common theme of completing the jigsaw (usually once the birth mother has been contacted). In a subsection of Feast (1994: 137-138) a 'Diary of a Reunion' records the thoughts of one woman which describe a major motivation for tracing both birth parents:

I watched a programme on adoption, one of the adopted children who had found her birth mother said that now she felt a complete person - before she had found her mother, a part of her had been missing - but how can she feel whole until she has found her father.

In her study of adopted people and birth mother relationships March (1995) includes empirical evidence in respect of contact between adopted people and their birth fathers. March notes that adopted people appear to express 'little interest in the birth father when they begin to search' (110) but that this lack of interest is replaced with a



desire for contact with him during the search and contact process involving the birth mother (ibid.) 22 respondents in March's study had met with their birth father (118). Types of contact were described as ranging from 9% (2) who had felt rejected by their birth father to 9% (2) who classified their relationship as 'father-child'. A majority of seven (32%) considered the contact to be: 'between friends' (ibid.). March found that the 'adoptees' descriptions of adoptee-birth father interaction and outcome of contact resemble the accounts given for contact with the birth mother' (120).

It seems from adopted people's accounts of searching and contact that many adopted people have an interest in the birth father. Yet this interest is not universally held or echoed by professionals. In this study of the literature for references to birth fathers I have identified considerable professional ambivalence.

### **Attitudes to Birth Fathers - Professional and Academic Voices**

As noted previously, many researchers and professionals have called for more information on the experiences of birth fathers. This has been a feature in the literature over the past forty years. Another feature appears to be historical and contemporary variations in the way that birth fathers are regarded.

In the introduction to this chapter references were cited in respect of negative attitudes towards birth fathers in the nineteen sixties. In this study of the literature on post-adoption matters I have identified more present-day examples of a less than objective attitude to birth fathers. An example of what is suggested as a lack of balance can be found in Tugendhat (1992).

In a chapter entitled 'The Birth Father', Tugendhat quotes a leading UK post-adoption counsellor. The counsellor asks whether 'adoptees see him as of less importance?' and 'Is he (the birth father) less responsible?' (25). The answers to these questions are not pursued. Tugendhat then goes on to remark that it would be 'a

sensible presumption that birth fathers' present families would know nothing of the adoption and 'so it was better to let sleeping dogs lie.' (25). However, there is yet no empirical evidence for this and whilst there is evidence that the birth mother may be first to be sought out, this does not represent a fixed hierarchy of importance on the part of the adopted person (March 1995, Pacheo and Eme, 1993). Tugendhat then comments: 'Men can get away with denying pregnancy and often do' (ibid.).

A second public figure in post-adoption circles is then quoted:

Lifton describes her birth father as the type who used to be called a bounder or a cad: 'I see my macho father and his type in the chimpanzee male, who, having had his sport, is off to other parts of the forest.'

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There then follows an account of a US serviceman who had fathered a number of children throughout Europe. Tugendhat (26) remarks:

This is a perfect example of Lifton's 'macho' father who had misspent his youth indiscriminately spreading his seed around.

Reports from three adopted people's meetings with their birth fathers follow. It is recounted that the birth fathers had received the overture to a contact meeting with resignation 'as if they were waiting for their numbers to come up.'(26).

Tugendhat's chapter on 'The Birth Father' therefore contains sleeping dogs, 'getting away with it', chimpanzees and promiscuous males that feel consternation that their past will catch up with them. The positive account of a birth father's search and contact with his daughter at the end of the chapter does not redress what, it is suggested, is an overall imbalance in the chapter. Such an absence of balance is disappointing given the lack of birth father research to confirm or challenge such forthright opinions.



Possible stereotyping of birth fathers is not confined to the practitioners quoted in Tugendhat above. Brodzinsky's otherwise useful review of the literature on birth mothers (1990) carries an afternote that, as in those quoted above, conveys an air of unnecessary condemnation:

Historically, the biological father of an adopted child, the "birth father", has played little role in the decision-making surrounding the child's birth and subsequent placement in an adoptive home. However, since the 1972 Supreme Court decision in *Stanley v. Illinois*, where a birthfather's legal claim to a child was recognised as protected by the Constitution, considerable interest has been generated in the feelings and legal rights of these individuals....Despite the current move toward increased sensitivity to the rights and interests of the biological fathers of adopted children, it is this author's view that interested, committed birthfathers remain in the minority, with most individuals who father a child outside the protection of marriage, continuing in the centuries-old tradition of abdication of responsibility.

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The use of quotes around the word birth father when the same is not applied to birth mother in the body of the text, the phrase 'these individuals', the conflation of birth fathers in adoption with men who irresponsibly father children and the explicit value position on marriage, all convey an general air of disapproval. The one non-contentious opinion is that interested, committed birth fathers appear to be in the minority.

Whether the identification of possible bias in the remarks in Tugendhat (1992) and those of Brodzinsky (1990) betrays an over-sensitivity on my part (after all many men do 'abdicate responsibility'), or provides additional primary evidence of a set of negative attitudes toward birth fathers, is perhaps a matter for a more systematic critique of the adoption literature. However it may be suggested that previous negative attitudes towards birth fathers may not have entirely disappeared from contemporary adoption literature.

The genesis and persistence of such attitudes in adoption theory and practice may have roots in theories of the primary importance of maternal bonding and attachment that have heavily influenced thinking and decision-making in social work in the fifties and sixties. Arguably, this influence reached well into the nineteen seventies and eighties. I return to this matter in the next chapter when I look at the how the terms 'birth mother' and 'birth parent' have become synonymous and the question of the concentration on the birth mother in adoption.

An interesting question is posed by the above discussion. This is 'how many birth fathers might we be referring to?' Whilst we know how many children have been adopted and therefore may deduce that each one had a birth father and a birth mother there is a general lack of 'visibility' concerning birth parents as a whole (Mullender and Kern, 1997: 148). The numbers of birth parents that use services such as post-adoption counselling and mental health services contain very few birth fathers (Howe, 1990; Hughes and Logan, 1993). In the light of this difficulty in establishing a sense of the actual number of birth fathers who might feel they have experienced adoption in a way similar to that of birth mothers, I sought information from three sources. These were the adoption contact registers of England and Wales and Scotland

### **Birth Fathers in the Statistics: The UK Adoption Contact Registers**

The first Adoption Contact Register (ACR) was established by NORCAP a voluntary organisation in 1982. Since then ACRs have been established in Scotland (1984) and by The Office of National Statistics (1991). The ACRs function as a means to link up adopted people and their birth relatives. Individuals place their names and contact details on these registers and in the event of someone connected with them either already having registered or registering sometime in the future, then those concerned may be put in touch with each other. Mullender and Kern (1997) have explored various aspects of the adoption contact registers and one of their findings is that the registers are under-publicised (124). Consequently the overall numbers of people on the various registers are low relative to the theoretical number of those who might use



the service. Notwithstanding this reservation, data relating to the numbers registered gives some indication of the relative proportions of birth mothers and birth fathers on each of the ACRs. Also, it is possible to ascertain the overall number of birth fathers who have 'come out' i.e. have made themselves visible.

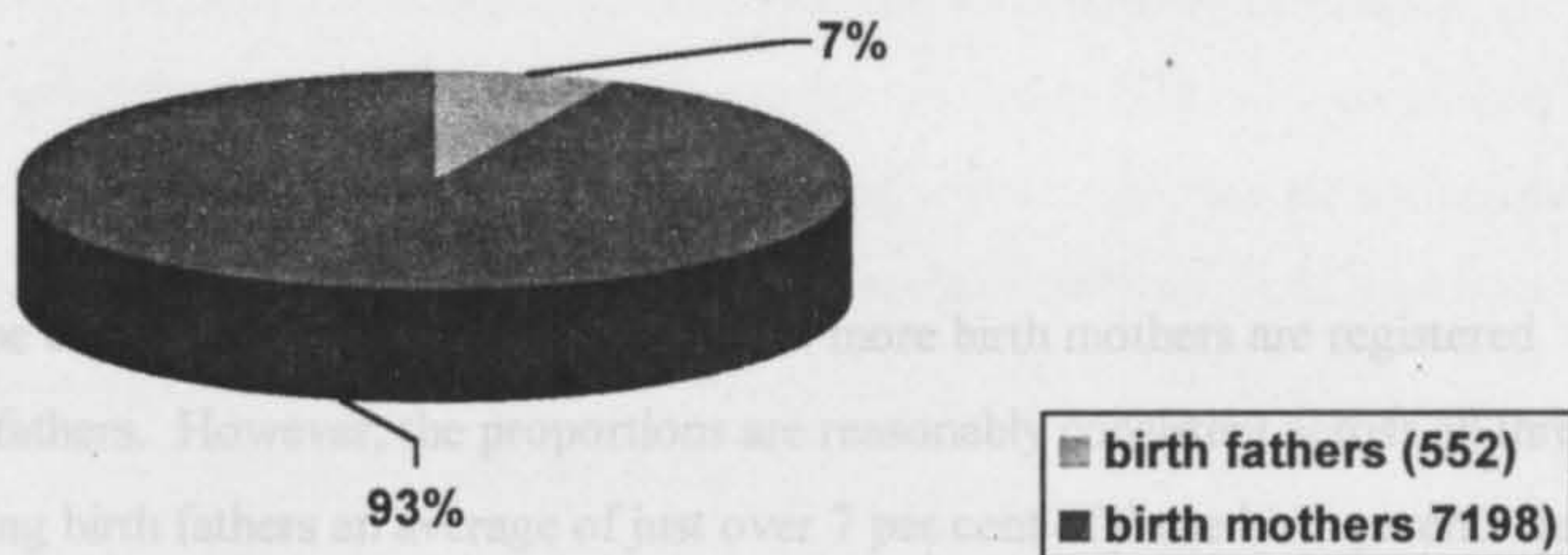
The three charts that follow give some indication of this.

**Figures 2-4. Three Charts indicating take-up of Adoption Contact Registers and proportions of birth mothers and birth fathers registered (personal communications, 1997)**

Figure Four. The Adoption Contact Register for Scotland (to end of 1997)

Figure 2

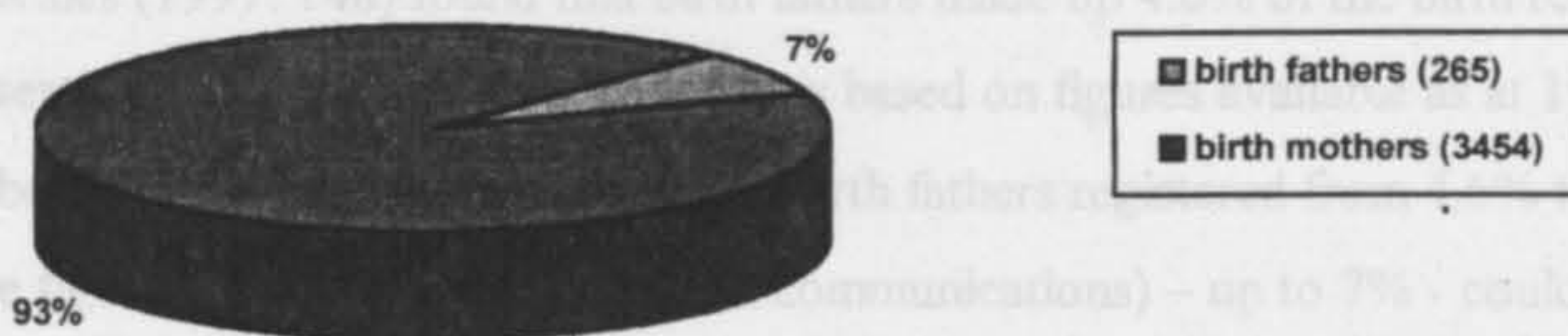
**NORCAP Contact Register for England and Wales (to September 1997)**



N= 7750

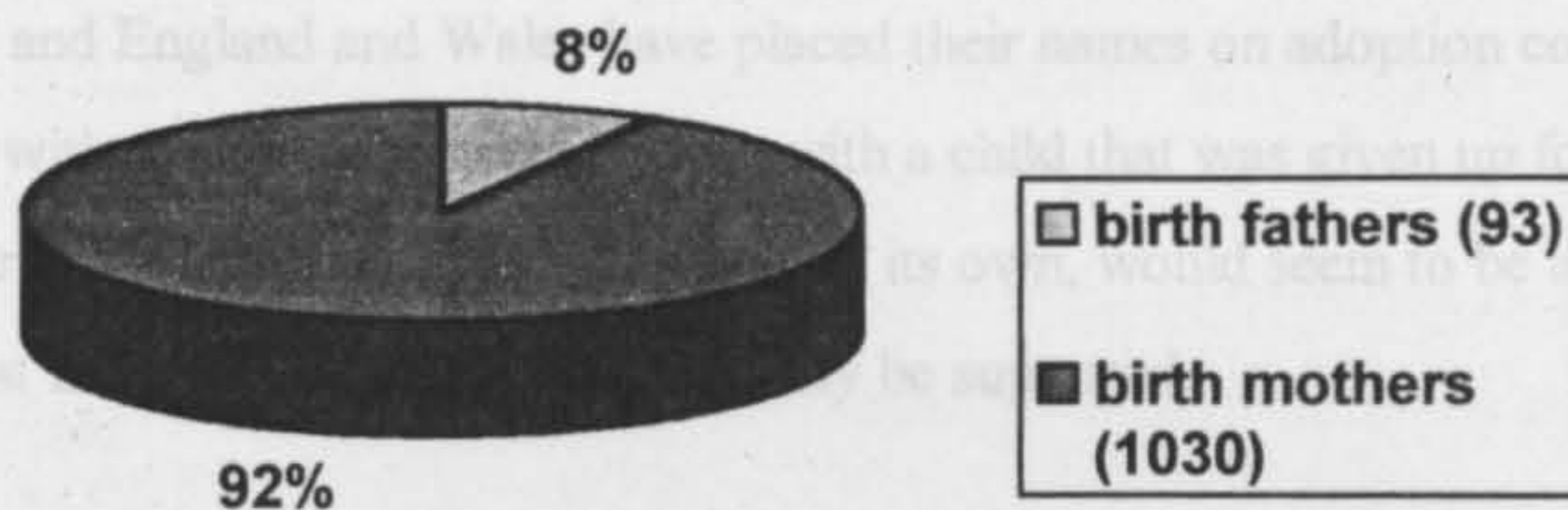


**Figure Three. Part II of the Adoption Contact Register (Office of National Statistics: England and Wales - to August 1997)**



N = 3719

**Figure Four. The Adoption Contact Register for Scotland (to end of 1997)**



N = 1123

As might be expected the above charts show that more birth mothers are registered than birth fathers. However, the proportions are reasonably consistent across all three ACRs giving birth fathers an average of just over 7 per cent of those birth parents that have registered. As an additional means of establishing possible proportions of birth fathers and birth mothers, I looked at figures for 'reunions' given by NORCAP. These figures are carried on a quarterly basis and represent 'reunions' facilitated by NORCAP services. There were sixty-one such meetings listed in NORCAP's Summer 1999 edition of NORCAP NEWS. Of these, four involved birth fathers i.e. 6.4%. Therefore it appears that from these available sources, as a proportion of birth parents



who have registered an interest in contact, birth fathers make up between six and seven per cent.

Mullender and Kern's study of Part II of the Adoption Contact Register for England and Wales (1997: 148) found that birth fathers made up 4.6% of the birth relatives registered. Mullender and Kern's study is based on figures available as at 1995. It may be that the rise in the percentage of birth fathers registered from 4.6% to the above figures provided to me (personal communications) – up to 7% - could be attributed to publicity concerning contacts between birth parents and their children in 1996 and 1997. This included the meeting of MP Clare Short and her son in October 1996.

An exploration of the reasons for the small percentage of birth fathers is beyond the focus of study. However it is worthwhile to note that in total 910 birth fathers in Scotland and England and Wales have placed their names on adoption contact registers with a view to possible contact with a child that was given up for adoption. This figure of nearly one thousand, taken on its own, would seem to be indicative of an interest from more birth fathers than may be supposed.

This review of the literature relating to fatherhood and birth fathers has raised a number of important issues. The first is the suggestion that in relation to expectant parenthood for men, an absence of the processes and experiences that are undergone by women (conception, pregnancy, birth) may not automatically preclude men from feeling connected their unborn children.

This theoretical perspective has not been part of the research discussions and therefore the literature on birth fathers has yet to provide a satisfactory answer to the questions 'how?' and 'why?' when confronted with the apparent depth of grief and loss expressed by birth fathers.

The research on birth fathers has been limited to 'reportage' concerning present emotions and feelings. Without a theoretical framework to the studies, birth fathers who report an enduring sense of loss and feelings of responsibility towards the child may appear unusual or aberrant - and birth mothers may be fixed in a biological essentialist position that suggests that all women who relinquish a child for adoption must feel grief. Thus in respect of the birth parent experience one writer (Reidel, 1995: 264) has counterposed two fixed gender positions:

All memories are held in the body. Women cannot forget their children because their body remembers gestation and birth. Men (in adoption) are often left with images of what could have been rather than the physical connection of birth.

I suggest that there is a common construct of two poles described here. These are on the one hand women who may derive an automatic connection via the processes of pregnancy and birth, and on the other hand, men who do not undergo these processes and therefore can only form an attachment in social activity with their children. This construct is simplistic as a perspective in respect of the experiences of mothers and fathers in general and birth parents in particular. In the next Section I will present evidence of stronger and more complex influences on the respondents than simply memory. I suggest that these influences include attitudes, feelings and beliefs in respect of their reports of feelings of loss and distress and attachment to the child. These influences constitute more than 'images of what could have been'.

The shortcomings of the existing research suggest the need for a theoretical grounding of the experiences of birth fathers (in all the phases of pre- and during birth, after the relinquishment of the child and in contact with the adult child). Such grounding would site the experiences of birth fathers within a wider framework of men's identity as fathers and their perceptions of their fatherhood. Such insight developed from theorising the experiences of men in adoption may not only contribute to a better understanding of the overall birth parent experience, it may also contribute to the general research base on men's consciousness of fatherhood.



The second issue raised by this discussion of the literature is not only the research lacunae that are present, but also the question of a professional and academic ambivalence towards birth fathers that appears to exist. Such ambivalence is expressed, it is suggested, in the lack of response to calls for more understanding of the birth father experience, findings of negative attitudes among adoption agency and personnel and what appears to be some adverse comments regarding birth fathers in the literature. I will return to this discussion in my conclusion when I make some suggestions as to the reasons for such attitudes.

To conclude this discussion of the birth father literature and research it seems that some birth fathers may feel a connection to their child without ever having parented it (and sometimes not having seen the child either). What is the nature of this feeling? Is it an 'affectional bond'? Is it an expression of filial deprivation? Can the experiences of the birth fathers that have been interviewed provide more substance to existing reports of birth father experiences that involve affective dimensions such as a sense of loss and attachment to their children that have been adopted?

The third issue that is raised is the question of any similarities and differences between birth fathers and birth mothers. What is the gender element in the birth parent adoption experience? This literature review now concludes with a discussion of the research into birth mothers' experiences. It goes some way to sharpening all three of the issues raised in this chapter. These are namely, how can it be that birth fathers report feelings similar to birth mothers? Secondly, does a negative bias in respect of birth fathers exist? And finally, what are the similarities and differences in the experiences of birth fathers and birth mothers?

## **CHAPTER FIVE**

### **BIRTH MOTHERS: THE EXISTING RESEARCH**

Since its beginnings, approximately twenty years ago, most research in relation to the birth parent experience, has concerned itself with birth mothers. In the UK and the USA, Raynor (1971) and Baran, Pannor and Sorosky (1974) respectively, were the forerunners in a series of surveys that, in the main, focused on the post-relinquishment experiences of women who had given up babies for adoption (Bouchier, Lambert and Triseliotis, 1991; Burnell and Norfleet, 1979; Coleman and Jenkins, 1998; Condon, 1986; Deykin, Campbell and Patti, 1984; Dominick, 1988; Field, 1991; Hughes and Logan, 1993; Logan, 1996a; Mander, 1995; Millen and Roll, 1985; Pannor, Baran and Sorosky, 1978; Powell and Warren, 1997; Rynearson, 1982; Sorosky, Baran, and Pannor, 1978; Wells, 1993a; Wells, 1994; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

The major emphasis of most of these studies has been to explore birth mothers' accounts of grief in later life.

#### **The Key Findings from Existing Birth Mother Research**

In her extensive review of the literature on birth mothers, Brodzinsky (1990) identifies the work of Winkler and van Keppel (1984) in Australia as 'the first systematic large scale research' and describes it as the most complete so far.

Winkler and van Keppel surveyed 213 birth mothers that had relinquished a first child and found that the relinquished child 'has a continuing presence for the mother'. For 58.8% of those surveyed, relinquishment was 'the most stressful thing that they had experienced'. A vast sense of loss was reported accompanied by illustrative comments such as 'part of me is dead'. A similarly large-scale survey published in the same year in the USA (Deykin et al, 1984) reported similar findings. 334 birth



parents were surveyed - of whom 13 were men. For these North American respondents, activity in search of the adopted child represented 'an attempt to resolve a significant loss'. The researchers also observed that 'grief over the surrendered child appears to remain undimmed with time' (280).

Both pieces of research also indicated that the birth mothers felt a continuing sense of obligation towards the child that they had given up. The women surveyed by Winkler and van Keppel expressed anxiety over a lack of information about the development and progress of 'their child'. Changes in experiences of sense of loss were related to this lack or presence of such information. Additionally, variations in a sense of loss were related to increasing hopes that the birth mother would be reunited with their child. Deykin et al found that a desire to search was almost universal. Searching had become a consuming activity for some: 'I have become obsessed with finding her'. (Brodzinsky, 1990) suggests that the experience for many birth mothers is one of nearly intolerable loss.

In Scotland, Bouchier et al (1991) interviewed 46 birth mothers using a slightly modified version of the questionnaire employed by Winkler and van Keppel in 1984. The findings confirmed that, among the forty-one women who were seeking contact with a relinquished child, the adoption was felt as a major loss. 56% described the adoption as 'the most stressful life event'. Bouchier et al (1991: 108) also found that the women who were committed to contact (i.e. they had registered with the Adoption Contact Register service) 'retained a very clear understanding of their sons and daughters as people with whom they still felt the deepest bond.'

Subsequent research among 444 mothers - the largest respondent group to date - who had sought information concerning a relinquished child from the New Zealand Department of Social Welfare, confirmed the above findings in relation to birth mothers' enduring concern for the life and well-being of the child (Field, 1991). Hughes and Logan (1993) also underline this presence of continuing sense of responsibility and, additionally, found explicit feelings of guilt: responsibility for the

adoption was internalised; some birth mothers described themselves as 'rotten to the core' and 'needing to be punished and to atone'. As in the case of the previous research findings, Hughes and Logan identify 'the continuation of a parental bond throughout life' for these women in respect of the relinquished child.

For many women therefore, it appears from the research that the adoption experience brings forth and maintains a powerful sense of unrequited motherhood. Millen and Roll (1985: 411) remark that 'the maternal experience does not end with the signing of the surrender papers'. Ten years later, Spiers and Patterson (1994) make a similar estimation of the experiences of many birth mothers by describing adoption as 'a life-long process'.

Given the depth and power of the emotions identified in the birth mother experience it is not surprising that the psychological health of many of these women was found to have been affected. Findings, which are commonly agreed in the research, discuss a cluster of emotions and experiences relating to the mental health of the birth mothers. These include a relationship between relinquishment of a child for adoption and subsequent impairment in psychological or mental health. Bouchier et al report expressions of 'a deep sense of bleakness and despair'. In one study, 83% of the women who were interviewed described depression as a significant part of their lives (Hughes and Logan, 1993). See also Burnell and Norfleet, 1979; Condon, 1986; Field, 1991; Rynearson, 1982; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). Field (1991: 145) remarks:

Thus, there was strong support from the survey for previous findings that birth mothers' long term psychological adjustment is facilitated by knowledge about the well-being of the child they relinquished.

In addition to agreement regarding the detrimental effects of adoption on the mental health of many birth mothers, a number of supplementary findings have been advanced. Deykin et al (1984) found that, for 71% of those who had married subsequent to the adoption, the earlier birth experience had coloured their marital



interaction. Here it appears that Deykin et al are addressing the birth mother experience; this seems an understandable elision given that fewer than 5% of the parents that they surveyed were men. I discuss the question of this elision below.

Deykin et al also found a 170% increase in secondary infertility - although they note that the item regarding this does not differentiate between infertility of the birth mother and infertility of a couple i.e. reported infertility after adoption could have included a partner's infertility. For those who had had children after the adoption, 80% stated that the earlier surrender had exerted a powerful impact on subsequent parenting. See also Bouchier et al (1991).

Many of the birth mothers report other life events after relinquishment as being of a negative nature e.g. references are made to poor relations with partners or difficulty in making and sustaining personal relationships, alcoholism (Bouchier et al, 1991; Hughes and Logan, 1993).

Field (1991) is among the few who have studied birth mothers' experience of contact with the child (now adult) they gave up for adoption. In his study of 444 mothers seeking information on a relinquished child, a sub group of 238 women had had contact with the child. Twenty-one members of this sub group were interviewed. Although a stated aim was to examine the experiences of women who had had contact, Field's findings only confirm (albeit in the largest sample yet) what is known in relation to the general post-adoption experiences of birth mothers, namely that birth mothers may be subject to considerable later-life distress as a consequence of the enduring effects of the adoption. Field presents some empirical data consisting of reports on reasons for satisfaction and dissatisfaction with renewed contact. In the respect of the latter findings, 61% - 'a solid majority' - of birth mothers who applied for information and eventually made contact with relinquished children were very satisfied overall with that contact (151). Of those who report dissatisfaction with renewed contact with a child, the highest number of these women (25.2%) reported the main source of dissatisfaction with re-contact as 'difficulties in forming

satisfyingly close relationships' (ibid.). Field draws attention to the strains and uncertainties of renewed contact and concludes that: 'in almost all cases, including those who did not like what they found, the reunion was seen from a psychological point of view as a positive growth experience.' (152). No deeper analysis relating to the relationships involved and stimulated by renewed contact experience is presented.

### **Some Additional Themes in the Research: Reasons for Pregnancy and Relinquishment, Motivation to Search**

Firstly, Deykin et al (1984: 279) observe that the search activity of those in their sample may not be related to actual retrieval of the surrendered child, rather, 'it is possible that search activity may be a means of achieving restitution not of the surrendered child but of the self.'

The detrimental effect of the adoption and relinquishment on self-image and self-esteem is regularly reported (Bouchier et al, 1991). Other researchers point to contact with the child as repairing, in part, the psychological damage caused by the experience of relinquishment (Field, 1991; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). More explicitly, one of the reasons for searching and contact is expressed as that of the need to be understood, to explain themselves, to reduce the guilt (Bouchier et al, 1991; Hughes and Logan, 1993).

In this sense, the motivation to search consists of various components. Two key ones may be an altruistic sense of commitment to the well being of the child: 'the right to know if she needs me in any way' (Winkler and van Keppel, 1984) and anxiety as to the outcome of the adoption and the need to psychologically repair oneself. There may be no dichotomy here. Both may be two sides of the same coin of consequences of the experience of unrequited motherhood. However, this suggestion of a less child-focused perspective with which to assess the birth mothers' accounts of their post-adoption experience has, by and large, not been pursued in later studies.



The extent to which it is useful to assess birth mothers' accounts in such a manner may become clear later when the experiences of birth mothers are compared and contrasted with those of birth fathers in this study. For example, in a study of birth fathers four years after their work on birth mothers, Deykin et al (1988) suggest a difference of motivation between birth mothers and birth fathers in their activities. They suggest that whilst birth mothers need to know and be reassured that their child is well, birth fathers appear to express a (perhaps more) self-centred emotion of seeking recovery of the 'stolen' child. However this aspect of birth fathers' feelings may be a gendered expression of the same need to regain self-esteem that birth mothers report. Deykin et al's study does not develop the suggestion. I will discuss various motivations - and any gender differences that there may be in this - for birth parent search activity in my conclusion.

Secondly, The extent to which came first - the detrimental effects of the adoption experience or emotional dysfunction - is also briefly alluded to in the literature. In commenting upon a larger than expected incidence of mental health problems in their sample, Hughes and Logan (1993: 39) observe that 'relinquishment may have contributed to but not caused the more deep-rooted difficulties with which an individual was contending'. This observation poses a different vista from that of the majority of the existing research on birth mothers' experiences. It can be inferred that the post-adoption experiences reported by some of the birth mothers in the research owe less to the effects of the adoption and more to factors which preceded it, e.g. instability of mental health, poor relations with parents. These factors may have given rise to the unplanned pregnancy and the decision to relinquish the child for adoption. In other words the condition crystallised in the constellation of feelings expressed by some birth mothers may have contributed to the adoption decision, and not the other way around. Not enough is known about birth mother experiences, particularly those that pre-date the birth and adoption of their child, to be any more definite. In the case of this study there are a number of respondents who may have had detrimental experiences of being parented. This possibility of a link between this and being a birth parent is also discussed later.

## **Theorising the Experiences of Birth Mothers**

In so far as these birth mother experiences are theorised, it is the effects of the relinquishment that have been studied and, to date, it appears that the chief theoretical framework utilised has been a psychological one. In particular the psychology of grieving and bereavement has been to the fore in the birth mother research (Millen and Roll, 1985; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984)

Millen and Roll use the work of Parkes on bereavement (1972) to present an understanding of the nature of the particular feelings and experiences of birth mothers. Their 1985 study was based upon observations made during interviews with 22 mothers who had surrendered a child for adoption and who had been in psychotherapy for three months to two years. Millen and Roll suggest that the experiences of these birth mothers could be understood with reference to the seven key features of grief reaction advanced by Parkes. These are 1) the process of realization; 2) an alarm reaction; 3) an urge to search for and to find the lost person in form; 4) anger and guilt; 5) feelings of internal loss of self and mutilation; 6) identification phenomena and 7) pathological variants of grief (ibid. 413). Millen and Roll found that the experiences of the women in their study were closely similar to these features. A key finding was that for the birth mothers in their sample, a normal working through or resolution of these features of bereavement had been denied (see also Brinich, 1990). Consequently, Millen and Roll (1985: 418) suggest that for their sample:

The experience of a mother relinquishing her child is similar to pathological mourning, including feelings of intense loss, enduring panic, and unresolved anger; episodes of searching for the lost child in waking life or dreams; and a sense of incompleteness.

In existing critiques of birth parent research it seems that the limitations of this starting point – the later-life effects of having had a child adopted - have not been identified. The emphasis in the critiques appears to consist of two areas -



methodological problems of sampling e.g. respondents' self-selection and a tendency for the literature to be atheoretical.

## **CRITIQUES OF RESEARCH ON BIRTH MOTHERS**

### **The Methodology**

In her literature review of the research on birth mothers, Brodzinsky (1990: 303-304) makes an important caveat regarding the research on psychological adjustment when she points out that it is 'generally flawed with methodological problems'. She draws attention to sampling bias and 'the questionable validity and reliability of measures and the absence of a theoretical context for the research'.

The non-generalisability of many of the birth mother research findings is a common observation in the research. Researchers have acknowledged that the birth mothers in the samples are not representative of the general birth mother population. This is either by way of these mothers' involvement in lobby organisations, their membership of adoption support groups or self-selection (Deykin et al, 1984; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). Or their having been drawn from a specific population such as users of a mental health or a post-adoption service (Field, 1991; Millen and Roll, 1985). Where sample bias is not explicitly acknowledged, it is obviously present e.g. the birth mothers involved in the sample had been contacted by means of their 'visibility' as users of a post-adoption service, members of a support group (Bouchier et al, 1991; Condon, 1986; Hughes and Logan, 1993; Rynearson, 1982 or self-selection (Warren and Powell, 1997; Wells, 1993a). In his review of the discussion on openness in adoption discussion, Triseliotis (1991: 25) remarks that problems of access and sampling have made studies biased 'overwhelmingly towards birth mothers that have been actively seeking information or to establish contact'.

The issue of self-selection remains an issue for research on birth fathers. Although there is a growing sense of birth mothers speaking out, this is very recent. The 'visibility' of birth fathers is much less so. Based on figures provided by the three

UK-wide adoption contact registers, between six and seven per cent of birth fathers are registered. This compares with over ninety per cent of the other registrations being those of birth mothers - I discuss these figures and the adoption contact registers in a subsequent chapter. The point here is that birth fathers are even less 'visible' than birth mothers. My national appeals for potential respondents produced only thirty-five men - of whom thirty fitted the study criteria.

### **Theoretical limitations of existing research**

The second theme in critiques of research suggests that studies of birth mothers have explored mainly only the later-life effects of having a child adopted.

There are two major points to this discussion. The first can be stated succinctly and briefly. With the exception of work on the value of bereavement theory as a framework for clinical practice with birth mothers that experience debilitating levels of grief, a general atheoretical content permeates the literature on birth mothers.

Brodzinsky (1990: 303) questions the use of the term 'sense of loss' by researchers:

The concept of a sense of loss is somewhat questionable as a construct especially when not theoretically grounded or operationally defined.

In my search of the literature before and since Brodzinsky's comment, it has proved difficult to find any discussion of the idea of a sense of loss. This suggests the need for more research that would explore the emotional and psychological dimensions of birth mother experiences e.g. what exactly is it that is felt to have been lost?

The second issue arising from a theoretical consideration of the birth mother research is what can be learned from the existing research approaches that would help in conceptualising the experiences of birth fathers?

The work of Millen and Roll (1985) on bereavement and the birth mother experience may provide one framework with which to approach the task of exploring the



experiences of birth fathers. However, whilst Millen and Roll's framework may help us evaluate the feelings of birth fathers and compare these with those of birth mothers, this approach provides an analytical tool only in respect of the effects of relinquishment. In other words, the majority of birth mother research provides little insight as regards the experiences of birth mothers throughout the adoption process because, it is suggested, it narrowly focuses upon exploring in later-life experiences, explanations for their distress.

In other words it seems that in most of the birth mother research, women's experiences have been discussed within a specific theoretical framework. This is one that has sought to explore and explain an **outcome** - the present emotional and psychological conditions of women involved in giving up a baby for adoption many years previously.

To widen an understanding of the process of being involved in relinquishment of a child for adoption and the subsequent post-adoption experience, it seems that the discussion could usefully shift to the wider subject of how motherhood may be constructed. This is because the birth mother research has consistently found that birth mothers' feelings of distress and loss is closely connected to maternal feelings for the child (Bouchier et al, 1991; Brodzinsky, 1990; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

The construction of motherhood has been much written about (e.g. Chodorow, 1978) but it appears that this body of literature on motherhood has not greatly informed the research on birth mothers. The birth mother research has taken birth motherhood as a given by virtue of two key and connected factors. These are firstly, the physiological fact of having successfully carried a baby to term and secondly - because strong emotions are generated by such a process but interrupted by adoption - the existence of feelings of loss generated by the severed bond with that child (Verrier, 1991).

It will only be possible to sketch out some questions here but it seems that if we are to seek meaning in the experiences of birth fathers it is necessary to have some notion of

how people may come to feel like parents. Much more has been written about women than men in this matter.

The process of becoming a mother has been problematised and de-constructed (Badinter, 1981; Cheetham, 1977; Chodorow, 1978; Forna, 1998; Oakley, 1979; Rapoport and Rapoport, 1971; Rich, 1977). It has been suggested that not all women who become pregnant and give birth automatically or immediately become mothers. Maternal instinct is not necessarily a given in respect of a pregnant woman. Forna (1998: 74-82) questions 'pre-existing assumptions' regarding women's inherent suitability for motherhood. Women who become pregnant have been described as 'possible mothers' with options and paths to motherhood (Marck, Field and Bergum, 1994: 273). Existing birth mother research does not seem to include this perspective. The research seems to start from a position that takes motherhood as a given.

A study of a group of women who had experienced or were experiencing unplanned pregnancies may provide this additional prism through which to theorise experiences of birth mothers. Marck (1994: 83) explores the question of the elements that contribute to the emotional process in which motherhood is constituted: 'what does it mean to imagine oneself as a mother?'

The study sample is small (four women, including a woman contemplating adoption for her child). However the findings may assist us in a better grasp of the question of the consciousness of women-as-mothers and therefore provide some tools to deepen an exploration of the experiences of birth fathers.

The study by Marck (1994: 123) suggests a notion of 'being there' for the child-to-be and suggests that this:

connotes a wider notion of commitment to a child: the covenant to respond, to be with, to make always, ever after, a place for a child in one's life.



By relating the development of motherhood to the formation of commitment to the child, this understanding goes some way towards a theoretical explanation of the emotional depth of the experiences of birth mothers i.e. if there is no essential difference between the grief experienced by a birth mother for her lost baby and conventional grief experienced by any other person (Powell and Warren, 1997), a reason for such intensity of grief could be a result of the pain of the unfulfilled 'covenant'. A covenant that has been made as a result of 'the sharing of self with other, a relationship with a self that is not oneself.' (Bergum, 1989: 55 quoted in Marck and Field, 1994). Such a covenant or commitment is formed in the experience of pregnancy and birth and becoming a mother – and it is broken in the experience of birth mothers.

But the problem that confronts this study is that such an understanding would then imply that any claim to birth father status or identification of such a concept as a birth father attachment to his child rests on theoretically thin ground. That is to say, after participation in the act of conception - because he does not become pregnant – it would seem that compared to women, a man has no appreciable relationship or may feel little or no connection with his child until it is born. The substantial fatherhood connection commences when he can become an active father by virtue of the fact that he can do something. This study will present findings that question any such-like general assumptions concerning men's thought and felt connection with their children. What grounding for this discussion has been arrived at in this review of the relevant literature?

The first chapter in this section looked at the literature on men's sense of fatherhood. Although there has been little that directly dealt with men's sense and perceptions of fatherhood, the material that exists suggests the possibility of an inner-world of men in which their feelings and thoughts in respect of an unborn child have deep roots and origins. The discussion of the literature on birth fathers took this concept a stage further and found evidence of the persistence of feelings and thoughts concerning the adopted child after birth and the adoption and throughout the life of the men

involved. The final chapter that reviewed the literature on birth mothers indicated agreement on the existence of loss and of a felt sense of a connection with the child. In sum therefore, we have information concerning the birth mother experience that provides evidence of an enduring feelings of attachment to the child and motherhood. We also have voices from the small amount of birth father research and literature that exists that point to the possibility of birth father experiences that have some similarities with those of birth mothers e.g. that feelings of loss and fatherhood might continue throughout life. Finally, we also have indications that a sense of fatherhood might exist without 'hands-on' care of a child. Here then there seems to be similarities in the experiences of birth mothers and birth fathers and also a framework with which to explore birth fathers' attachment to their children.

In noting an early differentiation between fathers and mothers based upon the assumption that fathering follows the birth, Brinich (1990) suggests that this may be a 'stereotypical view of the development of fatherhood'. Brinich goes on to call for a re-examination of this view and concludes that research with men who have fathered children who were then relinquished for adoption 'would yield much more than the vacuum that previous authors have suggested exists' (59). This review of the literature has pointed to grounds for considering that in theory there may indeed be more than a vacuum. Can the reports of the respondents in this study provide an empirical confirmation?

#### **Note regarding the elision of the terms birth parent and birth mother in the literature**

March (1995: 34) points out what may be seen as the obvious when she talks of 'the saliency of the birth mother's position in the adoption process'. However any discussion of the relative experiences of birth mothers and birth fathers perhaps needs to bear in mind that whilst acknowledging the fact of the birth mother's central part there may be some drawbacks to the focus having always been on the birth mother (Harper, 1993).



In the preceding chapter I discussed the existence of negative attitudes in respect of birth fathers. Are these attitudes simply the result of the birth mother's central part in the adoption process? On the other hand might there be something imbedded within adoption discourses that works to minimise the possible role of birth fathers? I suggest that the literature on birth mothers provides some evidence of this possibility.

My reading of the literature on birth mothers has identified an elision between the terms 'birth mothers' and 'birth parents'. Two large-scale surveys that refer to parents or birth parents are in effect reporting on, primarily, the experiences of women. This is because of the small number of birth fathers involved - 13 out of 334 in Deykin et al (1984) and 5 out of 101 in Hughes and Logan (1993). Although the failure to achieve a statistically relevant response from men is not explicitly given as a reason, Deykin et al subsequently went on to be involved in a similar study on birth fathers (Deykin et al, 1988). In their work, Hughes and Logan draw upon, except for one man, quotes solely from women. Within discussions, e.g. 'Relationships', Hughes and Logan switch between use of the two phrases – birth parents and birth mothers (1993: 24-25).

Other writers convey this elision. Brodzinsky (1990: 314-315) subtitles her literature review 'The Birth Mother Experience' and the content is solely concerned with birth mothers, yet the conclusion speaks for both birth fathers and birth mothers:

The newly found voice of the silent member of the adoption triangle will not rest until some reevaluation of adoption policy is undertaken. Having offered false hopes and promises in the past, we must now take up the challenge of providing more realistic and more effective modes of intervening with birth parents.

Still other researchers (Baran and Pannor, 1990: 329) alternate the terms in the space of two sentences:

Birth parents cannot receive anonymity. Giving birth to that child and being that child's mother is a fact of life that cannot be wiped out.

and

The needs of birthparents have been overlooked and need to be redressed. One way would be to provide them with identifying information about their lost children that would offer the 'peace of mind' that so many birthmothers would welcome.

Wells, 1993a: 26

Further evidence of an elision of the terms 'birth mother' and 'birth parent' exists in official documents (Scottish Office, 1993), in the writings of adoption practitioners (Post-Adoption Social Workers Group, 1987; Sawbridge, 1991) and academics other than those to whom I have already referred (Silverman et al, 1988).

An effect of this elision is to suggest an erroneous impression i.e. that the vast majority of existing research incorporates the birth parent experiences of women and men. A consequence of this is that findings, whilst portrayed as concerning birth parents, are not and apply only to the birth mother experience. As yet we do not have knowledge enough of the birth father perspective to suggest that those of birth mothers and birth fathers are one and the same.

Although not an elision there is a second feature in the writing that also serves to suggest an exclusive focus on birth mothers. This is a tendency to name the primary parties involved in adoption without reference to the birth father: 'There are three main parties in the adoption situation, mother, child and adopters' (Triseliotis, 1970: 17). Twenty years after, Brodzinsky (1990: 315) in the quote above expresses a similar exclusive tendency in the writing when she refers to the birth mother as 'the silent member of the adoption triangle'.

It is not suggested that elision and an exclusive focus on the birth mother are conscious practices designed to marginalise the role of the birth father. Such features of the writing may be rooted in understandable developments. These are firstly, the process by which knowledge of the birth parents' experience has emerged. Women have made up a vast proportion of birth parents using post-adoption services (Howe,



1990; Hughes and Logan, 1993) with birth fathers making up a very small proportion of the numbers of birth parents that are thus 'visible' (see the discussion of adoption contact registers in the previous chapter). Secondly, the fact as indicated by the adoption contact register figures, that the only empirical sets of UK-wide evidence that reflect the actual numbers of birth fathers and birth mothers (and their relative proportion) appears to signal that many more women would seem to be affected by the adoption experience than men.

