

Father Involvement, Nurturant Fathering, and Young Adult Psychosocial Functioning

Differences Among Adoptive, Adoptive Stepfather, and Nonadoptive Stepfamilies

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The present study was conducted to investigate differences in nurturant fathering, father involvement, and young adult psychosocial functioning among small samples of three nontraditional family forms. A total of 168 young-adult university students from three family forms (27 adoptive, 22 adoptive stepfather, 119 nonadoptive stepfather) completed retrospective measures of nurturant fathering and father involvement and measures of current psychosocial functioning. Results indicated that adoptive fathers were rated as the most nurturant and involved and that nonadoptive stepfathers were rated as the least nurturant and involved. In adoptive families, young adults' ratings of paternal nurturance and involvement were strongly and positively correlated with their reports of current psychosocial functioning. The relationships of family form to reports of fathering appeared to be moderated by the child's age at father entry and the number of years of involvement in the child's life.

Keywords: father involvement; nurturant fathering; stepfather; adoptive; family form

The importance of fathers in child and adolescent development has been well documented (e.g., Palkovitz, 1997, 2002; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Most fathering research, however, has been conducted with biological fathers (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). With rising divorce and remarriage, unmarried childbearing, and adoption rates (Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention, 2001; Finley, 2002; National Center for Health Statistics, 2002), it now is critical to study the effect of fathering by non-biological fathers and in nontraditional family forms. These new family forms include stepfamilies, adoptive families, and adoptive stepfamilies.

Fathering in Adoptive Families, Adoptive Stepfamilies, and Nonadoptive Stepfamilies

In the present study, we consider three types of fathers who are not biologically related to the adult child participant but who vary systematically in terms of their legal commitments and legal relationship to the child. As applied to the family forms examined in the present study, social role theory (Cherlin, 1992) suggests that the degree of legal commitment and role clarity associated with a given father type helps to determine the father's degree of investment in the child. This level of investment, in turn, may be a powerful determinant of the degree of warmth and involvement that the father provides in the child's life (cf. White, 1994). The fact that adoptive fathers tend to enter the child's life at birth, and to be the only father whom the child knows, suggests that their roles are clear and that they have made firm legal commitments to the child from the beginning (Finley, 1999). On the other hand, nonadoptive stepfathers are not legally committed to the child, and their roles in the child's life are often unclear (White, 1994). Adoptive stepfathers, because they make a legal commitment to the child but often enter the child's life at a later age, would appear to fall somewhere between adoptive fathers and nonadoptive stepfathers. Below, we briefly review the knowledge base regarding legal and emotional commitments and role clarity among adoptive fathers, adoptive stepfathers, and nonadoptive stepfathers.

Perhaps because of their comparatively high role clarity, adoptive fathers tend to be highly emotionally committed to their children (Finley, 1999). There also is evidence that adoptive fathers may be closer to their children than are biological fathers (Sobol, Delaney, & Earn, 1994). In addition, children from adoptive families may rate their relationships with their fathers more positively than do children from other family forms (Lansford et al., 2001; Lanz, Iafate, Rosnati, & Scabini, 1999). Because adoptive fathers are self-selected and must pass an extensive screening procedure (Finley, 1998), they appear to represent a unique and highly involved group.

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Adoptive stepfathers have been virtually ignored in the research literature. Adoptive stepfathers enter the child's life through a marital relationship with the mother. However, they also make an additional and critical legal and financial commitment to the child by adopting her or him at some point following the marriage. This legal, financial, and affective commitment affords the adoptive stepfather a defined role in the stepchild's life (i.e., as "father"). However, because adoptive stepfathers have not been studied separately from adoptive fathers and nonadoptive stepfathers in the published literature, it is not known whether adoptive stepfathers would be rated similarly to or differently from these other two father types.

