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Birth Fathers' Perspectives on Reunions with Their Relinquished Children

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Abstract

As part of a larger study, 20 birth fathers from Australia and overseas were surveyed regarding their contact or reunion experiences with their children. In all cases, the children had been relinquished for adoption as infants and were now adults. Qualitative data were analysed to identify themes that were associated with satisfying or dissatisfying aspects of the contact or reunion experiences. The first contact was typically associated with strong emotional responses. A degree of mutuality, in which the adoptee also wanted contact, was helpful in establishing a positive first contact experience for the birth father. Satisfying ongoing reunion relationships were associated with regular contact, shared experiences, and close, supportive relationships. Less satisfying reunions sometimes involved less contact, a mismatch of the birth fathers' and adoptees' needs, and difficulties with the developing relationships. As birth fathers with positive reunion experiences were overrepresented in this study, more research is needed to further elucidate factors that contribute to dissatisfying reunions. Further research would also benefit from more in-depth interview data. Implications of the findings for adoption practitioners are discussed.

Birth Fathers' Perspectives on Reunions with Their Relinquished Children

Since the opening up of adoption records in some states and countries over the last couple of decades, there have been more reunions between birth parents and their relinquished children. However, the reunion experiences of birth fathers have received less attention than those of adoptees or birth mothers. This could be due to practical reasons, in that birth fathers' names are often missing from birth certificates and adoption records, thus making them harder to trace (Coles, 2004). However, stereotypically negative views of birth fathers as uncaring cads (Sachdev, 1991) may also deter researchers and policy makers from giving them due attention.

Two studies by Passmore and colleagues have identified a number of themes associated with adoptees' perceptions of satisfying or dissatisfying reunions with their birth fathers (Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Themes that facilitated reunions between adoptees and their birth fathers included birth fathers' favourable personality and behaviour towards the adoptee, similarities between birth fathers and adoptees, good communication, neutral or realistic expectations of the reunion, resolution of identity issues (e.g., gaining of information), favourable personality of the adoptee, supportive behaviour of others (e.g., adoptive family, birth father's family, and birth mother), and birth fathers' favourable attitudes or behaviour towards the birth mother. The converse of all of those themes tended to be associated with dissatisfying aspects of reunions. In both studies, adoptees also differed regarding the types of relationships they had established with their birth fathers (e.g., a father-child relationship, other family relationship, friendship, acquaintance, or stranger).

While these studies shed some light on adoptee-birth father reunions, it is not clear whether birth fathers' perspectives would be similar. Some research has explored the experiences of birth fathers, though little attention has been given to their experiences of contact or reunion. When reunion experiences have been addressed, findings have typically been presented as descriptive material rather than being further analysed for common themes that are associated with satisfying or dissatisfying contact experiences (e.g., Clapton, 2003; Triseliotis, Feast, & Kyle, 2005; Witney, 2005).

Although various theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the impact and experience of adoption (e.g., Zamostny, O'Brien, Baden, & Wiley, 2003), most of these focus on the adopted child or adoptive parents. When birth parents have been considered, the emphasis has often surrounded issues of loss or psychic wounding (e.g., Verrier, 1993). Few theorists have grappled with reunions among members of the adoption triangle (i.e., adoptees, adoptive parents, and birth parents) or the specific issues that face birth fathers. Family systems theories and Erikson's identity theory may be useful in this regard.

According to family systems theory approaches, the family is a dynamic organism in which the members are interdependent and influence one another reciprocally (e.g., Trinder, 2008). With adoption reunions, however, it is not always easy to determine who is in the family and who is not. The reunion ostensibly occurs between the birth father and the adoptee. However, others may also be directly or indirectly involved, such as the birth father's wife and children, the adoptive family, the adoptee's spouse and children, and the birth mother. Any of these individuals can influence contact experiences, both at the initial stages and in ongoing reunions where notions of kinship expand and change. As such, a systems perspective provides a valuable framework from which reunions can be examined.