Alternatively, it may be suggested that when negative attitudes towards birth fathers are taken together with features that work to cast the birth mother as a singular party in the adoption process (see my introductory remarks to these chapters on birth mothers and birth fathers), then there are grounds for exploration of bias in adoption discourses. Any such bias would effect the way that both birth fathers and birth mothers are viewed. This is a matter for a differently focused study of birth parents than the present, however I will return to this matter in my conclusion.

## **SECTION THREE : EXPERIENCES OF BEING A BIRTH FATHER**

### **CHAPTER SIX**

#### **THE LIFE LONG CONSEQUENCES AND RESONANCES OF BEING A BIRTH FATHER - THE RESPONDENTS**

As noted in the methodology discussion, the study group was self-selected. In all thirty men constituted the final group of birth fathers whose experiences met the criteria for interview.

From the North of Scotland to the South East of England, housing estate to stockbroker belt and unemployed drivers to businessmen and professionals, the descriptions of experiences of the respondents offer a window onto feelings, behaviors and lives that have in one way or another been significantly affected by the acts of fathering a child and having had a child adopted. The similarities and differences in the accounts of their lives prior, during and subsequent to the adoption suggest the existence of a broad band of shared experiences and emotions.

This broad band of feelings and events suggests a phenomenon of a 'birth father's life course'. The content of the following narratives suggests the appropriateness of the label 'birth father' in that these accounts have produced one connecting thread. This thread consists of the fact that despite not having been responsible for day-to-day care of their child, and in some cases never having seen her/him, a large majority describe similar experiences and express a feeling of themselves as fathers. As I will show, the existence and influence of this feeling has fringed large areas of the subsequent social, emotional and psychological lives of the respondents.

The accounts in this study span significant past and present events that cover key common milestones in these birth father life courses. Hence it has been convenient to organise and analyse the information using Temporal Clusters - The Pregnancy and Birth, The Adoption, Subsequent Life Events, Seeking and Establishing Contact.



Each of these particular phases in the respondents' narratives is discussed followed by a conclusion that seeks to draw out and highlight emergent theoretical points and issues.

I end this section with a discussion of how each of the phases in the birth father narratives as a group is connected by a number of defining themes. The most notable of which is the majority of respondents' feeling of a connection with their child, present in their thoughts of the child and concretely manifested, for some, when late-life contact occurs.

The overall study concludes with a third section that will present a discussion of any light that the findings may cast upon fatherhood as a whole. Some policy implications are outlined.

The following series of chapters in this section begins with one that provides a general overview and interpretation of the more demographic and quantitative information that emerged from the interviews. Qualitative discussion and analysis will take place in the chapters that follow.

## GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE RESPONDENTS' LIFE COURSES

In Figure 5 below it can be seen that twenty-one men went on to have children after the child that was adopted. For five respondents, the adopted child has been their

### At the Time of the Interview

Thirty men were interviewed. Twenty six reported that their physical health and mental health was good or very good.

The respondents were from diverse class backgrounds and walks of life e.g. GP, Church of Scotland minister, bus driver, businessman, therapist, a musician, social worker, a retired man, skilled tradesman.

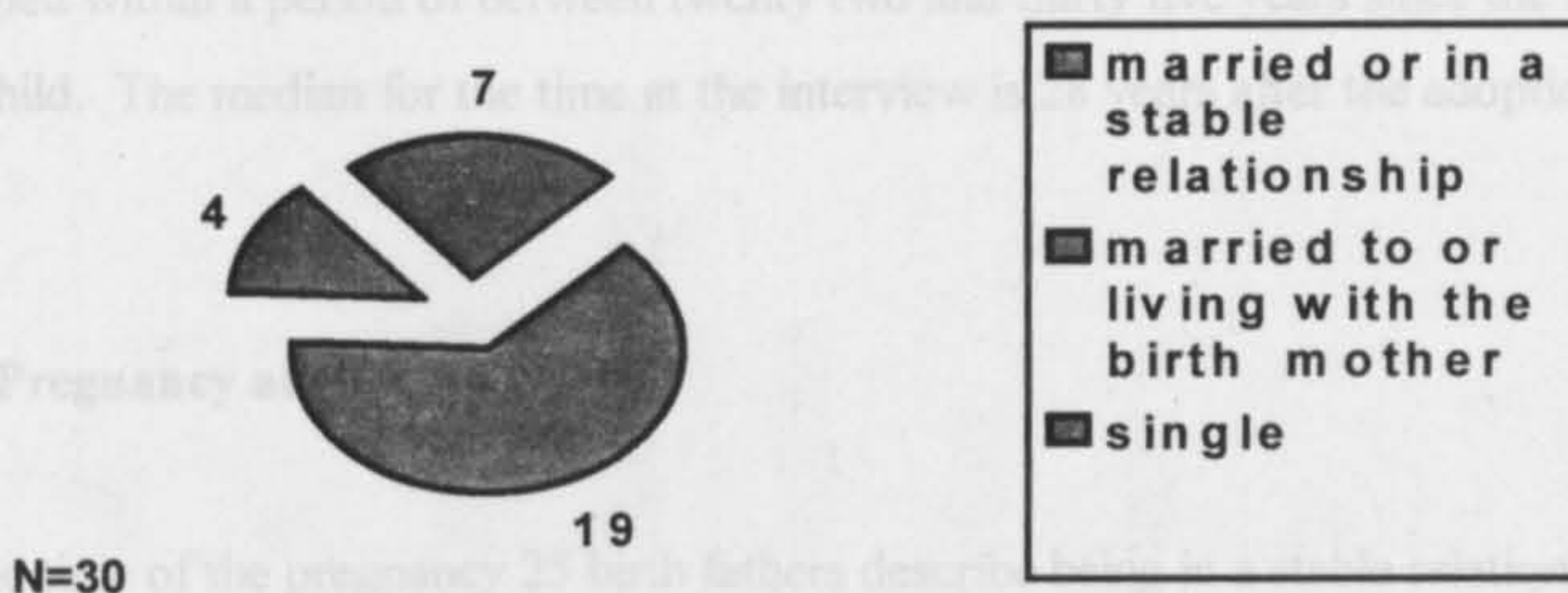
They were aged between 35 - 79 (median: 50). Figure 1 shows the marital or relationship status of the group. At the time of the interview, twenty-three were married or in relationships.

Four of the latter group were married to or living with the birth mother. Three of the 22 men in relationships were going through separations at the time of the interview.

The remaining seven men were single (previously widowed, divorced or separated).

Three of those who reported themselves as single had had multiple divorces. For a time span of eleven years between the adoption and the respondent's account of the events and experiences.

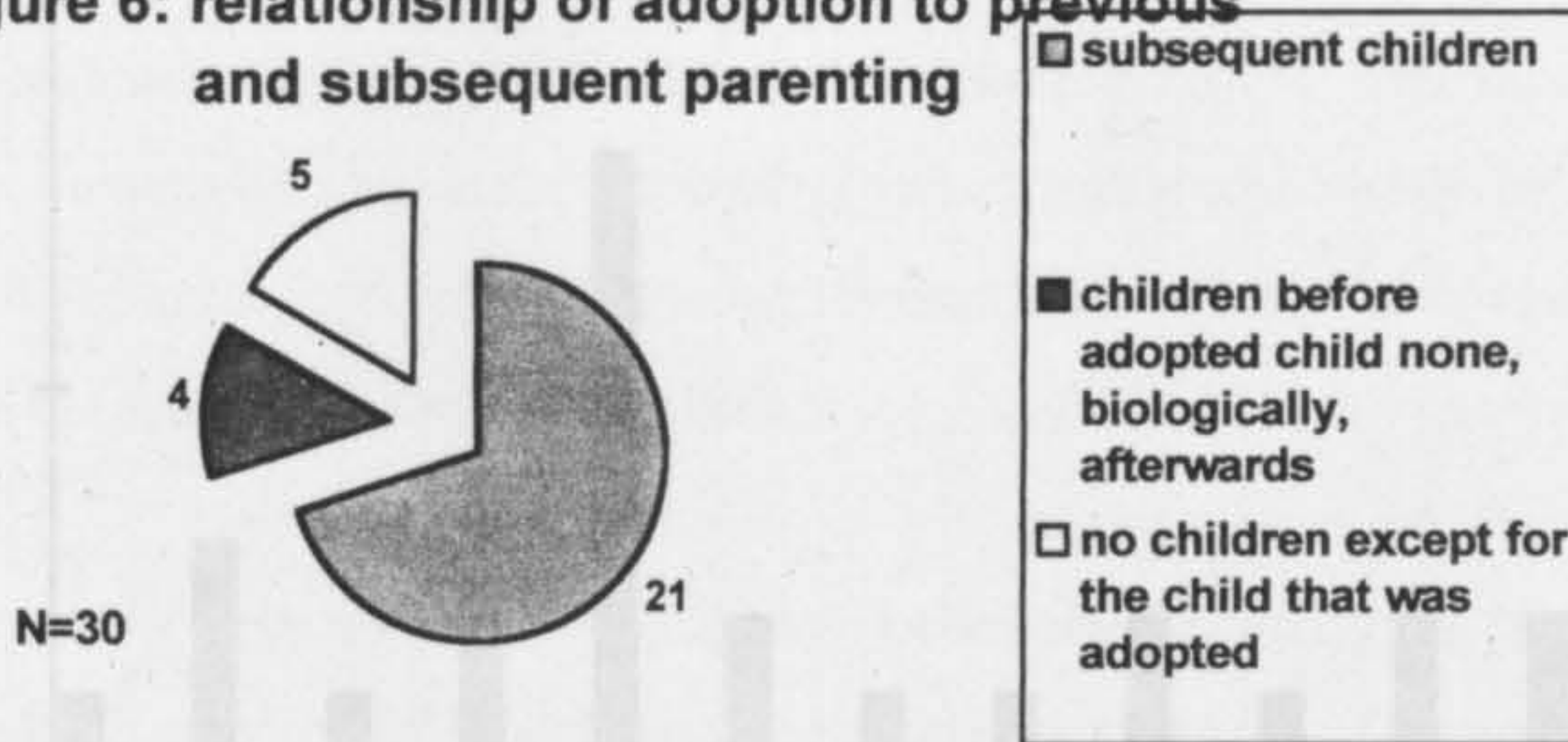
**Figure 5: marital status**





In Figure 6 below it can be seen that twenty-one men went on to have children after the child that was adopted. For five respondents, the adopted child has been their only one. Four men had fathered children previously to the child that was adopted and though one subsequent to the adoption became a step-parent, none of them biologically speaking fathered any others. Therefore, in biological terms, nine out of the whole group (9/30) had no other children subsequent to the adoption.

**Figure 6: relationship of adoption to previous and subsequent parenting**



All but one of the interviews took place between August 1996 and September 1997. In relation to the time span between the interview and the birth of the child this began with the earliest birth dating from 1950 i.e. the interview took place forty seven years after the adoption events. The most recent birth - child born in 1985 - made for a time span of eleven years between the adoption and the respondent's account of the events and experiences relating to it. The largest number of accounts (21/30) were grouped within a period of between twenty two and thirty five years since the birth of the child. The median for the time at the interview is 28 years after the adoption.

### The Pregnancy and Birth

At the time of the pregnancy 25 birth fathers describe being in a stable relationship with the birth mother (three of this grouping were married). Two respondents



described the relationship as brief or new, and two were involved with or married to someone else. One man described the relationship as “*superficial*” - although he also reported that they were living together.

At the time of the pregnancy and birth the men were aged between 15 - 44 (median: 20). Figure 7 indicates that a majority (17/30) were in their late teens/early twenties.

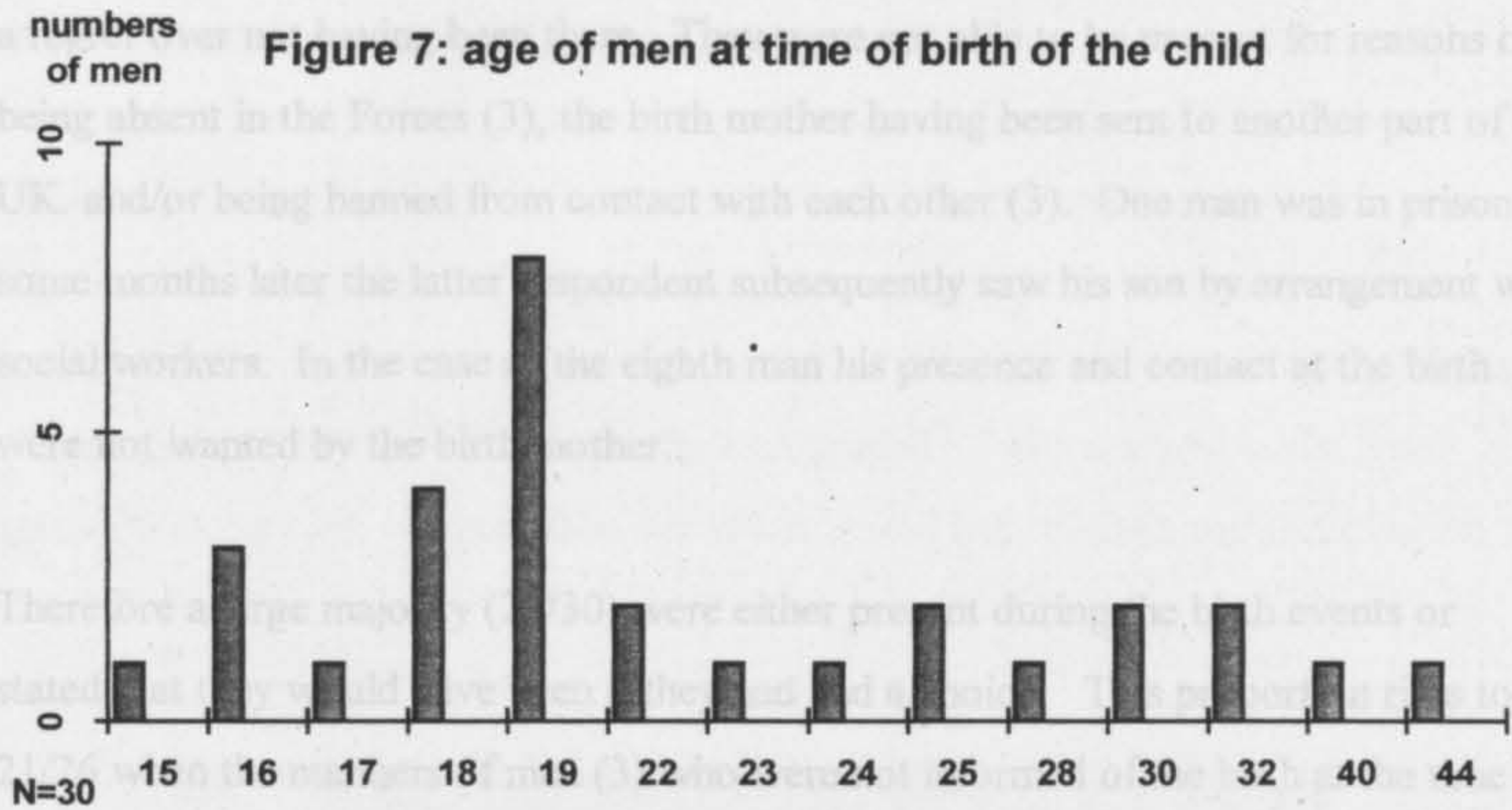
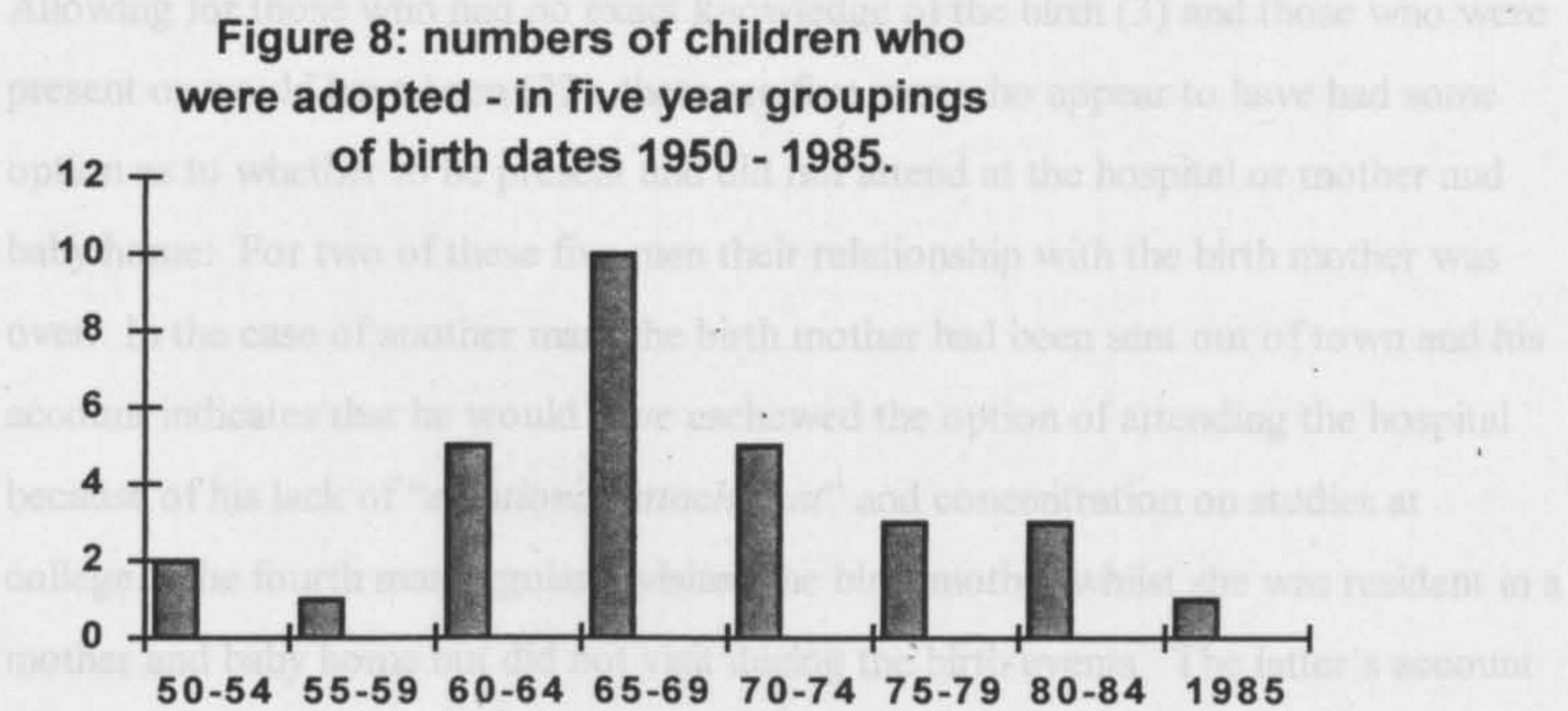


Figure 8 shows the numbers of the children who were adopted by year of birth in groupings of five years. The children were born between 1950 -1985 (median: 1969). 20/30 were born in the ten years between 1960 and 1970.





Fourteen of the respondents were present in hospital and/or at the birth or arrived as soon as they could (within 24 hours). For this group (14/30) involvement in the birth events was in keeping with the pattern of their reported relationship with the birth mother i.e. they were in regular communication with each other, considering and making plans for their continued involvement each other.

Eight men did not have the option of attendance during the birth events and expressed a regret over not having been there. They were not able to be present for reasons of being absent in the Forces (3), the birth mother having been sent to another part of the UK. and/or being banned from contact with each other (3). One man was in prison - some months later the latter respondent subsequently saw his son by arrangement with social workers. In the case of the eighth man his presence and contact at the birth were not wanted by the birth mother.

Therefore a large majority (21/30) were either present during the birth events or stated that they would have been if they had had a choice. This proportion rises to 21/26 when the numbers of men (3) who were not informed of the birth at the time are deducted. In these latter three cases two men knew within a week of the birth and one man found out about the pregnancy/birth/adoption many years later (it is possible that this group of three would have been present had they been given the choice).

Allowing for those who had no exact knowledge of the birth (3) and those who were present or would have been (22), there are five men who appear to have had some option as to whether to be present and did not attend at the hospital or mother and baby home. For two of these five men their relationship with the birth mother was over. In the case of another man, the birth mother had been sent out of town and his account indicates that he would have eschewed the option of attending the hospital because of his lack of "*emotional attachment*" and concentration on studies at college. The fourth man regularly visited the birth mother whilst she was resident in a mother and baby home but did not visit during the birth events. The latter's account did not elaborate on this although he was present when the birth mother was

discharged from hospital (and knew his child was upstairs in the crèche). One man's response to the pregnancy and forthcoming birth was flight: "*I did a moonlight. To avoid responsibility. I was immature*".

More than three-quarters of the men (22/27) that knew of the impending birth expressed a commitment - either in practice or in their aspirations - to being involved in the birth events. As noted above, two of the remaining five appear not to have been committed in so far as they were not exactly unable to attend the hospital. Although in practice they appear to have little option by virtue of their having distanced themselves from the birth mother and birth through having commenced relationships with others. The third man gave no elaboration as to why his participation during the pregnancy stopped short of actual attendance during the birth - although in 1963 this was not exactly encouraged. Two men who could have attended at the birth said that they opted not to and had rejected any participative role.

Eleven of the entire group of 30 helped name the baby. Of the others, six men could not participate in this because three were absent in the Forces, two had been excluded from doing so by the birth mother and one knew nothing about the pregnancy and birth. One man said that he was unsure as to whether he had helped name his child. Six men, although involved at some level during the pregnancy and birth, did not name the baby. The last five respondents are those men who either passively rejected an offer (e.g. by being involved with someone else) or actively opted not to attend at the birth events.

A final six men were prevented from participation in naming the child as a result of direct exclusion from the process. Here the actions of external authorities e.g. parents, welfare officers begin to assume a high profile in the accounts and a process of disenfranchisement becomes apparent. This process is even more emphasised in the numbers involved in registering the child's birth - just five men were involved in



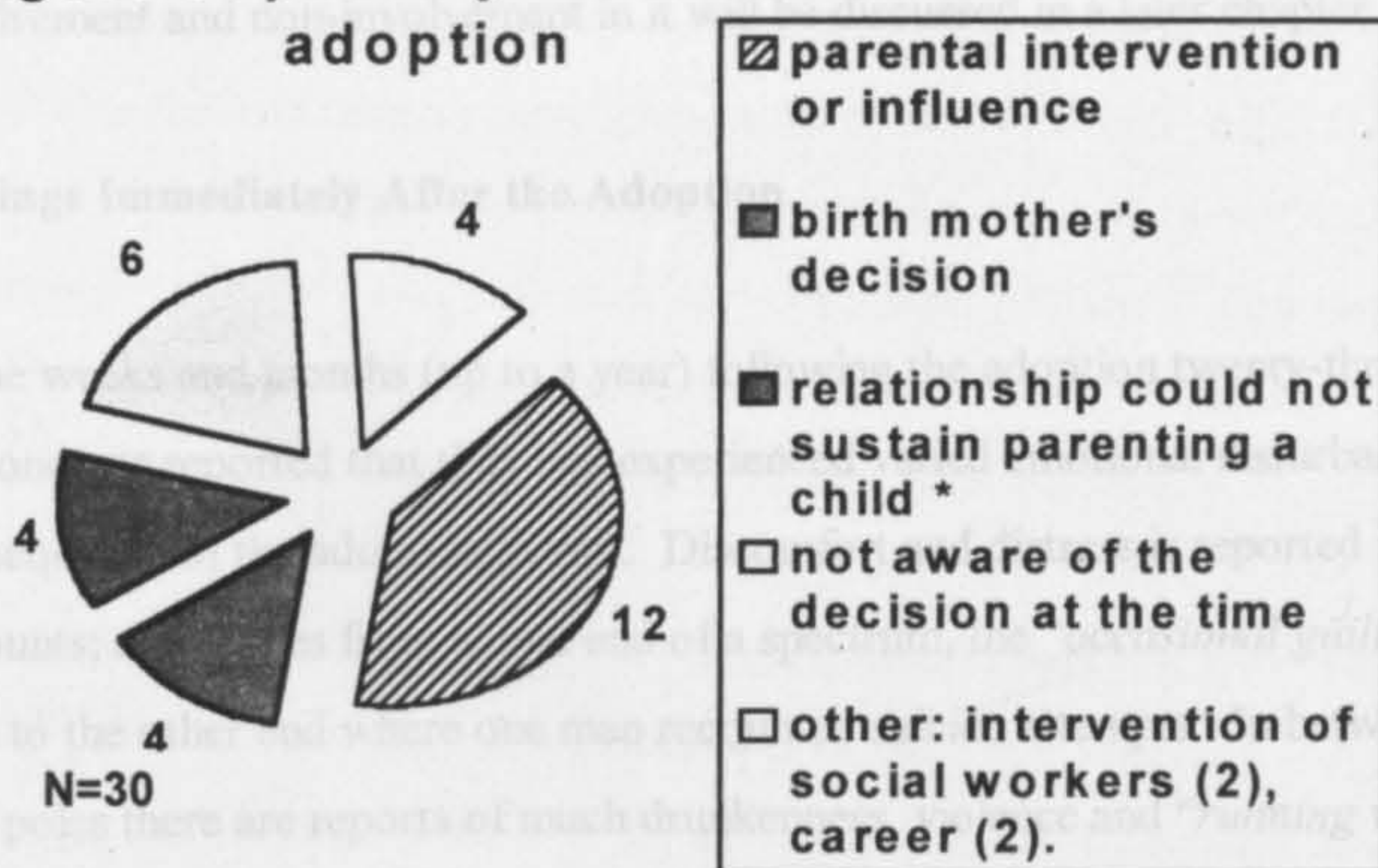
the official birth registration arrangements. It should be borne in mind that of these five men, three were married to the birth mother.

It may be that - to further develop the previous observation concerning disenfranchisement and exclusion - at critical official junctures e.g. naming the child, registering the birth and, as we shall see, the decision to adopt and signing consent to adoption, the involvement of these birth fathers was either obstructed or discouraged. I will return to this in a later chapter.

### The Adoption

Twenty four birth fathers were aware of the adoption at the time that arrangements were proceeding. Six were not. For those who were aware of the adoption their reports of the reasons for the adoption are given in Figure 9 below. The greatest reason is reported as parental intervention or pressure. This is followed by the adoption being the decision of the birth mother in four cases and for another four, the reason was given as the relationship had ended or was of such instability as to be unsuitable to proceed to marriage and/or encompass raising a child. Figure 9 depicts the various proportions of these reasons for the adoption.

**Figure 9: primary reasons for adoption**



\* 'relationship could not sustain parenting the child' - this category includes decisions not to marry, did continue the relationship or the fact that the relationship had ended.



Of those who felt able to comment on their overall attitude to the adoption (n = 24), eighteen expressed a negative attitude towards the adoption. Six respondents said it was either completely as they wished or 'somewhat based' on their wishes.

Twelve birth fathers were involved in the adoption arrangements and process. One of this group was involved but in opposition to the adoption from the outset; another of this group changed his stance from agreement and involvement in the proceedings to opposition as well as involvement. The reasons for the lack of participation reported by the other eighteen respondents were as follows: six men were prevented from playing an active part by external authorities; five men were not aware of the actual adoption proceedings. Three were excluded by the birth mother. The other four were, typically "*not invited in*" in the words of one man.

Nine birth fathers signed formal consent to the adoption; one of the men remained reluctant to do so until three years after the birth. Eleven others reported that they did not sign - nine were not invited to and two refused. Five men were absent and/or unavailable at the time that the adoption papers were to be signed. Three men could not remember whether they signed.

The substance and nature of this disapproval and approval of the adoption and involvement and non-involvement in it will be discussed in a later chapter.

### **Feelings Immediately After the Adoption**

In the weeks and months (up to a year) following the adoption twenty-three respondents reported that they had experienced varied emotional disturbance as a consequence of the adoption events. Discomfort and distress is reported in these accounts; this ranges from at one end of a spectrum, the "*occasional guilt*" of one man to the other end where one man recounted suicide attempts. In between these two poles there are reports of much drunkenness, violence and "*running wild*".



Amongst the extreme post-adoption reactions, serious depression was reported by two men. In the words of one: "*very depressed, a lonely time, I could have committed suicide*". "*Lost of part of me*", "*like a bereavement*", "*anguish*", "*a traumatic period*" were all words and phrases that typically occurred in these reports of feelings that were attributed to the effects of the adoption.

For some men these post-adoption feelings and behaviour led them into conflict with the police and authorities (3), to choose marriage as a compensation - "*married on the rebound*" (3) and irreparable rows with their mothers and permanent departure from their home (3). One man reported that he dropped out of college as a result of his distress.

Four respondents could not say how they felt immediately after the adoption because they were not aware of it at the point it happened. When one man found out a year later he began going AWOL ('Absent Without Leave') from the Army and as an eventual result of such absences he was dismissed.

Leaving aside the four men who belatedly found out about the adoption and could not therefore give an account of their immediate feelings after the event, there remains a very large proportion of the study who gave accounts of feelings of discomfort and distress in this period - 23/26. For many in this group, these feelings resulted in behaviour that had adverse consequences for their lives at that point. There were periods of police custody and permanent injury as a result of "*going and deliberately looking for trouble*". This behaviour also detrimentally affected their future lives and well being, i.e. some reported that they entered into ill-judged marriages, family relations were sundered and prospective careers were eclipsed.

For two men the turbulence of their post-adoption feelings was resolved in a choice of career paths with which they expressed satisfaction - one suggested that his feelings regarding the adoption resulted in him choosing to become a social worker - with children. The compensatory nature of this employment choice was acknowledged by

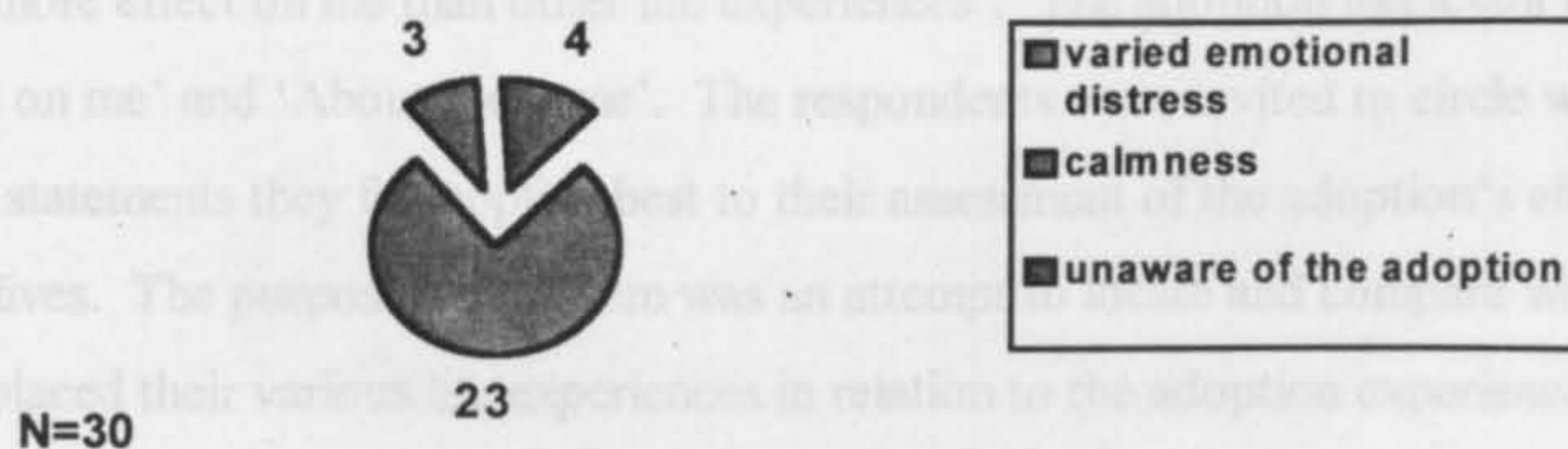
the respondent. This is underlined in his account when he goes on to report that within months of him having been involved in the adoption of his child, he was professionally active in adoption services for other children and their families - both birth and prospective adoptive parents. The phenomenon of birth fathers who, in later-life, become employed in the child care field has been identified by others (e.g. Rosenberg, 1992: 39).

A small minority (3) reported a - relative to the others in the study - lack of feelings of distress and upset. Three men reported that they felt nothing, although one suggested that he would have been detrimentally affected by the adoption had he not "shut it out".

An evaluation of the accounts of the respondents' feelings and behaviour immediately subsequent to the adoption suggests that for a majority, in very practical terms (criminality, relationships and careers) the consequences of the adoption of their child were already far-reaching.

The proportions relating to feelings immediately after the adoption are shown in Figure 10.

**Figure 10: feelings in the twelve months after the adoption**





### **Did Feelings Level Off?**

Fifteen of the men who reported distress subsequent to the adoption said that their feelings eventually leveled off. As one put it: "*a void sort of closed up*". In some cases these feelings leveled off after five years, for other men, eighteen months was the minimum period before their feelings of distress stabilised and receded. Eight men reported that their feelings of distress did not level off. These feelings either changed variously (in one case to lasting hatred for the birth mother's parents); or were channeled into permanent competitiveness in his chosen field of employment in the case of one respondent; or they stayed the same: "*just never gets any better, the bitterness is still there*". Or the feelings became more acute.

### **The Adoption and Its Place Alongside Other Life Events**

When asked to give other important life experiences after and apart from the adoption eighteen men cited separations and divorces (four of which involved second or third long-term relationships). Five men reported that they had married someone else "*on the rebound*" after the adoption. One described himself as being "*unlucky in love*". Eleven reported serious emotional trauma e.g. breakdown and depression, leading to suicide attempts in three of these cases.

Respondents were asked to compare the adoption with other major life experiences. This item was constructed along the following lines: 'The adoption has much more/a little more effect on me than other life experiences'. 'The adoption has less/a little less effect on me' and 'About the same'. The respondents were invited to circle which of these statements they felt applied best to their assessment of the adoption's effect in their lives. The purpose of this item was an attempt to locate and compare where the men placed their various life experiences in relation to the adoption experiences. It was often explained as seeking to map a graph of their life and the place of the adoption in such a graph.

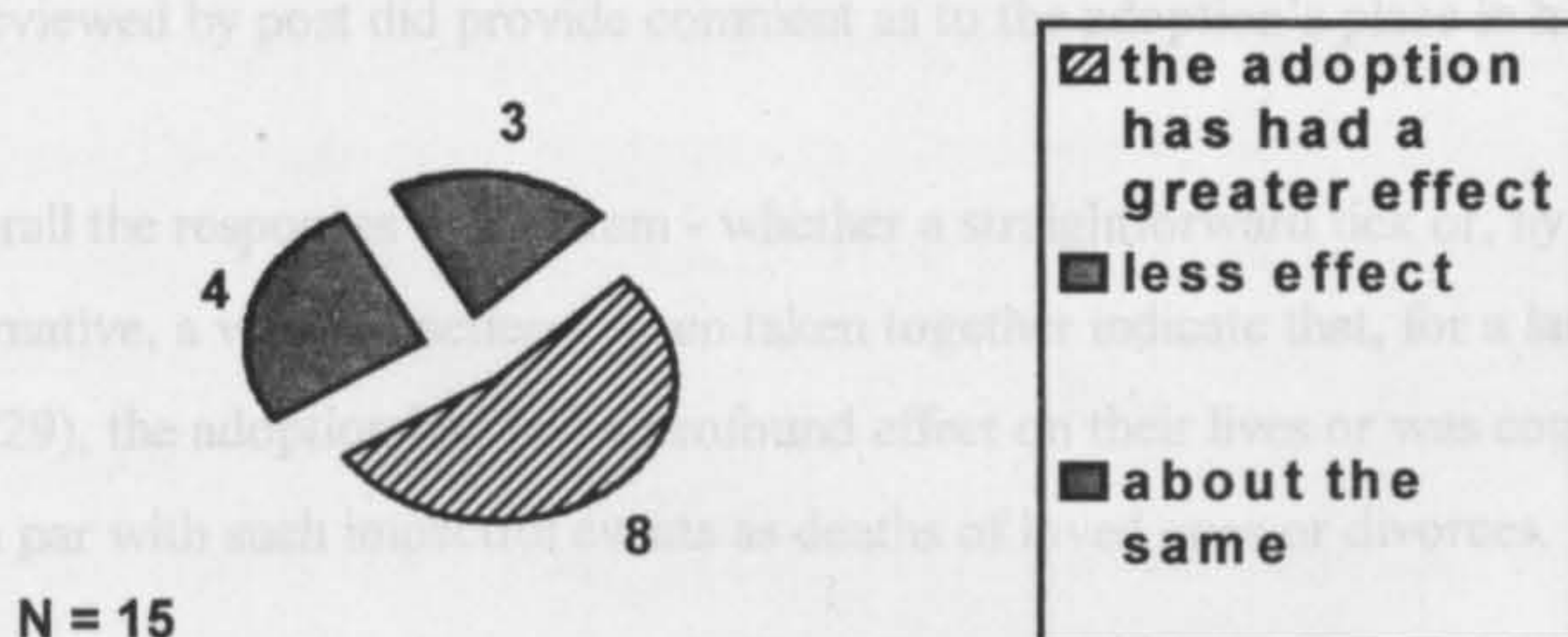


Fifteen birth fathers gave written responses. Of these, eight circled the phrases: 'The adoption has much more/a little more effect on me than other life experiences'. In four of these cases greater detail was added to the effect that the adoption had had a great impact in their lives. Typically, in the words of one man the adoption had been "one of the major happenings in my life".

Four men indicated that: 'The adoption has less/a little less effect on me'. The events that were 'rated' as having more impact upon them than the adoption were given as deaths of parents (in two cases), a divorce (after fifteen years marriage to the birth mother) and the birth of a second child. Another three men reported 'About the same' i.e. that the adoption's impact on their lives was the same as other important experiences. Of this group, one man had had a long life - he was 79 at the time of the interview - and had experienced a number of bereavements such as the death of a second wife and the early deaths of a son and daughter. The second said that the effect of the adoption on him was the same and went on "The only thing that I would say was as much hurt was when my dad died. That hurt.". A third man equated the emotional impact of the adoption as the same as his distress when his wife left him.

A simple breakdown of the responses of those who were able to circle the item is depicted in Figure 11.

Figure 11: comparison between the adoption and other important life events





Nearly half of the entire group of respondents (14/30) felt unable to be as categorical and precise as required by the item i.e. they felt that circling a formal statement was *“too difficult”* yet they proceeded to give accounts of where the adoption came on their ‘life graph’. All of the men in this group variously indicated the adoption’s importance in the emotional and psychological geography of their lives:

*“In terms of a life graph through to the birth of my next children, it would be very high. Highest thing around, because going off to college and A levels was no big deal. It was a different world in those days. It [the adoption] was a very big event and I wouldn’t think that there was really anything much to compare with it.”*

Within this group (those who could not circle an item but instead talked to it) there were differences of emphasis. There were those who spoke of the adoption and its effects having the greatest impact in their lives and those felt that there had been other equally great events in their lives yet rated the adoption as *“up there”* with other positive and negative highlights. One man said that the negative impact of the adoption in his life was: *“a loss that I suffered and about the same as the positive effect of my [later] marriage, but different. I don’t know whether you can rate that”*. Another spoke about the adoption and the end of his marriage as *“completely separate”* yet it was clear that these were two events that somehow stood side by side in this particular man’s visualisation of his life graph.

One man did not provide any answer, neither a ‘tick’ or a verbal response. This may be because his interview was accomplished by post (although the other man who was interviewed by post did provide comment as to the adoption’s place in his life).

Overall the responses to this item - whether a straightforward tick or, by way of an alternative, a verbal reaction - when taken together indicate that, for a large majority (25/29), the adoption had had a profound effect on their lives or was considered to be on a par with such impactful events as deaths of loved ones or divorces.

Three men specifically likened the effects of the adoption as akin to bereavement but observed: *“A death is just that. It’s something that’s gone.”* unlike (for them) the

adoption where “*there is no end to the consequences*”. These men suggested that death offers the opportunity of ‘closure’ in that the bereaved person could grieve yet adoption, because the child continues to live, does not offer such a resolution to painful feelings. This is in keeping with the major research findings on the experiences of birth mothers (e.g. Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

In the course of addressing this item concerning the part played by the adoption in respect of life’s losses and separations, it emerged that, nine men out of the total of thirty, had experienced some form of major loss or separation in their lives prior to the adoption. In five cases a parent had died in the time before the adoption (usually over a year but during the pregnancy in the case of one man’s father). In the case of the other four men, one respondent’s mother had suffered a serious life-threatening illness (cerebral hemorrhage) and had undergone a lengthy hospitalisation. A second man had been separated from his parents at the age of ten years and sent from Brazil to boarding school in England; in the case of the third, his parents had divorced when he was four years old. The fourth man reported that his life had been “*troubled*” by the knowledge of what he termed his “*illegitimacy*” - he did not know who his father was. Three of the nine men in this group of respondents gave no formal response to the item regarding ratings of the adoption in relation to other significant events. However all commented on the place of the adoption in their lives and in doing so six of this group of nine offered some evaluation of the adoption’s significance vis-a-vis other life events that they deemed to have been important to them. One man replied that it had had less effect on him than the death of his father. Five reported that the adoption, from the standpoint of their lives at the time of interview, had had more effect on them than other significant experiences in their lives including the death or loss of parents. One respondent said that the adoption had begun to take on more significance in recent years.

In a later chapter, that provides an analysis of the above responses, I will include a discussion of the specific issue of whether the effects or memories of such loss may have had any bearing upon the behaviour and feelings of this group of nine men.



## Searching and Contact

Two thirds of the group (21) had not had contact with the child given up for adoption. A third of the group (10) had experienced contact. N = 31 here because one birth father features twice as he had contact with one child who was adopted and is seeking contact with a second who was also adopted the following year.

Five men had been traced by their son or daughter. Of these, four were found by their daughters and one by his son. The other five respondents had either found their son or daughter or indicated their willingness to be traced by placing their names on an adoption contact register - see Section Two Chapter Four for a previous discussion of these registers. Of this group (who traced or actively took steps to make themselves traceable) four had met their adopted daughters and one had met with his adopted son.

One man from the latter group had gone further than registering his desire for contact. In his case he had "*pursued*" his son and his son's adoptive parents. This man's activity resembles that of a number in the other group of non-contacts in that they too were actively searching or had done so without success - one case involved the hire of a private detective. This particular aspect of the searching activity raises, amongst other things, an ethical issue to which I will refer in later discussions on policy and the experience of searching.

All but one of the ten contacts between birth father and child (now adult) were reported to be have remained positive. At the time of the interview the duration of these relationships varied between four months and six years, most were over two years with the average length of contact i.e. from the time of their first face-to-face meeting, being 34 months.