By contrast, nonadoptive stepfathers have been among the most commonly researched "nontraditional" fathers (e.g., Bray & Berger, 1993; Dunn, Davies, O'Connor, & Sturges, 2000). Nonadoptive stepfathers, even when they are identified as the primary father in the stepchild's life, are connected to the stepchild only through the mother and have no separate legal role or rights regarding the stepchild. As a result, the role of nonadoptive stepfathers is maximally ill defined both by law and by social construction (White, 1994). The resulting role ambiguity and lack of legal rights may prompt the child to question the stepfather's legitimacy as a father.

Research has found that the earlier the age at which a nonbiological father enters the child's life, the better the relationship (Hetherington, 1993). Moreover, the length of time that the father is involved with the child and the permanence of that relationship may also be important determinants of the father-child relationship and of the child's later psychosocial functioning (Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000). Nonadoptive stepfathers' involvement with their stepchildren may be transitory given the failure rate for second marriages with stepchildren (estimated at more than 70%; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000). The transitory, and thus risky, nature of many stepfather-stepchild relationships thus may represent an additional hardship for the child, who must endure multiple family transitions. Moreover, once the nonadoptive stepfather leaves the household, he has no legal rights to the child.

The Present Study

The comparisons among adoptive fathers, adoptive stepfathers, and nonadoptive stepfathers that we make in the present study involve an examination of three father types that differ systematically in commitment and role clarity (as indexed by legal status) with regard to the child. To the extent that a nonbiological father's nurturance and involvement is a function of his commitment and role clarity (cf. Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Lansford et al.,

2001), social role theory would suggest that adoptive stepfathers are intermediate between adoptive fathers and nonadoptive stepfathers in terms of nurturance and involvement. The present study represents an attempt to explore this theoretical proposition.

In the event that the primary study hypothesis is supported (i.e., adoptive fathers are rated as significantly more nurturant than are nonadoptive stepfathers), we would then focus on the relative position of adoptive stepfathers in relation to each of these other two family forms. Only if adoptive stepfathers were found to be significantly different from nonadoptive stepfathers would a separate line of research on adoptive stepfathers be warranted.

Methodological framework. The methodological framework underlying the present study is a blend of child-centered, multidimensional, and developmental perspectives. The primary premise of our work is based on Rohner's (1986) argument that children's own perceptions of their fathers' involvement are uniquely predictive of those children's later developmental and behavioral outcomes, independent of the veridicality of those perceptions (for reviews of supportive empirical literature, see Khaleque & Rohner, 2002; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Our model of father involvement is drawn from Hawkins and Palkovitz's (1999) call for nuanced and multidimensional understandings and measures of father involvement (see Finley & Schwartz, 2004). Our use of retrospective reports of fathering with young adult samples is consistent with a number of prior studies (e.g., Campo & Rohner, 1992; Sobol et al., 1994).

The use of a young adult sample and of retrospective reports is an important approach to father involvement research. Recent empirical articles and literature reviews have emphasized the importance of long-term, rather than short-term, effects of father involvement on children's perspectives and outcomes (e.g., Braver, Ellman, & Fabricius, 2003; Fabricius & Hall, 2000). Young adulthood is also the time when individuals prepare to face the challenges and decisions of adulthood (Arnett, 2000), and it is the time when the intergenerational transmission of parenting attitudes and beliefs begins to manifest itself (Chen & Kaplan, 2001).

Hypotheses. In light of Lansford et al.'s (2001) finding that fathers in nonadoptive stepfamilies were less involved with their children than were fathers in adoptive families, we hypothesized that adoptive fathers would be associated with significantly higher reports of father involvement and nurturant fathering than would nonadoptive stepfathers. Given that adoptive stepfathers may be in between nonadoptive stepfathers and adoptive fathers in terms of legal commitments and role clarity, we hypothesized that adop-

tive stepfathers would be rated as intermediate between nonadoptive stepfathers and adoptive fathers in terms of nurturant fathering and reported father involvement. Given the lack of research on adoptive stepfathers, however, we did not advance specific hypotheses regarding the extent to which adoptive stepfathers would be rated significantly differently than would the other two father types.

We also were interested in the extent to which the relationships between fathering reports and young adults' reports of their own current psychosocial functioning would differ among the three family forms studied. Such an analysis would allow us to further examine the long-term effects of fathering in the three family forms. Given that this was an exploratory research question, we did not advance a priori hypotheses.