Erikson's (1980) stage theory of identity development has often been used to highlight the challenges adoptees face in establishing a coherent identity (e.g., Passmore, 2004). However, the theory may also be useful when considering reunions from the birth father's perspective. Many birth fathers were adolescents or young adults at the time their child was conceived and relinquished, and thus may still have been at the 'identity versus role confusion' stage of

Erikson's theory. While they were fathers in the biological sense, they did not take on the fathering role (either through their own choice or through the choice of others such as parents or the birth mother). Erikson argues that continuity is important for the establishment of a healthy ego identity, yet birth fathers have experienced discontinuity in their genetic and social histories. Loss or confusion regarding that part of their identity (i.e., the father role), may prompt some men to search for their relinquished child in the hope of re-establishing a genetic link and/or taking on a more active fathering role.

While these theories may provide a useful framework for discussing some of the findings of the current study, a specific theory is not tested in the present research. As noted earlier, we are unaware of any studies that have specifically investigated themes relating to birth fathers' perspectives on the satisfying or dissatisfying aspects of their contact and reunion experiences. Thus, we felt it was important that the present study be data-driven rather than imposing a theory on the data. As such, the findings will be largely descriptive. While descriptive studies are sometimes seen as simplistic, it depends on the research questions and what will be most relevant for the target audience (Sandelowski, 2000). As research into birth father reunions is still in its early stages and we want the findings to be helpful to practitioners and members of the adoption triangle, our approach is an appropriate first step.

The main aim of the current study was to identify themes associated with the satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of birth fathers' (a) first contact experience with their child and (b) ongoing reunion experiences. As part of the ongoing reunion experience, we also investigated the type of relationship that had been established between the birth father and his child. In the absence of previous literature, it was hypothesised that birth fathers' perceptions of their initial contact and ongoing reunion experiences would be similar to that found in studies of adoptees' reunions with their birth fathers.

Method

Participants

Twenty-seven birth fathers, whose children had been given up for adoption in infancy, took part in a larger study on the impact of relinquishment. The current study reports on the experiences of the 20 birth fathers who had had some contact and/or ongoing reunion with their adult children (including 6 sons and 14 daughters). Participants ranged in age from 48 to 72 years, with a mean age of 58.40 years. At the time of the child's conception, ages ranged from 14 to 28, with a mean age of 19 years. Five were minors at the time (14-17 years) and nine were late adolescents (18-19 years). Thirteen identified as Anglo-Australians, three as British, and four as American or Canadian. Four of the participants were married to the birth mother at the time of the survey. Seventeen of the birth fathers had actively searched for their child, with four of those cases also involving the adoptee searching. Participation was completely voluntary, with no incentives offered.

Measures

As part of the larger study, participants completed a questionnaire in either a paper-and-pencil or online format. Items included demographic questions, standardised measures, and quantitative and qualitative questions regarding the relinquishment, impact of the relinquishment, search, and reunion. Only the items of relevance to the current study will be described here (see Passmore & Coles, 2008 for a more detailed description of the questionnaire). Participants rated their satisfaction with the first contact they had with their child and their current relationship with their child on scales ranging from 1 (*extremely dissatisfying*) to 6 (*extremely satisfying*). They were also asked to explain why they were satisfied or dissatisfied and to indicate whether their current relationship with their child could best be described as a father-child relationship, family relationship though not father-child, friendship, acquaintance, stranger, or other. Those who were dissatisfied with the type of relationship they currently had with their child were also asked to indicate the type of

relationship they wanted. Participants were also given the opportunity to write any further comments about their contact or reunion experiences.

Procedure

Most of the participants ($n = 18$) were recruited via stories in the print and electronic media or from advertisements that appeared in the newsletters or web sites of various adoption groups in Australia and overseas. The other two participants were personally known to one of the researchers. Participants were either sent a questionnaire package or invited to log onto a secure web site to complete an online version of the questionnaire.

Coding of Qualitative Responses

Open-ended comments relating to participants' contact or reunion experiences were transcribed verbatim. A thematic analysis (Joffe & Yardley, 2004) was then conducted to identify themes associated with the satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of birth fathers' (a) first contact with their relinquished child and (b) ongoing reunion experiences. Each author independently coded the comments for relevant themes. We took an inductive process, allowing themes to emerge from the data (Patton, 2002). Themes were then compared and modified through discussion until consensus was reached.

Results

As many participants identified both satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of their contact and reunion experiences, the following analyses highlight satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of the reunions rather than a comparison of participants who had satisfying reunions and those who did not. A summary of the themes is presented in Table 1.