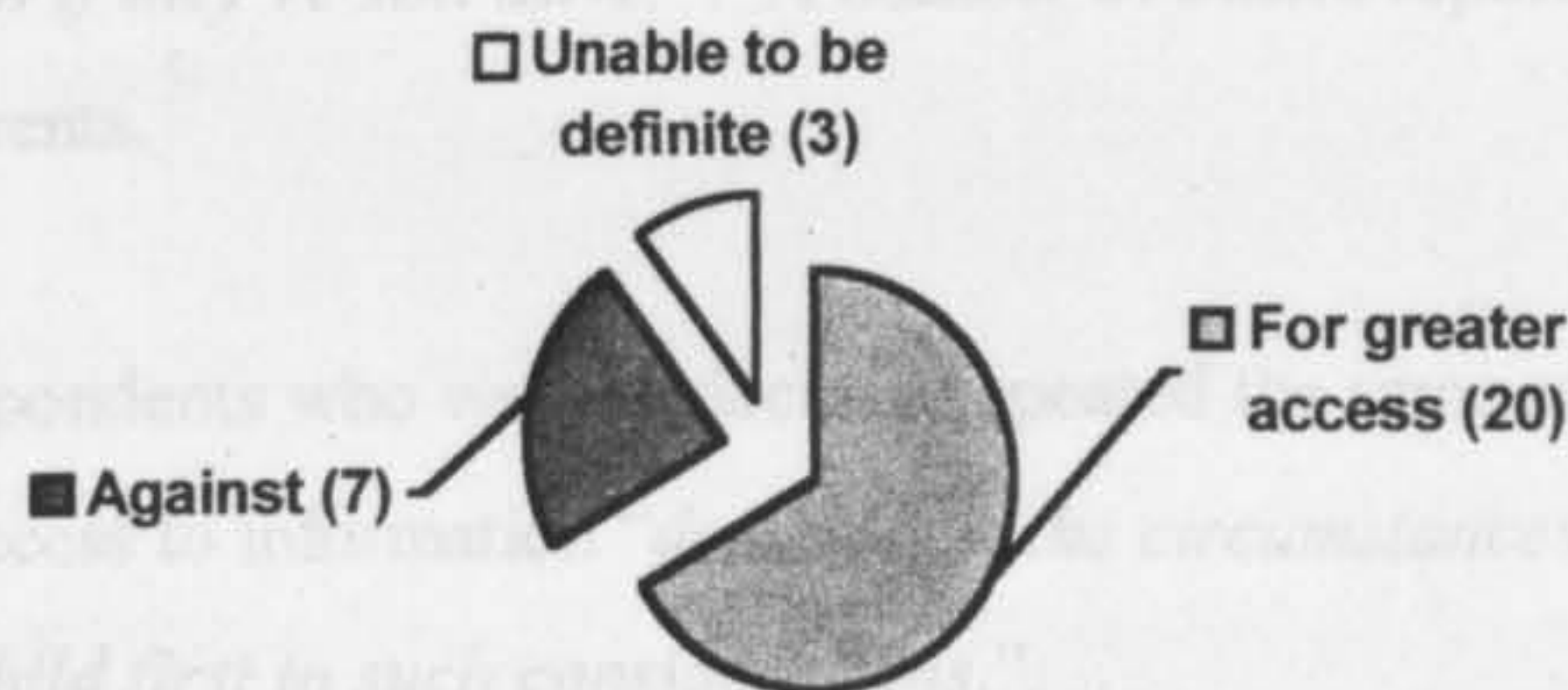
To conclude the discussion regarding the respondents' search activities and contact, I asked them for their views on birth parents' access to the type of information that

would allow them to identify their adopted child. I described the possibility of this information as reciprocal to that afforded adopted people. In the case of the latter they have the right of access to records such as their original birth entry. This provides adopted people with identifying information relating to their birth parents and so makes searching for them easier. I asked the respondents their views on their having access to their children's adoptive names – which would allow searching and possible contact.

### Attitudes to Access to Identifying Information

Twenty respondents were in favour of greater information relating to the adopted child. Seven were against this and three said that they could not be categorical.

**Figure 12 Birth Father Attitudes to Access to Identifying Information**



N = 30

The respondents' reports conveyed no evidence of thoughts taking the child back – a form of militant birth father feeling that was found in the North American research (Deykin et al, 1988). The notion that identifying information might be used to make unwanted interventions in their child's life was echoed in Mullender and Kearn (1997: 21) who based their reservations regarding birth father involvement in the adoption proceedings on the North American study findings. The respondents in this study do



not confirm such reservations concerning birth fathers' possible negative feelings of 'ownership' of the child (ibid.). One man out of the thirty reported that, because he was her father "*it was totally outrageous*" that he could be denied information and therefore the possibility of access to his daughter. Another agreed that he "*should have the same rights to know where she is.*".

The other eighteen men who were in favour of access to identifying information qualified their support for this. Typically one man reported his attitude to greater 'rights' as follows:

*"Yes. But I should not have the right to go up to her door and say 'I'm her father'. I should have the right to send a letter."*

Most of those in favour of access to information and possible subsequent contact reported that they felt that this should be arranged through an intermediary so that "*the child can refuse*". It would be "*disruptive if birth parents were to have direct access*" said one respondent. Another said "*Yes but via mediation. You should have the right to know if they're still alive.*". A number of others reported a concern for the adoptive parents.

Those three respondents who were undecided repeated the same sentiments. One man said that access to information "*depends on the circumstances. You should sound out the child first in such considerations.*".

The seven men who were not in favour of access to identifying information conveyed broadly the same considerations for the child and its adoptive family. In the case of this group, these considerations outweighed the feelings and any potential rights of birth parents. One respondent said "*No. Birth parents could destroy a child's life. There should be well-publicised contact registers.*". Another of those who disagreed with the idea of access to information commented that:

*“The main thing is protection of the child. You should have the right to discuss with the authorities if the child is alive and well and happy.”*

The attitudes reported above were spread evenly throughout both groups of men who had had contact and those who had not. Those who had not had contact were no more likely to be in favour of unqualified access to identifying information than those who had met their children.

The attitudes of the respondents is closer to that of birth mothers who ‘did not want to rock the boat’ or disrupt lives (Bouchier et al, 1991: 112). Birth fathers in this study shared with birth mothers a wish for the right to information and the possibility of some form of indirect communication regarding the child’s welfare (Field, 1991; Wells, 1993b; 1994).

Finally, the interview’s conclusion produced a finding that is somewhat surprising in the light of conventional thinking regarding men’s ability to use support groups.

### **Attitudes to Support**

I invited the respondents to say whether they would use a support group for birth fathers. One man already ran such a group and another attended one. Overall a majority of sixteen respondents (16/30) said that they would use a support group. Among the reasons were statements such as “*we don’t talk enough about these things*”, “*to find out others’ experiences and prepare for contact*”, “*to ease your pain*”. The overall reasons for attending a support group can be summed up as a need to share information, feelings and experiences. This finding may be of interest to professionals involved in post-adoption services. The ease with which the respondents could speak about their need for support came towards the end of a lengthy and emotionally engaging interview in which considerable pains were taken by to establish rapport and encourage frankness.



The next chapters discuss the experiences of the thirty men who make up the study group. The temporal phases of their experiences commence with news of the pregnancy. As indicated in the present chapter, a central feature in the accounts - backed up in the above discussion of the interview process - is the emotional salience of the adoption in these birth fathers' lives. Existing just below the surface and sometimes on the surface of the consciousness of the men in the study group, the memory and lasting effect of their adoption experiences are matters that have the power to call forth the deepest of emotions. It is this - the emotional salience of the adoption and surrounding events - that will be shown to be created and/or bolstered during each of the various segments of the respondents' adoption experiences from the news of the pregnancy to the present day. The clarity with which the respondents recall the events that took place decades ago suggests confirmation of the importance of the event.

In this respect Yow (1994: 19) suggests that: 'if the event or situation was significant to the individual, it will likely be remembered in some detail, especially its associated feelings'. It will be shown in the following detail of the events and experiences of the times, that the adoption was and is of major significance to the respondents.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DURING THE TIME OF THE PREGNANCY AND BIRTH

**salient:** arresting, conspicuous, important, jutting, marked, noticeable, outstanding, projecting, prominent, pronounced, protruding, remarkable, signal, striking.

(Collins Thesaurus, 1991)

A combination of powerful events and experiences has produced deep and lasting feelings for nearly everyone in the study group. For the respondents the adoption "*looms large*" in their lives many years later. In the words of another "*the adoption has formed my reaction to a number of things in my life*". The adoption - seen as a process of events, experiences and feelings during pregnancy, surrounding the birth of their children, the adoption itself and in the weeks and months following the adoption - has an emotional salience for the respondents.

This chapter is the first in a series that makes an in-depth and qualitative examination of the phases of the respondents' adoption experiences - up to and including the period of present day contact between the respondents and the child that was adopted. It includes the current activities and feelings of those who have not had contact with their child.

This beginning chapter deals with the time between news of the pregnancy and the birth of the child. It shows just how emotionally turbulent a period this was. Powerful mixtures of pleasure and pain, commitment and loss, inclusion and exclusion permeate this time. The first threads of a feeling of fatherhood are also in evidence for some men. The chapter ends with a discussion of these themes. Themes that, as will be seen in the subsequent chapters that proceed through these birth fathers' life courses, persist, are strengthened or emerge for nearly every man in the group.



## THE PREGNANCY

Nearly all of the men in the group had been in what they described as a stable relationship with the birth mother. This is defined as committed to one another and 'going steady' for more than three months. Hughes and Logan (1993) and Wells (1993b) also refer to the nature of the birth mother's relationship with the birth father in their research. They comment that evidence of the steady nature of the relationship in some cases challenges the conventional notion of adoptions following pregnancies from 'one night stands' between relative strangers (who remain so). However most of the literature on birth mothers does not enquire into or assess the relationship between birth mother and birth father - indeed one of the most widely-regarded works expressly sought out women who were partnerless at the time of the adoption (Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

I have been able to identify six texts in the body of work on birth mothers that report on and discuss the birth mother's attitudes to the part played by birth fathers during the pregnancy (Bouchier et al, 1991; Howe et al, 1992; Inglis, 1984; Mander, 1995; Raynor, 1971; Rockel and Ryburn, 1988). Most of the observations in these writings agree with Mander's conclusion that once the pregnancy was confirmed, the birth father was of 'relatively minor significance'. Howe et al (1992: 54) go further and in my opinion tip over into confirming a stereotype:

In other cases he was a married man or a feckless, insubstantial individual that the woman did not wish to marry....With the increasing urgency of sorting out what to do and where to go, the birth father became of less interest and relevance. As the birth mother necessarily became preoccupied with her own worries, he would find that there was little room in the saga for him and often he completely disappeared from the story. This upset and angered some mothers but not a few viewed his departure neutrally and with no great interest.

With such bad press from within the adoption community (see also the previous discussion in the review of literature that pointed to the possibility of negative attitudes towards birth fathers) there is a strong case for research into the feelings of these 'shadowy figures' and their reaction and behaviour. The accounts that follow

will show that, for a large majority of this group of birth fathers, the stereotypes and beliefs that exist both within and outwith the adoption profession and academic community do not hold true.

It will be seen that not only is there a research gap relating to the details and nature of the birth parent's relationship but also I will indicate other research lacunae – e.g. the activities of birth fathers during this important period – throughout this chapter. So what did the respondents feel during this time?

### **Pregnancy: The emotional response**

As a result of the steady nature of their relationship with the birth mother, most of the men in the study group were aware of the pregnancy within two months of conception.

The news of pregnancy was greeted with a variety of reactions and emotions. The most common was one of shock. Over half of the group - fifteen - described experiencing some form of shock or alarm on news of the pregnancy. Six men used the word 'shock'. Another three said that the news had made them feel scared and anxious. A further three reported a mixture of feelings of shock and fear with other feelings of anxiety. Three more reported initial feelings of worry. These feelings were experienced for a number of reasons but primarily because of the unplanned nature of the event coupled with fear of the repercussions. In three cases, either the birth mother, birth father or both were under-age. One man was, "*Shocked like any young man of 19. You think 'oh my God what have I done' or 'what have we done'. I was frightened of the consequences. Frightened of parents.*".

For others the worry was primarily as a result of their felt lack of maturity:



*"I think she kept hoping that her period would start and she was four months before we went to the doctor. I always remember that night and he said 'yes, yes' and took her into the room and came back out and 'yes, yes she's definitely pregnant'. I thought Christ, that's what I don't want to hear. He said 'she's fine, no problem, very healthy' and I said 'well there's a problem, I said we're not married'. 'Oh that's no problem' he said. I said 'I'm 16'. The doctor then said 'Ah well that could be a problem.'"*

For others the concern was because *"It was taboo, I was immature and with low wages, it was difficult to look after a kid"*.

Six men greeted the news of the pregnancy with pleasure. Three in this group of six were married to the birth mother. Here there was an element of planning involved with regard to conception and parenthood - the reasons for adoption are so diverse in the case of these three married men (injury at birth, 'place of safety' measures taken by social workers in two instances) as to not make this grouping significant.

Another five men reported a mixture of competing feelings such as unhappiness and pleasure and fear (of parents) and pride. One said he felt *"unhappy - I thought how's her family going to react? Also pleasure - I'm going to be a dad - and sadness at the (birth) mother's family hostility"*.

Another said that he found his mix of feelings during this time difficult to describe:

*"A tremendous mixture of feelings really. Sadness because it wasn't planned. I remember it was in my final year. There was obviously a conflict of feelings. But very mixed emotions. I suppose initially shocked, sad. Worried about what we were going to do, how we were going to cope with the situation."*

Four men responded to the news of the pregnancy with clearer negative reactions.

One *"did a moonlight"*. One man was angry at what he perceived to be manipulation (into marriage). Another expressed disbelief in relation to his paternity of the unborn child and the fourth *"didn't think of the child"* at that point because he and the birth mother had separated and he was about to get married to someone else.

Overall then, few men responded to the news with undiluted pleasure.

It should be noted that the preceding discussion regarding reactions to pregnancy takes place relatively uninformed by the benefit of comparison with birth mothers. The particular question of birth mothers' reaction to their pregnancy appears to have been discussed infrequently in the research. Where it has been discussed, birth mothers' reactions evidence the same range of panic and alarm as those of the men in the group. This is together with - not explicitly reported by the men in the study group - feelings of shame and guilt at 'having got themselves into trouble' (Inglis, 1984; Rockel and Ryburn, 1988).

### **Pregnancy: A sense of fatherhood**

At the time of receiving the news and for the remainder of the pregnancy twelve men, when asked whether they felt like a father at this point, answered in the affirmative and reported feelings of fatherhood. One man was *"looking forward to being able to take him out and do things"*. Another said something similar: *"looking forward to doing things with him. You feel very proud that you are a father. We had made plans."*

Although shocked at the news of the pregnancy, one said that:

*"We agreed to keep the baby. There was no question of running away. We both agreed that we desperately wanted to keep the baby. Yes, I saw myself as a father. I always thought I was good with kids."*

A number with affirmative feelings towards fatherhood expressed these in a 'workmanlike' approach to the news of the impending birth and child i.e. although surprised and shocked, they intended and expected to be the child's parent. One of the men asked of himself *"Is this the point in time when you start to settle down?"*.



During the course of the pregnancy a further three men who initially answered in the negative when they were asked whether they felt like a father, reported the emergence of a sense of curiosity, responsibility or obligation vis-a vis the unborn child. In the case of one, his shock and worry at the news of the birth mother's pregnancy changed to curiosity: *"Both of us began to wonder what the child might be like - we came from families of academics and swimmers - would he or she be sporty, academic?"*. For these respondents, paternal feelings emerged and grew as the pregnancy developed:

*"Eventually you start feeling you're going to be a dad and it was going to come into the world and you were going to do right by it, there's a maturity comes over you."*

One man began *"looking forward to settling down. There had always been kids around. Having children was a natural thing"*.

The fifteen men who spoke of feeling like fathers were asked to elaborate upon this i.e. 'In what way did you feel like a father'. A range of responses was emerged. This consisted of overlapping responses such pride and anticipation and I have chosen to group the remarks according to the men's leading statements. Two men spoke in terms that expressed a sense of ownership - they felt that the child-to-be was theirs - one referred to her as, *"My birthday present"*, the other responded that: *"the baby was mine and my responsibility"*. Four spoke of pride in their child's conception and its development during pregnancy: *"I could feel it kicking"*. Four spoke of an anticipation of parenting - *"looking forward to doing things"*. Five expressed a joint responsibility for the child's conception and remarked upon their involvement throughout the pregnancy and their desired wish for an outcome that would have resulted in them becoming parents of the child: *"I think we wanted to get married. We'd have managed somehow. I've a great love for children, somehow or other I'd have managed."*

In the case of those birth fathers who reported that they had no feelings of fatherhood - nine - some said that they were too young to think of themselves as fathers: *"I think*

*I was still a big boy at that time. Too young to contemplate, to accept the full consequences of what it was going to be.”* Or they were committed to other plans that excluded having a child:

*“Neither she nor I wanted to have the baby. We were very much in love with each other as these things go. A very good relationship. But we certainly didn’t want to have children. I was going to go to College. It came around the time I should have been revising A levels.”*

For others in this group who felt no sense of fatherhood, the relationship with the birth mother had ended or they felt that it could not sustain the responsibilities of marriage and raising a child.

One man closely approximates the stereotype of the male’s immediate abandonment of pregnant girl friend. In his case, news of the pregnancy resulted in him “*doing a moonlight*”.

Except for this man, stereotypes of the man’s immediate desertion on news of pregnancy, the ‘one night stand’ or older male sophisticate who gets a young girl in trouble (Pannor et al, 1971), do not hold true for the men in the entire group. Even this respondent, whilst in the midst of his abandonment of the birth mother, expressed a wish that the birth mother move out of her parents’ house so that he could return and live independently with her. He also offered to ‘keep’ (financially, that is) the child.

Over a half (15/24) of the men who could report on whether or not they felt like fathers during this period replied in the affirmative either from the onset or as the pregnancy developed. Of the remaining six men in the entire group, 3 birth fathers were not precisely aware of the pregnancy, two could not say how they felt and one omitted to answer.



During this time, for almost all, irrespective of their feelings and attitude towards paternity, whether these were present from the start, developed, or stayed 'unfatherly' a wide range of emotions were reported:

*"You think first running away, then you think of your responsibilities, you want to keep a family, you think of yourself at nineteen, you say to yourself 'I've got a whole life. To me you're swung between running away and staying and facing the music."*

There seems to be no direct association between those men who were shocked or displeased at news of the pregnancy nor felt like fathers, and whether they did or did not participate in the subsequent course of the pregnancy. However, as we shall see, involvement from now onwards - irrespective of whether any one felt like a father or not - was to be problematic for many in the group.

Again as with previous discussions of existing research on the pregnancy and birth process, birth mothers do not seem to have been asked whether or not they felt like mothers during the pregnancy. Typically Howe et al (1992: 38) move from 'the moment she discovers that she is pregnant' to commence the remainder of their discussion of pregnancy with 'The Unmarried Mother-To-Be'. Here the assumption seems to be that pregnancy automatically and unproblematically confers motherhood. Wider research relating to women's experience of pregnancy has addressed this and shown that the notion that equates pregnancy and motherhood is an overgeneralism that fails to appreciate the problems surrounding the transition from pregnant woman to mother-to-be (e.g. Chodorow, 1978; Forna, 1998).

This research gap in the birth mother literature precludes comparison between birth mother and birth father feelings towards maternity and paternity at this point in the respective circumstances.

## **Pregnancy: In the course of**

As indicated above, during the pregnancy a number of men gave accounts of the growth of feelings of fatherhood. In addition events of a more external nature took place.

Here the content of the accounts shows the difficulty of trying to pin down details of this nine-month period in someone's life. In the quest for information concerning the respondents' feelings and behaviour at the time what is gleaned regarding the birth father may be at the expense of people and events that surround him. Thus a certain amount of background 'colour' is lost e.g. many significant world events took place in the nineteen sixties - men landed on the Moon (1969) and in Paris in 1968 students nearly brought down the French government. Two respondents voluntarily provided this type of backcloth when they spoke of being involved in battles between Mods and Rockers and college sit-ins. Taking my own experience as a reference point, in the course of the pregnancy there were many events some exciting, some boring, that had little to do with the impending birth. I, and I surmise many of the birth fathers in the study, did 'young-people' things such as looking for employment, going to the pub and cinema, being bored as well as attending sessions at the hospital and buying items for a baby's layette. Notwithstanding these considerations the accounts provide relevant insights relating to life between the initial news of the pregnancy and the birth.

After confirmation of the pregnancy, the next months were marked for a third of the respondents - ten men - by either being separated from the birth mother against their will immediately or at a subsequent point in the pregnancy (5), or having no choice about being apart (5). In the case of the men in the latter category, three were in the Forces and two were confined - one in prison and the other in a 'Reform School'. An example of the feelings of powerlessness in the events of this period is provided in the case of one of the men who was in the Forces. He was serving overseas in Aden at the time. Unbeknownst to both him and the birth mother, their letters to each other



were never received. The birth mother's father intercepted them - he was able to do this because he was employed as a postman in a major mail-sorting centre. This act of censorship resulted in considerable distress for both birth father and birth mother and, according to the respondent, his consequent 'silence' was construed as indifference thus contributing towards the decision to have the baby adopted.

Other acts of exclusion were more visible and overt for the other five men in this category - those who were compulsorily separated either by relatives (usually parents) or welfare workers. One said he felt "*manipulated*" by both sets of parents and as a result "*shut everything out*". The other four sought to maintain contact by writing and phoning. In the case of two men, their efforts to see the birth mother and baby resulted in their ejection from the hospital at the time of the birth.

For another ten men their relationship with the birth mother and presence throughout the pregnancy was less subject to external intervention. The relationship with the birth mother continued (and developed in one case) with meetings, weekend contact and correspondence. Two men in this group were married to the birth mother and for them the pregnancy was regarded as a welcome and developmental aspect of the marriage.

In the case of five men, they report that their relationship with the birth mother declined and ended after news of the pregnancy (in one of these cases the news of the pregnancy was retracted by the birth mother). They had little or no contact with the birth mother. In the most extreme case, despite having a steady relationship with the birth mother one man simply fled - from London to Wales. He stayed away for the duration of the pregnancy, the birth and the adoption proceedings.

For two men the relationship with the birth mother was already over before they heard news of the pregnancy. They became re-involved. One of them re-established a friendship with the birth mother and participated in the adoption arrangements. The other, who was by then involved in home-making with another women who had

become pregnant with their child, became involved in the adoption process after the birth of his first child.

Two men did not furnish details of the period between pregnancy and birth, possibly because the postal nature of the interview was not conducive to providing such information. However, for a large majority of those who did provide accounts of this time (20/28), relationships with the birth mother either continued (10) or were prevented from doing so (10) in spite of their wishes. Contrasts in reactions and behaviour are evidenced in the case of the man who ran off, and another man who, on news of the pregnancy, accommodated the birth mother in his room in a shared flat, cared for her and was present at the birth. So the stereotype provided by the former man – the one who fled - does not hold true for most of the men in the group. The actions of most respondents appear to approximate more the behaviour of the latter man who sought to care for and support his pregnant girl friend.

Such care expressed in the behaviour of the majority of the men in the group contrasts with reports of the behaviour of men included in one piece of research on birth mothers. In this, birth mothers reported that over 50% of their male partners abandoned or lost contact with them during pregnancy (Hughes and Logan, 1993).

For all of the men in the study, the events and experiences that surround the actual birth of their child further underline the highly charged and complex nature of this pre-adoption period. It is to this event that I will now turn.



## THE BIRTH OF THE CHILD

### Reactions to the news

The majority of the men, who were able to be informed of the birth, reacted to the news with pleasure, delight and a sense of being (pleasantly) overwhelmed e.g. “*cloud nine*”. Of this group, four referred to pleasure and relief regarding a safe birth and the birth mother’s health. One man reported a mixture of “*gladness and sadness*”.

Three men expressed a mixture of negative emotions such as guilt and sadness. One respondent reported that he felt “*a deep sadness, remorse and guilt*”. Two others reported that they felt empty. Two more said that they could not recall how they responded to news of the birth.

### Birth and Fatherhood

The fifteen respondents who saw their children report feelings of pleasure, excitement and pride: “*There was an excitement - this cute wee thing.*”. Another said that:

*“Even although her dad came in and sort of, ‘you, boy, out’, even with that I still went out of there with a bit of a skip in my step if you like. There was certainly a pride.”*

A number of men provided specific memories of the child and the time. These are particularly vivid:

*“I still say to this day, now and again, I can remember his scent. To me at times it is as if it was only yesterday I can smell him. It’s always with me even when I pick up another baby. In my heart I still believe I can still smell his scent sixteen and half years on.”*

For others the question of adoption lent a jarring note to the event: *“He was lovely, terrific. As I say I felt very, very sad because he was such a lovely looking lad.”*

Another said of the situation:

*“She looked like me. I loved her mum at the time. I think I was trying to distance myself because I knew the adoption was going to happen. That’s why I never held the baby.”*

Five men who had originally reported no feelings of fatherhood expressed a degree of change in their feelings at the point of birth e.g.:

*“I was overwhelmed when I went through to see the baby, in fact massively overwhelmed because this nurse gave me - a just turned 16 yr. old boy - this tiny little thing that was mine. I can certainly remember being kind of like ‘Oh, this is mine.’”*

One man who did not initially see himself as a father began to experience a change during the pregnancy e.g. he began to look forward to settling down. But he added that his first contact with his child accelerated the growth in his feelings of fatherhood: *“ I felt a lump in my throat when I held him. It’s quite awe-inspiring what has happened. That hits you more than anything else.”*

In the case of another man, he did not welcome the pregnancy, nor did he feel like a father at any time during the pregnancy - he said that he had had a career as rock musician to pursue. At the time of the news of the pregnancy he was in France with a band. However by the time of the birth this man had developed strong feelings for the birth mother. He decided to be at the hospital during the birth and afterwards he became involved in caring for the child: *“I went up to the hospital often, held her and helped feed her”*.

As a measure to gauge the proportions of men who expressed commitment (or otherwise) to the birth mother and child, the number of those men who were restricted from involvement can be deducted from the numbers of the entire group - 30. At a conservative estimate this include those in the Forces and those men



excluded from the birth events - 8 men in all. This results in a figure of twenty-two men who could be physically involved and present during this time. Of this number, fifteen respondents attended the hospital, saw, and in some cases, held their child. Therefore a large majority (15/22) had an active involvement in the events surrounding the birth.

For most of the respondents, such involvement was for a range of reasons and took various forms. Some were there for the birth mother: *"it was my relationship with the birth mother that was the all-pervasive one rather than the relationship with the baby"*. Some were pleased that she had had a good birth: *"I was glad it was a good birth, it never gave her any problems"*. Some were present at the birth, and some took an active part in feeding and changing the baby: *"I went up often, held her and helped feed her"*. For four men, the events around the birth included disputes and fights in the hospital as they sought to have contact with the birth mother and child. For these four, the normally positive experience of visiting mother and new-born baby was marred by the hostility of others and efforts to exclude them. One man described an argument at the bedside:

*"K. was sitting bottle feeding S. and I said 'oh great you're keeping the baby' and she says 'no I'm still putting the baby out for adoption.' So we started. I says 'why not give the baby to me, to my family?' And she says no. So we had an argument and the Sister came in and grabbed the baby. The way she lifted the baby hurt the baby's neck and I says to the Sister what she's doing with my baby - 'watch my baby's head'. My voice was probably raised. So I got flung out the hospital."*

Half (15) of the entire group did not see the baby. The reasons for this are varied. Six men in this group were unable to do so because they and the birth mother had parted - the responsibility for separation in these cases seems to have been either mutual or at the behest of equal numbers of birth fathers and birth mothers. Five birth fathers were excluded or banned by parents or social workers. Three men were overseas serving in the Forces. In one case the birth mother was sent away to another part of the country.

Of the fifteen birth fathers who never saw the baby, six report feelings of sadness, upset and regret. One man said that he *“didn’t have a bond with L. because I never even saw her. I always wanted to know what she looked like but I never saw her”*. Three said that they could not recall how they felt and had *“shut it out, blanked it”*. Two birth fathers said that they were reserved and controlled and in the words of one, he *“was frightened to say too much, didn’t want to get too involved for fear of opening up again the question of adoption”*.

In the case of three others in the sub-group of birth fathers who had had no sight of their child, their awareness of the pregnancy and birth was so belated or mediated through official notification as to render them unable to comment on their feelings of not seeing the baby.

One man presented as one of the most emotionally detached of the group who had not seen their child. In response to the item concerning whether he had had any sight or touch of the child, he replied:

*“I was interested if it was girl or a boy and if she (the birth mother) was alright. Frankly I had little experience of what a baby might be. I was much more concerned about her.”*

However there is an ambivalence imbedded in his remarks when he goes on to say that at the time he was: *“sad that there would be a child who I had fathered who wouldn’t know me. Sad, but in a cool distant way. There was no emotional attachment”*. Despite his detachment this man reports a regret and, in my reading of his comment, there is present some concern for a child together with an acknowledgement of a shared responsibility in her conception.

Excepting this man and another two who also consistently reported no feelings of fatherhood, there is a very large majority who, during the pregnancy and birth, reported having either begun with feelings of fatherhood or say that these developed in the course of the events. This group is composed of twelve who began feeling like



fathers, three who changed to feeling thus during the pregnancy and a further five who were so moved as a result of the birth and sight of their child as to express feelings of fatherhood. In all, twenty respondents reported that they had experienced feelings of fatherhood before or at the birth.

Of the total number in the study ( $n = 30$ ), four were unable to report on this period, one man did not give an answer (interview conducted postally) and one man could not (he reported that he remained “*unsure*” about his feelings towards the child). If these six men are deducted from the total it leaves twenty-four respondents who were able to report on their attitude towards fatherhood during the pregnancy and birth. Four said they never felt like fathers. This can be contrasted with twenty respondents who said that they had experienced feelings of fatherhood i.e. 20/24. But what was the substance of these feelings towards their unborn or newly-born child?

As noted above in the discussion on feelings during pregnancy, at and after the birth, the respondents describe feelings of pride, ownership, anticipation of a future in which they envision themselves as parents of the child-to-be and commitment to home-making plans that would involve raising a child. For the men who report feelings of fatherhood subsequently ‘kicking-in’, they too reported feelings akin to those of the first group i.e. ownership (“*oh this is mine*” in the words of one), pride and affection for the child.

One man’s conversion from a lack of interest in the pregnancy and birth to a position where he felt that he should oppose the adoption plans is a case that expresses a feeling that the majority of men held at the time. For this man, the adoption plans were a concrete signal that his child would not have a father. He opposed the adoption and made arrangements for the baby to come home because he felt an “*obligation*” upon him. This consisted of his responsibility to provide his daughter with a father.

It seems then that many of the respondents felt like fathers. These reports of an awareness and demonstrations of fatherhood will be considered in the next discussion regarding emergent themes in this period.

However before we move to this it is necessary to acknowledge that during this early phase of their adoption experiences, the issue of adoption had already been raised for many of the respondents.

### **Arrangements for the Adoption**

The group's experiences and feelings in relation to the particular events involving the adoption will be discussed in the following chapter. Yet the adoption cannot be viewed as a single event. In reality the adoption of a child is a process as well as a single act that follows birth. In most cases this process includes a pre-birth period of decision-making that may involve (welcome or not) GPs, social workers and parents, initial contact with adoption agencies, participation in interviews with adoption practitioners. In the accounts of the group, sometimes the adoption was agreed early in the pregnancy and in other cases only after the birth. Here the discussion is confined to the part played by the broader issue of the question of adoption in the period prior to the birth - the next chapter looks at the adoption process and proceedings more comprehensively.

Prior to the birth of their child, over half of the group who could report (17/25) reported that adoption had become an issue. This involved a variety of types of decision-making, participation or non-participation. Either way for seventeen men the questions of adoption, their attitude to it and potential involvement in plans were posed during the period between pregnancy and the birth. This took a number of forms and these broadly depended upon whether the birth father was in favour of adoption or not. Eight of the seventeen respondents (8/17) were broadly in favour of proceeding with the adoption. All but one of this group were involved in the pre-birth adoption arrangements e.g. meetings with social workers to elicit views as to the



preferences of the birth parents in relation to upbringing. The one man who was not involved felt he was given no choice: *“No, I can’t say the adoption was against my wishes but I really felt that I had no significant choice in the matter.”*

The element of no choice is more prevalent amongst those in the group that were opposed to the adoption plans (9/17). The phrases ‘no option’, ‘not consulted’ and ‘no alternative’ feature regularly in their accounts. This was typically expressed as:

*“I felt that we, I, had no choice. No option. I felt guilty. The impression was that this was nothing to do with me. I felt isolated.”*

Therefore there seems to be a close correspondence between agreement to the plans for adoption and involvement in these and a similar association between opposition to the plans and exclusion from such arrangements. At an early stage in the pregnancy, birth and adoption events, it seems then that over a third of the respondents who were in a position to report (9/25) have, according to their accounts, undergone feelings of disenfranchisement.

This concludes the discussion of the group’s accounts of their experiences of the pregnancy and birth phase. What are the emergent themes?

## **AN EXTRAORDINARY LIFE EVENT, LOSS, THE EMERGENCE OF FEELINGS OF FATHERHOOD**

What can be inferred from the foregoing analysis of the time of pregnancy and the birth of the child? One distinct message is communicated. This is that for most of the men in the group, decades after the events of this period (and in one case nearly fifty years on), the effects have resonated and continue to do so in such a way that lends a passion and deep emotional quality to their accounts. It is too early in the discussion of the phases of the life courses of these birth fathers to make a direct connection with the men's feelings and the child that was given up for adoption. However, the notion of feckless young men who abandon both mother and baby is far from confirmed by this study of just the beginning period (i.e. the point at which their paternity becomes known to them) in their lives. .

It is suggested that three defining features of this first period emerge. These are a) that the time of pregnancy and birth was usually an extraordinary and impactful life event; b) that most of the group were involved in a series of events that left them with a substantial sense of loss and c) that typically there is evidence of a constellation of feelings and behaviours that suggests that a consciousness of fatherhood begins to develop at this point.

I will now discuss each of these features in turn. I conclude by suggesting that an appreciation of these features and the effect of their combination is central to understanding the life experiences of these birth fathers. This is because that here, in reactions to the news of the pregnancy and its subsequent stages, it is possible to discern the formation of feeling of birth fatherhood - whether or not this is explicitly acknowledged subsequent to the adoption - and a distinct birth father 'narrative'. As will be seen in discussion of the later phases of this birth father narrative, these defining characteristics of the pre-adoption experiences are repeated or echo in subsequent periods i.e. the adoption process, later life experiences and contact and/or searching in relation to the child given up for adoption.



In addition to the above a 'marker' regarding the shortcomings in the birth mother research will be placed at the end of this discussion of emergent themes. It is envisioned that identification of lacunae in the existing literature on birth mothers will emerge incrementally as we proceed through the various temporal phases of the birth father experiences.

### **An extraordinary life event**

Most of the men defined the period of the pregnancy and birth as having a considerable and formative impact upon them. Most were teenagers and very few planned to have a child at that point in their lives. A sense of alarm pervades many of the accounts they give of their reactions to the pregnancy. For many the sudden requirement to become more emotionally and socially mature - to consider others such as the birth mother and the unborn child - cut across existing life plans and aspirations. This dual challenge - to become an adult and to become a parent - which faces young fathers-to-be has been pointed out elsewhere (e.g. Pannor et al, 1971). Predictably the birth fathers in the study group evidence a depth and range of emotions that underlines the formative nature of this period for them and for many young fathers.

From first reactions to the news of the pregnancy through to the feelings on contact with their baby son or daughter, experiences and feelings were vividly recounted and remain important memories. A similar ability to minutely describe other various events during this period - their whereabouts and actions when first informed of the pregnancy; the detail of certain incidents that took place during the pregnancy and birth; events at the hospital - demonstrates the existence of an enduring set of memories relating to this period. The fact that a number of respondents became upset during the interview underlines the deep impact made on their lives by the experiences of this period.

A second significant factor in the casting of this period as impactful and extraordinary is the active presence and intervention of authority figures. This intervention often took the form of parental pressure to rule out any possibility of the relationship between birth father and birth mother continuing into joint parenting. In three cases the statutory welfare services were involved. These interventions whether statutory or familial, were experienced as repressive and authoritarian. In some cases, strained relationships between the birth father and either members of his family or those of the birth mother's family resulted in major arguments, physical violence and irreparable damage to family relations. In other cases the birth father found that his decision-making powers were removed, he was excluded from the pregnancy and birth events or he and the birth mother were required to separate, the birth mother being geographically removed to a mother and baby home or distant relatives. In these instances, most of the pregnancy and birth took place without the participation of the birth father who would have otherwise been involved. In other cases the requirement that the birth father adhere to Army or Navy discipline worked to produce a similar imposed non-involvement and feelings of frustration.

An additional factor that contributed to the feelings of exclusion during this period was the adoption itself. In most cases adoption arrangements had begun before the birth. Often these arrangements - meetings with social workers, completing forms etc. - because they tended not to include the birth father, produced an additional sense of disenfranchisement from the overall decision-making process. The men affected in this way expressed bitterness and anger over exclusion from discussions about life and family preferences for the child and key matters such as his social and medical profile as a birth parent. However it should be acknowledged that, in all but the recent period, there has been a general practice that tended to discourage many unmarried fathers from participation and formal decision-making e.g. having their names on the child's birth certificate (Barber, 1975).

Notwithstanding any general antipathy towards young unmarried fathers, such feelings of powerlessness and helplessness left by this set of negative experiences



contribute to the extraordinary impact of the overall events surrounding the pregnancy and birth. These are in keeping with the feelings of marginalisation expressed by birth mothers in areas such as pressure from external authorities (Bouchier et al, 1991; Deykin et al, 1984; Hughes and Logan, 1993; Inglis, 1984; Shawyer, 1979; Wells, 1993b).

For all those respondents that were involved in the birth events e.g. being there at the birth, close by, or present before or shortly after, the birth of their child was a moving and significant event in itself - whether or not they experienced paternal feelings.

Many of the men reported that they had been profoundly affected by the sight and feel of their child. For many this event was bound up with their feelings of paternity but also for those who had felt no sense of fatherhood throughout the pregnancy and felt none at the birth, the experience was unforgettable and they describe it in minute and vivid terms.

In respect of the three men who were married to the birth mother, the period of the pregnancy and birth was different with less of a sense of shock in their reactions to the news of pregnancy. Nor did there seem to be confusion regarding their role and status as fathers. For two of them there was no unwelcome intervention of authority figures. In the case of these two men, the impactful nature of this period derives not as a result of interventions that were perceived as unwarranted, rather their experience of this period was characterised by the development of a sense of fatherhood vis-à-vis the unborn child that they expected to parent.

This brings me to the second defining feature of this period that spans the pregnancy and birth of the child - the experience of loss.

The second feature of this phase of the respondents' experiences, and the third - the emergence of the first feelings of fatherhood - could be subsumed under the present one i.e. the experience of loss and the emergence of a sense of paternity constitute an extraordinary life experience in these circumstances. Whilst this is true, and all three

features are capable of being merged into one totality (an extraordinary life event), to do so would be to lose a distinct focus on the quality of two key features in the accounts. Firstly feelings of loss and secondly, thoughts of paternity. The resonances from these thoughts and feelings ebb and flow throughout the subsequent lives of the men in the group.

## Loss

This period sees the existence of a stable relationship with the birth mother for most men and the emergence of feelings of fatherhood for many. It is a time of the development and formation of strong bonds either with the birth mother or the baby or both. However it is also a period in the birth father narrative during which these attachments are severed - resulting in deep feelings of frustration and regret. These feelings were painful and still were for many as evidenced in their distress and anxiety during the interview.

The severing or uncoupling of these bonds occurred as a result of a number of factors. In some cases the fact of the pregnancy produced an adverse reaction and caused the end of the birth father and birth mother's relationship. This was sometimes on a mutual basis, on other occasions at the behest of the birth mother. In a few instances the end of the relationship was brought about by the birth father. In other cases the relationship was terminated by external authorities - parents, social workers, posting away or abroad in the Forces. A consequence of these separations was that the men involved were not able to see either the birth mother or the child at the time of birth. For some although young, certain 'nesting' activities (Richman, 1982) had taken place in a commencement of plans for marriage and a home for their child. Such plans were dismantled as events took a course guided by external authorities. For many of the respondents such separations were matters of grief that resulted in feelings of considerable regret and loss.



Feelings of grief and distress were also occasioned for some men because of the adoption plans. Arrangements to have the child adopted had already begun in many cases. The knowledge of this (whether accompanied by participation in these arrangements or not) may have also lent depth to feelings of loss e.g. sorrow was expressed by some who, at the birth, simultaneously felt pleasure and sought to distance themselves. This - they reported - was for fear that they would 'weaken' and abandon plans for the adoption.

In a significant number of accounts, loss unrelated to the experiences of pregnancy and birth was reported. This loss consisted of separation from a parent usually as a result of that parent's death. This was found to be the case in two other pieces of research (Bouchier et al, 1991; Mander, 1995). Bouchier et al also reported that an 'insecure childhood' was recorded as a major event in the pre-adoption period of the lives of the birth mothers that they interviewed. This suggests a case for further research into the life paths of birth parents prior to unplanned pregnancy. There can be little doubt however, that for those men who had experienced such loss, the pregnancy and birth experience would have contributed to an already turbulent psychology thus assisting in branding the adoption as an impactful experience on their consciousness.

### **The emergence of fatherhood**

Whether a feeling of fatherhood was present at the beginning of the pregnancy, developed during it, emerged at the birth or 'hung in the air', by the time of the child's birth most of the group reported feeling and behaving like fathers.

The pregnancy was unplanned for the majority of the respondents and therefore the question of fatherhood was unexpectedly posed to them. Over a third reacted with an immediate sense of fatherhood and by the time of the birth over half of the group had experienced some feelings or thoughts of responsibility towards the child. Some of these feelings took the form of regular and solicitous involvement during labour, the

birth and confinement. Other men expressed their hopes of future involvement in play with their son or daughter and others participated in choice of name. For other men it took the form of the assumption of responsibility in relation to home-making and 'settling down'. In those situations in which the birth father and/or birth mother were under age, discussions took place regarding elopement with a view to living together and raising the child. For the men who said that they had no feelings of fatherhood, neither at the beginning or subsequently in this period up to and including the birth, some of their statements can be qualified. This is so, in that present in their accounts, is an ambiguity in respect of their feelings i.e. these respondents experienced a sense of 'ownership' regarding the child. Yet they report that they did not feel like fathers because they could not be or were not to be fathers in the conventional – social - sense.

The subject of ownership is of relevance to the broader group in that many of those who said that they felt like fathers put it in such terms, typically "*she was mine and my responsibility*". As we shall see in the next chapter if the respondents felt that ownership was one of the characteristics of their relationship with the unborn child, then enforced adoption plans would feel like, in the words of one man "*robbery*".

Unlike women who may attain the role of mother by automatic ascription, as noted in the previous chapters, unmarried fathers as a whole - whether or not they intend to be involved in keeping the child - are conventionally seen as in a state of suspension pending a hands-on role (e.g. Rossi, 1977). Other than this social definition of a father, fathers and the singular world of their consciousness of fatherhood have been ignored (Marsiglio, 1995a; Richards, 1982). Although unable to be mothers nor 'do' fathering (i.e. perform as one), many of the men in the group felt themselves to have been - and be - a father. Being fathers was expressed in a pride at 'having made a baby', anticipation of future parenting, preparedness for home-making, concern for welfare of the birth mother and unborn child, readiness to physically confront individuals and influences that sought to deny them access to and involvement with their new-born child. A feeling of responsibility towards the child - the obligation to



provide a father for her was voiced by one. It is suggested that these activities and feelings constitute the 'protective agency' of a father-to-be described by Diamond (1995a). Diamond suggests that this 'agency' is the male counterpart of the mother's motherliness (devotion) towards the unborn child. And as such is a measure of emotional and psychological commitment to fatherhood.