Method

Participants

The present sample was part of a larger project (Finley & Schwartz, 2004) investigating young adults' retrospective reports of father involvement and nurturant fathering. All participants from this larger study who identified an adoptive father, adoptive stepfather, or nonadoptive stepfather as the primary father in their lives were included in the present analyses. The present sample consisted of 166 university students (27% males, 73% females) with a mean age of 21.5 years. In all, 27 participants identified adoptive fathers as their primary fathers, 22 identified adoptive stepfathers, and 119 identified nonadoptive stepfathers. All participants reported having lived with the fathers they identified during at least part of their childhood or adolescence.

The sample for the present analyses represents 7.0% of the total sample collected. As reported in Schwartz and Finley (2005), 84.5% of participants in the total sample ($N = 2,353$) identified their biological fathers as the most important father in their lives and indicated their family form as intact or divorced. The remainder of the sample identified other family forms (e.g., father deceased) or did not provide family form data.

The ethnic distribution in the present sample was 24% non-Hispanic White, 18% non-Hispanic Black, 49% Hispanic, 7% Asian, and 2% mixed. In all, 65% of participants and 41% of fathers were born in the United States. These percentages are similar to those in the larger sample, and the present sample is consistent with the ethnic composition of the university from which participants were recruited. The present sample is not representative of the U.S. population because of the overrepresentation of minorities. However, it may be representative of the future of American families, as sug-

gested by recent demographic trends indicating increasing representation of minorities (especially Hispanics) in the United States (Day, 1996).

Measures

Demographics. In the present study, we assessed demographic variables commonly measured in family research such as age, gender, ethnicity, father's education, and annual family income (during the participant's adolescence). We also assessed demographics appropriate for a minority college sample including year in school, participant's nativity, and father's nativity. Participants from adoptive and nonadoptive stepfamilies were asked to report how old they were when the stepfather entered the household, and participants from adoptive stepfamilies were asked how old they were at the time of adoption.

Nurturant fathering. The Nurturant Fathering Scale (Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Williams & Finley, 1997) consists of nine items that participants use to characterize their relationship with the father selected on the demographic form. Participants are asked to read each item and to respond using a 5-point rating scale (the anchors for the scale vary as a function of item content). Possible scores on this measure range from 9 to 45. The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the present sample was .95. A sample item from this scale is "When you needed your father's *support*, was he there for you?"

Father involvement. Participants were asked to complete the Father Involvement Scale (Finley & Schwartz, 2004) with regard to the father or father who was most influential in their lives. For each of the 20 fathering domains listed, participants are asked to indicate (a) how involved, on a scale of 1 (*not at all involved*) to 5 (*very involved*), their fathers were in their lives; and (b) how involved they wanted their fathers to have been, relative to how involved their fathers actually were, on a scale of 1 (*much less involved*) to 5 (*much more involved*). A sample item from this scale reads, "_____ developing competence _____" where the participant is instructed to write the reported involvement rating into the first blank and to write the desired involvement rating into the second blank. Only reported involvement scores were analyzed for this report.

Factor analyses of the reported involvement items from the Father Involvement Scale in the larger sample yielded three subscales (Finley & Schwartz, 2004). Reported involvement subscales included expressive involvement (caregiving, companionship, sharing activities, emotional development, spiritual development, physical development, social development,

and leisure; $\alpha = .94$), instrumental involvement (discipline, providing income, protecting, school or homework, developing responsibility, developing independence, moral development, and career development; $\alpha = .89$), and mentoring/advising involvement, which represents the empirical overlap between expressive and instrumental involvement (mentoring, giving advice, intellectual development, and developing competence; $\alpha = .91$).

Young adult psychosocial functioning. A three-item scale was constructed to assess participants' present psychosocial functioning. The scale was composed of items assessing self-esteem, life satisfaction, and future expectations. Participants responded to each of these items using a 5-point, Likert-type scale with 1 (*very low*) and 5 (*very high*) as the anchor points. The Cronbach's alpha estimate for scores on this composite scale was .70.

