



## Parents, Children, and (Adoptive?) Bonds: Theoretical Notes for Understanding Parenthood through Adoption

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the complexities of adoptive parenthood through a theoretical lens, examining the social, emotional, and identity-shaping processes that distinguish it from biological parenthood. Grounded in psychological and sociological research, the study highlights the unique challenges faced by adoptive families, including bureaucratic hurdles, social judgment, and integration issues, while emphasizing the role of pre- and post-adoption support in fostering positive outcomes. The analysis reveals how adoptive parenthood is constructed through legal, cultural, and interpersonal dynamics, with particular attention to the selective preferences documented in Brazil's National Adoption Registry (CNA), which reflect underlying racial and age-based biases. The article also addresses the historical evolution of motherhood and fatherhood, contextualizing adoptive roles within broader gender and family structures. By comparing adoptive and biological parenthood, the study underscores the significance of affective bonds, legal frameworks, and societal perceptions in shaping family identity. Key findings suggest that adoptive parenthood, while distinct, involves similar processes of identity formation and relational adjustment, challenging traditional notions of kinship. The article concludes with recommendations for tailored interventions and policies to better support adoptive families.

**Keywords:** *Adoptive parenthood; Family identity; Adoption policies; Parent-child bonding.*

### 1 Introduction

This article is part of the theoretical foundation of the dissertation entitled “Family identity formed through late adoption: dynamics between parenting and affiliation”, defended by one of the authors. In this section, we aim to present a theoretical overview of the processes of parenthood and affiliation within the context of adoption. The study is

grounded in research from the field of psychology and seeks to contribute to a broader understanding of the adoptive family by addressing elements such as the social and legal context, decision-making processes, vulnerabilities, affectivity, public policies, among others.

Understanding the phenomena involved in constructing parenthood is crucial because it is not just a biological event, but a complex social, emotional, and identity-shaping

process (Piotrowski et al., 2024; Silva et al., 2025; Valério et al., 2024). Recognizing these dynamics helps individuals, families, and professionals better navigate the profound changes, challenges, and decisions that come with becoming and being a parent.

The transition to parenthood is constructed through both language and social practices, creating a collective sense of transformation and new identity for parents. This process is amplified by educators and social expectations, highlighting the major life changes involved and the need for guidance and support (Giovanardi et al., 2025; LaRossa & Sinha, 2006).

New family forms, such as adoption or assisted reproduction, require a rethinking of traditional concepts of parenthood, opening up new possibilities and challenges in the construction of family identity (Bowman-Smart, 2020; Valério et al., 2024). When it comes to adoptive families, the understanding of parenthood arises in the face of unique challenges, expectations, and adjustment processes that differ from those found in biological parenthood. Recognizing these phenomena contributes to better preparation, support, and outcomes for both parents and children in adoptive contexts.

Adoptive parents often encounter specific challenges such as bureaucratic hurdles, emotional stress, social judgment, and integration issues that are distinct from those faced by biological parents (William et al., 2023). Unrealistic expectations about adoptive parenthood or the adjustment process can lead to difficulties, especially when adoptive children have emotional or behavioral needs. Adequate pre-adoption preparation is linked to more positive outcomes for both parents and children (William et al., 2023). Although still insufficient in the Brazilian context, post-placement services and support resources are significant predictors of parental stress and adjustment, highlighting the need for tailored interventions (Fiore et al., 2025; William et al., 2023).

Finally, the process of constructing adoptive parenthood affects family integration, parent-child bonding, sibling relationships, and the psychological well-being of all family members (William et al., 2023). Long-term impacts include identity formation, legal and social status, and future planning, underscoring the importance of understanding these phenomena to promote sustained family health and stability (Hamilton et al., 2007; William et al., 2023).

A deep understanding of the phenomena involved in adoptive parenthood is essential for preparing parents, supporting healthy family integration, and ensuring positive

long-term outcomes for adoptive families. This knowledge enables the development of effective support systems and policies personalized to the unique needs of adoptive parents and children.

## 2 Parenthood and Adoptive Parenthood

Barroso and Machado (2010) emphasize that the concept of parenthood in the scientific field tends to encompass both a positive relationship between parents and children and the legal recognition of parental responsibility toward offspring. In the legal domain, Brazilian national (Law No. 8.069, of July 13, 1990) and international (UN/UNICEF, 1990) regulations define the status and obligations of parents toward their children. In the field of psychology, however, parenthood has been understood as a set of resources that enable the effective exercise of the paternal or maternal role, in articulation with child development (Macarini et al., 2016; Szcześniak et al., 2025).