Although other formative influences and experiences in the birth father narrative have yet to be discussed, it is suggested that at this point there is evidence for an emergent identity as a 'birth father' *per se*. These men report that they never thought of themselves as 'birth fathers' in the 1990s terminological sense. Notwithstanding this, there are indications of a spectrum of thoughts and feelings ranging from an all-pervasive feeling of fatherhood (to be forcibly denied an outlet or 'consummation') for some respondents, through to little or no feeling toward the unborn child in the case of - very few - others. However, even in the numerically small latter group, there is some evidence of expressions of regret. Such regrets concerned the possibility that their child would remain ignorant of details regarding its biological father and concern for their child's well-being. This was expressed in one case in the offer by the 'deserter' (the respondent who "*done a moonlight*") to 'keep', i.e. financially maintain his daughter.

An overview of the respondents' accounts relating to this suggests that, for a majority of the respondents, the existence of thoughts of fatherhood (and corresponding behaviour) is commensurate with the range of reactions, feelings, behaviours and aspirations that exists in relation to any fathers-to-be who intend to proceed to parent their child (Lewis, 1982). However, as noted the matter of the adoption had already begun to loom large for many and their narratives have begun to depart from those of other more conventional groups of fathers. The break or splitting of the 'father' role into two, the one that they will not become - a social father and the one that they will remain - the biological father, develops in the next phase - the adoption. However, the germination of a perception of fatherhood and an identity that includes being a

father in respect of the child in question has occurred for a significant number of respondents.

## **Conclusion**

It is suggested then that for many of the men in the group during this phase of the pregnancy and birth, a powerful 'trinity' had formed. This trinity consisted of three connected groupings of deeply-felt experiences and events i.e. an extraordinary and impactful life event, the experience of loss and the beginnings of feelings of fatherhood and attachment to the child. It is suggested that such an analysis and configuration of the early experience of these birth fathers provides a template for continued exploration and understanding of the next phases of their narrative. As we shall see in the following chapter on adoption and immediate post-adoption events, for many of the respondents, their experiences intensify or commence with reference to these three axes.

## **The Birth Mother Literature - A note regarding gaps**

In discussion of the phase between cognisance of pregnancy and the birth (thus excluding events to follow such as the adoption and the immediate post-adoption period, life experiences since and searching activity) it has become apparent that much of the research on birth mothers' experiences has been individualist in theme. As noted previously, studies have tended to analyse birth mother experiences from the standpoint of contemporary feelings of birth mothers, i.e. later-life - at the point of interview - distress and pain. These studies have sought, retrospectively, to construct a theory of unresolved grief based upon an enduring sense of loss as a result of having to have a baby adopted. In short the effects of relinquishment have been major research foci (e.g. Bouchier et al, 1991; Hughes and Logan, 1993; Millen and Roll, 1985; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). The literature has thus concentrated upon the birth mother as an individual somewhat devoid of a social context (save for the



detrimental activities of parents). The research discussion has tended to omit exploration of other social circumstances pertaining at the time e.g. the presence and activities of the father of the child and what became of this relationship. Other factors such as the birth mother's acceptance of motherhood-to-be are under-represented in the literature - the birth mother's parental status and role appear to have been automatically assumed and ascribed.

When men's role in pregnancy is researched we understand and accept that a 'natural' or fair question to ask of men is 'do they have any feelings of father-to-be?' Further reflection during this work has led me to research that has problematised assumptions regarding women, namely those that suggest that pregnancy automatically confers motherhood e.g. Chodorow, 1978. Such a research body of opinion does not exist in respect of the birth mother literature. Birth mothers do not appear to have been asked whether they felt like mothers in the same way that men may be routinely questioned about their feelings of paternity-to-come. As we proceed through the discussion of birth fathers' life experiences we shall not only see similarities with experiences of birth mothers but also new areas of the birth parent experience will be thrown into relief. In some cases new understandings will be illuminated by study of the respondents' experiences. In other cases it is suggested that previous knowledge of birth mothers' experiences will require revisiting and hopefully broadened.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE ADOPTION

*“It was a very emotional time. It was tinged with great sadness and a certain amount of loss, and anger.”*

This chapter presents findings relating to the second of the temporal phases of the respondents' adoption experiences. The first dealt with the pregnancy and birth period. This chapter discusses the adoption of the child and the twelve months afterwards. Reports from this period include events such as signing of consent to the adoption and accounts of how the respondents felt and behaved. As is the case for any aspects of the experiences of birth fathers in general, almost nothing is known about the feelings and behaviour of men in relation to their experiences in and of the adoption process and proceedings (Deykin et al, 1988; Menard, 1997). One of the only two existing studies of birth fathers discusses their feelings and behaviour in this period (Cicchini 1993). In this work Cicchini finds similarities between the experiences of birth fathers and those of birth mothers. Therefore Cicchini's work and findings will provide a useful reference point throughout the forthcoming discussion.

As noted in the previous chapter, for many men in the group (17/30) the question of adoption had already been raised prior to the birth of the child. Eight more men were informed at or around the time of the birth in hospital or in the days that followed. Five men remained unaware of the adoption for some considerable time - either months or years.

Twenty five men were able to report on their involvement in one, some or all aspects of the adoption - the decision-making process, arrangements, leave-taking, legal proceedings - either by choice, reluctantly or in opposition to it. This chapter seeks to lay out and analyse the feelings, motivations and influences that underlay the respondents' experiences during this period.



It is suggested that aspects of the men's reactions are similar to the adverse post-adoption emotional reactions of birth mothers as described in the research (e.g. Bouchier et al, 1991; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). The effects of the adoption experience have produced emotions that are commonly felt and are therefore cross-gender in their nature.

A second theme also emerges. This is in relation to a constellation of feelings that were expressed; some recalled, others revisited during the interview. It concerns a sense of powerlessness that emerges from the accounts of the respondents. These emotions included those of indignation and anger, frustration and humiliation. It is suggested that the process of disenfranchisement that began during the pregnancy can be seen to gather pace during the adoption process and proceedings. For some men exclusion takes an official form in moves to prevent them from participation in decision making.

Thirdly, it is suggested that the end of the formal adoption proceedings with its connotations of finality, assists in giving an emotional salience to this period. The reactions described by many of the men to the legal 'full stop' placed after the adoption betoken the presence of powerful feelings. For the men in the group there was no sense of 'closure' yet emotions were running high. Their feelings appear to have reached an impasse as regards the possibility of a positive outcome. Instead these feelings, as reported, express themselves in a variety of harmful and adverse ways.

In Cicchini's phrase this time of giving up the child is experienced as a 'period of crisis' (1993: 10). Such a characterisation of the period is confirmed in this study where evidence of considerable emotional turbulence is found the reports of the weeks and months following the adoption.

Fourthly, this chapter notes that others who hitherto had no feelings of fatherhood join the men who had reported or expressed such feelings. It is suggested that there is

some evidence of these feelings in the specific behaviour of some of the men as they proceed through the adoption process. By the end of the twelve month period after the birth of their child, the numbers of respondents who reported feelings of fatherhood have increased to fifteen out of twenty five who are able to report on the adoption events.

Finally there is a finding that seems to be unique to this study. This is that whilst there are elements in the respondents' experiences that correspond to those that have been identified in respect of birth mothers, there are groups of feelings and reactions that do not have any commonalities with birth mothers. Present in the respondents' accounts is a loose collection of unresolved emotions that have no wholly specific focus upon the child and are more generalised.

These feelings and thoughts are diffuse but seem to be in respect of loss felt in relation to the end of the relationship with the birth mother. A second dimension - again unreported - perhaps because unexplored - in the birth mother literature is that of thoughts of regret concerning unfulfilled aspirations for family life, in the respondents' cases, life involving the birth mother and child.

It is suggested then that, bearing in mind the retrospective nature of these accounts, the air of loss or regret conveyed and expressed by some of the men may be derived from different sources. Firstly thoughts and feelings for the child alone; secondly feelings for the birth mother and finally a combination of thoughts of loss in respect of both child and birth mother i.e. the loss of a shared future with child and birth mother.

The chapter will conclude with a discussion and summary of any significant themes that are new or a continuation of themes that have already been identified. These include consciousness of fatherhood, feelings of disenfranchisement and the presence of emotions that would bear out the suggestion that the adoption was (and remains for some) a life event of some considerable emotional salience.



An important reminder of a point made in the discussion of methodology needs to be made here. This is that the data arising from the interviews with the men in the cohort have been post-coded. For example, the organisation of 'reasons for the adoption' was derived from a combination of selecting one box on the questionnaire and combing through the verbatim quotes for the most frequently emphasised cause for the adoption decision. Other groupings of data were assembled and coded afterwards. These include the grouping of responses into pro and anti-adoption. In the latter case this relied less on a study of transcripts and more on data arising from respondent self-reporting - they were required to choose an attitude from a pre-coded selection that represented a spectrum of responses from unequivocal agreement with the adoption plans to unequivocal opposition. Here too, I have post-coded responses by grouping 'somewhat opposed' with 'opposed' and 'somewhat agreed' with 'agreed' to the adoption. Other such post-coding will be indicated as I proceed with the discussions in this chapter.

It is also fair to comment that in some respects there is an element of pre-coding i.e. in the interviews the men were not only asked to recall a time in their lives but also reconstruct it following the temporal structure of the questionnaire. The real-time experiences of these birth fathers (and often the interview itself) were not as compartmentalised as the organisation and presentation of the data suggests. Memory recall was required to follow the discipline (more or less!) of a pre-determined interview structure. But to begin with a fundamental question. Why adoption?

### **Reasons for the Adoption**

Parental intervention was reported as the greatest reason (12/25). This equates with the birth mother literature (e.g. Bouchier et al, 1991) in terms of the role of parents in promoting adoption as the only option to teenage pregnancy. It is the parents of the birth mother who feature the most - (9/12) - in this group of twelve sets of parents. The birth mother's mother was referred to as the driving force in six out of this latter

group of nine parents. In only one instance out of these nine sets of birth mother parents was the father of the birth mother specifically cited as an active influence in favour of adoption. This bears out findings in the general literature on women's role-taking namely that women are ascribed a central role in relation to emotional and practical responsibility in matters such as these (e.g. Rich, 1978). Such a confirmation is also the case - although not cast as findings as such - in accounts of birth mothers' experience of the role played by their mothers in adoption decision-making (Mander, 1995).

In three cases the respondents reported that both sets of parents intervened to ensure that the child would be adopted. Later in this chapter less congruent standpoints of some of the respondents' parents are discussed.

The next largest reason for the decision to adopt was shared equally between it being the decision of the birth mother (4/25) and something post-coded as 'the relationship could not sustain parenting a child' (4/25). This represents a collection of broadly similar reasons for the adoption. These include such comment as the relationship being described as not serious ("*a fling*") or not of the character that the respondent then considered suitable to lead to marriage and raising the child: "*We never had that sort of relationship. It would be one mistake compounding another*". In one case the respondent reported that their relationship had ended and he had set up home with another girl who was pregnant with his (second) child.

In the four cases of the birth mother's decision to have the child adopted, the respondents said that they believed the decision to have been made because her career considerations were the motive force. It is not obvious from the accounts whether there were any other influences in these decisions, i.e. the birth mother's parents or the birth father's unwillingness to proceed with any other alternatives to the adoption. However in two other cases, the birth father's career was given as a specific dominant force in his decision in favour of adoption.



One of these cases gives a sense of determination not to parent on the part of the birth father:

*“By then (the birth), I had gone up to College and I had shut my mind to the possibility of being married. I had friends and girl friends... I thought quite carefully about it. I thought fairly clinically. Selfishly. I could see my life’s prospect and Tim’s [a friend who had had to get married after his girl friend had become pregnant]. I just knew it was the best thing.”*

Five men were not in a position to give a first hand account of the circumstances that surrounded the reasons for the adoption

### **Reactions to the News of the Decision to Adopt the Child**

I have previously discussed the reactions of a majority of the group (17/25) because the issue arose in the period of the pregnancy and birth. Eight of the men were broadly in favour and nine were opposed to the decision in favour of adoption. What of the other eight men for whom adoption had not been on their agenda?

They reported that the news that their child was to be adopted and that such plans were in hand had not been anticipated. And for most of them the news was not welcome. Three were told in hospital. In one of these cases the child had had a serious accident in hospital and was, according to hospital staff, brain damaged. Nevertheless, the adoption was reported as having taken place against the feelings of the birth father. In the case of two men, they did not have an ongoing relationship with the birth mother. These two men reported that the first that they knew of the adoption was when they were informed by the agency involved in the adoption arrangements. One man was informed by social workers that had brought his child to see him. The seventh and eighth were informed, respectively, by an Army chaplain whilst on service overseas and by prison social workers.

This sudden knowledge of plans for the adoption added an extra twist to the emotions of the time:

*“I felt a lump, in my throat when I held him. It’s quite awe inspiring what has happened. That hits you more than anything else. While I was standing there holding David, M- said that she was having him adopted because that was for the best. I think I said ‘if that’s what you want’. I got upset and angry, handed David back and left.”*

In the two cases where the relationship with the birth mother had ended, one man had been excluded from the pregnancy and birth events by the birth mother but had hoped to achieve a reconciliation - thus the adoption plans were a surprise. In the other case (the man who had set up home and was planning a family with another woman), his reaction to the news of the adoption plans was muted. He reported feeling that he “*shouldn’t take a role*”.

It is significant that all of this group (the eight men for whom the adoption plans were not anticipated) were opposed to (or came to oppose) the adoption. Even in the case of the child who had been permanently injured, the respondent reported that he had felt rushed and had been reluctant to agree the adoption. To a certain extent the opposition of this group of respondents is to be expected given that instead of adoption, they had envisioned going on to parenting the child in the context of a family life.

### **Involvement in the Adoption Arrangements and Proceedings**

Involvement in the adoption is defined here as participation in the adoption process and proceedings. That is, in respect of contributing to arrangements, e.g. communicating preferences for adoptive parents and future life style of the child, sharing personal and family medical histories. I have also included in ‘involvement’ those men who participated by opposing the adoption plans. Altogether twenty-four men were able to talk about the degree of their involvement or non-involvement. The group is evenly divided between those who were and those who were not against the adoption.



The degree of involvement of the men who participated in the adoption process and proceedings (12) ranges from a one-off visit to social workers to regular contact with the adoption agency, and signing consent forms. In at least two cases birth fathers participated in the physical hand-over of their child. In two other cases their involvement includes the birth father's active participation (post-birth) against plans for the adoption.

The reports of these respondents convey a degree of responsibility. Many men attended the various interviews. They reported that they had supplied details of their religious and schooling preferences for the child, indicated preferences for types of adoptive parent. And, when they were invited to, the respondents expressed their wishes for the child's upbringing, e.g. that the child be encouraged to have an interest in sports. Most of the men - when they were able to be - were supportive and concerned regarding the birth mother's health, feelings and her best interests during the adoption arrangements. It is difficult to say whether the expressions of concern in these reports were derived from a care felt towards the birth mother or felt towards the child, or both.

The experiences of the group of twelve men who were not involved in the adoption proceedings evidence a range of non-involvement, i.e. from active exclusion or discouragement (9/12) through to simply an absence of their participation. Altogether ten of this group (10/12) were opposed to the adoption. Being opposed to the adoption was associated with exclusion from the arrangements and, at the least, discouragement from participation. This confirms the USA research among birth fathers (Deykin et al, 1988).

It is a different picture when we look at those who had an involvement in the adoption arrangements. The converse of the above is not the case, i.e. here involvement does not necessarily betoken agreement. In the group who were involved in the adoption, the numbers of men who said that they were broadly opposed to the adoption (6/12) and those who were in favour of the adoption (6/12) are equal.

What of these six men who were involved in the proceedings yet reported being against the adoption plan? They contributed to the adoption plans and proceedings whilst remaining opposed to the conclusion - the adoption of their child. It should be acknowledged however that 'involvement' has been post-coded to include official opposition in three instances in which the respondents' only participation involved opposing the legal proceedings - one of these men specifically classified himself as having not been involved. Nevertheless, the considerable 'negative' activity of these respondents and the energy expended (lobbying the authorities, court attendance etc.) can be seen as a form of participation in the public record.

The other three men who were opposed to but participated in the adoption plans were the group of three men who were married. In two of the latter cases, the adoption plans were advanced by social workers. The third man reported that his opposition to the adoption consisted of reluctance in the face of adamant conviction in support of the adoption from his wife and her mother. In terms of this group of husbands and legal fathers, it would be unusual not to have participated in interviews and mutual official consent to the adoption - given that their involvement was a legal requirement. As it was these men did participate in the adoption arrangements e.g. by taking part in interviews and signing their consent.

The group of six men who evidence a combination of involvement (although, for three men this encompasses involvement only by way of activity in opposing the proceedings) and opposition to the adoption plan, make up an additional aspect to the diversity of perspectives evidenced in the sub group of twelve men who were involved in the adoption process and proceedings.

A total of twenty-three men - sixteen who were against and seven who were broadly in favour of the adoption - were able to talk of their motives and feelings that underlay the adoption decisions. Discussion of this set of thoughts and feelings now follows.



## Feelings during the Adoption Process

### *- Those Who Were Against The Adoption Decision (16)*

The feelings reported by the sixteen men who said that they had been opposed to the adoption decision ranged from extreme hostility (4) and distress (4): *“Mentally I didn’t want the adoption to happen under any circumstances. I felt that E. was being stolen from me. Someone stole her life away from me.”* to a sense of powerlessness and feeling that they had no connection with the unfolding events (6). A combination of this ‘disconnected’ feeling and anger was expressed by one respondent in the latter group of six.

Another man reported that on receipt of the adoption papers he had felt *“an indignity for what C-- was going through”*. But he felt, he went on to say, that there was no role for him because the relationship between himself and the birth mother was over. He had also begun a relationship with another woman and expected this to be long-term and stable (she was expecting his child). This man’s emotional detachment - in terms of what he said regarding his own feelings - changed to opposition to the adoption as the legal proceedings gathered pace:

*“I began to feel a growing feeling of responsibility for L--. She was expecting me to be her father. I decided to oppose the adoption plans. I refused my consent and wrote to the Court to say so. I was prepared to look after L--.”*

Two men said that they felt, respectively, *“a sense of relief”* and a feeling of *“for the best”* in spite of their overall reluctance regarding the adoption.

Of these sixteen men who were opposed to the adoption, thirteen responded in the affirmative to the item that inquired as to whether they had felt like fathers and/or reported the development of feelings of fatherhood at some stage during the pregnancy and birth events. One man said that he had had no feelings akin to those of fatherhood, one replied that he was *“unsure”* as to his feelings regarding this and the sixteenth man (a postal interview) provided no response.

Just as those who were opposed to the adoption experienced a range of emotions from anger to a mix of reluctance and relief, so also was there a similar diversity of feelings reported by the group of seven men who had been in favour of the adoption.

*- Those Who Were In Favour of the Adoption (7)*

This group of seven men report a range of feelings and behaviour. This includes whole-hearted support for the birth mother (a 'right behind you' stance that probably, if my field notes are accurate, masked a personal whole-heartedness in support of the adoption i.e. an expression of agreement by proxy). There was also expressions of qualified agreement that brought with them a mixture of emotions:

*"I had no argument with the adoption, it was so inevitable that it would happen although I had reservations about losing contact. We were both very upset at the time; it was becoming final."*

Relief was also present: *"we were told that's what was happening and there was an element of a wee bit of semi relief"*. Relief plus *"confusion"* was reported by another. One man who had reported himself as 100 per cent favour of the decision, also expressed a mixture of emotions - with a preponderance of conviction in favour of the adoption:

*"There was an inevitability. I just wasn't old enough to get married. And I was quite happy with the thing. Except I thought it was sad. Sad that there would be a child who I had fathered who wouldn't know me. But in a very cool distant way."*

The reports of two of this group show a dissonance regarding their approval and feelings that accompanied this. One was: *"Confused. A traumatic time. It became harder and harder"*. The other felt:

*"Awful really. Very, very sad. Very mixed feelings. Something I wouldn't have done under any other circumstances. There was high emotions of all sorts. There was so much going on at that period of time. I think I was shell-shocked when I look back. Kind of on auto-pilot."*



None of those in favour of the adoption (7/23) had previously reported any distinctive feelings of fatherhood except for one man who was definite about feeling like a father. He expressed a sense of ownership towards his child: "*she was my birthday present*". This man had also seen and held his child. This is the man who described himself, when asked about his attitude to the adoption, as being in support of the birth mother. This man's approval of the adoption remains consistent throughout the process and, it is suggested, his feeling of fatherhood and his lack of ambivalence, regarding the adoption, is atypical of most of the rest of the respondents.

#### *- Two Men Who Approved of Then Opposed the Adoption*

Two of the men in the group of sixteen who were against the adoption reported that they had had no feelings of fatherhood during the pregnancy and birth period. Their decision to contest the adoption and seek to parent their child is worth looking at in the light of research into motives of men who 'block' an adoption (Schwartz, 1986).

Both of the above men were 19yrs old. One was at university and the other was an apprentice tradesman. The latter respondent saw his child, the former did not. The apprentice withheld his consent for three years whilst financially contributing to his child's maintenance. The student (who had bought a flat and established another relationship in which the woman was pregnant) made representations to the court three months after the birth after he had come to the decision that the adoption should not go through.

The respondent who had been an apprentice at the time had been present in hospital soon after his child was born and held her. He helped name the baby and, unusually for that time in respect of an unmarried teenage father, his name was used for the registration of the child's name. Events such as this in the period of the birth and immediately after seem to have contributed to the conversion of this man's feelings to include a sense of responsibility towards his child. It was in hospital that he was informed about the adoption decision. He reported that he and the birth mother (who

was underage) drifted apart. The child was placed with foster parents. He withheld his consent for nearly three years. Eventually:

*“The only way that I convinced myself [to consent to the adoption] was that she was going to be better off, she’s going to have a house, she’s going to have clothes. With a more stable family than what she would have with me. I kept hoping that in those years I’d find somebody that I really want to settle down with. That I could have a mum for her.”*

When asked what could have been different this man (who was 19yrs at the time) replied *“I feel if I had been another five or ten years older, more mature.... It’s difficult to say. The baby’s mum never got married.”*

The respondent who had been a student at the time also converted from having no parental feelings to feeling a similar sense of concern for his child’s welfare. This change, he reports, began during the pregnancy of his second partner. He speculated that his feelings of parental responsibility may have been invoked by the imminence of this second child. He began to feel that L. - the child being adopted - needed to have him as her father. That she was demanding this commitment from him. He also referred to feeling a *“duty of care”*. His representations to court included outlining his positive material circumstances, e.g. a stable relationship and an established home. However these were unsuccessful.

Schwarz (1986) discussed in Menard (1997: 156) suggests that the motives of birth fathers that officially oppose the adoption can include pride in paternity or procreation that may give rise to a view of the child as his or his family’s property. Opposition could also stem from a belief held by some birth fathers that history should not be repeated; namely that a child should not be abandoned by their father in the same way that they (birth fathers to whom this applied) felt that they had been by their fathers. Schwarz also discusses anger at the birth mother as another motive for opposition to the adoption plan. The conclusion is drawn that opposition is ‘determined by (the birth father’s) feelings about himself, the birth mother and the meaning the adoption has for him’. It is the case that one of the sixteen men who expressed their



disagreement with the adoption spoke of the child having been “*stolen*”. No respondent directly associated their opposition to the adoption with any childhood experiences such as loss of their father - I will return to the connection between thoughts of the child and childhood experiences in my conclusion. One man talked of his anger at the birth mother - but, as in the case of the other fifteen, he did not formally oppose the adoption. In the case of the motives of the two men who formally opposed the adoption plans there is also little corroboration of Schwarz’s suggestions of feelings of the child as property or antagonism towards the birth mother as motives for their opposition.

Schwarz’s overall conclusion regarding birth fathers’ motives for opposition to adoption suggests that the source of these motives is in a constellation of the birth father’s feelings about himself, the birth mother and the meaning of the adoption. Notwithstanding this suggestion, Schwarz omits a significant aspect - the feelings of the birth father towards the child.

An association with the respondents’ attitude towards the adoption and their feelings of fatherhood is capable of being depicted in table form:

**Table 3**

**Attitude to adoption and feelings of fatherhood**

	Feelings of fatherhood	“Unsure” re fatherhood	No feelings of fatherhood
<i>Opposed to the adoption</i>	14	1	1
<i>In favour of the adoption</i>	1	0	6

As can be seen from an analysis of the accounts of those who reported that they were against the adoption and those who supported the idea, those men who felt like

fathers during the pregnancy and birth period (or later came to feel thus as in the case of the two men) were much more likely to be amongst the ones who opposed the adoption. And those who did not feel like fathers were those who were broadly in favour of the adoption.

### **Giving Up the Child**

Altogether fifteen men were involved in either the act of giving their legal consent to the adoption, the physical activity of leaving the child, or both.

#### *- Leave Taking (15 respondents)*

These acts were described as having given rise to painful experiences. Particularly felt by the seven men who were involved in leaving their child - either by departing from the hospital or from the house of foster parents or by handing him or her over to welfare workers:

*“I was there when M. [the child] had to leave from the hospital. Her mother and father were there. It was just like getting ready for going home, like a normal mother would do, getting her stuff together, getting the baby ready. Then the social worker come and took the baby. I’m not sure if I imagine this but I actually saw her putting the baby in the car and driving off. We all had a cuddle of her anyway. You know what I mean. That was the bad moment. I was cuddling D. [birth mother], probably restraining her as well really.”*

In another of these cases, taking his good-byes from the child was described as a protracted “*trauma*”. This came about as a result of increasingly tense visits - spread over six months - whilst their child remained in foster care awaiting adoption.

Eleven men in all (including four of the above seven who physically participated in the leave-taking of their child) were asked to sign their consent to the adoption. Faced with the question of whether to accede or not, eight men signed and three refused. Of those who refused to sign their consent, two became involved in formal challenges to



the proceedings. The third man eventually signed after three years. Two of these three men (who refused their consent) reported the development of feelings of fatherhood towards the child and the desire for a family. I have discussed these two men above - the apprentice/birth father who eventually signed his consent to the adoption and the student/birth father whose consent was dispensed with ("*noted*" in the court letter that he supplied with at the interview). In the case of the third man who refused his consent, he reported that he asked and was permitted to attend court on the day of the adoption proceedings "*to put my point forward*". He did this not so much to offer an alternative to the adoption plans - by this time he was married to a wife who was (mentally) "*not well*", living in a one-bed roomed flat and had no job stability - but it seems, to have his day in court. By the time of the court hearing he understood that the adoption was inevitable yet he felt that he needed to be a party to the proceedings.

His attitude was tinged with "*bitterness*" and an anger that was present during his account. This, he reported, was derived from him having been excluded from all events except the early part of the pregnancy, e.g. he was notified of the birth of his child, her sex, weight, etc. by the adoption agency a week after the event. At the court his contribution was noted for the record, he refused to sign his consent and after the proceedings (which resulted in approval of the adoption) he departed but "*felt a bit better*". When asked whether he had felt any feelings of fatherhood during this period, this man reported that he was "*unsure*". However his aspirations for a family life involving a wife and child were more clear in his account.

This small group of three men who were invited to sign their consent but refused, have in common at one time or another during the events of the pregnancy and birth, experiences of a desire for a family in which the child's presence was seen as central (NB two of them did not see the child). In other words, it is suggested that feelings for the child were at the centre of their refusals to sign the consent and their objections to the adoption.

Signature of consent to the adoption did not necessarily mean agreement with the events or an absence of any feelings of fatherhood. All of the eight men who signed reported that they, variously, had experienced feelings of fatherhood and a wish to make a family. However, by the time of the consent to adopt - in most cases some months after the birth - the adoption was seen and felt to be inevitable.

Notwithstanding this, two who signed considered changing their minds but did not act on this.

*- Those Who Did Not Participate In Giving Up The Child (15 respondents)*

Six men were absent and unaware of the adoption at the time and had no option in respect of involvement or otherwise. This leaves another nine men who despite being present at the time of the adoption neither physically nor legally participated in any leave-taking concerning their child.

Six of this group of respondents were not in a position to exercise a choice by virtue of their exclusion from the adoption process and proceedings. Of the remaining three men, the report of one remains faithful to his description of himself as having “*no emotional attachment*”. That is to say that he agreed to the adoption, had no involvement in the arrangements and played no part in any giving up of the child. Neither did he see the child. The birth mother had been sent to Scotland to live with relatives and it was there that the baby was born and adopted. The two other men were both, in their different ways, committed to the adoption plan. Both were involved in attending interviews during the adoption process. One of the respondents reported that he “*did not feel like a father*” during this period but began to feel some curiosity as to how his child would develop. He reported that he also began to have reservations about losing contact with him. This man elected not to see his child in hospital because: “*I was frightened to say too much, didn't want to get involved for fear of re-opening the question of adoption or not*”. The decision to have the baby adopted was reported as a mutual one. Perhaps then it is fair to suggest that this man,



by not looking at his child, was seeking to avoid the possibility of changing his mind and calling off the plans to adopt.

The third man reported that he had had feelings of fatherhood during the pregnancy and had seen his child in hospital. This man, unlike the vast majority of the others, had had four other children prior to the child that was given up for adoption (he was 32 when he and the birth mother began their relationship).

This man's account posed the question 'did prior experience of social fatherhood make the adoption less distressful?' Two other men had previously had children from their marriage to the birth mother of the child (a third man was a father but he did not know this at the point at which his – second - child was adopted). These two men were engaged in parenting children when the second child was adopted. The decision to have this child adopted was reported as having been a difficult decision for them. Both men reported that it was against their wishes. Their decision in favour of an adoption plan came about as a result of external influences from, respectively, hospital social workers following the brain injury of his child, and pressure from the birth mother's mother. In these two cases previous experience of fatherhood did not seem to help make the adoption decision less stressful.

### *- The Formal Consent*

Overall, twenty-one respondents out of the entire group of thirty were in position to be able to sign, i.e. they were either immediately on hand or could be contacted by the authorities. Of the twenty-one, ten were not offered the opportunity to do so. If the three married men are deducted from the remaining eleven who were given the opportunity to sign, and removed from the overall number of those invited to sign their consent, the result is a high number (8/18) of unmarried, teenage (mostly) men who were offered such an option in relation to the legal process of the adoption of their child. This is high in terms of the then general practice of not actively inviting

young teenage fathers into similar official proceedings such as birth registration (Platts, 1968; Sarre, 1996).

The level of respondents' involvement from physical relinquishment to official signing of consent to adopt; the number in the group who participated in the process and the degree to which some of them were involved, provides some qualitative evidence of unmarried teenage fathers' willingness and ability to be involved in the adoption decision-making. More specifically, the reports of the respondents in this matter (whether involved or prevented from involvement) do not confirm the suggestion that birth fathers tend not to be involved in the adoption process (Lightman and Schlesinger, 1982; Mander, 1995).

The above discussion has taken events up to and including the final physical and legal disconnection between the respondents and their children. The next discussion explores the after-effects of this.

### **Feelings Following the Adoption**

In keeping with previous research relating to birth mothers (e.g. Bouchier et al., 1991; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984) and the Australian study of birth fathers (Cicchini, 1993), the respondents were invited to talk about the feelings that they had had in the weeks and months immediately following the adoption.

#### *- Little or No Effects: 5 Men*

Five men reported that the adoption had little or no immediate effect upon them. One said that whilst he had felt that his child was being "*stolen*" from him during the adoption process, after the adoption took place "*it wasn't a major problem*" (later this man's account reveals that three years on "*things begin to grate*"). A second man responded that the adoption had had no effect on him because:



*“I shut it out. I literally put it behind me. I’d never known anyone in that situation before. There had always been kids around. It (having children) was a natural thing. But it was always there.”*

However, the above verbatim quotation tends to belay his declaration that he was not affected by the adoption.

Three other men were less ambiguous in their responses as to whether or not they had experienced any after-effects relating to the adoption. One man reported that he had had no feelings afterwards because he had begun parenting a step daughter (from another relationship) and that this daughter served as *“a substitute”* for the daughter that had been adopted. A second man’s account was consistent with his continual feelings throughout the process. This was to the effect that he had had *“no emotional connection”* with the event and that he had known that it was the best thing to do. This man reported that he had felt *“nothing”* after the adoption. The third respondent *“wondered what had happened”* to his child in the weeks and months after her adoption. During this interview this man presented as the one who was the most matter-of-fact in relation to his overall experiences. He was also the least forthcoming. He is the respondent who was much older than the median at the time of the adoption and the man who had previously been involved in parenting four children.

*- After Effects: 21 Men*

I have already spent some time discussing the quantitative nature of these accounts in the first chapter of this section. There I reported that a large majority of the respondents (21/26 - four men found out about the adoption more than a year afterward and therefore are not included in this discussion of immediate after-effects) talked of experiencing some form of emotional discomfort or distress after the adoption. In that discussion I quoted reports of depression and self-harm, and ill-judged decisions to enter into marriage. I also reported that although the tendency was for the majority to report what impressed as powerful negative reactions, the

accounts of a smaller sub-group of four men were presented in less powerful terms. One man said that he had felt “*a bit upset*”, another felt “*occasional guilt*” and one other said that at the time he was:

*“too young to have the kind of feelings that someone maybe two or three years older would have had and I had that immaturity, if you like, in me that I was still a young lad [16yrs]. I felt a certain loss in that he was gone and I would never see him.”*

If these four relatively less powerful accounts are removed from the number of those who reported experiences of emotional turbulence we are left with 17 reports that vary between discomfort, distress, dysfunctional behaviour or all three. Distress is post-coded here and defined on the basis of the respondents’ self reports.

These reports ranged from, in the case of one man, feelings of despair that resulted in attempted suicide and another who mentioned feeling suicidal and being “*very depressed*”, to those men who said that in the months after the adoption they typically felt “*numb*”, “*manic*” or “*very upset*”. One man’s response to the question contains feelings that recur in many of these accounts:

*“I became a very angry person after she was born. I used to go to dance halls looking for trouble. I just turned violent for a long time. I used to go out with quite a few guys. We used to get into trouble. Just being stupid. Hitting other people. I turned to drink some times. A couple of times I tried drugs.*

*I was having trouble sleeping. I was having back pain. I wasn’t mentally ill but I ended up at the Andrew Duncan [a local psychiatric hospital] as an outpatient. What I was doing was punishing myself. I was trying to punish myself for what I had done.”*

The mildest of these reports described being “*worried*” about the child and having many anxieties. ‘Dysfunctional behaviour’ is also a post-coded category of my own. This covers behaviour of either an explicit anti-social nature e.g. arrestable activity such as violence to others, or personal abuse such as extended drinking bouts, illegal drug-taking. Also included in this overall category are three men who made unhappy



marriages - one of the men used the term "*on the rebound*" to describe his reasons for marrying soon after the adoption.

In order to analyse the cause of such distress it is helpful to ask if the degree of distress has a relation to three factors. The first one is concerned with opposition to or agreement with the adoption. Is it the case that opposition equates with a greater negative reaction? Or alternatively, was agreement with the adoption decision liable to result in a less extreme post adoption reaction?

*- Comparison of After Effects of Those Who Agreed and Those Disagreed with the Adoption*

Those Who Agreed (7 respondents)

Did agreement with adoption make the weeks and months after it less turbulent than for those who opposed the decision to have the child adopted? The answer seems to be in the negative. Of the seven men who reported that they agreed with the adoption two reported virtually no effect on their lives in the months following the adoption. One of these two men felt some curiosity. The second reported that he had experienced "*occasional guilt*" afterwards.

Of the other respondents, one man described the period as: "*a mixed emotional time - feeling bad and a lot of self-interest*". Of the other four respondents in this group of seven, experiences range from a report of confusion and a row with the birth mother on the first anniversary of the birth of the child, to more extreme accounts of: "*a traumatic period*", "*lots of difficulties*" and a marriage entered into "*on the rebound*".

Therefore amongst those who agreed with the adoption, a majority (5/7) reported negative after effects. This is surprising on the presumption that agreement to the adoption ought to have betokened a positive attitude that would have helped dilute more extreme reactions. However, the effects of the emotional turbulence of the

entire sequence of events - from awareness of pregnancy through the birth events to their child's adoption - on such young men cannot be underestimated. By the time that the respondents in question had arrived at the agreement to the adoption many of them had experienced a considerable flux of emotions:

*“Awful really. Very, very sad. Very mixed feelings. Something I wouldn't have intrinsically done under any other circumstances. There was high emotions of all sorts. There was so much going on at that period of time. I think I was shell-shocked when I look back.”*

Such a set of experiences is typical of many of the respondents irrespective of their stance on the adoption decision. The respondent quoted above reported that he had agreed with the adoption decision and participated in the arrangements. Yet he too reports considerable negative after-effects. Therefore an association between agreement and less after-effects is not in evidence. It may be then that an evaluation of the after-effects of the adoption can be too narrowly focussed upon the agreement or disagreement decision. In the case of five respondents it appears that negative after-effects may also be to do with the experiences and events throughout overall process from pregnancy to adoption. An *“emotional roller-coaster”* as one man put it.

#### Those Who Disagreed (17 respondents)

Seventeen respondents disagreed with the adoption. How did they fare in terms of after-effects? Was there more turbulence in their lives immediately after the adoption than in the case of those who agreed? Or, do conventional notions of an association of adjustment to decisions based upon agreement or opposition, not apply here also?

As reported in the previous discussion of the more quantitative analysis of this period, the experiences and behaviour of sixteen of this group of seventeen respondents suggest considerable post-adoption distress. Violence, alcohol abuse, suicide attempts and *“deep depression”* feature regularly in their reports of the time after the adoption. Therefore a more conventional association can be drawn here in the light of



there being only one of this group of seventeen respondents who disagreed. Only he reported minimal effects: *“It wasn’t a major problem straight after the adoption”*.

It is suggested then that there is an association between disagreement with the adoption and negative after-effects.

However an unexpected finding has also emerged. After analysis of the reactions of the entire group of those who agreed or disagreed with the adoption, it is suggested that negative reactions to the adoption could not have been forecast on the presumption that only those who disagreed with the decision would experience distress. Those who agreed also reported distress and anti-social behaviour in the weeks and months afterwards. This pattern can be depicted figuratively:

**Table Four**

**Attitude to adoption decision and after-effects**

	Distress	little or no distress
<i>Agreed with adoption decision</i>	5	2
<i>Did not agree</i>	16	1

Adverse reactions in the months that followed the adoption can be seen to fall on both sides of a line dividing supporters and opponents of the adoption decision.

A supplementary question is this. Is there an association between the level of involvement in the adoption process and proceedings and the degree of distress? In other words, did participation in decision-making make for less of a negative reaction in the weeks and months that followed the adoption?

- *The Relationship Between Participation in the Adoption and After-effects*

The finding here is that those respondents who participated in the adoption process and plans were just as likely to have experienced emotional turbulence as those who did not. Indeed the ideal configuration (in terms of imagined adjustment) of support for the adoption together with involvement in the arrangements was in place in the cases of six men. Yet five of this group reported experiences of post-adoption distress. These ranged from “*anguish*” to one man who said that he “*lost all sense of direction and meaning to life*”. The respondent who was the father of four previous children is the sixth man. He reported having agreed with the adoption and participated in arrangements and said that he had felt no discomfort afterwards.

The overall relationship between participation or not and whether or not the respondents reported distress is depicted below:

**Table Five**

**Participation in Adoption Arrangements and After-effects**

	distress	little or no distress
<i>Participated in adoption arrangements</i>	8	1
<i>Did not or could participate in arrangements</i>	10	2

This analysis fails to bear out any notion that participation in the adoption process may leaven any adverse emotional reaction. However it should be noted that for some among this group of respondents, participation or involvement in the adoption proceedings was reluctant. In the case of at least three men they reported that they were unhappy with the adoption plan.



Irrespective of whether there was a concurrence with the overall plans, the finding that participation in the proceedings was not a predictor of better adjustment is interesting as it appears to go against the flow of other research results in this field.

In Cicchini's study of Australian birth fathers there is a suggestion that a lack of involvement indicates a potential for the continuation of any negative after-effects. Additionally, Sachdev (1991b) suggested that greater involvement by birth fathers in the adoption decision may contribute to an increase in positive feelings concerning the adoption. Whilst a lack of "positive feelings" is not quite the same as the post-adoption distress outlined here, given the lack of literature on birth fathers in the adoption process, Sachdev's work is another relevant comparison.

A wider comparison is possible if we turn to research in other fields. Here there is a conventional belief involving the relationship between participation in potentially distressful situations and recovery. This conventional belief is expressed, for example, in the view that attendance at funerals aids the bereaved one in dealing with their distress. Clinical research underlines this commonly-held view. For example, in a study of attitudes to parental involvement in medical decision-making in respect of the withdrawal of treatment to an ill child, McHaffie and Fowlie (1996: 182-183) suggest that any subsequent emotional and mental health consequences of such decisions are ameliorated if there has been parental participation. Elsewhere, the therapeutic benefits of service user involvement in decision-making in respect of admission to residential care are set out in Brearly, Hall, Gutridge, Jones and Roberts (1980); see also Perlman (1957) for a social case-work perspective on the advantages of client involvement in decision-making.

Yet in the present study a different finding is indicated. Namely, that the distress felt by many of the respondents after participation in the adoption process does not confirm the view that involvement in a potentially distressing process assists the person in their ability to recover from any of its negative after-effects. It should be borne in mind however that in this instance, it is the **immediate short-term effects**

i.e. under twelve months, which are under discussion. The longer-term effects and impact of the adoption experience is discussed in a later chapter.

A further question is posed here. How does the immediate after-effects compare between those men who reported feelings of fatherhood and those who did not? In other words did the former (those who felt like fathers) feel worse than the latter (those who did not)? Did these feelings of post adoption distress and the degree to which they change have any relationship with feelings (or not) of fatherhood?

*- The Relation Between Feelings or not of Fatherhood and the After Effects of the Adoption*

Twenty-three men responded to the item concerning if and when their immediate post adoption feelings subsided. As noted previously, the time taken to reach more calm emotional waters ranged from a minimum of eighteen months to five years.

An eventual change in feelings of distress was reported by sixteen men (NB there is at least four men who indicated that whilst a certain levelling off was the case, they also commented that the child was, typically, “*always there*”. Of this group of sixteen, nine reported that they had had some feelings of fatherhood and six said that they had not.

In the case of the group of respondents for whom feelings failed to change, five of them (5/7) experienced feelings of fatherhood, one did not and one man reported that he was unsure as to having had any feelings of fatherhood at the time.

This pattern can be shown in table form:



**Table Six**

**Feelings of Fatherhood and After-effects of the Adoption**

	Distress	No distress
<i>Feelings of fatherhood</i>	13	2
<i>No feelings of fatherhood</i>	7	3
<i>“Unsure” – about feelings of Fatherhood</i>	1	0

Comparing the two main groups cannot be done in any quantitative sense. However, there is an indication that feelings of fatherhood are proportionally more likely to appear in the group of respondents who experienced negative after-effects in relation to the adoption. Or put the other way around, in the group of men for whom feelings of pain and distress were present after the adoption, there were more of those who reported feeling like fathers than the numbers in the group for whom there were no such negative after-effects. This would suggest that feelings of fatherhood may play some part in the existence of distress during this period.