Procedure

Participants completed the Nurturant Fathering Scale and the Father Involvement Scale in class. Research assistants administered the two measures and demographic form as a single questionnaire. The administration time for the entire assessment ranged from 10 to 20 minutes.

Results

Sample Characterization

Because the present sample was gathered at a large urban university, we examined the proportion of participants who resided at home with their families. We also examined the number of nonadoptive stepfathers no longer residing in the household, how long prior to assessment these stepfathers had left the household, and in adoptive stepfamilies, the length of time between stepfather entry and adoption. Although the time lag between stepfather entry and adoption may be beyond the control of either the stepfather or the stepchild, this time lag may somewhat reflect the adoptive stepfather's degree of commitment to the fathering role.

Percentage of participants residing at home. In the sample as a whole, 57% of participants resided at home with their families. This percentage did not differ significantly by family form, $\chi^2(2) = 1.09, p < .59, \phi^2 = .01$.

Percentage of nonadoptive stepfathers no longer residing in the household. In our sample, all of the participants rating adoptive fathers or adoptive

stepfathers reported that these fathers were still present at the time of assessment. However, of the 119 participants rating nonadoptive stepfathers, 34 (29%) reported that their nonadoptive stepfathers had left the household. These nonadoptive stepfathers had left the household between 1 and 35 years prior to assessment ($M = 7.50$, $SD = 7.74$; 80% between 1 and 11 years).

Time between stepfather entry and adoption in adoptive stepfamilies. Participants rating adoptive stepfathers reported that they had resided with those stepfathers for between 0 and 7 years ($M = 2.25$, $SD = 2.08$) prior to the formal adoption.

Identification of Demographic Covariates

A series of ANOVAs and chi-squares revealed significant family form differences in only two demographic indices: the child's age at father entry and the number of years during which the father was involved in the child's life. Although age of stepfather entry did not differ between adoptive ($M = 7.23$) and nonadoptive ($M = 7.83$) stepfamilies, $t(127) = 0.59$, $p < .50$, $\eta^2 = .01$, adoptive fathers entered their children's lives at or shortly following the child's birth. Moreover, the number of years during which the father was involved in the participant's life differed significantly among family forms, $F(2, 154) = 63.03$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .45$. Tukey's least significant difference post hoc tests indicated that adoptive fathers ($M = 21.19$ years, $SD = 3.35$) had been involved in their children's lives significantly longer than had either adoptive ($M = 12.47$, $SD = 4.38$) or nonadoptive ($M = 10.91$, $SD = 4.59$) stepfathers.

Effects of Family Form on Nurturant Fathering and Father Involvement

Effects of family form on the nurturant fathering and reported father involvement scales were examined using MANOVA. Although nurturant fathering and father involvement represent separate constructs, the conceptual and empirical interrelationships between them appear sufficient to warrant analyzing them together (Finley & Schwartz, 2004; Schwartz & Finley, 2005). We first conducted the MANOVA without covariates. Provided that the MANOVA yielded significant results, we reconducted the analysis controlling for the child's age at father entry and the number of years during which the father was involved in the participant's life. In adoptive stepfamilies, as an exploratory follow-up analysis, we examined whether the time from stepfather entry to adoption would be related to the fathering vari-

ables. Because the small number of participants rating adoptive stepfathers ($n = 22$) precluded the use of traditional significance testing, we used effect sizes to identify important correlations. Only correlations meeting Cohen's (1988) criterion for a small effect size ($r^2 \geq .10$) are reported.

