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Contents

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EDITORIAL

- 75 Successful treatment of nightmares may reduce psychotic symptoms in schizophrenia
Seeman MV
- 79 Psycho-emotional content of illness narrative master plots for people with chronic illness: Implications for assessment
Soundy A

MINIREVIEWS

- 83 Single men seeking adoption
Seeman MV

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Observational Study

- 88 Drinking plain water is associated with decreased risk of depression and anxiety in adults: Results from a large cross-sectional study
Haghighatdoost F, Feizi A, Esmailzadeh A, Rashidi-Pourfard N, Keshteli AH, Roohafza H, Adibi P

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

- 97 Antidepressant foods: An evidence-based nutrient profiling system for depression
LaChance LR, Ramsey D

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

- 105 Psychic euosmia and obsessive compulsive personality disorder
Pasquini M, Maraone A, Roselli V, Tarsitani L

ABOUT COVER

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Single men seeking adoption

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Abstract

It was once impossible anywhere in the world for single adults to adopt children, and this is still the case in many jurisdictions. Elsewhere, however, single adults are now being actively recruited primarily because they are more willing than are married couples to adopt older or disabled children or to adopt across racial or other barriers. This is true for single men as well as for single

women, but single men seeking to adopt continue to be widely viewed with skepticism and are reportedly often judged to be inappropriate parents. This paper reviews the sparse fostering and adoption literature on single heterosexual males and addresses the evident ambivalence with which parenting by single men is held among both child and adult mental health professionals. The paper also discusses the parenting styles of mothers and fathers, the ways that the central nervous system in both sexes has been found to respond to parenthood, the similarity of outcomes between single male and single female parenting, and the availability in North America of support and training for foster and adoptive single parents. The paper concludes that, in general, single men have as much to offer an adopted child as do single women and that seeming discrimination against them by childcare agencies requires investigation.

Key words: Single parents; Male adoption; Foster parents; Fathers

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Core tip: Since contemporary definitions of masculinity have changed, men are no longer afraid to express emotions and to be nurturing fathers. More single men are now seeking to adopt children but, although male role models are very much needed for children in care, childcare agencies continue to be wary of single would-be fathers.

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INTRODUCTION

As much of the world's conceptions of family structure changes, a growing literature has arisen that addresses

single motherhood, as well as two-mother households and two-father households^[1]. There remains, however, only a very modest childcare literature on single, especially single and heterosexual, fatherhood^[2].

The relative lack of discussion of single male parenthood in the psychiatric and childcare literature is probably due to the assumption that heterosexual men have no innate desire for children unless they are in a committed relationship with a female partner. Motherhood is traditionally construed as central to a woman's sense of self^[3], but relatively peripheral to a man's. Men are said to prioritize career over family^[4]. Exceptions to this generalization are generally acknowledged, however, especially in the case of gay men. Eighteen years ago, in 2000, one in five male same-sex couples were reported to be raising children^[5]. Gay fathers, when interviewed^[5] clearly articulated their motives for parenthood: They enjoyed the company of children, they valued family ties, they wanted to nurture and rear children of their own, particularly once they had reached a relatively mature stage of life and had achieved financial stability. Although, now that old-fashioned concepts of masculinity have become outdated^[6], these same motives are likely to apply equally to heterosexual men, although the literature indicates that it remains somewhat unusual for unpartnered heterosexual men to actively seek fatherhood. This is the case despite the fact that, when comparing single mothers and single fathers, DeJean *et al*^[7] found that single fathers were generally perceived in their communities in more positive terms than were single mothers. In contrast to single fathers, single mothers were described by participants in this study as "less intelligent, less desirable, less secure, less fortunate, less satisfied with life, less moral, less reputable, less of a good parent and less economically advantaged^[7]." This perception of single fathers being "better" than single mothers is surprising. Surprising or not, it appears to do nothing to change suspicious attitudes among the general public and child care personnel about single fathers who seek to adopt children^[8]. Should the single man seeking adoption have a history of a stigmatized condition, mental illness for instance, his chances of fostering or adopting children through either public or private channels become essentially nil^[9,10].