To remain with the question of the part played by feelings of fatherhood, two additional questions are posed here. Firstly does the time taken for distress to subside bear any relation to whether or not a man experienced feelings of fatherhood?

The time taken to arrive at a reported measure of stability seems to bear no relationship to whether or not a man had had feelings of fatherhood, e.g. one man who had reported distinct feelings of fatherhood reported that it took him eighteen months to settle down after the adoption. For him such a time span “*was a long time to be angry*”. Conversely, another who did not report paternal feelings towards his child said that it took him five years to adjust to the negative effects of his experience.

Secondly, as most of the entire group (21/26) who could report on their post adoption feelings experienced some form of emotional turbulence, it seems axiomatic that both those who reported feelings of fatherhood during this period and those who did not, will feature amongst those who underwent distress in the weeks and months afterwards. But if some form of distress is taken as a given for most of the group, does the depth of this distress have a relationship to whether or not the men experienced feelings of fatherhood?

The associations in this case, although numerically slight, suggest some observations. Nine men underwent serious distress after the adoption, e.g. self-harm, received clinical treatment for depression. Seven of the men reported feelings of fatherhood and two said that they had had no such feelings. However, the converse points to a stronger suggestion. Of the twelve men whose post adoption experiences were that of distress but not as outwardly extreme as the others e.g. their reports were relatively mild and include being “*upset*”, feeling “*bad*” and experiencing “*a mixed time*”; more of this group reported little or no feelings of fatherhood - 8/12. Consequently it is suggested that whilst nearly all of the men experienced levels of distress after the adoption, the depth of emotional turbulence may be associated with whether or not they felt like fathers.

In other words, those men who felt little or no sense of fatherhood were likely to be among those who had less of a difficult emotional time after the adoption. The birth mother research does not appear to explore this association between feelings of motherhood and after-effects, presuming as it seems to do, that all such women will have feelings of motherhood.

Whether the experiences of the respondents included behaviour and emotions that subsided, intensified or were relatively insignificant during the adoption events, they took place in a social context. Other people played a part in either the amelioration of distress or its intensification. Who were they?



## **Social Influences During the Adoption Process**

The key other party is the birth mother. Because she is a central participant in the respondents' experiences her part will be subject to a separate and later discussion.

Apart from the birth mother there were other people who played significant roles in the experiences of the respondents. They include parents (both sets), welfare workers, other family relations and friends. The various contributions of the individuals in this diverse group played an important part in the complex web of experiences and emotions that were formed during this period. At various points the actions of such individuals were influential, e.g. in copper fastening a sense of exclusion, by defraying some of the distress or through a rejection of this distress with either an exhortation 'to get on with life' or hostility. Such individuals fall into three main groupings.

### *- Parents*

I have already drawn attention to the twelve cases where it was reported that the parents of the birth mother intervened to play a pro-adoption part. In at least two of these cases both sets of parents were in agreement with the adoption decision. One set of the two pairs of parents combined to organise living accommodation for the pregnant birth mother (at the home of the birth father's parents) so as to ensure that the birth father and she were kept apart and to institute adoption plans. More frequent than such concord between both sets of parents were reports of offers by the parents of the birth father to assist in raising the child. In at least four cases the respondent reported that his parents made explicit offers to care for the child. One of these offers was declined by the birth father because it was conditional on the child being raised as that of his parents, i.e. as the respondent's sister. He reported that he foresaw a time when he would not be able to maintain such a subterfuge. In the three other cases the offers of the birth father's parents were ignored. In an additional four other cases, the birth father's parents were opposed to the adoption plans. In one of these latter cases

the birth father reported that his request that his parents be approached went unheeded by prison welfare workers. In five cases it was reported that there was no active intervention or offers from either set of parents. In two of this latter five cases, the birth father and birth mother were older than the average age of the cohort and therefore, probably, the adoption events were outwith the knowledge of their parents.

*- Welfare workers*

I will return to the issue of social workers and associated adoption personnel in a later discussion of policy. However at this point it is important to note the influence of welfare workers during the respondents' overall progress through the adoption process. One man deemed social workers to have been helpful. Otherwise the activity and attitudes of welfare personnel came in for criticism. Sometimes this influence was by omission: "*didn't think they did enough to talk us out of it*" and on a number of other occasions by commission, whether by hospital staff who made him: "*...feel neglected. Forgotten about.*" or who ordered another man to leave the bedside, or by adoption workers who were:

*"... biased and biased and biased, she (the social worker) was in favour of the adoption. No matter what you asked her it was always 'in the long term he will go to a good home. He will be brought up by good parents'. What right did she have saying that? I am a good parent."*

Another man reported that the adoption worker was: "*... a bit abrupt with me. She said 'father or no father you do not have any rights as to whether the adoption goes through.'*".

A respondent who travelled to Cork from Scotland to place his child with nuns who were to arrange the adoption, gave an account of his experience when he and the birth mother arrived at the gates of the convent in Ireland:

*"It was very short. It was extremely business-like. No small talk at all. It wasn't pleasant. There was certainly no hospitality. Dare I*



*say, there was possibly feelings of disapproval - two healthy people giving up a baby. I felt awful, dreadful."*

Reports of similar contributions and attitudes weave in and out of the respondents' accounts of their contact with welfare and adoption workers. Such people clearly played decisive parts at the various junctures, perhaps not in the ultimate decision, but the condemnatory attitudes of others, it is suggested, played a detrimental part in whether the potential distress of the experience may have been minimised.

Therefore authority figures, i.e. parents and welfare professionals contributed to the dynamic that unfolded, typically in a manner that was detrimental to the respondent's perceived interests at the time. This happened either by way of the direct removal of choice and options or in attitudes of condemnation or disapproval. Those respondents whose parents offered an alternative to the adoption reported feeling a sense of distress. This was derived from a combination of the men's opposition to the adoption and the rejection of their parents' offer of alternative provision of care for the child. When asked to consider what they regretted about the overall period, the respondents' most prevalent comment was one of not having had any choices laid out before them.

Whilst the temporal division of the respondents' accounts requires that a dotted line be pencilled under the adoption and surrounding events, it is suggested that an accurate map of the experiences of the respondents does not quite fit with this schematic approach. Some of the respondents reported that emotionally and psychologically speaking, the effects of the adoption did not pause or cease. In the case of others for whom there were no immediately detrimental effects or who had experienced a decline in their immediate post adoption distress, feelings relating to the adoption either subsequently emerge for the first time or re-emerge. A discussion of this and the subsequent lives of the respondents will take place in the next chapter. For now however it is important to stand back from these narratives and repeat the question that was asked at the conclusion of the last chapter on the pregnancy and

birth. What are the main themes that appear? This time, in the respondents' experiences of the adoption process and its aftermath?



## **PARALLELS WITH EXPERIENCES OF BIRTH MOTHERS - ADVERSE REACTIONS TO THE ADOPTION; THE CHILD IS GONE YET THE FEELINGS REMAIN, POWERLESSNESS CONTINUED; REGRET.**

As always throughout this work, the self-selected nature of the group needs to be borne in mind when main themes are suggested. Having said this there is very large majority of the men in the group who reported adverse reactions in the weeks and months after the adoption had been finalised. These reactions appear to have been occurred whatever the stance taken on the adoption. Both the groups of respondents who were broadly for the adoption and were against it, reported emotional turbulence. Why such a large group (21/26) and why so many reports of discomfort and distress? Was it a 'period of crisis'? (Cicchini, 1993: 10) and if so what was its nature?

### **An Emotional Pitch Is Reached. Adverse After-Effects and Comparisons With Those of Birth Mothers.**

Whatever the final outcome in terms of opposition or approval, participation or not, their distress levels after the adoption and whether or not the men experienced feelings of fatherhood, for most respondents, the adoption process is reported as having been an experience that was emotionally taxing. The process and proceedings of the adoption with their requirements for decision-making, the issue of whether the respondent was to be (could be) present or absent during the process, the questions posed as to his commitment to the relationship with the birth mother, the leave-taking (legal and physical) of the child, were all factors that served to maintain a level of intensity of emotions that had been established during the pregnancy.

Descriptions of the adverse after-effects in the research amongst birth mothers' immediate post-adoption feelings are echoed in the reports of the respondents in this study. Bouchier et al (1991: 50) present accounts of 'sadness and loss' and list anger and resentment, inadequacy and frustration, isolation and rejection, guilt or shame, and fear of the future and anxiety about the child. This range of adverse reactions was identified in the feelings experienced by birth mothers in the months after the

adoption. Three accounts, one from Bouchier et al and two of this study's respondents can be laid side by side for an indication of similarities:

I drifted further and further from my own family, rejecting them as they had done me. I lost my self-respect and this led to a lack of control, forethought and direction. Drugs, drink and promiscuity were the result. I became unable to trust adults and made myself thoroughly objectionable and argumentative. Eventually I became very depressed and tried to kill myself by taking an overdose.

(Bouchier et al, 1991: 53-54)

*"I left my parents' house. And got lost for a wee while. I drank a lot. Buried my head in the sand. Then it was a lot of bitterness and anger and a bit like a bereavement."*

*"I lost all sense of direction and meaning to life, ran wild, lost my self-esteem."*

There are other similarities between the reports from birth mothers in the Bouchier et al study and those of the respondents e.g. self-abusive behaviour such drinking and drugs binges and overdoses are common to both sets of accounts. A generally common theme is that of painful reactions in the weeks and months following the adoption. This existence of similarities between these experiences of birth fathers and birth mothers confirms the findings of the only other study to inquire into birth fathers' emotional responses to the adoption (Cicchini, 1993).

An important conclusion in the birth mother research and that of Cicchini is that in the birth parent emotions and behaviour after the adoption, there can be discerned the presence of what is termed a 'grief reaction'. This is also indicated in the case of some of the respondents in this study. The subject therefore requires some discussion.



## A Grief Reaction?

In the earlier discussion of the quantitative data I noted a number of accounts that specifically referred to the respondents' emotional reaction to the adoption in the same terms as their response to the bereavement of a loved one. Most of the men in this group referred to their feelings regarding such deaths as "up there" with the effects of the adoption. Death and bereavement were used as yardsticks with which to measure their feelings regarding having given up a child for adoption. Three men went further and reported that they felt that their experience of the adoption was worse because, whereas feelings of loss concerning the death of a loved one could include a sense of finality, the adoption experience lacked this potential for an eventual resolution to such feelings. This was because the child who had been 'lost' as a result of the adoption was still in existence. One man expressed this succinctly and seemed to capture the feelings of the others when he said about his father's death:

*"That hurt. But you know that's something that's dead, it's gone. I think it's worse when it's something that's gone but you know is alive, and hopefully well somewhere. I think that's harder to cope with than someone who has a bereavement or loses a baby. That's sad, but that's something that goes away, you live with it you cope with it. You don't walk down the street and turn round a corner and see a young girl and think 'I wonder', 'could be'."*

In this respect there are parallels with experiences of birth mothers who are also reported to have had experiences that militate against 'normal' grieving processes (Millen and Roll, 1985; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

The research among birth mothers suggests unresolved grief as a key component of emotional and psychological life after the adoption of the child and likens this to bereavement (Bouchier et al, 1991; Brinich, 1990; Millen and Roll, 1985; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). Winkler and van Keppel (1984) liken this to feelings of bereavement following peri-natal death.

In one of the first works that sought to theorise the post-adoption experiences of birth mothers with reference to grief reaction Millen and Roll (1985) researched the behaviour and feelings of a group of twenty-two birth mothers. They used the work of Parkes (1972) on the key features of grief reaction as a template - see my previous discussion that deals with the literature on birth mothers. Millen and Roll suggest that the experiences of birth mothers not only conformed closely to Parkes' features of grief but that, in addition, the special nature of such experiences fulfilled the conditions that would constitute a state of, what Millen and Roll described as, 'pathological grief'. An interpretation of the emotions, behaviour and feelings reported by some of the men in the group would suggest a correspondence with aspects of Parkes' taxonomy, including the special feature - pathological grief - as applied to birth mothers by Millen and Roll. I will now outline these features and discuss them in relation to the experiences of respondents in this study.

Many of the men in the study group reported feelings of loss and in at least three cases likened this to a bereavement, with the added complexity - as reported by Millen and Roll in relation to the birth mothers in their study - that for them the child lived on. The inability to settle, anti-social behaviour and drinking bouts reported by some of the men seem to correspond with the second feature of Parkes' paradigm of grief reaction. This is namely, feelings of being panicky, irritable, tense, jumpy, and in a turmoil; symptoms of what Parkes called "restless anxiety" (quoted in Millen and Roll: 413).

The next component in the normal grief reaction is termed "searching". Millen and Roll refer to a woman who had given up a child six years previously and continued to be startled by any child who she thought looked like her child. Millen and Roll, show a 'fit' between the searching behaviour aspect of grief reaction and the feelings and activities of the birth mothers in their study. Millen and Roll suggest that, uniquely in the case of birth mothers, searching may not be futile. This searching phenomenon is also present in the behaviour of some of the respondents years after the adoption. In



the case of a few of the respondents in this study, such 'searching' behaviour is present in the months and year immediately following the adoption.

The fourth aspect of grief reaction is that of **anger and guilt** and there are parallels between what some of the men in the group report regarding their feelings of bitterness and self blame. Millen and Roll report that, unlike the notion of a grief reaction (as outlined by Parkes) which involves the subsidence of anger directed towards others, the bitterness of most of the birth mothers in their study appeared to intensify. This is because third parties (e.g. social workers and parents) were perceived as having been coercive. Yet again I have drawn attention to such similar feelings i.e. the lack of change in the adverse and negative emotions reported by a number of men.

**Loss of self** was felt as a fifth feature of grief reaction. Birth mothers in the Millen and Roll study reported feelings of physical loss. The respondents included men who reported that they had felt this way. One birth father in the study explicitly referred to having: "*lost part of me*". Identification was seen as the sixth component of grief reaction. Here there is less congruence between the findings of Millen and Roll and the men in the study group. Millen and Roll suggest that identification or a lack of a sense of separateness (Parkes uses the example of identification with the loved one by a bereaved person) in the birth mother experiences is made complex by the physical reality of pregnancy. The researchers suggest that the birth mother experience of pregnancy may intensify the feeling of oneness with the lost person/the child that was adopted. Obviously none of the men in the study could report such feelings involved in carrying a child and it moving around inside of them. There is nothing in the respondents' accounts that appears to relate to this identification aspect of grief reaction advanced by Parkes and Millen and Roll.

The seventh and final feature of grief reaction as enunciated by Parkes and used by Millen and Roll to analyse experiences of birth mothers, is termed **pathological grief** or in Parkes' phrase "atypical grief". This is described as the presence of features that

prolong or delay a conventional mourning reaction. Millen and Roll point to such features that were present for the birth mothers in their study. Such factors as the adoption of the child being subject to social stigma; external events that prevent the adequate expression of feelings of loss; an uncertainty as to whether or not there is actual loss; an absence of mourning at the relevant time; and the lack of mourning rituals. As I have shown, there is evidence for all of these features throughout the reports of the men in the study group. One man's experience encompassed all of these factors. He was subject to social stigmatization as a result of he and the birth mother's sexual relationship. There was an absence of sympathetic personnel in the detention centre where he then lived and this militated against any discussion of his feelings of being apart from his girlfriend during the birth. He reported having to be "*tough*" for both of them at the point at which the child was physically removed from them. Following this emotional leave-taking experience he reported having to return to the detention centre and being required to behave as if nothing had happened. There are echoes of this experience in the accounts of other men e.g. that of one man who was in prison during most of the pregnancy and the birth, and another respondent who was in the Army at the time of the birth.

Thus it is suggested that in the feelings, behaviour and experiences of the respondents as reported in the period immediately after the adoption, there are similarities with the experiences of birth mothers. The experiences of birth mothers have been theorised as exemplifying a pathological grief reaction borne out of sense of loss. Additionally, such a reaction is deepened by the experience of the unique event of the adoption in which loss does not equate with conventional instances such as bereavement, i.e. in adoption the child is 'lost' but continues to live and grow.

The reports of some of the men in the group would appear to suggest parallels with this type of a grief reaction.



## **Thoughts and Feelings of Fatherhood Are Present Yet The Child Is Gone**

The reports by many respondents of adverse after-effects would suggest that the totality of the experience produced an emotional flux for which there was no relief or outlet. The 'natural order' of things for many of the respondents, when faced with the situation of their girlfriend's pregnancy, was to contemplate proceeding to some form of family life and parenting; yet this was problematic for them. Those who had debated and then rejected the idea of becoming a parent were among the numbers who experienced distress - possibly arising from them having had some form of contact with their child, possibly because they went through a separation from the birth mother, possibly both. In two cases, men reported that their initial rejection of parenthood altered. They 'converted' from not feeling a sense of paternal obligation to a position where they developed a belief in, as one man put it, their "*duty of care*". Both of these men resisted (unsuccessfully) the adoption on the basis that they wished to provide a family for their child.

An evaluation of the narratives of these birth fathers up to the point under discussion suggests the existence of a considerable degree of energy - particularly psychological and emotional - and drive as the pregnancy and birth period is followed by the adoption process. For most of the men the onward movement of this powerful payload of emotions was not arrested by the fact of the adoption. There was no resolution except in the negative - the focus (their child) was removed. In the words of one man referring to his then feelings for the child: "*The adoption rubbed me out legally but not emotionally*". This comment echoes that of Millen and Roll (1985: 411) when, in analysing the experiences of birth mothers they remark: 'The maternal experience does not end with the signing of the surrender papers.' Some men specifically recalled frustrated paternal feelings. One reported that the abiding emotion he had had during the months following the adoption was of being: "*very upset at losing my daughter*". Another said that afterwards he:

*“...felt disappointed and a bit upset. Because now I was going to have to face the next seventeen years - minimum - without having to see anything or knowing about E--. It might seem a very strange thing being (only) a bit upset but that's the reality. I had already resigned myself to losing her.”*

What changes at this point is that during the pregnancy the birth mother and the child within her formed one corporeal centre of attention and interest. With its birth, the unborn child became a physical reality. It became a he or a she. Many of the respondents were involved in naming the child. Baby clothes for the right sex were bought. Some of the men held the child, others fed him/her. In many ways, for some of the respondents, their fatherhood now had a living and breathing manifestation (Lewis, 1982). In the light of this it is not surprising that at the end of this phase in their experiences, the overall number of men who reported feelings of fatherhood has increased.

Yet with the act of adoption this focus of the respondents' attention ceases to be. Whether as planned in the months or days before the birth, at the birth or shortly afterwards, the adoption decision was implemented. Their child is gone. Within a very short time the child in their lives came and went. Sometimes this was experienced as a physical process – the child was seen, held and handed over. In other cases this took the form of a series of official and legal events as they attended interviews and participated in giving official consent. For some respondents both processes were at work – the physical and the official.

In three cases the adoption process and proceedings were drawn out. Consider, for example, the man who did not wish to parent his child but became involved in protracted - and because of this increasingly painful - visits to the foster parents who were looking after his child pending the adoption. However for most respondents, once the papers had been signed or the final leave-taking had occurred, there was no more focus. Even the two or three men who had consistently felt detached from the process and could report no sense of fatherhood or connection with the child reported feelings of disquiet in the immediate post-adoption months. In the light of the



comment by Weiss (1991: 74) that 'adults may in a very brief time develop very strong investment in newly born children' it is suggested that the respondents' distress is not surprising.

### **Powerlessness**

A third theme that emerges from analysis of respondents' experiences in this phase is one of powerlessness, whether introduced for the first time or as a continuation of a process that began during the pregnancy of the birth mother. The term 'powerlessness' is another that has been post-coded. This category includes expressions of a lack of choice and feelings of "*helplessness*".

For many of the respondents, the adoption proceedings continued a process of disenfranchisement that had begun during the pregnancy and birth events. In many cases the two periods overlap because adoption arrangements were set in train during the pregnancy. This cumulative process was characterised by experience of either being offered no choice, the removal of choice or having been actively disbarred from the unfolding events of birth and adoption. Such experiences produced anger and guilt at having been unable to effect what felt like an inexorable and painful process. The respondents reported powerful and disturbing memories variously: "*we were given no options*", "*I hated the hospital for that*", "*I was angry. Really, really angry. Still am*". Such feelings of disempowerment intensified (or for some, began) during the period of the adoption process and proceedings.

This chapter has presented evidence of thoughts, feelings and behaviour that suggest commitment to and a connection with the child. A number of respondents described having a sense of fatherhood in respect of their child. Such a collection of attitudes and thoughts are further manifested in the weeks and months after the adoption. There is evidence of negative after-effects. Some of these may be a consequence of the strain of the events however many respondents attributed their post-adoption disturbance to the loss of their child. It is suggested that this is evidence of feelings of

fatherhood that continued after the adoption. It may not be dissimilar from that expressed by birth mothers vis-à-vis maternal feelings that continue after the child is gone.

At the end of their reports on this phase of their experiences I asked the respondents to look back at this period and provide a one or two word phrase that would sum it up for them. The most prevalent sentiments expressed were those of regret over missed or denied opportunities and feelings of having been isolated and helpless. In this respect there are congruences with the feelings of the participants in the Jenkins and Norman study (1972) discussed in the literature review. In that study of the feelings of parents after separation from their children, Jenkins and Norman found that 'sadness' was an emotion common to both fathers and mothers. Jenkins and Norman termed the emotional state of their participants as one of suffering 'filial deprivation'. It is suggested that this would be an appropriate characterisation of the emotional state of many of the respondents.

In the next section we shall discuss the influence of the adoption experience on the respondents' lives in the years after the adoption. Did time heal?



## CHAPTER NINE

### ASPECTS OF THE BIRTH FATHERS' LIVES FOLLOWING THE ADOPTION

*"A secret set of emotions"*

The experiences and consequences of having been a 'birth father' have had an important resonance in the subsequent lives of most of the men in the study. The adoption experience, feelings for the child that was adopted and emotions concerning the birth mother seem to form a constellation of thoughts and feelings that have been long lasting and are seen by them as formative. As such the adoption is considered by the respondents to be an important milestone in their mental landscape.

The interviews gained access to an inner life where there is the continuing presence and influence of a set of thoughts and emotions that are bound up with the adoption experience. This mental landscape includes not only feelings in connection with the child but also feelings for the birth mother. Also included are feelings of powerlessness generated by the adoption process. The respondents report that these feelings are felt to have adversely shaped many of their attitudes to life and people in the months and years following the adoption.

Two central findings emerge from the evaluation of this phase of the respondents' lives. These are: firstly a presence of emotionally charged thoughts that betoken a sense of **connectedness** with the child that was adopted and secondly; the continued existence of feelings concerning the birth mother.

This chapter takes the respondents' narratives from twelve months after the adoption to the point where most were motivated to have contact with their child - now an adult. This 'searching and finding' aspect of the respondents' experiences will be dealt with in the next chapter.

The data generated from my discussions with the respondents does not provide a comprehensive account of the lives of the men in the group; some major events were mentioned only in passing. Many other things happened to them: at least three of the respondents suffered the deaths of other children in the years following the adoption. Other men, by virtue of their age, had experienced the loss of their parents. Some men had suffered strokes, others had risen to be high in their profession. Others were facing redundancy. Other respondents had experienced major loss prior to the adoption.

The lives of any group of people might offer the same rich detail as this group does. Inevitably, during the course of the interview, I exercised some censorship or at least steered a respondent away from subjects unrelated to the adoption. As a result some of the detail (hopefully not relevant) of the respondent's lives may have been bypassed in the semi-structured nature of the interview session.

The problem of recall (i.e. memory contaminated by more recent events e.g. contact) featured here (Yow, 1994: 21). To provide some balance or perspective, I also asked the respondents to explain how they viewed the impact of adoption in the wider context of their lives: both prior and subsequent to the adoption. Findings from this discussion are presented later in this chapter. Notwithstanding this, accounts of feelings regarding the child's adoption will have been undoubtedly influenced by present-day contact with him or her, where this has occurred.

The respondents were asked to cast their minds back and talk their way through 20 yr. old experiences and events. However, as their accounts approached the present day, the data on relationships with the birth mother and other adults, parenting, their life's graph, thoughts of the child, began to be affected by two factors. These were a) whether the men in the group were reporting from a present that included contact with the child that was adopted and b) if so, the nature of that contact e.g. one man who had been contacted by his adopted daughter rated the adoption experience as the most profound in his life. He explained that this might not have been the case a year



prior to our interview because at that point his contact with his daughter had been traumatic and painful.

It is worthwhile observing here that all of the data that was derived from the interviews, from the moment of awareness of pregnancy, birth etc., will be coloured by such an event as tracing and contact. This may skew accounts of where the child and the adoption fitted into their lives following the adoption and before contact.

With these considerations in mind, we may now proceed to assess the place of the adoption in the lives of the men in the group. One man started his report from a set of events that took place eleven years ago. In the case of the oldest adoption, forty-seven years had passed. There was a median age of twenty-eight years between the adoption of the child and the interview.

The reports that follow offer an insight into thoughts and feelings that have been held for decades and, in many cases, according to the respondents, had not been shared with anyone else.

## **THE CHILD IN MIND**

The research among birth mothers points to, for some, enduring feelings of motherhood in the years that follow adoption (Baran et al, 1977; Howe et al, 1992; Hughes and Logan, 1993; Millen and Roll, 1985; Sorosky et al, 1978). Was there any parallel for these birth fathers? Did the child continue to 'exist' in their thoughts? If so how? What of the relationship between any such thoughts of the child and other lasting thoughts and emotions e.g. in connection with the birth mother?

Regarding the existence of similarities with the birth mother experiences, the answer is in the affirmative for most of the men in the group. The non-representative nature of the study group should be borne in mind here - the vast majority of the men were contactable precisely because they had thoughts of the child and wished to make, or

had made, contact. Notwithstanding this qualification, what is the nature and quality of such thoughts?

Many respondents indicated that thoughts of the child were regular and unexpected throughout their subsequent lives. A sense of a visitation was communicated strongly in some accounts - one man likened the recurrence of thoughts of the child to the appearance of a ghost. Throughout the discussion of the respondents' lives since the adoption, reports of feelings towards, and concerning, the child who was adopted were present. These feelings - typically of a disturbing and moving nature - have, the respondents report, played a part in influencing their behaviour e.g. precipitating marital discord, being more protective towards subsequent children. So when, why and how does the child 'persist' for the respondents?

Respondents were asked to look over their lives from the adoption to present day, trying to exclude any recent motivation to search or contact (see next chapter). They were invited to comment on the appearance and recurrence or continuation of any feelings that may have related to the child. They were also asked to identify any triggers for such feelings.

Twenty-eight respondents were able to report in this area. The remaining two men were unable to because they had become aware of the adoption many years after, and so could not substantively discuss the child in their lives following the adoption.

I have divided the responses into two main groups: those men for whom post-adoption feelings subsided; and those men for whom such feelings either did not ebb or increased in intensity. A discussion of each gives a flavour of the various degrees of presence of the child in the respondents' lives. Just over half of those who could report on changes in their post-adoption feelings (14/27) experienced an eventual reduction in feelings of distress.



## Post Adoption Feelings

### *- Those Whose Feelings Subsided After The Adoption (14 respondents)*

The men in this group reported that various feelings of loss, anger and powerlessness subsided in the weeks and months after the adoption. Notwithstanding this, they spoke to a regular presence of the child in their thoughts in the following years.

Accounts of the child's continuing 'existence' for the respondents are diverse but typically one man put it that he (the child) "*was always in mind. I have a kid out there. I always remembered his birthday*".

Another man said that he had:

*"never stopped loving him or caring for him. It's like I have a son somewhere out there and it can bring a smile to my face and other times it's like a glow. I just feel good. At other times I feel sad when I think about him."*

One man recounted that he had once been struck by feelings that something untoward had happened to his son:

*"I had this weird apprehension that something had happened to him during childhood. And I had to let him go, I had to pretend that he was dead."*

This was apparently because, to all intents and purposes, his son's welfare was beyond his control. This respondent also spoke of feelings that drew comparison between the son that was adopted and a second son. His relationship with his second son was not as close as he would have hoped. He sometimes speculated that he and the adopted son would have been closer:

*"I suppose the bit that I feel about M--, is that a bit of me feels, well, I would love to have somebody who's, you know, possibly just that bit closer, somebody who would take me out for a pint."*

Another man felt similar feelings of disappointment in relation to his (second) son's lack of interest in athletics - he too speculated as to whether the adopted son would have been more "*sporty*".

One man's feelings subsided to a much greater extent than that of the others. Recurrences of thoughts of his daughter were less arresting than for many in this group. This respondent said that he sometimes "*wondered how she had turned out.*"

The triggers for the recurrence of feelings regarding the child were many. They arose for some men, when receiving professional help. Less extremely and more typically, triggers for recurrence of thoughts of the child were grouped around key dates such as birthdays ("*there's never a 7 March goes by without thoughts of him*") and Christmas ("*a bad time*"). Other triggers such as the sight of, and contact with, children who would be the same age as the child who was adopted were also reported. Also, there were thoughts of the child: "*at quiet moments*".

*- Those For Whom Feelings Persisted, Intensified or Emerged (14 respondents)*

There were fourteen men in this group (14/28). They described emotions that either remained at the same intensity or increased. One respondent said that "*it never gets any better*". Another reported that his feelings had never changed and added:

*"It was terribly difficult to cope with. In the intervening years you wonder what she's like. It's her birthday. She's three. How was she getting on. Even to the fact that you wonder 'is she still alive'. Something could have happened to her. Not everybody survives childhood. 'Was the adoption successful?' Things triggered it. Suddenly seeing a little girl of that age."*

Another man, in similar terms to those quoted above, kept an account of his child's development via her birthdays:

*"As time went by when I'd see a child, I'd think B-- must be that age. This feeling has become more pronounced as I've got older. There has never been a time when I was completely free."*



In the case of another, he reported a similar regularity with regard to the child's presence in his life. In his case this was "*every day*" and his thoughts consisted of "*wanting to know*" his daughter.

Some men reported that they had experienced a growth in the intensity of their feelings. One man reported that the pregnancy and birth events had had little impact upon him: he had become involved with another woman, she was expecting his (second) child and he had bought a flat for them. However, during the adoption arrangements that followed the birth, he became progressively more agitated as to the welfare of his child that was to be adopted. He opposed the adoption unsuccessfully and was then left with, he reports, considerable feelings of regret that remained permanently close to the surface. His "*stack of emotional baggage*" had always meant that he had been unable to think of her "*without feeling tearful and emotional*". This had further intensified at certain times such as the births of subsequent children.

One respondent reported that, five years after the adoption, he undertook a search of all the primary schools in the area where his daughter would have been likely to be residing. Another explained that he married soon after the adoption. The subject of children inevitably arose and he began looking in prams for the son that had been adopted. One man said that said that the subject arose during counselling:

*"It was actually on the day of his birthday. I had never seen it (the adoption) as my loss. Always only Y's [the birth mother] I completely broke down and cried."*

There are also three men who reported that they initially felt little or nothing after the adoption. For them thoughts and feelings in relation to the child emerged for the first time some years after. Their accounts are diverse as to why they felt little or nothing after the adoption. One man said that he did not feel anything because the adoption experience rendered him emotionally "*blocked*". The second man said that his feelings concerning the adoption "*weren't a major problem*". However three years after the event:

*“it started to grate on my mind. It was just there in your brain. The not knowing. Whether she’s alive, whether she’s alright.”*

The third man, when asked about his feelings after the birth and adoption, referred to gender divisions:

*“I suppose I blanked it. Yeh, I suppose I was disappointed. I never saw her (the child), there was no hands on. Psychologically it was a different kettle of fish from a man and a woman. We’re not the same as women, are we? I was disappointed. I wasn’t hurt. I had N. [step-daughter], another daughter. I had hands on with her.”*

This man went on to suggest that his step-parenting role took the place of any activity that would have happened with his first (adopted) daughter; thus for him, alleviating any negative feelings that may have endured as a result of the adoption. His views and feelings provide a counterpoint to any suggestion that birth fathers may all feel a sense of loss associated in respect of the child that was adopted. This man, as he indicates, seemed to have had his need to parent a daughter satisfied with a substitute. Though he, as we shall see in the next chapter, is among a number of those who are now determinedly searching for their children.

Notwithstanding the case of some men for whom feelings for the child were overlain by other events and relationships, it can be seen from the above accounts that for a large number of respondents the thoughts of the child are diverse, impactful, frequent and capable of being triggered by a variety of experiences. But exactly who or what did they think of? And how?



## **The Child in Mind - A Spectrum of Thoughts, Feelings and Attitudes**

In the only birth father study to date to explore the nature of feelings associated with being a birth father, Cicchini (1993) reported the existence of a range of emotions. These were pre-coded and the respondents asked to tick a box corresponding to the closest to their feelings. Responses were grouped into two categories: 'Negative and Positive Feelings'. In the former category, feelings of 'sadness' are recorded by 67 per cent. This is followed by 'caring' (63 per cent), 'frustration' (57 per cent), 'responsibility' (50 per cent) guilt (43 per cent) and 'helplessness' (43 per cent). These were followed by diverse other feelings such as 'anger', 'emptiness', 'remorse' 'confusion', 'inadequacy' and 'worry'. 'Grief' was reported by 13 per cent. Cicchini does not explain why feelings such as that of caring and responsibility are included in the category of 'negative'. Nor does he have regard to the gender of the child.

The number of feelings grouped in the 'Positive' category is fewer. There are four. These are: 'caring' (which is repeated this time as also a positive feeling with no explanation for its featuring twice) a feeling reported by 63 per cent of the sample; followed by 'happiness' (13 per cent); 'peace' (10 per cent); and 'contentment' (3 per cent). Cicchini suggests, from his assessment of the quality and prevalence of negative feelings, that 'relinquishment has been a distressing emotional experience' (17). Here Cicchini may somewhat overstate the case by omitting a consideration of the meaning of the existence of those feelings he has chosen to call 'positive' - 63% of his sample. As it stands, the inclusion of the category of 'positive' in relation to feelings associated with being a birth father is interesting however a discussion of the data generated from this item remains undeveloped.

A value of Cicchini's material is that a range of feelings within his sample is identified, albeit in connection with his study participants' feelings in respect of any identity as birth fathers, i.e. as distinct from feelings about the child. In relation to 'thoughts of the child' held by my study group, I have chosen the term 'spectrum' as it seems to

provide a better image of the varieties of feelings that exist: from a mild form of curiosity to stronger feelings such as worry about the child.

Therefore, as distinct from Cicchini whose inquiry focussed upon feelings associated with being a birth father, I explored the respondents' feelings about the child. I have sought to separate out feelings directly concerned with the child from those feelings that were more to do with the adoption e.g. powerlessness and (as used by Cicchini in his category of negative feelings) 'anger'.

The respondents' reports of how they think of the child have been post-coded. This coding has been done on the basis of both explicit content - respondents who referred to 'a curiosity' are grouped in a category entitled 'curiosity'- and implicit meanings. Respondents who referred to 'wondering about the child' have also been included in the 'curiosity' group.

Respondents' responses often appear under more than one heading. At one end of the spectrum there is a group of feelings that, it is suggested can be characterised as **curiosity**.

### **Curiosity**

Under this heading the feelings of 14 respondents are recorded. This is half of those who responded (N = 28; two men are not included in the responses to this item, possibly because it required discussion and their responses were conveyed by post).

Typically featured in this group are statements such as:

*"I'd just like to know what had happened to him, where he'd been, what he'd done. Just like to know, just like to know. Curiosity, simple curiosity."*

and

*"When she was a teenager - 'Is she going out dancing?' Is she married? And has children? How old is she now?"*



## Concern or Worry

Curiosity seems to shade from a mild curiosity into more concentrated interest that becomes concern or worry for 9 of the respondents (33 per cent):

*“I wonder what sort of person she is and, as I say, one then starts to worry about if there are tremendous difficulties in her life either caused by the adoption or just because of who she is. I suspect, although I don’t know, because I don’t have any other children, I suspect it is a parental worry that I have or it is a worry about, I suppose children in general - in a world full of drugs and muggings etc. It’s a concern but it is also an interest.”*

or as it was also put:

*“Is she alive, is she doing well?” [‘And if she wasn’t and her whereabouts known?'] “Well I would steam in and help her. If she was a drug addict, or anything, if she was desperate, you’d help her”*

In a similar manner to the way that curiosity begins to dovetail with worry, so too does worry or concern shade into feelings of responsibility:

*“I worry about how abandoned she feels. Is she alive even? We want her to know if ever she needed us, we’d be there for her.”*

## Responsibility

Cicchini (1993) suggests that the sense of responsibility expressed by birth fathers in his study is one that is derived from a maturational process. He contends that over the period from their teenage years to the time of the interview, the birth fathers in his study have developed a sense of responsibility towards the child. This development, he suggests, is part of the process of moving into mature adulthood. This area was not the subject of the present study. It seems that without an accurate account of the degree of responsibility felt at the time of the adoption, then any comparison with that felt in later years is difficult to make. What has been sought in this study is the nature of the feelings in later life.

Seven of the respondents (23 per cent) described feelings that conveyed a sense of responsibility. Responsibility, obligation and duty were all words that were used to describe how they felt about the welfare of the child. Two men spoke of a feeling of 'duty' towards the child. One man spoke of his "*duty of care*" in relation to the child. In his case to provide himself as a father to her. He felt this but also felt that he had not been able to fulfil such a duty.

Another respondent also spoke of his 'duty':

*"It's built up. I think brought on by my eldest daughter going to college - rites of passage - made me sort of start thinking. It was always there. I wouldn't say that I am doing it out of duty [registering on a contact register], but there is also a certain sense of duty. I'd love to know how she is, how she got on. I'd be frightened about it as well. But I very much want to be available for her."*

Another said when he thought of his child:

*I still have all the parental feelings. They won't go away. It's a burden you can never put down."*

This man's words convey a sense of having 'shouldered' a (painful) obligation at the point of having the child adopted.

The widespread belief that good fathers are those who provide (e.g. Warin, Solomon, Lewis and Langford, 1999) is summed up by a birth father in the literature who asks: 'Who am I if I am not a protector and a providing father?' (quoted in Rosenberg, 1992: 35). Such a belief coupled with a feeling of having defaulted on it would contribute to the respondents' enduring thoughts of responsibility. This would also be linked with feelings of guilt – see below.



## Parenthood

So a spectrum of feelings begins to emerge. Another overlap between feelings of responsibility, duty or obligation occurs with those of feelings of parenthood.

The majority of the studies of birth mothers have pointed to a continuing sense of parenthood (Howe et al, 1992 Chapter Nine; Hughes and Logan, 1993). In this study, ten men (37 per cent) expressed a similar set of feelings:

*“There’s one missing in my family. I wonder what she’s like. I think waste of potential. I feel I have abandoned my charge. I regard her as my child. As one that’s missing amongst my children.”*

and

*“I’ve got a fourteen year old in my mind’s eye. At the end of the day, in one sense, you can only turn around and say ‘she’ll always be my little girl’. But I know she’s fourteen, she’ll be fifteen in June. She’s no longer the madam who’s growing up. She’ll have her own ways.”*

This man also expressed a belief that he:

*“can’t turn round and say ‘she’s mine’ because I’ve never met the girl. Although technically, in one sense, she is mine. On the other hand she isn’t mine.”*

Further, an acknowledgement of the division between social parent and biological father was made in four out of the ten accounts that referred to a feeling of parenthood:

*“I wonder if she’s ok., if she’s healthy, if her parents are good to her. It depends who I’m speaking to but I sometimes say ‘I’ve got three’. I think of J-- as a second daughter.”*

and

*“Although S--, even if she came back, I’ll never be her father. I’m her father biologically.”*

## Love

Two men expressed feelings of parenthood and also said that they felt love for their child. Two others expressed love without directly referring to any feelings of parenthood:

*“There is a sense in which, I don’t know, whatever he’s done or hasn’t done; or what would happen if he’d turned out and been a murderer or rapist or you know, I would love him any the less. I don’t think I’ve ever stopped loving him. Or the thought of him.”*

## A Connectedness

Related to these feelings of parenthood and/or love, two men expressed a feeling of **connectedness** with the child: *“Who is he? What’s his personality like? I wonder about someone out there that I’m close to. I feel like I know him.”* and:

*“It must be partly love. I’d love to see him. What I did was a wrong thing in one way. I thought we were making the right decisions whatever. It goes against the grain. You’re giving up somebody you instinctually love, is part of you.”*

This sense of a continuing connection and intimacy with the child is also reflected in the birth mother research (Millen and Roll, 1985; Weinreb and Murphy, 1988).

## Loss

The literature suggests that the nature of the loss felt by birth mothers is that of the **loss of the child** (Howe et al, 1992; Inglis, 1984; Millen and Roll, 1985; Sorosky et al, 1978; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984). Such a direct association has been established in the birth mother research, however what appears not to have been explored in the research is whether the loss reported by birth mothers concerns any components other than that centred on the ‘lost’ child. Brodzinsky (1990: 303) questions the use of the term ‘sense of loss’ in the research and argues that it is ‘somewhat questionable as a construct when not theoretically grounded or



operationally defined'. In this study the six respondents (22 per cent) who spoke to a sense of loss referred to feelings of loss of the child when they thought of him/her:

*"I hope she's well, ok. Then a little bit of anxiety steps in. Helplessness, you want to reach out to something you don't know where it is. You want to reach out and probably say who you are.*

[Why?]

*I still feel that she's a part of me. Its like something from inside of me is missing. Part of my being, in a way."*

Loss was deeply felt by at least two of this group who spoke of their sense of loss in physical terms:

*"It's like, I don't know, it's like a finger cut off, thirty years ago. There's so much to be regretted because we lost this child for that length of time. That's an accurate assessment of the factors. That's what I feel."*

and

*"There is not a day that goes by that I don't think of him. I feel as if there is something inside me that has been ripped out and I feel empty and nothing is going to fill that"*

Feeling of physical loss is reported in the research on birth mothers (e.g. Roll et al, 1986; Sorosky et. al, 1978).

However, an additional dimension to a sense of loss was reported the respondents. This was the loss of missed opportunities to parent the child:

*"I feel that I've been robbed of his childhood. Seeing him grow up and all his teething, taking him to parks and all that sort of thing, football games."*

This reference to a sense of loss as regards the activities of parenting may indicate a gender difference in birth parents. It may be that because fathering is defined by what a man does, birth fathers are more susceptible to feelings of missed activity with the

child. Here I found connections between such expressions of loss and feelings of regret.

## Regret

Four men reported that they, *inter alia*, felt a sense of regret when they thought of the child. In the case of one this was added to by a sense of loss:

*“I think of her as somebody I miss. Somebody that I’ve missed all these years. Miss the contact. Missed even seeing her as baby and I think that was totally unfair. I don’t feel that I’m her natural father, that I was responsible for her birth, that she had got adopted. Had I been present it wouldn’t have happened. She would have a different sort of life.”*

## Guilt

Four men felt guilt, typically: *“I feel guilty about the rich family life she could have had. I feel like we abandoned her.”* This emotion is also present in the birth mother research (e.g. Hughes and Logan, 1993).