The one-way MANOVA yielded a significant multivariate effect, Roy's $\Theta = .08$, $F(4, 153) = 3.14$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .08$. Univariate analyses revealed significant differences in each of the fathering indices by family form: nurturant fathering, $F(2, 155) = 4.68$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .06$; expressive involvement, $F(2, 155) = 3.91$, $p < .03$, $\eta^2 = .05$; instrumental involvement, $F(2, 155) = 6.10$, $p < .01$, $\eta^2 = .07$; and mentoring or advising $F(2, 155) = 4.45$, $p < .02$, $\eta^2 = .05$. Tukey's least significant difference post hoc tests indicated that, for all four fathering indices, adoptive fathers were rated as significantly more nurturant than were nonadoptive stepfathers. Adoptive stepfathers were rated as significantly higher than nonadoptive stepfathers on instrumental involvement and mentoring/advising but not on nurturant fathering or expressive involvement. Adoptive fathers and adoptive stepfathers did not differ significantly on any of the fathering indices. Because of the inconsistencies in the patterns of differences between adoptive and nonadoptive stepfathers, we conducted a series of linear contrasts comparing adoptive fathers and adoptive stepfathers to nonadoptive stepfathers. For all four fathering variables, linear contrasts revealed that adoptive fathers and adoptive stepfathers, as a group, were rated as significantly more nurturant and involved than were nonadoptive stepfathers (see Table 1).

When we introduced the covariates into the analysis, the multivariate effect of family form on reported father involvement was no longer significant, $F(4, 145) = 1.22$, $p < .31$, $\eta^2 = .03$. All of the univariate effects were reduced to nonsignificance as well. Among the covariates, the number of years during which the father had been involved in the participant's life approached significance at the multivariate level, $F(4, 144) = 2.42$, $p = .051$, $\eta^2 = .06$. At the univariate level, however, neither covariate was significantly related to any of the reported fathering indices. In adoptive stepfamilies, time from stepfather entry to adoption was negatively related to nurturant fathering, $r = -.31$, $r^2 = .10$, and to mentoring/advising, $r = -.40$, $r^2 = .16$.

Examining the Effects of the Covariates

To examine why the covariates appeared to have reduced the mean differences by family form to nonsignificance, we examined the bivariate correlations between the covariates and the fathering indices within each family form (see Table 2). These analyses were intended to explore the potential

Table 1
Means and Standard Deviations for Fathering Scales by Family Form

Scale	Family Form						η^2	F Ratio	η^2	Linear Contrast ^d
	Adoptive ^a		Adoptive Stepfather ^b		Nonadoptive Stepfather ^c					
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD				
Nurturant fathering	3.50 _a	2.37	3.36 _{ab}	2.92	2.99 _b	2.93	4.68*	.06	2.64**	
Expressive involvement	3.58 _a	2.90	3.32 _{ab}	3.37	2.94 _b	3.21	3.91*	.05	2.52*	
Instrumental involvement	4.66 _a	2.52	4.41 _a	3.24	3.90 _b	3.15	6.10***	.07	2.47*	
Mentoring/advising	2.89 _a	1.68	2.88 _a	1.82	2.43 _b	1.86	4.45*	.05	2.11*	
Young adult psychosocial functioning	4.13 _{ab}	1.12	4.22 _{ab}	0.80	3.99 _a	1.03	3.30*	.04	2.52*	

Note: Within each row, means with different subscripts differ at $p < .05$. All means are on a scale of 1 to 5.

a. $n = 27$.

b. $n = 22$.

c. $n = 119$.

d. Computed as a t test comparing adoptive fathers and adoptive stepfathers to nonadoptive stepfathers.

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$.

Table 2
Correlations Between Covariates and Variables of Interest, Separately by Family Form

Variable	Nurturant Fathering	Expressive Involvement	Instrumental Involvement	Mentoring or Advising
Child's age at father entry				
Adoptive stepfamilies	-.48 (.23)	-.50 (.25)	-.40 (.16)	-.33 (.11)
Nonadoptive stepfamilies	.04 (.00)	.06 (.00)	-.06 (.00)	.01 (.00)
Number of years involved				
Adoptive Stepfamilies	.68 (.46)	.69 (.48)	.66 (.44)	.54 (.29)
Nonadoptive stepfamilies	.00 (.00)	-.01 (.00)	.09 (.01)	-.03 (.00)

Note: Effect sizes are in parentheses.

moderating effects of the covariates on the relationship of family form to reports of fathering and of young adult psychosocial functioning.