Arbitrary restrictions to fostering and adoption based on demographics and discredited health conditions have become less intransigent over time, and most experts now agree that what is critical to successful adopting is filling the needs of the specific child, not concerning oneself with a would-be parent's marital status or psychiatric diagnosis. In the United States, single adults may now adopt in any state as long as they meet state-specific criteria for adoption^[11]. In addition, over the last decade, many American States have added language to their child welfare statutes that protects persons with disabilities (this includes psychiatric disabilities) from discrimination when they attempt to exercise their

fundamental right to create and maintain families^[12]. Based on available statistics, however, most single adoptive parents continue to be female^[13]; an apparent suspicion of would-be fathers remains prevalent^[14]. It constitutes a form of anti-male sexism that is shared by many childcare professionals and is shown in a number of childcare proceedings, for instance by the failure to include fathers in case planning discussions around children, by the exclusion of birth fathers as placement options for children, and by home visits conducted when fathers are absent^[14].

LITERATURE

The method for conducting this minireview was to scour the social work, psychology, childcare, and psychiatric literature for articles about fostering or adoption by single, heterosexual males. Very few articles were found.

MOTIVES FOR SINGLE FATHERHOOD

Motives for single full time fatherhood have been reported in Coles' ethnographic study of Black single birth fathers^[15]. In that study (which was not about fostering or adoption), a sense of duty and responsibility led the men to become full time parents. They expressed a need to the interviewer to make up for their own fathers' absence, and a desire to model high quality fatherhood for their children^[15]. At a June 2016 meeting sponsored by the Society for Research in Child Development, the consensus of an interdisciplinary group of scholars was that these same motives applied to single men, both gay and straight, who sought to foster or adopt children^[16].

MALE FOSTER PARENTS

The literature on male foster carers^[17] is almost always limited to males who are part of a married couple. Exceptions are Gilligan^[18] and Newstone^[19] who talked to a range of men who foster children, among whom were a few single males. Both these authors address the ambivalence towards males that, they claim, is often shown by childcare professionals. Both report that men are marginalized by social workers and childcare agencies because they are thought to represent a potential risk in the sense that foster fathers are often subject to improper sexual allegation. More rarely, men have, in fact, abused children in their care. Most child abuse in foster care is, as is true for aggressive acts everywhere, perpetrated by men^[20]. On the other hand, a significant proportion of children who require fostering and adoption have, in their earlier lives, lacked a consistent male figure so that strong, dependable paternal role models are very much in demand. Over time, this demand has led to a gradual reconsideration of single males as potential foster parents. In 2003 in the United Kingdom, 20% of foster parents were unmarried singles. Two percent of these were single males^[21]. The percentage today of single

male foster parents is unknown, but is likely to differ in different parts of the world.

SINGLE MALE ADOPTION

As early as 1977, Feigelman and Silverman^[22] were reporting that adoption by single individuals, though historically considered “unthinkable” before the mid to late 1960s, had become possible in some jurisdictions as a result of the influx of growing numbers of children who needed a home. Singles were being actively recruited, they reported, for a specific reason - their relative willingness to adopt older, at-risk, and hard-to-place youth. It is known that the children who are adopted by single men through foster care in North America are usually older than average, more of them are disabled, and more of them are dark skinned^[23,24]. In the Feigelman and Silverman^[22] survey sample, 60% of single men adopted a child over 6 years of age whereas this was true for only 23% of single women and a mere 9% of couples. Forty-seven percent of single males in this sample adopted a child of a race different from their own, compared to 30% of single women and only 10% of couples. In 1997, Byrne^[25] reported that 21% of children adopted by single males were physically or mentally disabled.

Despite the willingness of single men to adopt hard-to-place children, the majority of single adoptive parents continue to be women because childcare agencies are reportedly still making it relatively difficult for single men to adopt^[23]. Although records of total adoption statistics (domestic, international, private) can never be totally accurate, it was estimated in 2015 that, of adoptions through foster care, only 3% (approximately) were by single men, most often gay men^[23]. This may simply reflect the ratio of women to men who seek adoption, but it does suggest that childcare agencies are not actively recruiting men.