First Contact

Satisfying aspects. All of the birth fathers rated their first contact as satisfying, giving ratings of 4 to 6 on a 6-point scale ($M = 5.73$, $s = .60$). The most common theme ($n = 7$) simply involved the opportunity to finally meet their relinquished child. For example, one birth father wrote that "being able to speak to him after 42 years was just so beautiful". Others noted that it was satisfying to finally meet because they had always wondered about their child. For example, one man who was also married to the birth mother, noted that "we were able to put a face in adulthood to the baby we never saw again".

The next most common theme ($n = 6$) involved positive emotions expressed by the birth father, with several of the birth fathers feeling overjoyed or euphoric with the first contact. As one birth father explained, "[it] was the most amazing thing that has happened in my life ... I was floating on air". One participant said that he "danced around the house for hours after the first phone call", while another described the first meeting as "very powerful and strong and like it was meant to be".

Five birth fathers were also pleased that there was a mutual interest in contact. One birth father noted how glad he was that his son did not reject him, while another was happy that his daughter forgave him in the first letter that she wrote him. The interest or acceptance of other people (e.g., the adoptive parents or other family members) was also seen as a positive by three of the birth fathers. As one noted, "all participants were extremely excited, her siblings, her children, her adoptive parents and her husband's extended family. We all had to meet as soon as possible."

Other reasons for satisfaction with the first contact included having questions answered ($n = 2$), having a genetic connection ($n = 2$), similarities between the birth father and adoptee ($n = 1$), and the benefits of having the first contact via a letter ($n = 1$).

Dissatisfying aspects. Three birth fathers reported mixed emotions. While they were generally happy with the contact, these men also remembered feeling stressed, nervous, or sad. As one participant noted, his first contact was "emotional and very happy yet for me sort of sad". He had earlier explained that he regretted losing both his son and the birth mother.

The birth mother had since died, which may have added to the bittersweet feelings surrounding his first contact with his son.

Earlier, it was noted that some participants were pleased with the interest or acceptance shown by other people. However, one birth father noted that the presence of other people could also be a disadvantage. As he said: “[It was] slightly dissatisfying because her family met my family at the same time and I was very keen to talk to her alone. Wanted to touch her but felt I couldn’t push.” Another birth father also expressed dissatisfaction with his daughter’s negative reaction: “It was good to see her but it was very plain that she was not all that interested in meeting me. But she did it out of obligation or something. I’m still not quite sure why she agreed. Maybe just to kick me in the balls – I don’t know.”

Ongoing Reunions

Satisfying aspects. While the ongoing reunions were also rated as generally satisfying, a greater range of responses was noted (i.e., ratings from 1 to 6; $M = 4.74$, $s = 1.32$). The two most common themes surrounding satisfaction in ongoing reunions were regular contact and shared experiences ($n = 5$ for each theme). For example, one birth father worked with his daughter for two years and saw her every day, another saw his son almost every day, and another had weekly phone contact. It was not just the contact that was important, but the sharing of experiences. For example, two men mentioned that they had been on holidays with their children, one said that he loved being involved in his daughter’s life, and another mentioned that he was a late-discovery adoptee himself and was therefore able to share the adoption experience with this son.

The closeness of the relationship ($n = 4$) and the enjoyable nature of the contact ($n = 3$) were also satisfying features of the reunions. For example, several participants said that they had fun with their children and some mentioned forming a “close, supportive bond” with their child or developing a loving, caring relationship. However, the relationship was sometimes more complicated than that. The same birth father who had earlier noted that the first contact was sad, said the following about his ongoing reunion: “We are mates but it’s hard to actually get a feeling as feelings come and go. He is my son but in fact we are really strangers. Funny isn’t it. You love someone because he is yours but you don’t know him. But my relationship is great with him.”

Another satisfying aspect of the ongoing reunion was good communication ($n = 2$). One participant found emailing particularly helpful in the first year of the reunion, as he found it easier to express himself in an email or letter. Another noted that he and his child could speak openly on any subject. Other satisfying aspects included support from others ($n = 1$), no more secrets ($n = 1$), and feeling “(almost) guilt-free” ($n = 1$).

Dissatisfying aspects. Five birth fathers were dissatisfied with the amount of contact they had with their child. In three of these cases, the birth father and adoptee did not live near each other. In another case, contact had ceased altogether.