In adoptive families, because all of the adoptive fathers entered the respondents' lives at or shortly after birth, age of father entry was a constant for adoptive families. Correlations therefore could not be computed using this variable. Moreover, because the length of the father-child relationship in adoptive families was equivalent to age for the adoptees in the present sample, it was not possible to uncouple the length of the father-child relationship from the participant's chronological age. Correlations between age of father entry and participants' ratings of their fathers would therefore likely have different meanings in adoptive families than in adoptive and nonadoptive stepfamilies. As a result, correlations between the covariates and fathering variables were not computed for adoptive families.

In adoptive stepfamilies, considering correlations with effect sizes of .10 or greater, the child's age at father entry was negatively related, and number of years the father was involved was strongly and positively related, to nurturant fathering and to all three indices of reported father involvement. Examination of scatterplots suggested the presence of consistent correlations in all four cases. In nonadoptive stepfamilies, neither the child's age at stepfather entry nor number of years the stepfather was involved was related to any of the fathering indices. Examination of scatterplots suggested the presence of consistent null correlations.

Relationships of Nurturant Fathering, Reported Father Involvement, and Desired Father Involvement to Young Adult Psychosocial Functioning¹

Bivariate correlations were conducted to ascertain the relationships of nurturant fathering and reported father involvement to young adult psychosocial functioning within each of the three family forms considered. These correlations were then compared, using the *z* test for independent correlation coefficients and the *q* index of effect size (Cohen, 1988), to ascertain whether the relationships of father involvement and nurturant fathering to young adult psychosocial functioning differed by family form. As displayed in Table 3, for young adults from adoptive families, reports of nurturant fathering and of expressive father involvement were unusually strongly and positively associated with current psychosocial functioning, and these relationships were significantly stronger than the corresponding relationships in young adults from adoptive or nonadoptive stepfamilies. Reports of instrumental and mentoring/advising father involvement in young adults from adoptive families were somewhat less strongly associated with these young

Table 3
Correlations of Nurturant Fathering and Reported Father Involvement to Young Adult Psychosocial Functioning, Separately by Family Form

Family Form	Nurturant Fathering	Expressive Fathering	Instrumental Fathering	Mentoring or Advising
a. Adoptive ^a	.68*** (.68***)	.71*** (.71***)	.56** (.56**)	.53** (.52**)
b. Adoptive stepfather ^b	.18 (.09)	.20 (.09)	.24 (.11)	.25 (.15)
c. Nonadoptive stepfather ^c	.34*** (.35***)	.34*** (.33**)	.30** (.28**)	.25** (.24*)
a vs. b ^d	.65* (.74*)	.68* (.80*)	.32 (.52)	.33 (.43)
a vs. c	.48* (.46*)	.53* (.54*)	.32 (.35)	.33 (.33)
b vs. c	.17 (.28)	.15 (.25)	.06 (.18)	.00 (.09)

Note: Numbers in parentheses are partial correlations controlling for the child's age at father figure entry and length of time the father figure was involved in the participant's life.

a. $n = 27$.

b. $n = 22$.

c. $n = 117$.

d. Values in the comparative cells are effect sizes for the corresponding correlation differences, calculated using the q index (Cohen, 1988).
 * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$.

adults' current psychosocial functioning. These relationships did not differ significantly from those for young adults from adoptive or nonadoptive stepfamilies. None of the relationships of young adults' reports of fathering to current psychosocial functioning differed between adoptive stepfather and nonadoptive stepfamilies.

We reconducted these correlations covarying out the child's age at father entry and length of time the father was involved. None of the correlations changed significantly (see Table 3). The pattern of correlation differences among family forms also did not change when the covariates were introduced.

Discussion

The present exploratory study was conducted to ascertain the ways in which young adults would characterize adoptive fathers, adoptive stepfathers, and nonadoptive stepfathers in terms of father involvement and nurturant fathering. We were also interested in family form differences in the relationships of retrospectively perceived fathering to current psychosocial functioning.