Another approach understands parenthood as a "mental reorganization experienced by parents that begins with the realization of the desire to have a child" (Machado et al., 2015). This phenomenon is related to the formation of maternal or paternal identity, which develops gradually throughout the parental experience. Thus, parenthood is not limited to the practice itself, but refers to the set of meanings constructed by those who assume this role – meanings that guide their actions across various spheres of life, whether or not directly related to their children.

In both of the aforementioned conceptions, adoption always involves a process of constructing parenthood. As with biological parenthood, this process begins even before the physical presence of the child. In the case of adoption, it starts even before the legal procedures are finalized. The decision-making stages faced by prospective adoptive parents – up to the moment they choose to welcome a child or adolescent with whom they share no biological ties – constitute the beginning of the construction of this caregiver status, here understood as the role of father or mother.

Parenthood constructed through adoption presents specific characteristics regarding the pre-legal phase of the project. Prospective adoptive parents are called upon to formulate an idea of the child to be integrated into the family, which must be clearly described to the appropriate authorities at the time of registration. In this process, aspects such as age, nationality, race/ethnicity, background, physical condition, presence of siblings, among other factors that may vary depending on the country, must be clearly specified.

However, to what extent does this prior selection of basic characteristics differentiate future adoptive parents from those who will have biological children? After all, Dolto (1988) had already pointed out that parents invariably harbor desires that influence the development of their children. Such desires do not emerge only after the birth of the baby, but are shaped throughout the parental project or upon the realization of the pregnancy (Leite et al., 2014). Going further, Stern (1997) argues that pretend play in which children take on family roles, as well as adolescent fantasies about motherhood and fatherhood, already constitute early forms of preparation for a possible transition to parenthood (Stern, 1997).

Piccinini et al. (2004) discuss unplanned pregnancy, pointing out that even in such cases there may be an unconscious demand related to motherhood. In a study with pregnant women, the authors identified that this desire can manifest through behaviors such as lapses in contraceptive use and be present in discourses marked by ambivalence – between joy and concern – that characterize the experience of motherhood (Piccinini et al., 2004).

Gonçalves et al. (2010) indicate that the discovery of pregnancy, whether planned or not, and the decision to continue it trigger in the woman the process of forming a maternal identity. This identity is shaped by the expectations constructed around the child and the gestational process, as well as by the constant confrontation with the transformations of her own body (Gonçalves et al., 2010).

In both cases, even in the face of an unplanned pregnancy, a process of constructing parental identity begins, involving attitudes and positions toward the child to come. However, it is worth noting the scarcity of studies addressing the experience of parents in the context of unplanned pregnancy.

Another possible unplanned scenario is pregnancy resulting from incidents of sexual violence – a reality particularly concerning in the Brazilian context, where legal and moral barriers to pregnancy termination persist, even in extreme situations. Research indicates that, even in such cases, pregnant women may develop expectations regarding the child, such as concerns for their well-being (Drezett et al., 2011) and the establishment of affective bonds with the baby (Cantelmo et al., 2011). Furthermore, factors such as religious beliefs may lead these women to carry the pregnancy to term and to identify with the new maternal role (Nunes & Moraes, 2017).

When it comes to adoption, it is initially situated in a field distinct from the previously mentioned contexts. In this case, the existence of a prior desire to exercise parenthood is

assumed. In the legal and social domain of adoption, much of the work carried out by multidisciplinary teams is based on mapping the factors that sustain the choice made by prospective adoptive parents. As noted, at first, the decision to adopt is conceived as being at the opposite end of the spectrum from parenthood imposed without planning.

However, Weber (1999) cautions that even in a voluntary adoption process, it is not enough to have expectations regarding a promising future for the family to be formed (Weber, 1999). These expectations must be aligned with a moral and legal principle centered on the well-being of the adopted child or adolescent. In her research, the author found that the desire to exercise parenthood and interest in the child are often linked to personal motivations – such as the biological impossibility of having children or the attempt to strengthen the marital relationship. Motivations directed toward the child were also identified, including philanthropic impulses, the possibility of choosing the child's sex, and, in some cases, the desire to have someone to help with household chores. Such desires shape the expectations regarding the family that may be constituted through adoption.

Weber (2001) also points out that the motivation to adopt may come from parents who already have biological or adopted children and who seek to expand their family through adoption (Weber, 2001). In this context, a conception of parenthood is advocated that is constructed specifically in the relationship with each child, thus always singular and needing to be understood in its particularity. In other words, the process of recognizing oneself and presenting oneself in the world as a father or mother is continuous, manifesting through an ongoing dynamic in the lives of those involved. Therefore, the analysis of the construction of parenthood must consider the specificities of each dyadic relationship between parents and children, especially in the context of extended families, when applicable.