The birth father’s unfulfilled needs or desires ($n = 4$) also led to some dissatisfaction. One birth father wanted a deeper relationship with his child, while another was only slightly satisfied because he wanted his daughter to want him. One man admitted to being obsessed with his daughter for at least a year after meeting her and said that he “went a bit overboard in [his] desperate need to have her love [him]”. Another birth father admired the fact that his daughter was loyal to her adoptive parents, but for that reason, she called him by his first name. As he said, “I would love her to call me Dad, but I haven’t earned that right”.

Four birth fathers also noted some unfavourable characteristics of their children that affected the reunion (e.g., annoying traits, anger towards birth father). As one birth father explained: “She hates my guts ... I haven’t seen her for 10 years. She occasionally sends me a judgmental letter in reply to a birthday card that I might send her.” Contact had also ceased

between one man and his daughter after 16 years because his “relinquished daughter entered into a relationship with [his] kept daughter’s partner and they now live together”.

Three birth fathers noted the challenging nature of their reunions. While all three expressed some positives about the reunion, they also noted that it was “up and down, and hard work and expensive”, “a difficult path”, and like “walking on eggshells”. One birth father also noted the lack of support from others, perceiving that his child’s anger was being fuelled by other people.

Type of relationship. Most men established a reasonably close relationship with their relinquished child, though more described it as a family relationship ($n = 9$) or friendship ($n = 4$) rather than a father-child relationship ($n = 2$). The others described it as an acquaintance ($n = 1$), stranger ($n = 1$), or other type of relationship ($n = 1$). One man did not answer that question. Fifteen men indicated that they were satisfied with the type of relationship they had with their child. The other four who answered that question all indicated that they would like a closer relationship with their child.

Discussion

The main aim of the study was to identify satisfying and dissatisfying aspects of birth fathers’ first contact and ongoing reunions with their relinquished child. The main factors associated with satisfying first contacts included the opportunity to finally meet, a positive emotional response, mutual interest in contact, and the interest or acceptance of others. Some birth fathers also noted the importance of having their questions answered and having a genetic connection with their child. Dissatisfying aspects of first contacts included mixed emotional responses, the adoptee’s negative reaction, and the presence of others.

As hypothesised, the findings are generally consistent with those found in studies of adoptees’ perspectives on their reunions with birth fathers (e.g., Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). However, the importance of finally being able to meet was not specifically noted in previous studies. Although many adoptees would have known of their adoptive status since childhood, they may not have fully realised the implications of that until later in adolescence. Even then, adoptees typically search for the birth mother first. In contrast, the birth fathers in the current study had usually known of the child’s existence since the pregnancy, and in many cases, had thought of the child since the relinquishment. Birth fathers had sometimes spent many years searching for their child before they were finally able to meet. Thus, compared with their adult children, it is likely that the birth fathers had been contemplating a reunion for longer and may have been better prepared for contact.

While all of the birth fathers indicated that the first contact was a satisfying experience, ongoing reunion experiences had more diverse outcomes. Satisfying aspects of the reunions included regular and enjoyable contact, shared experiences, close relationships, and good communication. Some participants also noted the support from others, positive emotions, and the relief of no longer having secrets. However, ongoing reunions were not without their difficulties. For some, these challenges were purely practical (e.g., living too far away to have regular contact). Others dealt with a range of issues including their own unfulfilled needs or desires, unfavourable qualities of their child, and lack of support from others.

As noted earlier, the current study was data-driven rather than theory-driven. However, some of the results fit well within established theoretical frameworks. For example, some birth fathers noted that acceptance or support from others (e.g., the adoptee’s family) was helpful, while lack of support or negative attitudes from others could be detrimental. Indeed, one birth father felt that others were fueling his child’s anger towards him. Another mentioned that simply having the adoptee’s family present at the initial reunion was difficult because he wanted to relate to her on his own. These examples highlight the importance of utilising a family systems perspective of reunion relationships that considers all members of the adoption triangle and extended family members (see Zamostny et al., 2003).