PATERNAL STYLES OF PARENTING

To better understand gender differences in parenting styles, Heslop^[26] conducted an interview study of 23 foster fathers. The participants in this study were co-parents rather than single men, but their stories speak to the way contemporary men conceptualize their paternal role. The men in Heslop’s study^[26] filled traditional masculine parenting roles (as supporters and disciplinarians), but also felt comfortable in less traditional roles (sharing emotions and providing comfort to their children). Historically, male ways of parenting have been described as limited to roles such as encouraging friendships, teaching life lessons, and engaging children in active play^[27,28]. Fathers have been described as interacting with their children mainly through the sharing of activities such as sports, yard work and home repair^[29]. Many studies, however, indicate that, over time, fathers who stay at home with their children increase the amount of time they spend in care as distinct from play;

they create relationships with children based not only on shared activities but also on emotional expressiveness, tenderness and love^[30,31]. Hook and Chalsani^[32] are of the opinion that, faced with identical tasks, parenting behaviors of single mothers and single fathers become progressively more and more similar, gender differences being overridden by the necessities of single parenthood. In her recent review of single father families, Coles^[23] supports this view.

PLASTICITY OF THE PARENTAL BRAIN

In mammalian brain, the birth of offspring triggers a set of parental behaviors aimed to ensure the infant’s survival. While it is well known that hormone levels play a defining role in this process in females, less is known about what happens in the male brain that prepares and sustains men when they become parents. Recently, significant brain changes have been identified in new fathers, changes that facilitate increased vigilance and socio-emotional engagement, changes that are similar, though not identical, to those found in new mothers^[33,34]. In fathers, these brain changes are not driven by hormones but are activated by the experiences of childcare. It is postulated that these experiences provide emotional feedback that progressively shapes and patterns the paternal brain^[33-35].

OUTCOMES OF CHILDREN REARED BY FATHERS

There has been no specific research on outcome parameters in children adopted by single men who are not their birth fathers. All single parent participants in outcome studies conducted thus far have been biological parents who are separated, divorced or widowed. Reviewing this literature, Biblarz and Stacy^[36] report that, despite early findings that adolescents living with single mothers were more securely attached, had fewer behavioral problems, higher academic test scores and achieved higher educational and occupational status than those living with comparable single fathers, the literature as a whole concludes that children’s achievements are essentially the same whether their single parent is a man or a woman. The Biblarz and Stacy review^[36] hypothesizes that single-sex parenting fosters androgynous parenting practices, so that, as a result of necessity, the parenting styles of men and women become indistinguishable over time. These investigators found that, once family size was controlled, the number and severity of child behavior problems were similar whatever the single parent’s gender. It has been known for some time that children in single-father or single-mother families do less well academically, on average, than children in two-parent families^[37]. While this is true, and while parenting behaviors may also differ on average between single mothers and single fathers, Dufur *et al*^[38] are of the opinion that such differences do not exert any perceptible

long-term effects.

OUTCOMES FOR MALE AND FEMALE PARENTS

Parenting is universally acknowledged as stressful and capable of contributing to mental ill health in mothers and fathers. A United States study^[39] reported that continuously single fathers had significantly more mental health problems than continuously married fathers. This finding is supported by United Kingdom research on rates of common mental disorders in single parents of both sexes^[40]. This research^[40] found the risk to be almost twice higher in single compared to married mothers and almost three times as high in single compared to married fathers. Among the four groups (male single, male married, female single, female married), the lowest rate of mental disorder was found among married fathers. A relatively recent New Zealand study^[41] with data on 905 single parents and 4860 partnered parents, found that 15.7% of single mothers and 9.1% of single fathers endorsed high to very high levels of psychological distress as compared to 6.1% of partnered mothers and 4.1% of partnered fathers. The relatively poorer mental health of single mothers compared to single fathers was attributed to socioeconomic factors since single women, on average, earn lower wages than single men.

CONCLUSION

This brief review about the current state of knowledge on single fatherhood strongly suggests that men on their own are able to adequately care for adopted children. This has been made easier since pre-adoption training and post-adoption support for single parenting is readily accessible in many parts of the world^[42-45]. Support and training are important for all adoptive parents, but probably more so for single men for whom this continues to be, for the time being at least, a novel role. As pointed out by Atkinson and Riley^[46], child and adult mental health professionals also require training so that discrimination against qualified would-be parents, whether single, male, gay, physically disabled or with a past history of psychiatric illness, ceases to dominate fostering and adoption decisions.

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