The respondents’ responses as to how they thought of the child can be represented in table form. Here the second column represents the number of accounts in which the feeling was expressed or appeared:

**Table Seven**

### **Feelings Associated with Thoughts of the Child**

Curiosity	13
Parenthood	10
Worry/Concern	9
Responsibility	7
Loss	6
Love	4
Guilt	4
Regret	3
Connected	2



Note: many respondents expressed more than one set of feelings.

If the numbers of men who expressed feelings of parenthood (10) are aggregated with the numbers of those that felt a sense of responsibility (7), felt loss (2) and one of each of the men who felt love (1) and a 'connectedness' (1) - the other two respondents in each of these last two categories did not explicitly refer to parenthood - then it is possible to suggest that in the subsequent lives of these birth fathers, a total of twenty-one men (21/28) have experienced a sense of the continued existence of the child in their inner lives.

I choose the term 'connectedness' to sum up the collection of child-centred emotionally charged thoughts that exist for many of the men in the group. The fact that such a connectedness exists in the case of men who have never parented the child in question is a surprising finding, even more so for these few cases where the child had never been seen. This is a finding that suggests a rethink of conventional notions of fatherhood: in particular those ideas that suggest that men derive their feelings of parenthood from a process of active participation in social caring for the child.

Thus it is suggested that the respondents' experiences indicate the need for further research involving the possibility of parallel experiences of parenthood between men and women.

In some ways this finding of such a connectedness felt by the respondents, and its resonances with the experiences of birth mothers, is a central discovery of my research. I will return to this discussion in a concluding chapter that deals with notions of fatherhood where this connectedness will be designated as an attachment to the child.

A subsidiary observation may be made here. This is the possibility of a gendered nature of such feelings of connectedness i.e. are there differences between birth fathers' thoughts of boys and their thoughts of girls? Do thoughts of boys include a regret for traditional father/son activities e.g. football? Do their thoughts of girls

include notions that they may be in need of protection? This may be an interesting subject for research with a larger group of respondents. It is also another area that does not seem to have been explored in the birth mother literature.

The next discussion also concludes with a call for a similar re-think of research orientation. This time in relation to the question of the absence of research discussion relating to the relationship between the birth father and birth mother.

## **THE BIRTH MOTHER**

The birth mother has been a key but silent figure in this narrative to date. Very early in the course of conducting the interviews it became clear that the respondents were providing data regarding their present thoughts and feelings about the birth mother, including meetings with her following the adoption and sometimes contact, mostly considerably later in life. The pictures that emerge provide an additional insight to the inner lives of some of these birth fathers. In this case, regarding feelings for someone with whom they felt that they had shared a defining moment in their lives.

When birth fathers have been referred to in the birth mother research, the studies seems to have confined themselves to reporting the facts of nature of the relationship between birth parents at the time of the adoption e.g. whether or not it was a steady relationship (e.g. Hughes and Logan, 1993). Other brief observations confirm that many birth mother and birth father relationships were steady and not casual (Triseliotis, 1970; Wells, 1993b).

However it appears that there has been little discussion as to the quality, nature and outcome of the relationship between birth mother and birth father. A key piece of research specifically ruled out such a consideration in that its sample was constructed to include only women who were 'neither married, had been married, nor in a stable de facto relationship at the time of relinquishment' (Winkler and van Keppel, 1984: 29). Neither does it seem from the birth mother literature that there has been any



exploration that relates to any existence of thoughts of the birth father in the birth mother's life following the adoption. It would appear from the existing literature that birth mothers have not been asked about any later-life thoughts that relate to the birth father. The relevance of this line of enquiry will become apparent in the chapter on contact. Often it is in the circumstances of contact that the issue of the birth father- i.e. retained or forgotten thoughts relating to him arises for the birth mothers because he may become the subject of the adopted person's curiosity and search (March, 1995: 110-117).

It is a finding of the study that the respondents have retained a set of feelings for the birth mother. In some cases these were reported to be on a par with feelings about the child. It appears then that birth fathers, at least many in this present group of respondents, may think of a dyad - the child and the birth mother together. In this sense then the birth mother, as well as the child, has been a co-traveller in the inner lives of some of these birth fathers. The birth mother literature has omitted to enquire into this dimension of the post adoption experience. It may be that, in this case, birth fathers differ from birth mothers - in their reports of inner worlds that include thoughts of the birth mother many years after the adoption.

The accounts of the respondents indicated that the birth mother had a continuing presence in the inner lives of many of them. For a considerable proportion of the men, either the birth mother is present as a part of an actual relationship with the birth father; or she lives on in the form of emotions retained for her. What is the nature of these emotions? What part did the adoption experience have in these relationships?

As Chapter Seven showed, twenty-eight men (28/30) had had a commitment (at the time of the pregnancy) to a lasting relationship with the birth mother. What happened to this?

## Twenty One Relationships that Ceased

In nine cases it is reported that relationships drifted, ended or had somehow been damaged. One man said that he and the birth mother had agreed to part after the adoption. He reported that: *"...we both wanted to share the emotion. And couldn't. Sad."* In four cases, it was reported that the birth mother had ended it. One respondent said that she had felt unable to continue their relationship:

*"She felt guilty, devastation. We both felt mutual distress. She said to stop because of the pain."*

This man telephoned the birth mother a number of times to talk about the child but, he reports, she found the calls too upsetting and asked him to stop contact. One birth mother ended the relationship before the child was born because, the respondent reported, she had alleged that the child was conceived as the result of rape. Another birth mother ended the relationship immediately after the birth of the child. In another four cases the relationship was compulsorily ended as a result of the interventions of parents, or of external authorities such as social workers.

In three cases the respondents reported that they were responsible for the end of the relationship. One man fled on the news of pregnancy, another declined an offer to continue after the adoption and a third left the country some months after the adoption.

It is difficult to generalise from the reasons given for the end of these twenty-one steady relationships. The motives appear to be varied and of course truth is relative to the respondents. However it appears that for most, whether the relationship ended during the pregnancy or after the adoption, what had been stable relationships ended as a result of the overall experience. The two key causes appear to be that: the relationship could not continue in the light of the discomfort and distress generated during the process; or that the relationship was ended by forces other than the



respondent or the birth mother. The end of these steady relationships was seen by many respondents as a matter of regret.

### **Seven Relationships That Continued**

There were seven men who continued in long term relationships with the birth mother. Two were married; three became married; and two carried on the relationship. Here too there is evidence of negative ramifications arising from the adoption experience. All of the men reported relationship difficulties arising from either an inability to discuss the adoption experience or individual distress. One man reported that he and the birth mother married because:

*“After the adoption we both felt that we had a duty to one another and we both felt that it was the right thing to do - not the basis for a marriage. I felt that we got married and stuck together; the reward was that she would one day get in touch with us”.*

He said that - on reflection during the interview - mutual expectancy must have been their way of dealing with the negative emotional aftermath of the adoption. He and she never spoke about it however; this is also a characteristic of the other relationships. Three out of the total of five marriages eventually ended - two of these divorces were reported to have been explicitly caused by the distress arising from unresolved and unspoken feelings in connection with the adoption. In the case of one man who did not marry yet continued in his relationship with the birth mother, he reported that the relationship eventually ended because he wanted to have a (second) child but felt he could not. To have another child with the birth mother would have been *“too painful to bear”* as it would have brought back distressing memories of the adoption of their first child. So:

*“We split up about two years later. I’m putting it down to the strain of it. I thought that subconsciously if I left, then the past would go with it. Her having the baby stopped us from being normal teenagers.”*

As discussed above then, both groups of birth parents - those in relationships that ceased at the time and those for whom relationships continued - appear to have been adversely affected by the adoption experience. Here the events of the pregnancy and adoption can be seen to have generated considerable emotional turbulence. As noted above, the birth mother literature has generally focused upon one person and when it has discussed relationships with others, such evaluations have involved relationships with subsequent partners. Deykin et al (1984), for example, found that the adoption experience had had a detrimental effect on such relationships for half the birth mothers in their study.

It can be suggested from the foregoing discussion of the relationships between birth fathers and birth mothers that the experience and emotional effects of the adoption may be deeply felt by the birth father. The research to date has cast the birth mother as the sole party involved. In a number of cases in this study the birth father and mother constituted a central dyad in the events that unfolded. Where studies fail to recognise this and make no further reference to him, the impression may be conveyed that the birth father's emotional involvement in the events has been minimal. For example, Hughes and Logan (1993) report that in sixteen out of twenty seven cases the birth mother was either abandoned by the birth father or that they lost contact. In other words no differentiation is made between desertion and the relationship ending, perhaps - as indicated for some of the respondents in this study - as a result of the negative emotional effects of the adoption on the relationship.

There is a case for, as well as further research on birth fathers, the birth mother research methodology to be reviewed to include deeper analysis of the birth mother - birth father relationship. The point here is that we can tell little about birth fathers from existing birth mother studies.

It is suggested that birth mother research studies, by omitting to explore the nature of the birth mother-birth father relationship, have provided only a one-dimensional impression of the father. An inference may then be made in keeping with a negative



stereotype of young fathers. Brodzinsky (1990: 315), in a negative (vis-a vis birth fathers to whom she refers to as 'these individuals') afternote to a comprehensive review of the birth mother research, tenders unreferenced opinions. These are to the effect that birth fathers have historically played little role in the adoption decision-making process and that most 'who father a child outside the protection of marriage, continue in the centuries-old tradition of abdication of responsibility.' A more rounded and evidenced view of the birth parent experience and birth parent relations has emerged from this discussion of the relationships between the respondents and the birth mothers during, what for many, was a joint experience with many emotional parallels.

### **Subsequent Contact with and Continuing Feelings for the Birth Mother**

For some men a wish to re-establish a relationship with the birth mother was a powerful feeling that effected their relationships with subsequent partners. In some cases this aspiration was not acted upon, however in other situations a few respondents did re-new their contact with the birth mother.

Many of the men whose relationship with the birth mother either ended during the pregnancy or shortly after, reported subsequent contact between them. Altogether, discounting those who stayed in long-term relationships or became married to the birth mother (7), twenty-three respondents parted with the birth mother. Of this group, sixteen (16/23) men reported having had contact with the birth mother after the adoption. Subsequent contact with the birth mother was an unexpected but recurring feature in the lives of many of the men. As noted above in relation to the research on birth mothers, where relationships between birth mother and birth father have been reported, the research on birth mothers appears to have confined itself to the time of pregnancy and the birth. It seems that none of the birth mother studies have explored whether or not there had been any contact following the adoption, and the nature of this. For some of the respondents in the group, continued knowledge of and possible contact with the birth mother would not have been unexpected given that

they both lived in the same community or neighbourhood or that there were shared aspects of their lives. For instance, they were both at college or moved in the same circles or 'crowd'. Therefore, some of the respondents were able to report contact (as distinct from a relationship) that either continued or reoccurred. And, as we shall see, irrespective of whether they were ever in touch again, some respondents reported powerful thoughts and feelings held for the birth mother.

Subsequent encounters with the birth mother ranged from unexpected meetings on the bus or in the street in the months after the adoption, to having met again as a result of their (now adult) child having traced one or both of them. A considerable number of respondents reported meetings, by chance or by arrangement, telephone or letter contact and in at least two cases the re-commencement of a relationship. Some of those meetings were emotionally charged - even those that were unexpected - where heated exchanges about the child, the adoption and their relationship took place.

In one case a respondent reported that he and she had met three months after the adoption. She wanted to resume the relationship. He did not. He gave as his reason that he had been "*disgusted*" by her post-natal body shape.

One man reported a regular annual phone conversation on or near the anniversary of their son's birth as well as having had two or three meetings with the birth mother, years apart and in different parts of the UK. Another four men reported efforts to meet and talk about the adoption - in three of these cases, many years after the adoption. Two men reported aspirations and efforts to "*begin again*" - to re-establish a relationship with the birth mother. These men made considerable efforts to contact the birth mothers that were, by then married and living, respectively, in Canada and in Australia. Whether or not subsequent contact had taken place, nearly a quarter of the entire group of respondents (7/30) conveyed and expressed strong positive feelings for the birth mother.



At the time of the interview, two men had begun affairs with the birth mother - in one case they had both been married to others and in the second case, she was but not he. For the seven men concerned, deep feelings were present. These dated from a time of between 25 and 30 years since the adoption. One man reported that he was:

*“still carrying a torch for her. And that there was a sense in which throughout our whole marriage of 25 years, I have to say, I think that the ghost of C-- (the birth mother) existed.”*

There were reports of the influence of their feelings for the birth mother:

*“One of the difficulties that I’ve had probably, is that other people, especially women in my life, have probably emotionally had to be scored against C--. That’s not easy for somebody else to live up to.”*

Another man leant over to me and said, in a whisper (so that his wife who was nearby at the time could not hear) that he:

*“...still loved her. That never changed. I’ve been married for thirty years and although I would never say it in front of my wife, I still love her. Never been the same without her.”*

Two men said that on learning that the birth mother was to be married, they had secretly attended her marriage ceremony.

During these reports, the depth of feelings expressed by the respondents was striking.. Typically, “*she was the girl*” for at least a quarter of the group.

What was communicated in the respondents’ accounts was not only a sense of a first love lost but a distinct feeling that the respondents experienced regret. In view of the ages of the men at the time of the pregnancy, birth and adoption, the fact that for most the birth mother had been their first sexual partner, and the unexpected circumstances that brought their relationship to an end, it is not surprising that a feeling of loss of a (possible life) partner and a wistfulness related to first love were feelings that tinged the respondents’ accounts.

Not all of the respondents spoke so fondly. One birth father held no positive feelings of what might have been. On the contrary he was forthright in expressing a low opinion of the birth mother. Their relationship ended whilst he was in prison. He reported that she had been the prime mover in this and had not come to visit him:

*“I think it was probably just a case that I was a young boy of 18 and she was 24 years old - she was pregnant and I loved her. She asked me to marry her one day and I said yes. It’s really hard to explain. Basically if I had never met her none of this would have happened. But then again I wouldn’t have had my son.”*

One other respondent reported that his negative feelings for the birth mother had directly inhibited him from developing close relationships with others. A third respondent expressed bitterness because of, he reported, the way that he had been *“manipulated and used”* to provide the birth mother with a child.

Most birth fathers did not meet with the birth mother in later life. This did not prevent feelings regarding her playing a significant part in their lives. It is suggested that such a set of feelings, whether influenced by regret, nostalgia or sentimentality, may contribute to a sense of loss felt by the respondents. So much so that in one case the respondent’s account was more devoted to his sense of loss and feelings for the birth mother than any other single factor in the adoption experience. He spent less time discussing the child than he did on relating the history of their involvement and his attempts to locate her after the adoption. There is some evidence elsewhere of birth fathers’ continuing feelings towards the birth mother (Concerned United Birthparents, 1983).

What of those people in the respondents’ lives other than the birth mother? Did the resonances of the adoption impact upon other relationships? As mentioned above, in some cases feelings for the birth mother were a negative influence in subsequent relationships with other partners. What we shall see next is that not only were relations with partners affected by the respondents’ thoughts of the birth mother, but also thoughts of the child and the adoption experience were present in the inner (inner



because sometimes these feelings were left unspoken) lives of the men in the group. And these too were influential in shaping the respondents' behaviour.

## **THE ADOPTION EXPERIENCE AND ITS EFFECT UPON SUBSEQUENT RELATIONS WITH OTHERS**

### **Partners**

The quantitative data indicates what seems to be a high number of separation and divorces - eighteen out of a total of 30 men. Compared with the general population, the higher rate of instability of these relationships is not only a sampling artefact - the respondents often explained it in terms of the detrimental effect of the adoption experience.

Four of the separations or divorces involved a second or third long-term relationship. At the time of the interview some respondents were in the midst of separating from a long-term partner. Two men were leaving their wives and children. One man was in the middle of being left by a long-term partner as I arrived for the interview. Two other men explicitly reported current disharmony in their marriages. Another man was in the midst of his second divorce. Seven out of the thirty respondents drew connections between feelings about the adoption and the child and their experiences of marital or relationship discord. One man reported that his wife had left him for someone else because he had been too "*withdrawn*". Another said that his failure to commit to a partner was born out of a caution derived from his negative experiences of the adoption and surrounding events. This respondent felt that he had been betrayed - by the birth mother - into making her pregnant. A third man reported that his feelings for the child were a "*source of tension*" in his marriage. Another said that his feelings regarding the child, and the circumstances of the adoption, were a "*secret set of emotions*" that had been kept from his two wives. One man blamed his divorce (from the birth mother) on the negative adoption experience that both had gone through during an adoption that neither had wished for. Another man said that he felt that his marriage breakdown and subsequent divorce from the birth mother were also

directly attributable to negative feelings about the adoption that both he and she continued to carry.

Five men indicated that soon after the adoption, in the words of one man, they had married “*on the rebound*”. These marriages were not necessarily disharmonious, though some turned out to be so.

Four respondents said that their inability to talk about their feelings for their child had been a source of tension in their marriages or long-term relationships. This was because either they felt that they were unable to share them; or, when they were expressed, such feelings were received with lack of sympathy:

*“I don’t think I had come to terms with all these feelings. In a way I hoped that marriage would help that, but it didn’t. I felt that when I wanted to open up about D. and my feelings about that, I often got it chucked back in my face. He was a presence in our marriage and during many arguments.”*

Another man remarked that the adoption had had a negative impact upon his partner and this had “*sexually affected*” their relationship – “*destroyed it*”. At the time of the interview three of these marriages or long term relationships had ended.

The case of a fourth man provides a counterpoint to the suggestion that marriages or relationships ended because of unsympathetic partners. In this case, his partner, on hearing of his adoption experiences, responded by circling the adopted child’s birth date on each new year’s calendar. This was clearly received as a supportive action yet at the time of the interview their marriage was breaking up. Here the discord could not be attributed to his partner’s lack of sympathy towards his feelings for the child. In another three cases, partners were perceived as supportive and had enabled the respondents to talk about their feelings regarding the adopted child. In other cases however, either the respondents’ feelings regarding the adoption were not insistent enough to have been a matter for mutual exploration, or thoughts regarding the child lay dormant and were not expressed to partners.



Two other men reported that a combination of negative feelings regarding the adoption experience and their feelings regarding the child contributed to the break-up for their relationships. Neither man was able to separate out their feelings of distress from their thoughts of the child. In both cases the issue had surfaced whilst they were in contact with professionals for reasons ostensibly unconnected with the adoption experience. Both sets of emotions co-existed for these two respondents. For one there was a definite "*pinning for my baby*" accompanied with feelings of helplessness and anxiety related to his inability to have influenced the decision to have the child adopted. The second man held feelings and memories of having been powerless and isolated during the adoption process. He also retained feelings of "*loss and grief*" directly related to the child. Both reported initial feelings of being "*blocked*" when asked how they had felt at the time of the adoption. And both had experienced the sudden emergence of feelings some years after the adoption.

Other men reported that they believed that the adoption experience had been instrumental in the development of a general attitude to relationships with others. One man said that the adoption and its distressing process had made him "*bitter*". Another felt that he was a man who was "*unlucky in love*". Two others reported, that, for one the adoption experience had made him feel "*cynical*"; the other said that he felt that he had been "*hardened*". Another man echoes this sense of bitterness and disillusionment when he reported that "*I wasn't a very pleasant person to women in that period. I was very bitter.*" These men believed that such particular negative attitudes had had their origins in the experience of being disenfranchised during the adoption.

In addition to the effects on relationships with partners and others in the years following the adoption, two men said that they felt that the adoption experience had changed, for the worse, their relationship with their mothers. One man said that his relationship with his mother "*never recovered*". The other vividly reported what he described as a "*huge*", bitter and long-lasting row with his mother.

Overall then it seems that a diversity of thoughts and feelings and their combinations have had an influence on subsequent adult relationships in the lives of many of the men in the group. These are: feelings for the birth mother; feelings of anger and distress arising from what was perceived as the trauma of the adoption process; and thoughts of the child that were reported as being the principle factor in inhibiting the development of relationships with others.

This group of disparate thoughts and feelings (all arising from the one emotionally salient period in their lives) form a combination that is difficult to disentangle. There is no single determining element in the breakdown of the respondents' relationships. From the point of view of the effects of the adoption experience (there may of course be other factors that are unrelated to the adoption) the respondents reported a number of factors that they felt were present in the breakdown process of their relationships. These included their feelings of nostalgia concerning a possible family life with the birth mother and adopted child and an enduring love (or at the least a strong affection) for the birth mother. Negative emotions provoked by their experiences of the adoption process and persistent thoughts in respect of the child that was adopted were also reported as having been negative influences in their relationships with partners.

The findings here confirm the detrimental effect of the adoption on subsequent relationships in the lives of birth mothers (Deykin et. al, 1984; Rosenberg, 1992).

If then there is evidence of the adoption's impact upon adult relationships, how has the experience of becoming a parent (for most respondents, for the second time) been affected?

### **Parenting**

Most men (21/30) went on to parent other children. Six respondents referred to feelings of overprotectiveness regarding their subsequent children. One man said that



*“I treated J. [his next child after the one that was adopted] special because she was the first baby daughter I had hands on with”*. Others reported that the birth of their next child was an occasion coloured by their previous experience and memories.

Two men said that at the births of their other children they had thought: *“I’ve done this before but gave it away”* and *“I’ll never replace the one that got away”*. Before the birth another respondent reported that he had hoped that he would have a girl - to replace the one that had been adopted. More positive views were expressed e.g. a determination to be present at the birth in the light of having been banned from the birth of the child that had been adopted.

Many of those who had parented described an issue and dilemma that appears in the literature relating to birth mothers. This was how to respond when the subject of numbers of children came up. For instance, on application forms when required to state numbers of children and if they had not had another child of the same sex, when asked whether they regretted not having a boy/girl (e.g. Howe et al, 1992: 77).

Most of the respondents included the adopted child. Typically he/she was: *“not a secret”*; others were open with partners and those whom they felt that they could confide in: *“In the family I always used to say that I had three daughters”*.

Other men did not include the child that was adopted and reported that they mentally anguished about this *“difficult area”*. One said:

*“When I go for jobs and you get application forms and they ask if you have any children. Inside I know I have to put no. I feel like I am denying my son because he is not in my house and therefore I have not got a son. When in company and you say I have got a son but he is not around then they start wondering why.”*

Other men reported that they alternated between doing so and not, depending on the circumstances: *“I think of myself as a father of four children but I say this when I feel safe”*.

A significant number of men (9/30) had had no other children after the child that was adopted. For five men of this group (5/9) the adopted child was their only child. One man reported that he had felt that the responsibility of having other children was so great that he had delayed so long that the time had past. He had had a vasectomy. Two other men appeared to have not entered into the kind of relationships that encompassed the possibility of a child. Both had had some parenting experience derived from the presence of the children of subsequent partners. This was relatively tenuous. In the first case the respondent had had two relatively short relationships with women who had children of their own. In the second case, he had married a woman who had two young sons, however shortly afterwards she lost custody of them. Three of these five men (who had had no children than the child that was adopted) opposed the adoption of their children.

In the case of the sub group of four men (4/9) who did not have any other children but who had had children prior to the one that was adopted, one man said that the adoption experience had put him off having more children. A second reported that after the adoption he had "*never wanted another*". This latter man went onto have more parenting experience as a stepfather. These two men had been opposed to the adoption (and were married to the birth mother at the time). A third man reported that had he known of the adoption plans at the time he would have opposed them. The fourth respondent in this group of men who had had children prior to the adoption (but none after), reported that he had been in favour of the adoption.

In all then eight out of the nine respondents who did not biologically father again had opposed the adoption. This possible association between opposition to adoption and no subsequent children may be a matter for further research.

Irrespective of the respondents' parenting 'career' either before or after the adoption, nearly all of the respondents' attitudes to parenting again were influenced by the adoption experience and their thoughts and feelings in respect of the child that had been adopted. This was also the position in the case of the respondents' behaviour



and attitudes with subsequent children. Additionally, matters such as the dilemmas they faced when confronted with every day inquiries such as 'have you any kids' or "*you must miss not having a boy*" (when the child that was adopted had been a boy), were also influenced by the adoption experience and thoughts of the child that had been adopted.

## **THE ADOPTION AND THE RESPONDENTS' 'LIFE GRAPH'**

Two significant elements have emerged in the process of listening to the narratives of the respondents. The first was the child's continuing 'existence' in the thoughts of many of the men in the group. It is suggested that this existence is felt as a **connection or attachment to the child.**

Secondly, **the birth mother** and her place in the subsequent lives of the respondents; the influence of feelings for her - and as I have pointed out - her continued presence in the inner (and sometimes social) lives of the men.

Additionally this chapter has also explored adult relationships and how the adoption experience has adversely impinged upon respondents' relations with others e.g. partners. Finally, I have also discussed the impact of the adoption on the respondents and how this has informed their subsequent attitudes toward and behaviour in parenting other children.

This chapter now concludes with a discussion of the data arising from responses an item I have entitled 'life graph'. The responses followed two questions as to whether there had been any experiences in the respondents' lives - before and after the adoption that had had a significant impact upon them. They were asked: 'In terms of effect on you, how does the adoption match or compare with any such experiences?' (see appendix A for questionnaire item Section E Question 3. Responses were invited in the following manner:

*I would now like you to think about where the adoption experience might fit in your life. In terms of the peaks and troughs, where do you envisage it - the adoption - being placed as an experience in your life?*

The item and this introduction were framed as an invitation to the respondents to convey an overall sense of their lives' significant events. I sought to have the respondents paint a mental sketch of their lives and where in this that they 'sited' the adoption experience. This was an effort to focus on events other than the adoption experience in order to achieve a broader perspective. This would allow an opportunity to avoid an over-concentration on the adoption experience. I was aware of the possibility of such an interview-generated dynamic i.e. the structure of the session itself - spread over two hours, focused on one event and designed to encourage frankness and emotional honesty - contains within it the possibility of producing an over-stated sense of the adoption's influence. Furthermore in striving for this I sought to avoid, it is suggested, a possible bias in items used in previous research. These questions asked that the interviewees compare life events and the adoption in leading terms i.e. interviewees were asked to rank life events in terms of severity of stress (Bouchier et. al, 1991; Cicchini, 1993; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984).

Here I sought to avoid use of the term 'stress' and opted instead for the more neutral, in my opinion, terms of 'effect' or 'impact'. In addition to a verbal elaboration of the item, a typed sheet that depicted a rating scale was provided for completion by the respondents (see appendix A). On this they were asked to circle the effect of the adoption, rating it between 'having much less effect on them' to 'having much more effect on them'.

The 'life graph' format proved useful in providing respondents with a framework and opportunity to voice an overview of their lives and the adoption's place in these. Various life events were referred to and assessed - successful and unsuccessful



marriages, births of subsequent children and bereavements, the respondents' physical and mental health. Other diverse, impactful events were reported e.g. one man said that his gay son's 'coming out' was an event of extreme importance to him. One respondent described his marriage as life enhancing in direct contrast to the effect of the adoption. One man identified his first foreign holiday as an important milestone in his life. As part of his life's significant events, another recalled getting arrested during a 'mods and rockers' sea-side confrontation. In the presentation of these accounts, four men reported that adoption was less significant or impactful than the death of their fathers (two respondents), a divorce and the birth of a child subsequent to the one that was adopted.

Half the respondents (15) found it difficult to 'tick a box' and said that they were unable to or did not, as was the case in one of those two respondents who completed the questionnaire by post. Instead this group felt more comfortable in speaking to the item. Of those who were able to complete the ratings exercise (15), eight said that the adoption had had more effect on them than other significant life events. Three reported that the adoption came equal in terms of intensity of impact upon them and, as noted above, four said that it had had less effect on them.

What was suggested from the majority of the accounts was that the emotional impact of the adoption was of a similar calibre as that of the deep and lasting effects of other significant events in their lives. Many of the respondents cast the adoption experience as an emotional milestone in their lives.

It can be suggested that, for some men, the adoption's influence has been wide-ranging because, in addition to various life events that may be attributed to unresolved feelings concerning the adoption experience, there is evidence that the adoption continues to exist as an event of some considerable importance. The adoption is salient because appears to have been, for many, a developmental milestone that has had life-long resonances. The fact of the continued presence of thoughts of the adoption and their child was exemplified by the respondent quoted earlier. His

remark concerning “*being rubbed out legally but not emotionally*” seems to sum up how many of the respondents felt about the impact of the adoption in their lives.

There are a number of similarities between the respondents’ reports of their thoughts and feelings in the years following the adoption and those that are contained in the literature on birth mothers. The research on birth mothers has found evidence of ‘a feeling that a bond continues between the birth mother and child even after adoption and continues throughout life’ (Hughes and Logan, 1993: 90). The finding that these respondents continue to think of the child, with some expressing a connectedness with it, seems to betoken the existence of a more shared birth mother and birth father post-adoption experience than has hitherto been popularly imagined (Mason, 1995). Similar shared experiences also seem to be in evidence, in the case of the respondents’ relationships with partners and subsequent children.

Where there appears to be less of a parallel with the birth mother research is in the findings regarding the continuation of the respondents’ thoughts in relation to the birth mother. However it seems that the birth mother research has omitted to explore this area rather than there being evidence of a difference such as a lack of thoughts of the birth father.

In a final discussion on men and fatherhood, I will look at the implications of this chapter’s central finding - that nearly all of the respondents have thoughts of the child that was adopted and that some of the respondents hold feelings of an attachment to their child. For some respondents, a feeling of fatherhood, devoid of any social or physical focus, appears to exist.

The next and final chapter in the series on the temporal phases of the experiences of these birth fathers deals with the up-to-date circumstances of the respondents. This includes the motivation to search and be found, and, for some, the experience of contact with a (adult) son or daughter that was adopted by them as a baby. Why did



the respondents decide to seek or invite contact? And for those who have experienced this, how has their feeling of 'connectedness' translated into reality with their child?

### **Note Regarding Experiences of Bereavement or Major Loss *Prior* to the Adoption**

What of those men who reported experiences of previous significant loss? In the earlier quantitative discussion I noted a relatively high proportion of men (9/30) who had reported a major loss of or separation from a parent prior to the adoption. I also reported that the men in the group made diverse assessments of the comparison between this early loss and the loss that they reported having felt as a result of the adoption. Some respondents rated the adoption higher in terms of its impact upon them and others did not.

The respondents' reports did not include any connections or hints at associations between behaviour likely to result in a pregnancy, the adoption decision and their previous experience of the loss of a parent. However research among a larger sample of birth mothers (Raynor, 1971) found that a similar proportion of women had also experienced parental loss or separation. In this research, 16/56 women reported thus. Raynor's research did not suggest any conclusions that could be drawn from this. The figures were simply reported as a result of a quantitative data collection method. Neither Bouchier et al (1991) or Mander (1995) explore similar evidence of birth mothers' prior experiences of bereavement.

What may be suggested regarding the relationship between the experience of such different losses is that for those men who have experienced a bereavement and are then involved in what they perceive as a second similar loss - the adoption of their child – the latter experience may have been more distressing. On the other hand, the converse is equally possible i.e. that such men may be better prepared for feelings of loss, depending upon how they have coped with the first loss. Although from the respondents' accounts, this does not appear to have been the case.

It is suggested that further research into a possible association between previous parental loss and having a child adopted may be useful. Furthermore, previous research has suggested the possibility of another association – that there may be correlation between those who have experienced such loss and those who experience unplanned pregnancies. Pannor et al (1971: 120) suggest that the low self esteem that may be the product of parental loss in turn may find an outlet in sexual promiscuity and an unwillingness to use contraception.

Both these latter points and my earlier comments regarding our relative lack of knowledge in respect of possibly significant contextual factors, suggest further research. This it is suggested could take the form of a sociological study of the birth parent experience, i.e. research that would include less individualistic factors such as gender relations and provide a societal and historical context.



## CHAPTER TEN

### THE BIRTH FATHER AND CHILD: TOWARDS MEETING AND MEANINGS OF CONTACT

It would be useful if research could explore what practice and anecdotal accounts suggest - that some birth fathers at least do experience grief and a continuing need for reunion...

Mullender and Kearn, 1997: 20

This chapter is the last in the section to report on the life courses of the respondents. The discussion is in two broad parts, relating to either the respondents' experiences of contact, or the circumstances of respondents who wish for contact but have not had this.

The contact motivations of all the respondents will be explored. Additionally, in the case of the ten men who have met with their (now adult) children, the nature of these meetings and subsequent relationships with their son or daughter will be discussed.

Although the majority of reports (21) did not include accounts of contact with the adopted child, the expectations of and hopes for such an event have or had become an important factor in the lives of most of the entire group of thirty respondents.<sup>6</sup> Where contact has occurred this has presented new challenges such as establishing roles and relationships between members of other families. Where it has not taken place, the wish to meet was reported as now being a powerful and regular feeling.

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<sup>6</sup> It should be remembered that the figures for contact and non contact are made up of thirty-one accounts. Twenty-one accounts from respondents who have not had experience of contact and ten from men who have. This is greater than the overall number of respondents (30) because one man features twice: once for contact with one child and again in his account of seeking contact with a second child.

There are two main foci in this chapter. Firstly, an exploration of a series of questions posed to the respondents during the interview. These were grouped around the key question - 'why do you wish contact with your child?' It is suggested that the majority of respondents were seeking a resolution of intertwined sets of thoughts and feelings. These were a growing curiosity or concern, a wish to apologise and thoughts of fatherhood directed toward the child. Some respondents' reports of their motivations for contact contained an element of self-interest.

The second focus arises from a consideration of the question 'what happens - from the birth father perspective - when a father and child meet for the first time?' There is evidence of thoughts of kinship that have either emerged in the process of seeking contact or have been made a reality by the fact of contact with the adopted child. Thoughts of an attachment to the child that were reported in the previous chapter find a material expression in the reality of a (now concretised) social and emotional relationship with their child.

The tables that follow summarise the two categories of respondents and their experiences that will come under discussion.

### **Table Eight**

#### **Birth Fathers Who Have Not Met Their Child and an Indication of Their Position in the Process**

AWAITING CONTACT WITH CHILD	14
ACTIVELY SEEKING CONTACT	7

N = 21

The above table shows the numbers of respondents who have had no contact with their child. I have divided this group of twenty-one men into two categories on the



basis of the respondents' reports in respect of what they have done to realise their wish for contact. Sixteen respondents had placed their names and addresses on adoption contact registers or with a social work or adoption agency. At the time of the interview this sub-group were not engaged in tracing activity. In respect of views and thoughts on tracing activity there was a spectrum of attitudes in evidence across this group. All expressed a hope for contact. Nine respondents indicated that they felt that they had done as much as they could do. This was typically put thus: "*It is now up to her, if she wishes to find me she can.*" The respondents expressed a concern that the child's life should not be disrupted - if and when the child became curious enough to search, then details of where they could be contacted were now available. Five other respondents expressed a view that they would take steps to initiate contact with the child if they knew how.

At least three men in this group had been active in attempting to contact the child. One man had previously and unsuccessfully engaged the services of a private detective. Actions like this and attempts to subvert the official absence of knowledge as to the adopted person's identity are not uncommon (Coleman and Jenkins, 1998: 39-46). In a letter to the Newsletter of the Natural Parents Network (No. 18 1998), one birth mother spoke of 'loopholes in the system'. The NPN Newsletter, serves *inter alia* as a clearing house for the exchange of tips that aid the search process. It appears that the ethics of this intense form of search activity have been considered mostly from only the birth parents perspective. A frequent explanation given for such activity is that it is forced on birth parents. This is as a result what is perceived as a lack of official sympathy from adoption agencies and an overwhelming personal need to provide explanations as to the reasons for the adoption and ascertain the welfare of the adopted child (Coleman and Jenkins, 1998). The accounts of such search activity in the Natural Parent Newsletter and in Coleman and Jenkins are imbued with a number of themes. These include a 'rights'-based justification - in that adopted people have the ability to trace their birth parents whereas the same does not apply the other way around. Also present is a sense of something akin to excitement – energy is generated in the decision to act perhaps having remained in distress for a number of

years: ‘...the process of doing it myself, I think, was very therapeutic. The fact that a birth mother has lost something and then tries to find it herself made more sense’ (Coleman and Jenkins, 1998: 46). McWhinnie (1994) has pointed out that the needs of the adopted person do not seem to feature in the birth parent literature. Certainly the possibility of unresponsive son or daughter has been noted: ‘I thought she had a real nerve trying to come back into my life after all these years. She didn’t want me in 1961, she sure as hell wasn’t going to come back into my life now!’ (adopted person quoted in Coleman and Jenkins, 1998: 52). There were five respondents in this study who could come into the category of being engaged at the extreme end of a type of searching spectrum. One had hired the private detective unsuccessfully and one had successfully traced on the basis of his recollections of what had been shared with him by the adoption agency at the time. Three other respondents were in the process of randomly buying adoption certificates in the hope that the information could be matched with what they knew of their child’s adoption. The majority of the group, whether having had contact or not, had not been engaged in this type of search activity. One respondent reported that he had “*taken things as far as they could go*” with the various agencies involved in the adoption. It will be remembered from a previous discussion (Section Three Chapter Six) that most of the respondents reported a strongly-held conviction regarding the adopted person’s right to privacy.

This group of sixteen respondents who had not had contact therefore expressed varying degrees of satisfaction with their efforts in respect of achieving contact. The amount of time between their decision to place their contact details on file or a register and the interview varied considerably. At least two men had done this as soon as they knew that the child was of an age to access his or her original birth certificate - in their eyes, this was the moment when the child could (and hopefully would) look for them. One man had, since the birth of his child, been in regular contact with the adoption agency regarding news of her welfare and any change of his address. Others had utilised the services of the adoption contact registers on hearing of these. In the case of at least two men, they placed their names on adoption contact registers at the time of the launch of these registers in the early 1980s.



One man had been motivated to place his name on an adoption contact register a year before after a combination of radio and television coverage and feelings engendered by the departure of his oldest (not the adopted child) for college. However the majority of respondents reported that they had made their names and addresses available many years ago.

The seven respondents who were engaged in actively seeking contact had been doing so for two or three years prior to the interview. All of the men in this group had also placed their names and addresses with an agency that would forward this to the child if he or she so wanted. They were also searching. Some were attempting to locate the child by combing through adoption and birth certificates that they were engaged in purchasing in the hope that they could glean sufficient details to establish the new identity of the child. Others were using the mediation services of the original adoption agency or the agency that now had possession of the adoption papers. In such cases certain adoption or social work agencies will undertake to approach the child on behalf of the birth parent. In three cases the respondents were in the process of negotiations such as these.

## Table Nine

### Birth Fathers Who Have Met Their Adopted Child and How This Came About.

ACTIVELY TRACED BY BIRTH FATHER	2
TRACED BY ADOPTED PERSON VIA MUTUAL ENTRIES ON CONTACT REGISTER	4
UNEXPECTEDLY TRACED BY ADOPTED PERSON	4

N = 10

At the time of the interview, the respondents' contact with the adopted child (now adult) had been in place between four months and six years. The average length of time since contact had occurred was almost three years - thirty-four months.

#### THE MOTIVES FOR CONTACT - ALL RESPONDENTS

The discussion of motives for seeking contact includes all respondents i.e. both those who would like contact and those who have had contact with the child. In the interview respondents who had had contact were asked to retrospectively report on why they had wished for contact. No differences in motives for contact between those who now had it and those who would like to meet their child could be found. Therefore all respondents are included in the following discussion regarding the respondents' motives for contact.

Aside from the group of four men who were unexpectedly contacted by the adopted child, the others (n = 26) all had wished for or wish contact with the child. The motives for contact were various. Most motives seem to stem from a personal need of the respondents. Many of the group (15) expressed a curiosity as to, as one man



put it: *“how he turned out”*. Other respondents expressed a concern or worry, for example in the words of one man, there was an anxiety that being adopted may have led to his daughter feeling *“abandoned”*.

A large group of men (13/26) included in their motives the wish for an opportunity to make expiation as a means of relieving guilt. The guilt that they referred to was perceived by them to have been caused by the adoption and what they saw as their failure to have provided an alternative at the time. In the words of one man: *“to tell her that I am sorry for letting her be adopted”*.

There were other respondents (8/26) who were explicit regarding their need to have a *“some sort of relationship”* that, in the eyes of some of the respondents, might approximate that of father and child.

Included in the contact motives of three respondents were references to a need to complete their own personal and inner ‘jigsaw’. Comments such as these raised some questions regarding a possible mix of self-interest and altruism in respondents’ motives. These questions are discussed below.

In the following discussion of contact motives it is suggested that there is a follow-on from the findings in the last chapter. There it was found that most respondents reported that thoughts of the child had remained with them throughout their lives. In this next discussion, it will be seen that there is a continuity of attachment to the child.

### **Curiosity and Concern**

The need for contact with their child was seen by half of the respondents (15) as emerging from a feeling of growing curiosity or concern directed toward the child’s well being. This feeling has previously been discussed in relation to how the respondents thought of their child before any decision to seek contact. Such a decision was seen by some men as the culmination of a process that had begun in the

years following the adoption. This feeling of concern expressed itself in sentiments such as wanting to make themselves available to help, typically:

*“Why do I want to meet her? To know if she is alive; happy? To see if she is alright.”*

and:

*“I have a duty to her. I’d love to know how she is, how she’s got on. To be available.”*

Rather than a process of a gradually increasing curiosity or in some cases concern, four other men said that the child’s coming of age was a decisive moment. For them this was reported as significant because it was the time when they knew that the child could legally access his or her original certificate and thus know their birth father’s name. One of these men spoke of waiting for the “*knock on the door*”.

## **Expiation**

Where there are parallels with the birth mother experience (e.g. Deykin et al, 1984; Winkler and van Keppel, 1984) is in the presence of feelings of guilt that were reported by many of the respondents in addition to other thoughts of curiosity or concern. There were a number of references to the need to make some form of explanation or apology as to the circumstances of the adoption:

*“Is she alive? Well? Happy? To say I would have loved her, to apologise. To say I have carried on loving her.”*

and:

*“How is he doing? If I could help. Have some sort of relationship. It would be a relief for me. To explain my side. There is guilt in a way.”*

The need to apologise or ‘put their side’ was seen by most of the men who reported such thoughts as derived from their feelings of an inevitability or powerlessness



relating to the adoption decision. They reported a need to explain the circumstances at the time of the adoption. In the case of one man *"To tell her I'm sorry."*

Some of this group of respondents indicated that they concurred with the adoption decision at the time. It seems therefore that the thoughts of guilt in question and feelings of a need to apologise are sentiments that have appeared at some time after the adoption. Cicchini (1993) draws attention to the presence of these sentiments in his discussion of birth fathers' post-adoption feelings. He suggests that the emergence and growth of such feelings are the result of emotional maturation and a consequent growth in feelings of responsibility.

For the respondents, in most cases 'putting their side' was construed as explaining the circumstances in which both birth father and birth mother had found themselves. In the words of one man to say: *"that it was not really our fault."* Here the 'side' that these respondents wish to put in the event of contact includes the birth mother. This is to say that setting the story straight for the respondents appears to mean recounting the joint story of both birth father and birth mother reasons for the adoption. One respondent reported that if he met with his daughter he would, among other things, tell her that:

*"I didn't want her to be adopted. Never ever did. She mustn't hold it against us because it was not really our fault. You weren't a casual affair to a couple who weren't going to get married. The powers that be said 'no you can't'."*

The exception to this sentiment was the case of one man whose wish to *"put the story right"* was because the child was the result of his alleged rape of the birth mother. He felt that child would not receive an accurate (his) account of the circumstances of her conception.