Erikson's (1980) identity theory may also explain some of the findings. As we argued earlier, many birth fathers may have been at the stage of identity versus role confusion at the time of their child's conception and relinquishment, and the absence of an ongoing father role may have undermined their subsequent identity development. Some birth fathers noted that the gaining of information, genetic links, and similarities with their child were important elements of satisfying contact and reunion experiences, all of which could be related to identity issues. While many birth fathers also enjoyed reconnecting with their adult child, some were dissatisfied because the relationship was not as close as they would like. Indeed, one father noted that he would love his daughter to call him Dad, but he felt he had not earned that right. Clapton (2003) also noted a distinction between the biological and social father, though these roles did converge for some birth fathers as the reunions progressed.

These findings have implications for practitioners working with birth fathers throughout the search and reunion process. For example, counsellors can help prepare birth fathers for the emotional nature of the first contact, including the possibility of experiencing mixed emotions. Birth fathers could also be counselled regarding the complex nature of ongoing reunion relationships, particularly with regard to having realistic expectations. The role of father that was disrupted at relinquishment takes time to re-establish, and will not necessarily reflect a father-child relationship. However, close and enjoyable relationships can certainly develop. Similarly, adoptees could be counselled regarding potential contact with their birth fathers. The support of others is also important, as it provides a favourable atmosphere in which the contact and ongoing reunion can thrive. Some understanding of the dynamics of adoption kinship networks would also be helpful for all members of the family system (Dunbar et al., 2006).

The current study had some limitations. First, 85% of the sample (i.e., 17 birth fathers) had actively searched for their relinquished child. As these birth fathers were highly motivated to meet their child, the sample may be biased towards more positive reunion outcomes. Indeed, adoptees' reports of their reunions with birth fathers tend to be more diverse (e.g., Passmore & Chipuer, 2009; Passmore & Feeney, 2009). Second, only birth father's perspectives were collected. While we feel this redressed a gap in the literature, whereby birth fathers' voices have been largely unheard, future research would benefit from the inclusion of birth father-adoptee dyads within the same study. Where possible, it would also be helpful to investigate more fully the role that other people have in the reunion process (e.g., the birth father's family, the adoptive family, birth mothers) and the benefits and challenges of the ensuing extended family networks (e.g., boundary issues).

Some of the identified themes were reported by small numbers of participants. As open-ended questions were used, however, the numbers of participants associated with each theme are most likely under-estimates. Still, it is unlikely that themes have reached saturation. This may be due to the relatively small sample size and the constraints of using questionnaire data, with many birth fathers writing very brief answers. It was not possible to conduct face-to-face interviews, as the birth fathers in this study were located throughout Australia and overseas. Phone interviews were not considered to be a suitable option, due to the sensitive nature of much of the material and the difficulty of gauging participants' nonverbal behaviour over the phone. If participants had been interviewed, we would have had the opportunity to provide prompts and clarify answers, thereby obtaining a richer source of data. For example, birth fathers could be questioned further regarding strategies they may have used in preparing for contact with their son or daughter.

Due to sample size, it was not possible to analyse results separately for birth fathers who were reunited with sons and those who were reunited with daughters. This may be a fruitful avenue for future research, as the dynamics of father-son reunion relationships may differ from father-daughter relationships. Future research involving interviews with a more diverse

group of birth fathers (e.g., relatively equal numbers of those who have searched and those who have been found) would also be helpful in clarifying and extending the themes identified in the current study. As more data are collected and theories of reunions are developed and refined, practitioners will be in a better position to help all members of the adoption triangle.

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Table 1
Satisfying and Dissatisfying Aspects of First Contact and Ongoing Reunion Experiences

First contact	
Satisfying aspects	Dissatisfying aspects
Opportunity to finally meet (7)	Mixed emotional response (3)
Positive emotional response (6)	Adoptee's negative reactions (1)
Mutual interest in contact (5)	Presence of other people (1)
Interest/acceptance of others (3)	
Questions answered (2)	
Genetic connection (2)	
Similarities (1)	
Benefits of contact by letter (1)	
Ongoing reunions	
Satisfying aspects	Dissatisfying aspects
Regular contact (5)	Not enough contact (4)
Shared experiences (5)	Birth fathers' unfulfilled needs/desires (4)
Closeness of relationship (4)	Adoptees' unfavourable characteristics (4)
Enjoyable contact (3)	Challenging reunions (3)
Good communication (2)	Lack of support from others (1)
Support from others (1)	
No more secrets (1)	
Positive emotional reactions (1)	