A clear pattern emerged in the mean difference analyses. For nurturant fathering and reported father involvement, adoptive fathers and adoptive stepfathers were rated significantly higher than were nonadoptive stepfathers but were not significantly different from one another. Consistent with what would be expected in light of previous theory and research (Hetherington, 1993; Hetherington & Stanley-Hagan, 2000), these family form differences appeared to be at least partially qualified by the age at which the father entered the child's life and the length of time that the father was involved with the child. Even though these covariates were not significantly related to the fathering variables, the main effect of family form on the fathering variables was reduced to nonsignificance when these covariates were added to the model. This finding suggests the presence of interaction (i.e., moderating) effects between family form and these covariates on the fathering variables. We were able to explore these moderating effects by examining the relationships of the covariates to the fathering variables within adoptive and nonadoptive stepfamilies. The relationships between the number of years the father was involved and the reported fathering variables were strong and positive in adoptive stepfamilies and were close to zero in nonadoptive stepfamilies. Relationships between the child's age at stepfather entry and the reported fathering variables were negative in adoptive stepfamilies and close to zero in nonadoptive stepfamilies.

In adoptive stepfamilies, the association of earlier child age at stepfather entry and greater number of years of involvement with more positive father ratings may reflect the adoptive stepfather's commitment to the child (i.e., longer history and more time spent with the child is associated with more favorable ratings). Conversely, in nonadoptive stepfamilies, the lack of association of the child's age at father entry or number of years of involvement with fathering ratings is not clear and warrants further research. Although the present findings may be taken to suggest that differing family dynamics may be responsible for the differences in patterns of findings across family forms, it is important for future research to empirically examine the specific family dynamics associated with children's perceptions of fathering in adoptive families, adoptive stepfamilies, and nonadoptive stepfamilies.

Findings Related to the Three Family Forms

The finding that adoptive families were rated highly on nurturance and involvement is consistent with prior research (Lansford et al., 2001; Lanz et al., 1999; Sobol et al., 1994). Moreover, according to young adult children's reports, adoptive fathers' levels of nurturance and involvement were strongly associated with their young adult children's current psychosocial functioning. These strong associations may reflect the unique and highly selected nature of adoptive families. Adoptive parents are self-selected and must endure a lengthy and difficult process, including extensive screening and legal procedures (Finley, 1998; Grotevant & Kohler, 1999).

Adoptive stepfathers were lower than, but not significantly different from, adoptive fathers in terms of young adults' reports of nurturance and involvement. This finding suggests that adopting the child solidifies the stepfather's role and legal status in the family and in the stepchild's life. Moreover, stepfathers who adopted their stepchildren soon after entering the household were rated as more nurturant and as more involved in mentoring and advising than were stepfathers who adopted their stepchildren after longer periods of time.

Nonadoptive stepfathers were associated with the lowest nurturance and involvement ratings. Although the effect sizes associated with these differences were small, this finding is consistent with results reported by Hofferth and Anderson (2003) and by Lansford et al. (2001). The nonadoptive stepfather's role is inherently ambiguous in that he has no legal rights (and has made no legal or financial commitments) in the stepchild's life.

Implications for the Study of Father Involvement in Nontraditional Family Forms

The present results may have several important implications for the study of father involvement in nontraditional family forms. Each of these implications may both help to synthesize existing knowledge and suggest avenues for future research.

First and perhaps most importantly, the present findings indicate that adoptive stepfathers are distinct from nonadoptive stepfathers and should be studied separately. Interestingly, however, despite the fact that they tended to enter their stepchildren's lives considerably later than did adoptive fathers, adoptive stepfathers were not significantly different from adoptive fathers in terms of nurturance and involvement.

Second, to the extent that perceived paternal nurturance and involvement can be taken to be a function of the father's legal and financial commitment to the child (cf. Hofferth & Anderson, 2003; Lansford et al., 2001), two important conclusions can be drawn. First, the pattern of differences observed in the present study support the use of legal commitment as a proxy for emotional commitment and suggest that paternal emotional commitment differs meaningfully between nonadoptive stepfathers and the other two family forms. This pattern of differences is consistent with previous research comparing stepfathers to other father types (e.g., Hofferth & Anderson, 2003). Second, adoptive stepfathers appear to be nearly as emotionally committed to their stepchildren as adoptive fathers are to their children. This implies that adopting a child creates (or reflects) a high degree of legal and emotional commitment on the part of the father, regardless of whether the adoption occurs shortly after birth or at a later time in the child's life.