Such thoughts of a need to explain the circumstances seem to be based on a need for absolution. The need for contact was seen in one case, among other things, as *"to see if he'd blamed me"*. Another man reported that - again, among other emotions he

said that he had felt when he had met with his daughter for the first time - he had feared “*a belt in the mouth*” from her. He communicated that he had felt to blame for the adoption and that, in his view, she would be justified in any anger that she felt about it.

The respondents’ expressions of a need for expiation are also combined with other more selfish motives. One man’s report conveys this mix:

*“Some sort of relationship with him would be a relief for me. It’s something I would like. I’m not going to force it because I think it has to come from the other side. But if it did come I would try and establish a relationship. I suppose it’s guilt in a way. Because one of the things I would want to do is to explain my side of the story. I know it is very selfish. But the decisions taken then were in D--’s best interest, at the time as we saw fit.”*

This respondent seems to be saying what some others implied, that the goal of contact with their child includes a degree of self-interest and I will now discuss this.

### **A Self Interest**

Three men spoke of their desire for contact as also motivated by a need to complete an “*unfinished*” jigsaw. In his reasons for seeking contact, another man included a similar notion of gaps: “*Why contact? She’s part of me, is she happy? To fill in a few empty spaces.*”

The incomplete jigsaw analogy does not seem to appear in the birth mother literature; rather birth mothers are quoted as talking of themselves as having something missing. A similar analogy of ‘missing pieces of a puzzle’ features in the search and contact motivations of adopted people (Triseliotis, 1973: 81; March, 1995: 70). Does the jigsaw metaphor convey something about how birth fathers are affected by the adoption experience?

Feelings of emptiness are found in studies of birth mothers’ feelings in the years after the adoption (e.g. Howe et al, 1992: 84) and it may be that these are two ways to



express a similar sense of loss. Indeed one respondent's motivations for contact closely resemble the descriptions of birth mothers' motivations when he said, "*It's like something inside of me is missing*".

Notwithstanding the motivations of this respondent, it may be that, for those birth fathers who have used the analogy of the unfinished jigsaw, they are expressing something slightly different - a need to make things 'right' by completing their life history. This may be derived from the circumstances of adoption in which the respondents were excluded from the adoption proceedings. The respondents would therefore not have knowledge of such facts as weight of the child, time of birth, descriptions of adoptive parents and the area of the country where the child was to be brought up. In some cases the respondents never knew what the child had looked like. The relative knowledge that the birth mother gained of matters such as this is a feature of her more central involvement in the adoption than the birth father. Thus a gender difference in reasons for contact may be in evidence here. This, it is suggested, may arise from the circumstantially different experiences of both parties at the time of the adoption. The respondents knew relatively less of the facts and thus here is perhaps the reason for their descriptions of something "*unfinished*" and references to "*empty spaces*" in some type of mental curriculum vitae of their own inner world.

Where the respondents' reports and those from birth mothers seem to show some parallels is in the notion that motives for search activity contain an element of self-interest. Deykin et al. (1984: 279) comment that 'search activity may be a means of achieving restitution not of the surrendered child, but of the self'. In other words one of the motives for searching may be self-interest in the form of a desire to be more at ease with oneself. Hughes (1996) suggests that, for birth mothers, one of the long-term effects of adoption is the possibility of mental ill health. In this light then those who choose to search may have as one of their motives the hope that contact may ameliorate their mental distress or the feeling of not being a mentally whole person. Such a feeling of a lack of wholeness or negative self-esteem (Weinreb and Cody

Murphy, 1988) may approximate the sense of being without restitution to which Deykin et al. refer. There was some evidence of this in the respondents' accounts.

In the words of one respondent, he needed to begin searching "*to keep me sane*".

Another man said that a relationship with his son would be "*a relief*". It is suggested then that for some respondents such a self-interest is an additional element in the motivation to search. This element is echoed in the birth mother literature.

Berryman (1997: 311) reports findings to the effect that one of the search motives for birth mothers is to obtain a 'sense of relief and peace of mind'. Modell (1986: 655) quotes a birth mother on finding her son: 'These are liminal moments, of being outside of self and simultaneously completing self – "feeling whole again".'

However, it is also suggested that such motivations form part of a complex group of thoughts and feelings that also include more altruistic reasons for seeking contact. In this respect the dichotomy between self-interest and altruism suggested by Deykin et al's comment may not exist. In the search motives of the respondents, it appears that meeting a personal need and an aspiration to 'do right' by the child may be motivational factors that co-exist.

Finally in this discussion of motives for contact, there is a group of respondents who spoke to a wish to have a relationship with their child. There were eight men – over a third of the whole group – who included in their motives an explicit hope for contact that would lead to a lasting relationship.

### **The Wish for A Relationship**

In the responses to the item that dealt with motives for contact, eight men explicitly included a wish to have a relationship with the child. As to his reasons for contact, one man said:



*“...to reassure myself that he’s ok. To find out about him. Could we have a relationship? I think that there must be some Karmic connection between us.”*

One man expressed his regret poignantly and conveyed that he hoped that it might not be too late to have a relationship with his son:

*“I want to let him know that it’s not that I didnae want him. I always have and always will love him. That I would like to, if possible, be part of his life. I would like to know where he’s staying. He’s not too old. There’s things that I could do with him. I’m not too old.”*

Four of these men reported their motives for contact in explicit parent - child terms:

*“Why contact? The fact that she is my daughter. The fact that she is my flesh and blood. She has got a step-sister and step-brother.”*

This respondent was also clear about the specific nature of this relationship:

*“I think of J. [not the adopted child] as a second daughter. S, even if she came back, I’ll never be her father. I’m her father biologically. I would accept that.”*

Another man (who has had contact with his child) put it thus:

*“I think the dad part is very difficult because she’s had a dad that she respects. She tells people that I’m her dad. But I’m not her dad.”*

Another respondent also couched his ambivalence in terms of regret:

*“I missed out on her growing up. You wouldn’t expect them to love you like a father but still...”*

The respondents who shared their thoughts regarding this question of the difference between being a father (biologically) and a ‘dad’ (socially) seemed to be clear about the distinction. I could find no expressions of any impulse to replace an existing (adoptive) father. One man came near to such a feeling of possessiveness. After saying that he always replied in the negative when asked whether he had children he elaborated:

*“The simple reason is that she’s not mine at this moment in time. At this moment in time - probably the wrong thing to say - she’s on loan to someone else.”*

However this was qualified in the next sentence:

*“I can’t turn round and say she’s mine because I’ve never met the girl. Although technically, in one sense, she is mine. On the other hand she isn’t mine.”*

This discussion of the respondents’ attitudes to the distinction in parental roles and responsibilities does not confirm the findings of the 1988 North American study of birth fathers. This study found that ‘search activity was highly associated with serious thoughts of taking the child back’ (Deykin et al, 1988: 244). Based on this finding Mullender and Kearn (1997) have recently voiced a need for ‘caution’ (21) regarding birth fathers’ involvement in the adoption process. Mullender and Kearn acknowledge that there were biases in the North American study - derived from the fact that the interviewees were members of a campaigning group (ibid.).

Notwithstanding this reservation, Mullender and Kearn make the suggestion that whilst the involvement of birth fathers in the adoption decision-making process is important there may be a need to ‘exercise care about involving them at later stages once an adoption has taken place’ (ibid.). Presumably this comment is made in the light of the North American evidence that suggests that birth fathers may use any such contact opportunities as an occasion to ‘retrieve’ (ibid.) the child. The views and motivations for contact of the respondents in the present study do not reinforce such an apprehension.

The central thread that seems to run through these accounts of motivations for contact is that, irrespective of whether the wish to meet is derived from curiosity or concern, a need to make expiation or a greater self interest, or aspirations for a relationship, **the child has remained in mind**. Furthermore, in these reports of motivations and wishes for contact, we can see that these thoughts have taken on a



practical expression. The respondents had taken active steps to make themselves contactable and secure a meeting with their child. In this respect a number of respondents expressed a belief that they had never relinquished their status as a father of the child. Overall then, if the respondents' senses of loss and wishes for a relationship are taken together with their feelings of attachment then it is suggested that the respondents experience the type of affectional bond that Ainsworth (1991: 38) describes:

In an affectional bond there is a desire to maintain closeness to the partner. In older children and adults that closeness may to some extent be sustained over time and distance and during absences, but nevertheless there is at least an intermittent desire to re-establish proximity and interaction and usually pleasure – often joy – upon reunion. Inexplicable separation tends to cause distress and permanent loss would cause grief

This discussion of the respondents' aspirations and motivations for contact has provided evidence for affectional bonds experienced by the respondents and provided some empirical grounding for the relevance of attachment theory. Not only as an explanation for the birth fathers' feelings and thoughts but, it is also suggested, attachment theory may be useful framework with which to further explore and theorise the experiences of birth mothers.

In my conclusion to this chapter I will return to the issue of how the respondents imagine the basis of any such subsequent relationship and how they envisage their place in the lives of their children. This discussion regarding the child in their mind will be enhanced by information arising from the reality of contact and meeting with the child, i.e. the child in their world.

## CONTACT AND MEETING

The ten meetings and relationships discussed here do not provide sufficient information to draw conclusions regarding the shifting dynamics and roles in the unique configurations brought about by adoption and subsequent contact. Perhaps more importantly a question of methodology is raised when approaching the respondents' reports on contacts and relationships with their children. In my aspirations to explore the experiences of these birth fathers I decided to set up the research in such a fashion as to include their experiences from before the birth of the child that was adopted to, where relevant, the contact and meetings with their children. The interview process gave credence to this decision. It seemed counter-intuitive not to proceed to discuss contact where this had taken place. For most of the men who had had contact the accounts of their lives and experiences after the adoption were tinged with a sense of building up to the meeting. Not to allow them to continue would have seemed disrespectful of their account. As noted previously in the cases of many of the respondents, the interview served as the first opportunity that they had had 'to tell the whole story'. Without an account of the contact with their children their stories would have seemed inappropriately truncated.

However what has emerged in the process of undertaking and writing up this research is an appreciation that birth father-adopted child contacts and relationships constitute a whole other set of experiences that warrant separate research. These contacts and subsequent relationships, although part of the experiences of birth fathers, require their own research methodology. For instance such methodology would devote greater attention to the question of differences between feelings after six weeks and feelings after the six years, more in-depth exploration of expectations and the quality of the emerging relationships. In the light of this lack of methodological rigour relating to this area of their experiences, the respondents' responses tended to be less defined and more global (and less helpful). Therefore the discussion that follows draws upon data that is somewhat thinner than the subject deserves. However, in light of the fact that neither of the two existing studies of birth fathers explores



experiences of contact and relationships with adult children, what follows may at least provide an empirically grounded starting point for further enquiry.

As we shall see in the present 'snap-shot' of birth father – child relationships, there is evidence of a set of social phenomena taking place that is worthy of further study. The merits of such further exploration are underlined when it is appreciated that, in the case of the others who have not had contact, nearly all of the respondents would welcome the opportunity of a meeting and a possible relationship if they knew how to establish contact with their child.

The following reports and discussion of contact and meeting provide a glimpse into a complex world of aspirations, behaviours and feelings where the terms kith and kin seem to be taking on new and expanded meanings.

Ten of the respondents had met their children. Four men had been contacted by the adopted person - this arose from their having their names on adoption contact registers. Two respondents had located their child through their own efforts. The remaining four respondents had been found by the adopted person, but not as a result of any actions of their own, e.g. placing their name on a contact register. They had been found unexpectedly.

Reports were given from the experiences of relationships that spanned between four months (two meetings up to the time of the interview) and six years.

### **The Meeting**

The ten respondents were asked two main questions. Firstly 'what were their expectations of the first contact and meeting?' For all the respondents the first meeting was an emotionally charged event. All ten of these meetings went very well. There was: "*relief at how easy we communicated and how understanding she appeared*" and pleasure because "*we hit it off*". For another man, there was "*delight*"

that had commenced when his son had begun their first conversation with the observation that he was now owed twenty plus years pocket money, then: *“we sat and drank and talked until 5am then I put him to bed”*.

There was also shock:

*“When she came in, oh my god, as soon as she came in, she was the double of her mother. I just seen her. Me and her mother y’know; of course the usual [signalled tears] we held each other and that was it; sat down and started blethering...”*

For others there was what seemed to be a certain stupefaction:

*“It was something I had been waiting for all my life. I was on a different plane, I was just still vacant. I was wandering about saying ‘what’s happening here?’. And really that’s what I think I was saying to myself - ‘What’s happening here?’ To take the enormity of it was so much.”*

And there was recognition:

*“I recognised her before she came into the hotel. I saw her walking along. I knew it was her ‘cause she looks like me in many ways. And that’s my daughter.”*

Another respondent said that the meeting felt like the arrival of the *“prodigal son.”* Most of the respondents recounted the events of these meetings with passion and deep emotion. This group was moved to tears during this item.

The course of the first meeting was typically lengthy. They sat up talking for hours *“it felt just right”* and *“there was a relief at how easily we communicated”*. Irrespective of the amount of preparation beforehand, these first meetings were reported to have gone well.

The settings and the parties involved were varied. One man criticised the social worker for being present throughout the meeting and then indicating that she felt



'time was up' after an hour. Another man arranged to meet his son at the son's place of work - the son brought a friend (who had also been adopted). Another respondent and his daughter met in the foyer of a hotel and were soon after joined by the daughter's relatives and her adoptive parents. Another man took his (adult) son to meet his adopted daughter who in turn had brought her husband and their child - they all met in an amusement park. One man's meeting with his daughter took place at his house. They were joined by a number of relatives and friends. In the latter case the contact from the adopted person had come from 'out of the blue' and the meeting took place two days afterwards.

For many of the ten this first meeting provided an outlet for long-held feelings, e.g. the attainment of "*forgiveness*" was mentioned by one respondent. Another man said that "*a big hole had been filled in his life*". "*All those years of waiting were over*" and "*the worries had gone*" were statements made by two other like-minded respondents. Here there is a verification of one of the motives for contact that was discussed earlier, namely the resolution of inner and personal needs.

### **Attachment Given a Material Expression**

The second question invited the respondents to assess the nature of their relationship with their child.

All 10 referred to their son/daughter as 'theirs' or in a parental capacity:

*"I love her as a daughter. There's no two ways about that. She is my daughter. My blood daughter"*

Others gave similar responses. These were variously "*she's my babbie*"; "*as father to son - I am living on through him*"; "*Dat's my girl*". Another respondent proudly quoted references by his son to him as "*my old man*". Another said that he felt pride at being referred to as the "*granddad*" of his birth daughter's baby.

The man for whom the relationship had not developed spent hours describing how their relationship “*deteriorated spectacularly*” until he felt was “*gazing into the pit*”. Nevertheless he too felt that there was “*always a roof for her*” despite what he recounted as a painful and protracted breakdown in their relationship.

All but one of the men interviewed appeared to have established positive relationships and much pleasure was expressed. The tenth man, in spite of the relationship with his daughter having deteriorated subsequent to contact, reported that he would not have wished to have been denied the possibility of meeting her, after all, it was something he said he “*had been waiting for all my life*”. For this man, rejection and resolution coexist in the achievement of contact. The latter - and most seemingly ‘failed’ contact - may result in the re-establishment of a relationship on a less acrimonious footing because at the time of the interview the daughter had begun to communicate with him again (this time by letter and from the USA). Conversely the relationships that commenced and continued in euphoric mode, were reported to be not always strife-free. In six relationships some element of discord was reported but it was felt that this was part of a getting to know a stranger with whom they were intimately linked.

In all cases the respondents who had met their children reported feeling an intimacy from the first point of contact with each other. This was in respect of a person that most of the men had never seen as a baby and none had seen since the birth. During the interview the respondents talked fondly of such activities as going to the pub with their (birth) son, their daughter’s achievements; they reported a feeling of closeness during their first telephone calls - long excited conversations took place with each other. One respondent spoke proudly of being his daughter’s confidante. One birth father said he now felt “*a concern for him*” and another said that he was pleased and that everything was good and better than it should be - “*he’s my only boy*”. Two birth fathers used the term “*prodigal*” to describe the meeting with their son and their daughter. Typically, respondents spoke of “*hitting it off from the word go*” in respect of ease of communication. One respondent referred to a feeling of “*naturalness*” that was present in his first meeting with his son.



A sense of pride was also reported by four respondents. This was derived from the discovery that they were grandparents. In other cases there were reports of men who had had to alter dates in their life history after receiving news of births of children. The births of children of the adopted child had predated those of the respondent's subsequent (not adopted) children. Thus the respondents had become grandfathers years before this status had hitherto commenced for them. One respondent received the unexpected news that he was a great grandfather.

Those in the group of four respondents who were unexpectedly contacted were faced with a different set of dilemmas than those whose search activity had been public knowledge. For these four men the adoption had not been a matter of general knowledge among those close to them. Despite it never having been a secret from those with whom they were closest e.g. wives, some had not told their other children. Three men found themselves in the position of having to explain to a son or daughter that they were not, contrary to what had been understood, the respondent's eldest child. For the respondents in this group contact was not something that had been actively considered despite them having spoken to the child having been regularly in their thoughts. Some of the factors involved in not considering contact as a possibility have already been discussed e.g. the lack of knowledge about services such as adoption contact registers and a wish not to take any initiative that would disrupt their child's life. Further research amongst those fathers that have not actively indicated a wish for contact but are 'found' is necessary to explore the dynamics and reactions involved in this particular type of encounter.

The majority of the group with contact reported an improved sense of self-esteem. As half (5/10) of this group who had had were those who had successfully traced, or indicated a willingness to be contacted, this is not surprising, i.e. an important quest had been concluded. One respondent said that since meeting with his child he had *"now been able to get my life together"*.

In addition to such feelings of pleasure engendered by the establishment of contact, a number of respondents included in their reports a reference to a lack of resolution of some feelings. In one case guilt was not banished by the initiation of a relationship:

*“There is no difference in the feelings that I have for her and those I have for my other children, except the guilt is still there.”*

I was also struck by a similar tension within another respondent's otherwise positive account of his meeting and relationship with his daughter. His report conveyed a sense of euphoria as a result of having successfully traced his daughter six years previously. He now had contact with the birth mothers' parents, his (adopted) daughter, her husband and numerous grandchildren yet towards the end of the interview he stated that *“Xmas was a bad time for him.”* These two references to feelings that contrast with others of pleasure and successful establishment of relationships provide a suggestion that the more 'selfish' aspect of the motive to search may not find a resolution in contact with the child.

The appearance of the birth father in the adoptive family, whether as a result of the adopted person's activities or the birth father's, places on the agenda the question of what constitutes kinship ties. There are many other ramifications, not the least the question of which is more real - kinship legally and socially formed by adoption or biological kinship created by 'blood' and genetics? Or need all the parties that are involved have to choose between one and the other? There are other more prosaic challenges brought about by contact and the establishment of a relationship between the birth father and the child that was adopted. These include the sudden burgeoning of festive and birthday card lists and how to sign oneself, attendance (or not) at future births/christenings, marriages and funerals (and where to position oneself during these events – outside or inside?, front row or at the back?). The respondents' reports provide one-sided accounts. We do not know what contact has meant for the adopted children involved in the respondents' experiences.



For the respondents, abstract thoughts of the child were been changed into concrete social and psychological relationships that have the potential of rippling outward from the meeting. From the respondents' reports it seems accurate to observe that one of the consequences of meeting with their adopted children has been a material difference in the way that these birth fathers will henceforth conduct their lives. Certainly for the respondents, social relations have been altered by the fact of contact.

One of the potentially most challenging issues is that of the birth father's active presence in the life of the adopted child. Contact between the child and birth father raises the need for a separate discussion of the issues arising from the social existence (as distinct from theoretical) of two fathers. It is to this question that I will now turn.

### **The Issue of Status and Terminology – Two Fathers?**

On the question of the difference between themselves and the adoptive father, the majority of respondents took pains to communicate their appreciation of the distinctions between themselves (*"the father"*) and the child's adoptive father (*"her dad"*) and expressed a concern for the feelings of the adoptive parents:

*"When I met him, I told him 'Yes I was his father' but I wasn't his dad. His dad is the man who brings him up, and cuddles him when he's sick and tells him stories. Oh yeh, I was his father but I wasn't his dad."*

During contact and subsequent meetings the question of the precise nature of the relationship raised itself. Many of these men had never seen the child at all yet they reported feelings of fatherhood in respect of the adopted child. They reported that they felt that these feelings were similar to those that they had towards their other children. For some respondents, such thoughts and feelings had always been present since the adoption. For other men, feelings had emerged or grown in the years following the adoption.

Almost all the respondents expressed concerns not to disrupt the relationship between the child and his/her adoptive parents. This is evidenced in the care taken to differentiate themselves (father) from the adoptive fathers ('dad'). In the words of one man, the adoptive father was: *"the one that brought her up"*. Another respondent, who had met twice with his son, expressed a feeling of caution as regards their relationship especially vis-à-vis the son's parents. He *"did not want to come between him and his adoptive parents"*.

Notwithstanding this aspiration, in some cases there were some indications that the two roles of biological and social father had converged during contact and the subsequent relationship with the adopted child. There was evidence in this relationship of aspects of parent-child social relations developing irrespective of whether the social - adoptive - father was a reality in the life of the adopted person. For example, a number of respondents reported being described as *"dad"* or *"her real dad"*. One respondent talked of being asked to provide what he felt to be paternal advice and guidance.

Finch and Mason (1991) describe three key areas of parent-child obligation. These are personal care, financial support and accommodation. There is evidence of all three categories in the respondents' accounts. One man who had undergone a major heart operation was visited immediately afterwards by the daughter with whom he had recently had contact. The case of one man who had unsuccessfully sought his son indicates that that a parental role could extend to financial matters:

*"We have got to make a will in a couple of week's time. Obviously if he is not here then he won't be in it."*

Another respondent has undertaken some business with his daughter's husband. And, as noted above, a respondent (whose contact with his daughter was not thought to have been positive) was clear that should the need arise *"there would always be a roof over her head"* in his house.



Yet, whilst these relationships are forming and developing a 'first' social father - the adoptive father - is already in existence. One of the respondents graphically conveyed this conundrum and the potential for a confusion of roles when in response to a question as to how he thought that his daughter regarded their relationship, he said:

*“Like the dad that she can tell everything to. I’m the one that doesn’t give rows and judge and what not. The one that won’t be shocked. The confidant. She seeks my approval. She won’t get that disapproval from her adoptive mum and dad.”*

Modell (1986) draws attention to evidence of an aspiration to quasi-parent status among a campaigning group of American birth parents. Modell (ibid.: 658) has identified what she refers to as a 'rhetoric' in the literature of Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) that advances the view that 'the birthparent contributes love and emotion, spontaneity and support to an existing parent-child relationship, in the manner of the divorced parent or fond uncle in American culture.'

On the basis of what some of the respondents have recounted, in the respect of their new relationship with their adopted child, it would seem that there may be evidence of some new configuration of social roles that is emerging in the contacts between themselves and their children. This takes the discussion beyond birth parent expressions of hope or fantasy regarding 'equal status' with the adoptive parent (Modell, ibid.) and moves these aspirations into the realm of fulfilment and reality.

In terms of their possible multiplicity and possible duplication, the creation of these new roles may contain the potential for some confusion. The issue of the existence and presence of two fathers is posed by contact between birth fathers and their adopted children. An interesting and emerging social phenomenon may be signalled in these contacts. As indicated in the discussion of the motives of those who were seeking contact, a number of respondents expressed thoughts of fatherhood when discussing their children and when speculating about any future relationship. As also indicated, these thoughts were generally accompanied by statements regarding the respondents' appreciation of the status of the adoptive father in the child's life - he

was their “*dad*” whilst the birth father saw himself as the child’s father but not his or her “*dad*.” What do the accounts of the ten respondents tell us about this two fathers issue?

For these respondents the abstract has become concrete. All of the respondents were pleased that contact had occurred. The four men who had been unexpectedly contacted were equally pleased at the arrival of the child in their lives. In the case of these four men, there were reports of descriptions of a father-daughter/son status being in place in the relationship that had emerged since contact. As noted above some of these relationships were characterised by concrete evidence of parts being played that resembled those of a conventional (social) father.

In these emerging relationships, transactions were taking place for which there was no normative consensus. In other words, exchanges were taking place on a social, emotional and material level for which there were no ‘cultural rules’ (Finch and Mason, 1990: 221). In their discussion of changes in the patterns of divorce and remarriage, Finch and Mason (*ibid.*: 244) conclude that: “*There is a sense in which cultural rules to meet these situations are currently being written...*”. A similar process of events developing a protocol of their own seems to be the case in the field of contact between these birth fathers and their children. In the respondents’ reports it seems that two individual dynamics appear to converge.

These are firstly the respondents’ attachment to the child. This attachment or bond seems to have survived an apparently insurmountable obstacle - the lack of someone to be a father with. The majority of the respondents’ expressions of a care, a sense of obligation, and in some cases a feeling of fatherhood in respect of their children indicated a wish to be **someone in the child’s life**. This, it is suggested could embody a ‘pull’ to parent. Secondly, included in the adopted person’s motives for seeking contact, there may be a dynamic that complements that of the birth father’s wish to have a relationship. In respect of the adopted person’s motives to search, it is not suggested that this is as crass an activity as seeking a father replacement. There is



insufficient data relating to the search activities and motives of the children who found the respondents and from the men's accounts to suggest this. There do not appear to be any great gaps or losses relating to fathering in the lives of the children who traced them. The research also indicates that adopted people do not search or seek contact as a means of achieving a replacement parent (Howe and Feast, 2000; Triseliotis, 1977). However, Modell (1994: 12) suggests the searches of adopted people may betoken an engagement in a re-interpretation of their own kinship. The psychology of the adopted person's search could therefore incorporate an idea of the existence (or establishment) of a wider kinship network, i.e. one that includes two fathers (and two mothers, and for that matter additional siblings be they half or fully related to them). In the words of one adopted person who had recently met his birth father 'maybe one day dad will be more appropriate' (Post-Adoption Social Workers Group, 1987: 11).

Perhaps this indicates a process involving the conveyance of aspects of a parental role through it being ascribed by the child (now adult). His/her search activities, their initiation of contact and their feelings regarding the search for a birth father may be instrumental in the creation of another – second – father or father-like figure.

Thus there may be a chemistry at work in the meeting and subsequent relationship between birth father and child. This may have the effect of creating two different people or more accurately, two people each with a social role acquired by virtue of their contact with each other. From the part of the birth father, the new social role of father to the adopted child and from the experience of the adopted person, the social role of being a person who has a relationship with a 'new' (or second) father.

On this last point it should be borne in mind that, not only may the social roles of a father and daughter/son be created by the event of contact, the possibility of a multitude of other new roles is also a reality. Two men reported that they 'became' grandfathers for the first time at the first meeting between themselves and their children. Not only will they have acquired grandchildren in this event but also these grandchildren had acquired grandfathers. The list of those that are theoretically

affected and involved is as numerous as the members of the two kin 'groups' that come together when contact takes place between a birth father and his adopted child.

The assumption by some of the respondents of a quasi-parenting role in relation to someone with whom he has had no social parenting experience would seem to pose theoretical grounds for conflict. However none of the respondents reported conflict arising in their relations (where these were in existence) with the adoptive parents of the child.

The position of stepfathers provides a precedent to examine behaviour and role negotiations in a situation where two social fathers co-exist. However stepfathers do not bring with them the symbolism that is betokened by such terms as 'natural father' (or even more loaded, 'real dad') and the connotations that may be brought by the existence of a unique genetic connection. These potential rivalries are often expressed in literature. In George Eliot's, Silas Marner, the biological father who rejected the child as a baby rests his claim for custody of the child (now a teenager) against the child's adoptive father solely on the basis of his being the child's 'real' father. Irrespective of the life-long parent-child bond between the child and her adoptive parent, the biological father's case is given merit because of his being the 'natural' father. The film of the book - A Simple Twist of Fate - concludes with custody being denied to the biological father but with the suggestion that the child will continue to have him in her life. How all three will refer to each other is not portrayed.

This discussion of birth fathers, their wish for contact and the ramifications of their relationships with their children produces a questioning of both the usage and meaning of such terms as father, 'dad' and fatherhood. Conventional understandings of the status of father, what constitutes being a father and the meanings that may be attached to phrases such as dad and father are problematised in exploring the meaning of the respondents' experiences. In one sense there has always been two fathers. The main parties involved in adoption (the adopted person, the birth mother, adoptive parents - and social workers) formally acknowledge this and are, generally, aware of this as a



biological or genetic fact. The hands-on social parenting role undertaken by the adoptive father confers upon him the status of father and conventionally, it is understood that he is the only man who experiences thoughts and feelings of fatherhood toward the child. In this sense the adoptive father occupies and fulfils the male parental role. However, in excavating and exploring the experiences of the respondents, the existence of a second set of thoughts of fatherhood has emerged – that of the birth father. Modell (1986: 658) remarks that ‘there is no obvious role for a birthparent in an American kinship system’. The accounts by respondents of roles that have begun to emerge in their relationships with their children would suggest that the knowledge base of research community may be lagging behind events that are unfolding in society.

Therefore these questions of role and status – perceived, ascribed and actual - in the circumstances of contact are clearly matters that warrant further study.

Two central themes have been explored in this chapter. The first is the existence of the respondents’ enduring thoughts of the child and continuing need for a meeting (and in many cases, hopes for a relationship). Irrespective of the wider sociological and socio-anthropological ramifications, the nature and quality of the meetings and contacts between these birth fathers and their children seems to provide a practical outlet for their feelings of fatherhood that have been held throughout the period since the adoption.

The second theme involves the question called into being by the presence of two men who may respond to the title of father in respect of the child that was adopted. The data arising from the respondents’ accounts is necessarily one-sided and, as indicated at the beginning of this chapter, it is based upon a small sample whose reports of contact are deserving of a more rigorous and extensive research methodology. Notwithstanding these reservations I have suggested a number of lines of future enquiry. These would entail research into the perceptions and experiences of birth

parents, adoptive parents and adopted people in respect of contact and subsequent relationship between birth parents and their adopted children.

Overall then, I suggest that both central themes of this chapter - the motives of the men who have indicated a wish for contact and the experiences of the men who had met their children - provide evidence for the existence of attachment to the child – perceived as fatherhood by many respondents - actively experienced by the respondents in this study.

This concludes the discussion of the temporal phases of the respondents' adoption and post adoption experiences.

Many important findings have occurred in sifting the data provided by the respondents. There is a category of findings that indicates commonalities of a shared birth parent experience e.g. the attitude of the respondents to access to information. There are other findings that may not be shared with birth mothers e.g. thoughts of and feelings for the respondents' partners at the time of the birth and adoption. Other findings point to the need for more research. This is the case in the need for a sociology of birth parent experience and specifically investigation of the question of prior loss in the lives of birth parents i.e. loss of a parent prior to conception, birth and the adoption. Certain big themes have emerged. These are the sense of disenfranchisement and loss felt by the respondents and the adoption's effect and presence in their lives to the present day. Finally there is the evidence of distinct set of emotions and thoughts in respect of the adopted child. Despite these men having had no experience of day-to-day care and having never seen the child since its birth some thirty years previous (and in some cases not even this visual contact had taken place), the child remained in their minds. A bond with their adopted child seemed to run through their lives like the lettering in seaside rock. Any general assumption that men forget their children is not confirmed by this study. Furthermore it clear from the respondents' reports that the feelings and thoughts that a man may have for his child are not necessarily engendered by social care and activity alone.



Brinich's call for a re-examination of the 'stereotypical view of the development of fatherhood' (1990: 59) appears then to be vindicated by this study of birth fathers. This study has indeed 'yielded much more than the vacuum that previous authors have suggested exists.' (ibid.). It is suggested, that in the case of the respondents, fatherhood has been shown to have more dimensions than has been imagined.

Here it is well to be reminded that the self-selected nature of the cohort and its size requires caution in any attempts to extrapolate to any wider population of fathers from these findings. Further research is necessary with a larger group of respondents who, if possible, were less visible than those in the present group. What I have found applies solely to this group of respondents. The remainder of this work will constitute a conclusion that will necessarily have an air of speculation.

My final chapter draws together the emergent themes with particular emphasis upon the questions of what the respondents' experiences and my findings may tell us about men and fatherhood. The chapter will also discuss the findings and their relationship to adoption theory, policy and practice.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This research has explored a subject about which we know very little – biological fatherhood. A central finding has been that a group of men – biological fathers who had had a child given up for adoption – report a sense of attachment to the child despite never having participated in social parenting this child. This finding has been derived from a study of thirty men whose life circumstances could be seen to form a natural experiment - they are a group of biological fathers who have not been involved in a child's upbringing yet express an attachment to the child. Despite being 'childless fathers' in Modell's sense (1994) i.e. they had mostly never seen the child that they had helped to conceive, many of these men felt a bond - which some described as a parental feeling - with the child.

There are two parts to this conclusion. Firstly, there is a discussion of the nature of the respondents' feelings of attachment – their thoughts and an experience of a bond. In the words of Bowlby (1979c) and Ainsworth (1991) an 'affectional bond' seems in place in the respondents' reports of their connectedness to the child. However this bond exists in the absence of the type of behaviour and activity that is conventionally understood to be the basis for such a bond e.g. social parenting activities such as the provision of nurture and care and mutual interaction and affection.

This thesis has investigated the lived experiences of the respondents in the months and years following the adoption and the place of the child in their lives – thus the characterisation of the circumstances of the group as a natural experiment. The thesis explores why most of the respondents report a feeling of attachment to the child. Some possible answers to this are suggested and then the findings' relevance to our



understanding of fatherhood is explored. Finally, clinical practice and policy in the field of social work and adoption is discussed.

## **The Literature Relating to Fatherhood and Birth Parents – A Recapitulation**

### **Fatherhood**

The literature review began by drawing attention to the changing nature of expectations of fathers' involvement with their children and the present increase of interest in fatherhood. It suggested that public and official attitudes to fatherhood were contradictory in that often various types of fatherhood were under discussion yet it was unclear which was meant e.g. legal, social or biological. For instance legislation that stresses social fatherhood co-exists with that which tends to emphasise biological fatherhood. In the first case the UK Children Acts of 1989 and 1995 emphasise the social parenting obligations and in the second, the Child Support Act of 1991 stresses the obligations of biological fatherhood. Additionally recent adoption policy and practice has sought to give the child's biological father a greater relevance whilst the Human Embryo and Fertilisation Act and various policies surrounding artificial insemination by donor (AID) tends to lay less weight on biological fatherhood (Sarre, 1996). In addition to a growing interest in biological fatherhood, the literature review noted that young unmarried fathers and fathers who were not resident with their children had also attracted particular attention. The review of research on fatherhood indicated a paucity of material on men's perceptions of fatherhood. It was found that most of the literature concentrated on fatherhood as an activity. The literature tended not to make a distinction between biological and social fatherhood. It was suggested that being a father has been mainly defined as a set of social actions, e.g. the ability to provide nurture and raise an infant, to be a male role model in short – 'being there' (Lupton and Barclay, 1997). More recently, in the case of young unmarried fathers, the ability to support a child in the financial sense of contributing towards upkeep has increasingly advanced as a factor that defines a 'good father' (Speak et al 1997). Public and official definitions of fatherhood were

under construction and opinions were being advanced. Yet little is known of the less functional aspects of being a father - according to a recent comprehensive report on research into fatherhood, there is almost no research on young expectant fathers' sense of fatherhood (Federal InterAgency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998). Men's self perceptions of fatherhood, where the role of fatherhood fits in a man's identity and the relevance of biological fatherhood to the formation of social fatherhood, are all matters that appear to be absent from both contemporary public discussion and research.

The literature review explored the research on the content and process of how men in general may come to define themselves as fathers and what feeling like a father may mean to men. This exploration examined studies and literature relating to how men may develop a sense of a fatherhood in relation to their child and found some discussion of the development on attachment without a social or interactive dimension e.g. in fathers-to-be.

During the process of reviewing the fatherhood literature a significant development occurred. Using the grounded theory method, the literature review was constantly being added to at the same time as data collection. This way the data informed the identification of courses of enquiry such as the literature on expectant fathers. The emergence from the data of the theme of the respondents' connectedness to the child prompted an exploration of the literature on attachment theory. This was helpful in respect of how various bonds, ties and attachments may form - and between whom. Had a less open approach to data collection been adopted then the relevance of this important area of work might not have been grasped. As it was the grounded theory method added to the strength of the work by deepening the theoretical thrust of the data analysis. In other words had a more hypothetic-deductive method (Henwood and Pigeon, 1993: 22) been used in the research then this may have prevented the discovery of the relevance of attachment theory in interpreting the emergent data from the respondents' accounts.



Taken together the bodies of literature on fatherhood and attachment theory indicated that a bond could occur or be experienced in the absence of a socially interactive mechanism to promote this. However overall, both the general literature on fatherhood and the attachment and bonding literature was limited in respect of discussion of how a father may form and perceive of bonds with his child.

Finally it was noted that men as fathers have been studied much less than women as mothers. This gender imbalance also applies to the research in respect of birth parents.

### **Birth Parents**

The review of birth parent literature began by drawing attention to issues of gender and power in adoption policy and practice over the last fifty years. This discussion of gender and power in the development of adoption practice also helped ground the respondents' accounts in an understanding of some of the ways that birth mothers and birth fathers differently experienced the process of adoption.

The overall research relating to birth parents whose children were adopted was found to be limited and chiefly related to the experiences of birth mothers. Such research has focused upon the long-term effects of having had a child adopted. There is relatively little information regarding other aspects of the birth mother experience; such as the relationship between the birth mother and birth father and the transition from being a young woman to mother-to-be. Furthermore, the sense of loss reported by birth mothers in the research appears not to have been closely examined in respect of whether this is solely related to the child that was adopted. A recurring criticism in the birth mother literature is that of sampling bias. Sampling in birth mother studies has been limited to those who, in one way or another are 'visible' i.e. capable of being contacted and invited to participate. This weakens the generalisability of findings.

The research relating to birth fathers was sparser than the research on birth mothers. There have been two studies of birth fathers. One in carried out in North America

(Deykin et al, 1988) and the other in Australia (Cicchini, 1993). These studies have identified some similarities between the experiences of birth fathers and those of birth mothers. The North American study went on to note that gender differences may exist in respect of motivation to search. Deykin et al suggested that birth fathers may hold greater thoughts of reclaiming the child as compared with from birth mothers who appeared to seek contact with their children in order to be reassured regarding the child's welfare. The Australian study presented the first research evidence of birth fathers' feelings and emotions during the time of the adoption and afterwards. This study also drew attention to evidence of the development of the birth fathers' sense of responsibility towards the child that was adopted. Neither the North American nor the Australian studies related a discussion of their findings to fatherhood in general.

The criticism of sampling bias in birth mother research (e.g. Brodzinsky, 1990: 303-304) also applies to the existing birth father research. This is particularly worth noting in respect of the North American birth father study in which the respondents were drawn from supporters of a campaigning group opposed to adoption.

Finally I explored a study on 'filial deprivation' – what parents may feel in the absence of their children (Jenkins and Norman, 1972). Despite different study groups - the Jenkins and Norman study dealt with parents who had had some experience of parenting before the departure of their child to foster care - there were parallels to be found between parents' feelings following separation from their children in the Jenkins and Norman study and feelings reported by birth fathers following the adoption of their child. It is suggested that the issue of whether this constitutes – for birth fathers in this study – a specific state of filial deprivation may be a matter for further research.

### **Review of the Main Findings**

I have presented evidence that many of the respondents were in stable relationships with the birth mother during the time of the pregnancy and birth. The stereotype of an adopted child being the result of 'one-night stand' did not hold for a large majority of



the respondents. In their reports of their feelings during the period of pregnancy and the birth, some of the respondents conveyed the development of feelings of fatherhood. In their accounts of feelings for the birth mother and expectations of a future life together, some communicated a commitment to the establishment of a family. The birth of the child for most, even those who had agreed to the adoption, was deemed to have been an emotionally moving event. During the adoption process many of the respondents reported feelings of powerlessness and disenfranchisement that for some remained fresh and a source of some pain after many years. This feeling of disenfranchisement was engendered by a perceived lack of choice in whether or not to have the child adopted or of being discouraged or excluded from involvement in the adoption process.

Enduring feelings of sadness and resignation were found in the accounts of a majority, including those respondents who agreed with the adoption decision at the time. In their reports of the process from news of the pregnancy to giving up the child, many of the respondents reported mixed emotions including surprise and pleasure, sadness and distress, confusion and relief. Evidence of after-effects of the adoption was presented, particularly distress and emotional turbulence for most in the short term, and noted that the feelings and thoughts regarding their experience seemed to continue to be a source of discomfort for a significant minority of respondents throughout their subsequent lives. Such discomfort included a sense of loss.

In this respect then, there are similarities with the findings regarding the existence of feelings of distress and loss reported by birth mothers. These similarities may occasion some surprise in the light of conventional stereotypes concerning men and fatherhood, i.e. their reputed casual attitudes towards conception, their lack of parental responsibility and commitment to the children that they father.

Other feelings of the respondents echoed those of birth mothers. It is often noted in relation to adopted people and birth mothers that 'adoption is a life-time condition' (Byrd Dean, 1988: 24; Feast, 1994: 157). This study found that, for some birth

fathers, adoption can also be seen as an experience that is lived, or remains significant and resonant, throughout their lives. Here there are more gender similarities than differences.

Whilst exploring the respondents' feelings of loss, it was found that such feelings were not wholly focused upon thoughts of the child but encompassed loss of the prospects of a family life, and of the relationship with the birth mother. It was noted that loss that did not relate to the child seemed to have been less explored in the birth mother literature. Additionally, whilst findings of long-term thoughts and feelings for the birth mother were prevalent amongst a significant number of respondents it was noted that there was an absence of any similar discussion of the birth father in the birth mother literature.

The invitation to visualise and retrospectively 'site' the adoption as an event among other events in the respondents' lives gave a insight into the place of the adoption in the respondents' lives. It became clear that, for many of the men, the adoption was an important and emotionally salient milestone in their mental landscape.

The child that was adopted existed in the minds of the majority of respondents. There was evidence of feelings of an enduring connection with the child. The form that this connection took ranged from interest or curiosity to what some described as a parental love for the child. For the majority there was a sense of 'connectedness' to the child – conveyed both in the content of the accounts and the expressive manner in which they reported their thoughts during the interview. This sense of a connectedness with their child seemed to be at one and the same time deeply felt and have little other concrete expression. Some of the respondents reported that they had not shared with partners or wives the extent of their feelings about the adoption and child. Others said that they had never been able to recount the entire story until the interview.



For most in the study, motivations to have or offer contact with their adult children were the logical extension of this sense of connectedness. These motivations included curiosity and concern, a need to make expiation, a wish for a relationship and, self-interest. This last motivation – self interest - is not explored to any great extent in the birth mother literature. Where it is discussed there are similarities between what Deykin et al (1984) describe as search activity as a means of ‘restitution of self’ and what some of the respondents described as a need to resolve a feeling of lack of completeness.

Finally, although the data is limited, the nature of contact between the relevant respondents and their children, was explored and the significance for the men of their position as one of two fathers was considered. In the changed social reality after contact, the adoptive father occupies the legal and social role of father and is ‘dad’, and the men in this study have the status of biological fathers but were now involved in the lives of their children. In a few of the contacts between respondent and adopted child (now an adult), the men in this study reported that they felt themselves to be sharing a similar social and emotional status as the adoptive father. This was described as being asked to provide quasi-parental advice regarding boyfriends in one case, in another case one man reported that he was regarded as a father-in-law by his daughter’s husband. Another respondent gave an account that included being considered as grandfather and asked to baby-sit in respect of his daughter’s children. In five cases, it was reported that the word ‘dad’ had been used by the adopted person to describe the respondent.

It should be remembered that this sub group of respondents who have experienced contact consists of only ten men and of those, at least four did not feel that they had not become involved in aspects of social fatherhood. Furthermore the nature of the data prevents any further speculation as to whether a relationship that approximated that of child-father was developing. However the little data that has been produced does not refute findings from a study that explored contact and subsequent relationships from the adopted person perspective (March, 1995). The sample in this

latter study was small (24) however it was found that 25% - six – ‘adoptees had engaged in ‘parent-child’ interactions’ (108). More longitudinal research into these newly-formed relationships – a relatively new social phenomenon - is obviously necessary.

The finding that many of the respondents had never stopped feeling a connection with their child suggests that here there is evidence of a subjective and life-long continuity of an aspect of being a father. Most of the respondents seemed to carry around a mental map of their lives that includes a connection with their child and incorporates a self-definition of themselves as a father. This self perception, taken together with accounts from those respondents who have had contact and report experience of social fathering in respect of their child, would suggest that in these few relationships between the child and his/her birth father, paternal-like activity may not be problematic, at least for the birth father. Future research from a social anthropological perspective, focusing on social dynamics and how kinship is established, may yield interesting insights into these new relationships between people who are both relatives and strangers.

What may be suggested in the case of the respondents that have established relationships with their son or daughter is that their long-held attachment to their child is now a matter for expression and testing in practice. We do not yet know enough of the long-term impact of these relationships on the various parties to make further comment.



## **PART ONE**

### **FATHERHOOD: AN EXPANDED UNDERSTANDING**

There is a need for further considerations of the meanings of fatherhood. Many of the respondents, whilst teenagers, cared for and felt an obligation to their unborn child and the birth mother – though some of this went unexpressed. Some respondents reported expectations of parenthood and family life and were opposed to the adoption. Other respondents were broadly in support of the adoption. Most respondents experienced the events surrounding the adoption as an emotionally salient event in their lives and almost all felt that their subsequent lives had been affected by the adoption of their child. A considerable number of the group reported feelings of loss. Some respondents defined themselves as fathers at the time and reported that this belief in themselves as fathers (of the adopted child) had not ebbed since the adoption. For some respondents, this aspect of their identity become stronger as life went on.

Here, it seems a form of fatherhood - a consciousness of it – was established (for some) during the pregnancy and birth period and continued or appeared (for others) without the presence of the child. In this respect a feeling of fatherhood is not only held in relation to having conceived a child, but has also existed for the respondents without any further concrete or social expression of parenting that child. It is therefore suggested that a new finding that has emerged from this study is evidence of a bond or ‘bondedness’ in respect of the absent child, in most cases a child with whom the respondent had had no more than one brief contact, if that. This therefore suggests that the mechanism of bonding with a child may be less gendered than we have imagined it to be - none of the conventional mechanisms e.g. biological or social interaction factors had been in place in the case of the respondents. What might this say about our notions of fatherhood?

A possible explanation involves a re-evaluation of approaches to defining fatherhood that have tended to focus upon the social activity of being a father. As indicated previously a man’s fatherhood of a child has traditionally meant the biological act, i.e. having participated in the conception of a child – the ‘begetting’ part (Burgess, 1996).

Relatively recently - in the last thirty years - fatherhood studies have revised such a definition and sought to develop a notion of fatherhood that encompasses more than the act of procreation (e.g. Hawkins et al, 1995; Seel, 1987). Such work has argued that the idea of fathering a child can be expanded to include the acts of paternal parenting. Notwithstanding these developments in identifying various dimensions of fathering activity, 'mothering a child' remains a more socially acceptable or easier phrase to denote day-to-day parenting than that of fathering a child. This is underlined in the regular equation of parenthood with motherhood (Blendis, 1982; Daniels and Taylor, 1999; Williams and Robertson, 1999: 56). The phrase 'fathering a child' in any other sense than the biological remains awkward.

The research has provided some evidence of a continuing psychological or mental connectedness held by the biological fathers of children that have been adopted. The finding of attachment amongst this group of fathers - who have only experienced the biological dimension of fatherhood is a significant one. It suggests that men's perceptions of themselves as fathers and social fatherhood may be formed under conditions that do not normally suggest its presence i.e. where there has been no parenting and no contact with the child. A continuing sense of being the father of a child despite never having parented; a self perception of fatherhood that exists without ever having had a social manifestation. What might be a basis for this?

Research has shown that a state of expectant fatherhood may exist for many men. In such cases expectant fathers come to feel an attachment or connection with their unborn child (Cohen, 1993; Richman, 1982). In other specific instances e.g. men absent as soldiers; research has shown a sense of fatherhood continues after the birth without ever having seen the child (Bell, 1943; Turner and Rennell, 1995). These studies involved men who were in expectation of a continuing relationship with their child. However, in the case of many of the respondents in this study, a sense of fatherhood appears to have continued for decades after the adoption - a process and event that officially ruled out the possibility of a relationship with their child.

The discussion that follows offers some suggestions for an explanation of the presence of feelings of fatherhood in some birth fathers. The suggestions are tentative and



speculative however they seem to be the best available after a study of the literature and an analysis of the respondent's views and experiences.

Four areas are suggested for further research. They are all more or less concerned with the mental and psychological factors that may exist in the minds of the men in question.

## **Senses of Fatherhood**

### **- The Strength of Blood Ties**

Some of the respondents drew upon or quoted a belief in the primacy of blood as a means of explaining feelings such as responsibility for the child. This theme is found in the literature of social anthropology.

Modell is a social anthropologist who has researched and written on adoption. She has drawn attention to the power of a belief in the strength of blood ties in Western societies. Modell refers to 'the significance of blood in American understandings of kinship' (1994: 4). Such a belief is a powerful one in literature and culture, legislation re heritage (ibid.: 26), mythologies and beliefs e.g. 'blood is thicker than water'. It will be recalled that in chapter ten some of the respondents drew on imagery that included blood when asked how they felt about their connection to the child. Other respondents used phrases that denoted a similar physical connection between themselves and the child i.e. that they felt that the child was part of them. There is evidence that adopted people have a strong belief in the significance of blood ties (e.g. Sachdev, 1992: 64). This then would have echoes with evidence of some respondents' strong beliefs in the connection signified by blood.

## **- A Psycho-Biological Connection**

Whilst such beliefs in the importance of blood ties may offer one explanation for the respondents' feelings of fatherhood, another school of thought suggests a less psychological factor.

There is a small body of work on the psychobiological elements that may contribute to the development of a consciousness of fatherhood. This was discussed in the literature review but put briefly there is a school of thought that suggests that there may be a pre-birth process of becoming a father in the formation of men's consciousness of fatherhood. In other words, men may undergo perceptible changes in their transition to fatherhood before hands-on experience of parenting (Mackay, 1985; Pleck, 1995).

This process may commence with conception and continue throughout pregnancy, birth and afterwards. Mackay (1985) suggests that there is more to the ingredients of fatherhood than the act of conception and social activity with the child. He suggests (170) that there is also 'fathering instinct' and that the father-child bond has a genetic basis. The research in this field appears to have been focussed upon the fathers-to-be who are married and also all ages i.e. not necessarily young expectant fathers. It seems that no work in this field has been carried out with birth fathers. Overall this field of research suggests a male equivalent of pregnancy and the development of a material connection with the child albeit less physically experienced than in the case of women. Cohen (1993) also suggests that developing a sense of being a father is a process that is not limited to the starting point of birth from whence a man can actively parent his child. He goes on to suggest (1993: 10) that, in the case of some men, such a process may begin before birth and be 'broader and more dramatic' than may be expected. Krampe and Fairweather (1993) also suggest that there is an element of 'biological essence' to the fatherhood experience.

In the case of the respondents - nearly all of who were young men at the time of the pregnancy and birth - it seems that some of them may have also experienced the development of a mental connection with the child. The unborn child developed a presence in the mind of the respondents - not unlike the process that has been



described in respect of some expectant fathers. Richman (1982) refers to the development of 'special bonds' (100). For the respondents, the child's presence in their thoughts did not 'evaporate' with or after the adoption. The respondent who felt 'rubbed out' legally but not emotionally seems to sum up the feelings of this group. In additional cases it seems that the child's 'presence' in the respondents' minds either emerged or grew stronger in the years after the adoption.

So is the experience of some of the respondents evidence of a genetic blueprint for fatherhood (Mackay, 1985: 177)? If so it would seem to be remarkable for it to continue to be evidenced after such time and without the social stimulation of interaction with the child. The presence in the study of eight men who never parented a child that was biologically theirs after the adoption might indicate there is something working far below the surface that may relate to the consequences when such a blueprint to fatherhood is unfulfilled. What may have kept them from proceeding to fatherhood (again)? This too is a matter for further research

#### **- Thoughts of the Child As Symbolic**

Rather than explicable because of any adherence to societal belief systems or any biological influence, the respondents' enduring sense of a connection to the child may have its roots in the circumstances of the adoption. Could it be that the child in the mind's eye of many of the respondents, may be a symbol for thoughts and feelings that are described as fatherhood but represent something else not fully recognised?

Is it possible that the child may be a symbol of unrequited love for the birth mother? A significant number of the respondents linked the birth mother and child in their accounts of loss, still others were specific in relation to their continued affection for the birth mother. Associated with this latter idea, the child may be symbolic of unrealised hopes for a family life.

Thoughts of the child may also be symbolic of what may have been experienced as a formative - because felt as emasculatory - experience. In other words the child may be symbolic of a particular felt status. Such a status or mental image of themselves may

derive from a perceived failure to assume responsibility, or resist the intervention of other authorities in the case of the adoption, and the consequent feelings of disenfranchisement which emerged for many of the respondents. Thoughts such as these may go to constitute salient milestones in the way that the respondents have constructed their mental life maps. Perhaps then contact with the child may represent an aspiration for the restitution of self to which Deykin et al (1984) refer in relation to birth mothers' search motivations? In this respect meeting and establishing a relationship with the child in later-life may be seen as a hope to restore self-esteem. Allied with this point, Cicchini (1993) suggests that a sense of responsibility towards the child had grown in the normal course of the maturation of the birth fathers in his study. He suggests that this sense of responsibility had produced an increase (or development) of thoughts of a duty not discharged. Here the thoughts of the child would be bound up with both the symbolic (the child may represent a burden unshouldered) and altruistic – a wish to ensure that the child has thrived.

#### **- The Respondent's Experiences of Being Fathered**

Finally, in this speculative exploration of a possible material basis for the respondents' feelings of fatherhood, there may be influential events that long predate the birth and adoption, namely the respondents' own experiences of being fathered and parented. They fall into at least two categories.

The first category could perhaps be that a sense of fatherhood in respect of the adopted child is derived from the understandings that these men have in respect of what constitutes a good father e.g. one who does not abandon (in their words) a child. May these understandings be related to the respondents' positive experiences of being fathered - or negative experiences of not being adequately fathered or parented?

Could it be that the perpetuation of thoughts of the child in the minds of the respondents is an expression of a concern to be a good father that is based upon the respondents' formative childhood experiences? Here there may be evidence for a process of historical continuity where it is possible to trace the influence of the fathers of men who have had a child adopted. Given the influence in general that fathers have



on their sons (e.g. Andry, 1962; Blendis, 1982; Katz, 1999; Morrison, 1998) this would not be surprising.

With regard to the second category, it will be recalled that the findings showed that almost a quarter of the respondents had experienced some form of parental loss prior to the pregnancy. Evidence of loss of a parent figure also exists in the birth mother research (e.g. Raynor, 1971). It may be that feelings of anxiety and distress regarding the adopted child are connected to earlier needs namely the need for comfort and consolation arising from mourning for the loss of a parent. Perhaps for some respondents the pregnancy arose out of lives that were somewhat disrupted. At some unconscious level, were the respondents when engaging in unprotected sexual intercourse seeking a replacement family? There is some evidence for this that connects earlier loss and disrupted lives to unplanned pregnancies in the literature on young unmarried fathers (Pannor et al, 1971). Pannor (quoted in Barber, 1975) suggests that 50% of unmarried fathers have an absent or deceased father. Pannor et al (1971: 125-128) suggest that parental loss - whether through death or separation - could be a contributory factor in behaviour such as failure to take precautions in sexual relations. The need to prove oneself as a man may be more so in one who lacks a father; this it is suggested, may manifest itself in unconscious actions to prove manhood and boost self-esteem e.g. by fathering children.

In this respect feelings of loss could be seen to predate the adoption process which in itself involved a number of losses for many of the respondents - in addition to loss of the child e.g. their relationship with the birth mother. In the previous discussion it was suggested that the child may be symbolic of what **could have been**. In the case of the respondents who underwent childhood or teenage loss of a parent, perhaps the origins of connectedness with their child can be traced to events **prior to the adoption**.

These two suggestions allude to the influence of experiences prior to the pregnancy and adoption. They are as intriguing as the other three possible explanations for the respondents' feelings of fatherhood and perception of attachment to the child.

Whether any one of the above explanations better fits than another, the fact of the matter is that for most of the respondents this sense of fatherhood had no observable reality as far as the child is concerned, especially in the case of those who have not met their children. In these cases there was no direct social expression to feelings of being a father - most of the accounts dealt with thoughts and feelings that for many, had not been articulated prior to the interview. The child has no experience of this sense of fatherhood; nowhere could it have been manifested in any exchange or interaction between the child and birth father. Perceptions of fatherhood remained in the minds of the respondents.

There were a few concrete indicators of the respondents' sense of a connection or bond with their child. Most men had registered on adoption contact registers; some men were engaged in searching; some men's social and emotional relations had been affected, e.g. they not fathered or parented again, they attributed poor mental health and relationships to the effects of having given up a child for adoption.

It is suggested then that the attachment or bond that the respondents have in respect of their children is one that can be mostly measured in thoughts and feelings.

This study has revealed some of birth fathers' thoughts and feelings that may be deeper than previously documented. It seems that a combination of memories and responsibilities, curiosities and beliefs, processes begun and loves unrequited, all appear to have intertwined with each other to constitute the respondents' attachment to their children. This research, it is suggested, has identified what may be described as a non-conventional aspect of fatherhood. This is a bond held by the respondents and made the more non-conventional by its capacity to exist in an apparent social vacuum i.e. without the child. It appears that for many of the respondents in the study a switch was thrown with news of a child of theirs – either at the time or later - out in the world. Across time and space this has not been reversed. In their minds they became fathers and have retained that bond with their child. As such this is a new finding.



## **PART TWO**

### **ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT FATHERS: SOCIAL WORK AND ADOPTION POLICY AND PRACTICE**

The extent to which people continue to feel personally and socially related to others from whom they have been separated for a lifetime, or whom they may never ever have seen, is one enigma posed again by the findings reported here. It would greatly repay further research.

Mullender and Kearn, 1997: 27

Mullender and Kearn wrote the above in respect of the birth parents involved in their study of the use of adoption contact registers. In relation to this study's respondents and their continued feelings of a relationship with their child, some suggestions have been offered that may help explain the enigma to which Mullender and Kearn refer. Specifically in relation to birth fathers, the speculation by Brinich (1990: 59) first noted in the literature review may now be recalled. Brinich felt that differentiation between fathers and mothers was based upon the assumption that fathering follows the birth and suggested that there was a 'stereotypical view of the development of fatherhood'. Brinich went on to call for a re-examination of this view and concluded that research with men who had fathered children that were then relinquished for adoption 'would yield much more than the vacuum that previous authors have suggested exists'. This study has borne out Brinich's interest and has shown that the birth fathers in this study had formed an attachment to their child and experienced feelings for the child that continued after the child has been adopted.

The findings from the research offer the possibility of broadening the various meanings of fathering. As noted in previous discussions being a father in respect of a child has been extended to encompass **doing** with the child as well as 'siring' him/her (Johnson, 1988). Feeling like a father may involve more than the sense of parenthood that is derived from the active - 'hands-on' - experience of socially fathering a child. The research shows that feeling like a father may – in the case of many of the respondents – be a state of mind independent of activity with the child in question. Fatherhood may begin at (or before) the child's birth and continue in the child's absence, or be

awakened, without contact with the child. This is where the present literature on fathers and fatherhood has not yet been developed.

It is in the broad field of children and family welfare practice that the finding as to the existence of attachment in birth fathers has implications. It is suggested that there are also wider implications for social work practice with fathers as a whole. An appreciation of the complexities of fatherhood – particularly the notion of the existence of an affectional bond with the child in the thoughts of the father - that may exist either without ever having socially parented or no longer parenting is potentially useful for good social work practice. However, as can be seen such an appreciation has not tended to manifest itself.

### **Social Work**

In their review of social work literature, Grieff and Bailey (1990) have drawn attention to the consequences of negative assumptions about fathers. They found an absence of writing about fathers - unless the father's behaviour was a risk to or a destructive influence in a family. March (1995: 110) refers to a 'general disregard for fathers in the family literature'. Edwards (1998) also presents evidence of negative attitudes towards men. Research among the social services files of children in care (Masson, Harrison and Pavlovic, 1997: 2) found 'a lack of information about fathers and the focus on mothers suggested that the contributions, positive or negative, which fathers make to their children's well-being were ignored.' Social work-orientated research has also echoed a disregard for fathers (Blendis, 1982). A recent paper has traced such a bias throughout social work policy and practice (Daniel and Taylor, 1999).

In their paper Daniel and Taylor (1999) suggest that stereotypes regarding men's inability to care and nurture are detrimental to men and, because these assumptions involve defining men and women in gender-restricted roles, women too are negatively affected. Daniel and Taylor go on to argue that such a skewing of attitudes and assumptions regarding men can be discerned in many fields of social work practice. They refer to Trotter (1997) who has drawn attention to professionals' emphasis upon the negative behaviour of men in sexual abuse practice. In her work Trotter argues



that men and their behaviour are discussed only when they are abusive parents. Non-abusing fathers, she suggests, have received less attention. Elsewhere, in respect of children's social services files, researchers have noted proportionally much less information on fathers than on mothers (Masson et al, op cit.).

The finding that respondents had an attachment to their child is potentially valuable one. It provides a counter to negative assumptions of the order of 'out of mind, out of sight' in respect of how fathers regard their relationship with their children. In this respect the study findings are at one with a recent study by Bradshaw et al (1999). Bradshaw et al (1999) found that when contact was defined more widely than physically seeing a child, then a father and child's relationship could be discerned through other mediums such as e-mail and 'phone thus pointing to a non-tangible sense of continuing connection between fathers and their children. Practice with young, unmarried fathers and fathers who are without custody and non-resident may be informed by such insight as regards the minds of the fathers as is presented in this study. This insight appears to have congruence with that of other emergent studies.

In addition to their discussion of fathers and social work in general, Daniel and Taylor (1999) also discuss how adoption research and literature, policy and practice have exhibited a similar set of assumptions about men that serve to marginalise fathers. Recent findings arising from a study of social work adoption case files has indicated an absence of information in respect of birth fathers (Family Studies, Winter 1998). This helps provide a link with the next set of implications that are raised by the findings of this research.

### **Adoption Research, Policy and Practice**

A substantive understanding that emerges from this study is that there is now evidence that some birth fathers may wish to be key parties in the overall adoption process from birth to any subsequent post-adoption contact. Yet there is evidence that, as in the case of other areas of social welfare, views regarding the participation of men are mixed.

Thirty-five years ago Anglim (1965: 340) made a plea for birth fathers to be included in adoption practice with birth mothers. She raised the question of practitioners' conscious avoidance of birth fathers. In the same vein, Platts noted the existence of practitioner bias against birth fathers (1968), as did others following her (Pannor et al, 1971).

The respondents' reports confirm that such bias existed in the UK throughout the period in question – the nineteen fifties to the nineteen seventies (with one respondent providing evidence of a discounting of his role in 1985). This is evidenced for example, in their accounts of feeling marginalised or not consulted. Since the time of the respondent's adoption experiences it appears that little may have changed. Daniel and Taylor (1999) argue that a major text used in fostering and adoption practice (Fahlberg, 1991) repeats the gender role assumptions contained in traditional attachment theory by focusing upon mothers to the exclusion of fathers. They argue that such assumptions are not so much explicitly expressed but are evidenced in the absence of any references to fathers in particular, and the use in case examples of only women's experiences. More research is needed here as to the extent that this suggestion is true in practice.

Whilst it seems that previously it was evidently the case that adoption professionals ignored birth fathers, today, given the appeals for research on birth fathers in the literature, it would appear that professional practice that seeks to involve birth fathers is encouraged. The fact that virtually no one has acted upon these calls for research adds a caution to any conclusions regarding a sea change in relation to the involvement of birth fathers in adoption. It is suggested that the existing literature on birth parents tends to confirm this caution.

### **Birth Parent Research**

In writings concerning birth parents an elision takes place. This elision consists of the use of the terms 'birth parents' or 'birth parent' when the people actually under discussion are birth mothers. To properly attach the term birth parents to any conclusions that may be drawn, the research ought to involve the experiences of birth



mothers and birth fathers. Such an entity as a 'childless father' (Modell, 1994) or birth father can exist. Not only this, the findings indicate some similarities between birth fathers and birth mothers in respect of the adoption and its long-term effects. These similarities include a shared sense of loss and motivations for contact.

The research indicates that the two experiences may be less gendered than might be imagined. The similarities between birth mothers and birth fathers seem to outweigh the differences. The differences in the research between the experiences of birth fathers and those of birth mothers do not seem to be genuine differences so much as gaps in the birth mother research methodology e.g. the transition from teenager to parent-to-be and the relationship between birth mother and birth father. However, in relation to the latter question, it remains to be seen whether birth mothers have thoughts and feelings in respect of the birth father in the same way as these are held by birth fathers for the birth mother.

Overall it is suggested that whilst we know something of the nature of the later life experiences of birth parents, there is scope for a sociology of the birth parent experience. This would spend less time on the psychology and emotional aspects and give more attention to inter-personal, familial and societal factors involved in the pre- and post-adoption phases of the lives of birth parents. One such discussion point has arisen during the present research. This concerns the significance of terminology in the birth parent literature.

### **Policy and Practice - 'Reunion' Problematised**

An area where gender difference may present implications for practice is in the terminology with which writers have approached the subject of post-adoption contact between birth mothers and their children. Such meetings have been characterised as 'reunions'. The imagery in the birth mother literature conveys the depth of the distress and pain felt by many birth mothers. This is graphically expressed in birth mother accounts, for example, of being prevented to breast feed or cuddle their baby. The word 'reunion' carries with it not only the implicit message that two people who have

once been united have met again, but that this meeting is the resolution of an interrupted process and that there will henceforth be a union of the two.

Such descriptions and aspirations for reunion are a feature of the literature on birth mothers. The sub-text here seems to suggest that what is taking place is the physical reunion of mother with baby/the child that she carried. Such reunion, it is implied, brings these two people together again after having been physically parted at birth. It appears that this has helped construct the terminology for all parties involved in later-life contacts. In recent publications for or concerning adopted people and their motivations for contact, 'reunion' is the term typically employed for the contact between adopted people and their birth parents. The word reunion is used extensively e.g. 'Preparing For Reunion' (Feast, 1994; Feast et al, 1998), 'Reunions: True stories of adoptees' meetings with their natural parents' (Iredale, 1997), 'Adoption, Search and Reunion' (Howe and Feast, 2000) and 'Heart of the Reunion' (McMillan and Irving, 1997). Mullendar and Kearn (1997: 20) also use the word 'reunion' to describe birth parents' aspiration for contact with their children. March (1995: 48) also uncritically uses the term reunion in discussing the motivations of adopted people in their search for birth parents.

The research obviously could not deal with the physical effects of pregnancy and child birth on the respondents. In the respondents' reports there were other less bodily expressions of a connection between these men and their children. The connectedness that many of the respondents expressed was a state of mind. The respondents tended not to use the term 'reunion' as regards contact or their hoped-for contact with the child. Instead, they spoke of seeking a meeting and in some few cases, they hoped for a relationship. So whilst it appears that the men in the study did not use the word reunion often, the contrary is the case according to the birth mother literature. Can other areas of research on post-adoption matters help with this question?

It is now known from the literature on post-adoption contacts between birth mothers and adopted people that successful outcomes, measured for example in the development of on-going relationships, are not universally the case (March, 1995). Furthermore it is the case that for adopted people their motivations for contact are not



the same as the redress of feelings of loss and grief that are experienced by birth parents. Adopted people appear to seek answers to questions surrounding the circumstances of their adoption and details of birth family history such as medical, social and behavioural elements (Triseliotis, 1973). The need for a 'reunion' as a means to perhaps assuage feelings of loss, guilt or grief does not appear to be numbered highly in adopted people's motivations for contact so much as a need to feel a genealogical connection (Sachdev, 1992).

In the different birth mother and birth father approaches to contact with their adopted children, it seems that there then may be a gender difference. Here then it may be that some aspects of this difference exist because only women go through the process of childbirth.. Or is such a difference of approaches to later-life contact an artefact of the literature?

Until this is further explored, it is suggested that the word 'reunion', whilst capturing certain of the hopes and feelings of birth mothers, may not be the most helpful way to describe meetings and contact between any of the parties involved, including birth mothers.

### **Policy and Practice - Agency Practices Before, During and Post-Contact**

On the question of meetings and relationships between the respondents and their children, it must be noted that the research findings that are offered are based upon a snapshot of experiences and views of ten respondents. Much more needs to be done to establish the nature and order of the various social and emotional ramifications brought about by such events. The repercussions on kinship relations have already been pointed out e.g. the possibility of the concrete presence of two men who may term themselves as fathers in the life of an adopted person. Modell (1986: 658) argues that 'there is no obvious role for a birthparent in the American kinship system'. Since this was written there has been considerable increase in the USA and the UK in the number of meetings and contacts between birth parents and their adopted children (Feast, 1994; Feast et al, 1998) and longitudinal research is underway (Howe and Feast 2000).

The potential social, interpersonal and inter-familial dynamics of meetings between birth parents and adopted people - and subsequent relationships - make the case for research in this area. Without it post-adoption policy and practice continues to respond to such meetings informed only by a very small research base. Decisions may be made regarding whether or not to facilitate contact or release information based upon personal or agency prejudice (Feast, 1998). These actions, rather than articulated prejudices, may be based upon an attitude of protectiveness towards the adopted child (now adult) and its adoptive family. Such a 'tilt' may also be based upon the influence of long-standing orthodox conventions regarding the immutability of the 'permanent and clean break' notion of adoption at the time. The proportionally low numbers of birth fathers who use post-adoption services e.g. adoption contact registers, compared with the needs of the respondents in this (albeit unrepresentative) study suggest that low numbers of service users may not be indicative of the number of men that might use such services - if they knew of how to access them.

### **Policy and Practice - Birth Parents' Access to Identifying Information**

The question of birth parent access to information in respect of the adopted child is currently under debate (e.g. 'Counter Blast' BBC2, 14 June 1999). There is a spectrum of attitudes in the debate. Three main positions have emerged. These range from the position of many local authorities which will provide information only pertaining to the child's settling-in in the weeks and months after the adoption and nothing more e.g. Westminster Council (Community Care 27 August – 2 September 1998). Then there exists a more open-the-books approach modelled on what is deemed to be successful legislation in Australia and New Zealand (Field 1991). This provides for access to identifying information by all parties (Natural Parents Support Group, 1993). Finally, there is a view that identifying information should be made available but only via trained post-adoption professionals who would act as mediators (Feast, 1998; 'Desperately Seeking...' Frontline Scotland, 24 November 1998).

This study has found that the respondents did not agree with an untrammelled approach to information that would provide identifying details of child's identity e.g.



the child's adoptive name. The respondents conveyed a sense of a respect for the welfare of the child and their family. Most respondents said that they did not wish to 'rock the boat' in seeking information or contact. In saying this they underlined an earlier view - expressed in the interviews - that they did not see themselves to have been or were parents in the social sense. There was an expressed respect and recognition for the feelings and status of adoptive parents. The majority view among the respondents was that some third party or mediator should facilitate any exchange of information and any possible meeting.

The concern of the respondents not to disrupt the family life of their children seems as good a place as most to end. These concerns together with the respondents' hopes for meetings with their children show a complexity and an attachment to the child that they have never parented that suggest new ways of assessing the way men regard themselves as fathers.

This study has uncovered a depth and variety in respect of the experiences and self-perceptions of birth fathers. My conclusions are that the respondents are men whose imaginations have been engaged and their identities formed, partly through the knowledge of being fathers. The respondents have reported emotions normally associated with social fatherhood without ever having parented the child in question. This suggests that social fatherhood is more complex than we have hitherto understood it to be.

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**EXPERIENCES OF BIRTH FATHERS THROUGHOUT  
THE ADOPTION PROCESS**

**QUESTIONNAIRE**

***STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL***

**SECTION A: SOME CURRENT PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

1. What is your age?

2. Current address: .....

.....

.....

Phone No (if any): .....

3. (a) Are you employed at present: Yes  No

(b) If Yes to 3(a), what is your occupation:

(c) If not employed at present, what was your last occupation?

.....

4. What are your living arrangements?

5. What is your present marital status

(1) *Single*

(2) *Separated*

(3) *Widowed*

(4) *Divorced*

(5) *Married*

(6) *Other (specify)*

(7) *Details of any previous marriages*

.....

.....

.....

6. (a) Do you have any children? Yes  No

*If you answered Yes to 6(a) please give the number of:*

Boys  Girls

(b) Are any of these full brothers or sisters of the adopted child? Yes  No

*If you answered yes to 6(b) please give the number of:*

Full brothers   
Full sisters

7. Please rate what you consider to be your current state of physical health. Use Card.

Please rate what you consider to be your current state of emotional and mental health. Use Card.



**SECTION B: SOME PERSONAL BACKGROUND INFORMATION UP TO THE TIME OF THE ADOPTION**

1. When was the baby born? Month..... Year..... Don't Know

**Check on how to refer to the baby**

2. How old were you at the time?

3. Were you: Working  Unemployed  At school

4. Were you:  
(1) *Single*  
(2) *Married*  
(3) *In a stable relationship with the mother*  
(4) *Separated*  
(5) *Divorced*  
(6) *A Widower*

5. At the time were you:  
(1) *Living with parents*  
(2) *Living independently*  
(3) *Living with other relatives*  
(4) *Living with the child's mother*  
(5) *Other?*

6. Was the child placed for adoption your  
(1) *First born*  
(2) *Second born*  
(3) *Third born*  
(4) *Other (specify)* \_\_\_\_\_

7. When did you first become aware of the pregnancy?

If unaware of the pregnancy, birth and adoption go to Question G1.

\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

8. How did this news impact upon you ?

.....  
.....  
.....

9. Did you think of yourself as a father during this time?

Yes  No

If you didn't think this, did your feelings alter at any time in this period?

.....  
.....  
.....

10. What age was he/she  
place for adoption?

Months .....

Don't know

11. Were you involved in the birth? If not go to Question C3.

Yes  No



**SECTION C: THE BIRTH AND ADOPTION**

1. What happened around the time of the birth e.g. were you present?

Yes  No

2. What were your feelings at the time of news of the birth?

.....  
.....  
.....

3. Did you see the baby?

Yes  No

**If not, got to C7.**

4. What did you feel on seeing the baby?

.....  
.....

5. What did you feel about not seeing him/her?

.....  
.....

6. (i) Did you see the baby? In Hospital?

Yes  No

(ii) If Yes , how often? .....

(iii) If Yes , did you hold her/him?

Yes  No

(iv) If Yes , did you help feed her/him?

Yes  No

(v) Were any of these opportunities offered to you?

Yes  No

7. Did you name the baby? Yes  No

*If Yes, whose surname was used for registration purposes: .....*

8. Did any of your family and/or friends know of the pregnancy and birth, and if so how did they react?  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

9. Were you aware of the plans for the adoption?  
  
Yes  No

10. Why and How was it decided to place the baby for adoption?  
.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

11. Who decided this?  
.....  
.....

12. Please rate the degree to which you feel that the decision to place the child for adoption was based on your wishes. Use Card.



13. What were your feelings at the time of the decision?

.....  
.....  
.....

14. What was your role in the arrangements and process?

**If not involved go to Question C10.**

.....  
.....  
.....

15. Do you know who organised the adoption?

- (1) Doctor
- (2) Hospital
- (3) Lawyer
- (4) Private adoption agency
- (5) Local authority Children's or Social Work Department
- (6) Other (specify) e.g. parents

.....

16. Did you sign the consent forms for the adoption?

Yes

No

**If No, go to Question C15**

(i) If Yes, did you consider changing your mind after you gave consent?

Yes

No

(ii) If Yes to (i), how long after .....

(iii) If Yes to (i) why did you consider changing your mind?

.....  
.....

(iv) If Yes to (i) with whom did you discuss this? .....

17. Did you discuss the signing of the consent form with anyone?

Yes  No

18. Were you satisfied with the way in which the adoption itself was handled?

Yes  No

(i) Was there anything that you found particularly helpful?

Please specify:

.....  
.....  
.....

(ii) Was there any particular help or support that you wished but did not receive?

Please specify:

.....  
.....  
.....

19. Looking back, do you have any regrets about the above immediate period of the birth and the adoption?

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....  
.....



**SECTION D: EXPERIENCES AND FEELINGS AFTER THE ADOPTION**

1. It may be difficult to remember but think over the first months after the child was placed for adoption. What were your feelings during this period?

.....  
.....  
.....

2. Were you able to talk about these feelings? **Use Card.**

3. Was expressing them a problem?

*Yes*

*No*

4. Did these feelings change as time went on?

*Yes*

*No*

(i) If Yes, can you say when?

.....  
.....

(ii) If Yes, how did they change, **Prompt: did they get weaker or stronger?**

.....  
.....

5. Have there been particular times when this varies e.g. when your feelings about the birth and adoption may be become stronger? **Prompt: e.g. birthdays**

*Yes*

*No*

6. If Yes, please give details.

.....  
.....  
.....

7. After the adoption what became of your relationship with the child's mother?

.....  
.....  
.....

**SECTION E: OTHER LIFE EXPERIENCES COMPARED TO THE ADOPTION**

1. Before the adoption, had there been any experiences that had made a difference in your life?

If so, please give details.

.....  
.....  
.....

2. Have you received help or advice with any personal difficulties since the adoption?

3. In terms of impact on you, how do any such experiences (before and/or after the adoption) match or compare with the adoption? Use card.



**SECTION F: VIEWS AND FEELINGS ABOUT YOURSELF, INFORMATION IN RELATION TO THE CHILD AND POSSIBLE CONTACT WITH EACH OTHER. IF YOU HAVE HAD CONTACT WITH THE CHILD PLEASE OMIT THIS SECTION AND GO TO SECTION G**

1. Do you think about him/her?

- (1) *often (daily/weekly)*
- (2) *about once every few months*
- (3) *couple of times a year*
- (4) *once a year*
- (5) *rarely*
- (6) *never?*

2. How and when do you think about him/her?

.....  
.....  
.....

3. Who or what comes to mind? Prompt: a son/daughter, a baby?

.....  
.....  
.....

4. Has being a birth father affected your view of yourself?

Yes

No

If Yes, how has this view of yourself been affected?

.....  
.....  
.....

5. Has being a birth father subsequently affected your role as parent or potential parent?

Yes

No

If yes, how?

.....  
.....  
.....

6. Overall, where does the adoption fit in your memory and feelings now?

.....  
.....  
.....

7. Has the adoption affected personal relationships? If so, describe any special features e.g. with a partner, other children.

.....  
.....  
.....  
.....

8. Have you wished to have contact with your child?

Yes  No

If so, why?

.....  
.....  
.....

Ever sought information regarding this?

Yes  No

If so, what was the result?

.....  
.....  
.....

9. Has the child ever tried to establish contact?

Yes  No

If so, what was the outcome?

.....  
.....  
.....



10. Has anyone else tried to initiate contact?

Yes

No

If so, what was the outcome?

.....  
.....  
.....

11. Do you know whether the child wanted this?

Yes

No

12. Have there been any other experience(s) in your life that relate to adoption?

Yes

No

If yes, what are they?

.....  
.....  
.....

**If contact has not happened please go to Section H.**

**SECTION G: CONTACT AND MEETING**

*n.b. 'contact' = letter, telephone, etc not face to face meeting*

1. Who initiated the contact between you and your child?

*You*

*Him/Her*

2. If you did what was the nature of this:

- a. letter*
- b. telephone call*
- c. meeting*
- d. agency letter on their behalf*

3. If the initiative came from your child. How did this happen?

- a. letter*
- b. telephone call*
- c. meeting*
- d. agency letter on their behalf*

4. What were your motives in seeking contact?

.....

--

.....

--

.....

--

5. What were your feelings at the first point of contact?

.....

--

.....

--

.....

--

6. Has the contact continued or developed?

*Yes*

*No*



If Yes, describe:

.....  
..

.....  
..

7. If not, why not? - How has this felt?

.....

..

.....

..

.....

..

8. How long ago was the first contact?

.....

..

.....

..

.....

..

9. If you both have met, how long between contact and face to face meeting?

**If you have not met please go to question G15.**

.....

.

.....

..

.....

..

10. What did you think and feel during this time between contact and meeting?

.....

.

.....

..

11. Describe your experiences of the meeting

.....

.....

.....

12. Have there been subsequent meetings?

*Yes*

*No*

13. If yes, how have these gone?

.....

.....

.....

14. If you did not meet again, why not?

.....

.....

.....

15. How do you look upon your relationship to each other?

.....

.....

.....



16. Has being a birth father affected your view of self?

Yes

No

If yes, how has your view of self been affected?

.....  
.....  
.....

17. Has being a birth father subsequently affected your role as parent or potential parent?

Yes

No

If yes, how?

.....  
.....  
.....

18. Did you tell anyone else (birth mother, family, friends) of this contact?

.....  
.....  
.....

19. What was their reaction?

.....  
.....  
.....

20. Have they had contact with the child?

Yes

No

21. If yes, how has this gone?

.....

.....

.....

22. Has the adoption affected personal relationships? If so, describe any special features e.g. with a partner, other children.

.....

.....

.....

23. Have you had any contact with the child's adoptive parents?

Yes

No

If yes, how has this gone?

.....

.....

.....

24. Have there been any other experience(s) in your life that relate to adoption?

Yes

No

If yes, what are they?

.....

.....



**SECTION H: ADOPTION SERVICES AND GENERAL ATTITUDES - IF NO KNOWLEDGE OF THE BIRTH AND ADOPTION PLEASE GO TO QUESTION H6**

1. Did you receive advice or counselling before the child was placed for adoption? E.g. from a Social Worker?

Yes  No

If yes, to what degree was the advice or counselling helpful? Use Card.

2. Was there any other assistance available at that time?

Yes  No

If Yes, from whom?

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

3. If you were involved during the birth, were you satisfied with the hospital services? Use Card.

Please give details of what was satisfactory or unsatisfactory:

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

4. Did you receive any professional help soon after the adoption?

Yes  No

If Yes, from whom?

.....  
..  
.....  
..

To what degree was this helpful? Use Card. Did you think this was necessary? Was any of this unnecessary?

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

5. Regardless of whether or not it was felt needed, was support available? From family, friends, social worker etc, during the 12 months immediately after the adoption?

Yes  No

If Yes, was this helpful?

Yes  No

In what way?

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

7. In Scotland the law provides that adopted children on reaching the age of 16, can find out from Register House who their birth parents are. Consequently, if the child wishes, he/she could seek them out. Were you informed of this possibility at the time child was placed for adoption?

Yes  No

8. Do you agree with the right of access to original birth information?

Yes  No

9. Were you given any information regarding opportunities for future contact?

Yes  No



10. Should parents who relinquish a child for adoption have similar rights to find out about their son or daughter when the latter is 16 and, if they wish, seek the child out? Give reasons for answer.

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

11. If there was a group or organisation concerned with birth fathers would you use it?

Yes  No

If yes, for what?

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

12. Would you have used such a group at the time of the adoption?

Yes  No

If not, would you have joined one later? If so, when?

.....  
..  
.....  
..  
.....  
..

13. Thinking over the whole experience, are there any services you found useful or might have been helpful to you that have not already been discussed?

Yes  No

14. Any ideas for how experiences such as yours could be improved for others?

.....

# CARDS

A7

Please rate what you consider to be your current state of physical health

Very Poor      Poor      Average      Good      Very Good

A7

Please rate what you consider to be your current state of emotional and mental health

Very Poor      Poor      Average      Good      Very Good

C12

Please rate the degree to which you feel the decision to place your child for adoption was based on your wishes

Against my wishes      Somewhat against my wishes      Somewhat based on my wishes      Completion as I wished

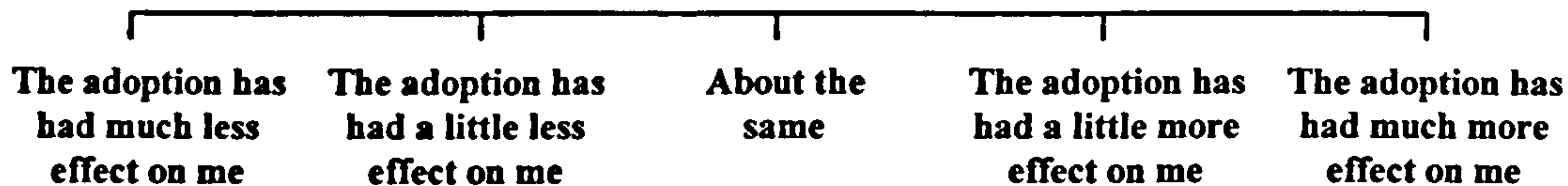
D2

Were you able to talk about these feelings?

No      Yes, a little      Yes

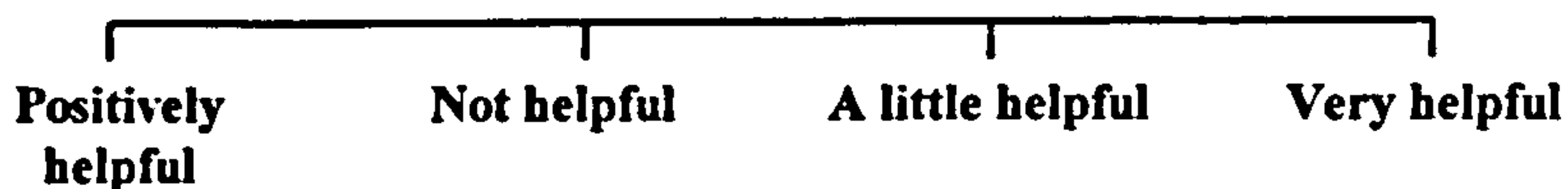


**In terms of effect upon you, how does the adoption match or compare with such experiences?**



H1

**To what degree was the advice or counselling helpful to you?**



H3

**Please rate the degree to which you were satisfied with your experiences of the hospital services**



H4

**To what degree was the advice or counselling helpful to you?**