Third, if one accepts the premise that paternal nurturance and involvement reflect the father's legal and emotional commitment to the child, then the present findings can be construed as supportive of social role theory. The congruence of the present findings with social role theory calls for further research into the specific family dynamics that might be responsible for the family form differences in paternal nurturance and involvement. The most critical research need in this area involves examination of variables that contribute to role ambiguity among nonadoptive stepfathers. For example, it would be helpful to elucidate the degree to which (a) specific maternal behaviors in stepfamilies inhibit or promote close stepfather-stepchild relationships and (b) specific biological-father and stepfather behaviors create or discourage divided allegiances in children.

Fourth, the present findings suggest that the age of father entry and the length of the father-child relationship are important only when the father is

legally committed to the child and when his role is sufficiently clear to support a warm and close relationship with the child. In the absence of paternal legal commitments to the child, the length of the father-child relationship does not appear to be related to the father's involvement or bond with the child. This conclusion calls for further research into the characteristics, family processes, and circumstances that are associated with the stepfather's decision to adopt his stepchild. Critically, although we used legal status as a proxy measure for role clarity and for legal, financial, and emotional commitment to the child, it is not clear whether role clarity and paternal commitments predated or followed the formal adoption. Moreover, it is also important to ascertain the roles that the mother and the biological father play in determining whether or not a stepfather will adopt his stepchild.

Fifth, although the present findings suggest that adoptive fathers and adoptive stepfathers are largely equivalent in terms of emotional commitment and role clarity, the strong correlations of adoptive fathers' nurturance and involvement to their young adult children's psychosocial functioning appear to reflect the unique and selected nature of adoptive families. It is important, however, for future research to identify specific characteristics of adoptive fathers and specific circumstances involved with adoptive parenting that might explain the strong association between paternal nurturance or involvement and young adult psychosocial functioning found in the present results.

Limitations

The present results should be considered exploratory in light of four substantial limitations. First, it is intuitively likely that the roles of mothers may be quite different across the three nontraditional family forms examined, and such data should be gathered in future studies. The mother's role in the father-child relationship may have explained some of the differences in paternal nurturance and involvement across family forms. Second, data on the circumstances leading to stepfamily formation should be assessed in future research. Stepfamilies (both adoptive and nonadoptive) can be formed following divorce, following the death of the biological father, or in cases where the child's biological parents were never married. It is likely that stepfamilies formed following different sets of pre-remarriage circumstances may be associated with different family dynamics and child outcomes. Future research also may clarify whether the circumstances leading to stepfamily formation are associated with the likelihood of stepfather adoption. Third, in both adoptive and nonadoptive stepfamilies, data should be gathered on the history and role of the biological father, including his rela-

tionship to the child and to the mother. For example, children may struggle with divided allegiances between their biological fathers and stepfathers, and these divided allegiances may decrease the extent to which the child attends to the stepfather's nurturance and involvement (cf. MacDonald & DeMaris, 2002). Fourth, although the ethnic diversity in the present sample is advantageous, generalizability might be enhanced with a larger contingent of "traditional" American families.

Despite these limitations, the present study has contributed to the literature on fathering in nontraditional family forms. Most importantly, the results indicate the need for research on adoptive stepfathers as a separate father type and suggest that adoption, regardless of when it occurs, is associated with increased paternal nurturance and involvement. Secondly, the present results also suggest the need for research on reasons for nonadoptive stepfathers' lack of commitment, role clarity, nurturance, and involvement. Given the increasing prevalence of nontraditional family forms in the United States, research examining these two conceptual areas will be valuable in informing family policy.

Note

1. Although mean differences in young adult psychosocial functioning by family form were not a focus of the present study, the mean young adult psychosocial functioning scores within each family form are presented in Table 1.

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