Moving to a broader overview, in the Brazilian context, the analysis of the National Adoption Registry (Cadastro Nacional de Adoção, CNA) in 2019 (Jacinto, 2023) reveals a relevant profile, allowing for the identification of parameters predominantly established by prospective adoptive parents and providing insights into the contours of the prior construction of parenthood. According to the available data, 14.3% of prospective adoptive parents accept only white children; 0.78% accept only Black children; 4.02% accept only mixed-race children; and only 0.05% accept exclusively Indigenous children.

On the other hand, considering prospective adoptive parents who accept children of certain races without excluding others, it is observed that 92.47% accept white children; 56.53%, Black children. Another significant finding is that 61.92% of prospective parents would not accept adopting siblings; 26.92% would not accept boys; and from the age of 11 onwards, no age group reaches 1% of the interest among prospective adoptive parents. Furthermore, 5.24% would accept adopting a child with HIV; 6.48%, a child with a physical disability; and 3.55%, a child with a mental disability (Jacinto, 2023).

These data raise important questions: Why do such choices converge? What social elements underlie these patterns? Are there similarities in the experiences of parenthood resulting from these selective processes? Considering that the construction of parenthood is permeated by a shared set of cultural beliefs that guide and shape it (Lightfoot & Valsiner, 1992), it becomes pertinent to investigate the connections between the patterns evidenced in the registries and the sociocultural contexts that inform them.

Beyond the statistical data, individual cases reveal particular desires that compose the unique histories of each prospective adoptive parent. Costa and Campos (2003) emphasize that these individuals idealize a model of family, even in the face of common doubts encountered by those who choose this path (Costa & Campos, 2003). Among these doubts, the possibility of constituting a family unit based on affection stands out. After all, biological ties alone do not guarantee a healthy coexistence permeated by positive affections, just as families formed through adoption are not doomed to artificial emotional relationships.

The emotions expressed by adoptive parents may encompass uncertainties and anxieties, but they also reflect positive experiences and expectations of bonding, affection, and fulfillment (Machado et al., 2015; Otuka et al., 2013). In either case, the finalization of adoption often triggers disruptions within the family core, as it confronts prior idealizations with the concrete reality of exercising parenthood.

Adoption is marked by both ruptures and constructions. In the Brazilian context, most children placed in substitute families have experienced institutionalization prior to the finalization of adoption. The child's trajectory within the institutional setting is characterized by the establishment of bonds that often fail to endure in the face of legal and social assistance procedures that guide policy. Studies reveal that the conditions of institutionalization and the experiences

within this context may have a greater impact on development than the actual duration of institutionalization itself (Balenzano et al., 2018). Thus, examining the institutionalization process can aid in understanding the experiences that may arise from subsequent adoption.

Jacinto (2019) demonstrated that the identities constructed by institutionalized adolescents carry traces of prolonged institutionalization trajectories (Jacinto, 2019). In the study, the adolescents emphasized their relationships with prospective adoptive families and positioned themselves in response to frequent failures by reaffirming their status either as institutionalized individuals or as autonomous persons disinterested in family integration processes that did not align with their expectations. Assuming that institutionalization marks an exceptional condition in the development of children and adolescents, it is understood that its prolongation is associated with a gradual intensification of these impacts. Thus, the process of late adoption, often characterized by children and adolescents with extensive institutionalization histories, may present peculiar challenges that demand distinct forms of conception and adaptation by those involved.

On the one hand, children and adolescents registered for adoption experience ruptures – from their biological family, from the attachments formed in care institutions, and from unsuccessful foster and substitute families – which guide necessary transitions for the adaptation of their self within this dynamic. On the other hand, prospective adoptive parents undergo similar processes. Understanding oneself as someone who plans to have a child exemplifies this phenomenon. The prospective parent moves from a position of desire to one of action, seeking to realize the condition of being a father or mother, marking a transition that becomes increasingly complex as it progresses.

According to Hamad (2010), the arrival of an adopted child necessarily subjects caregivers to emotional and psychological upheavals whose experiences are unpredictable (Hamad, 2010). Despite the partial preselection of the child and the existence of cohabitation stages, the legal affirmation marks a principle of parenthood that was previously primarily symbolic but now emerges as concrete reality. In this regard, Daly (1988) points out that the transition to an adoptive parental identity involves multidirectional transformations that trigger identity construction processes permeated by obstacles inherent to adoption and its consequences (Daly, 1988). These obstacles interact with the expectations and motivations of adoptive parents, who revisit their desires and reconstruct their



parenthood throughout the entire subsequent journey. According to the author, biological barriers may appear as impediments to guaranteed parenthood, and adoption drives a parenthood that must be shaped.

It is therefore understood that the comprehension of parenthood, as a movement of continuous construction of maternal or paternal recognition as a mother or father, is essentially dynamic. As such, it carries with it the possibility of slipping through the nuances of adoption, as a distinguishing element whose specificities guide particular trajectories.

Hamad (2002) points out another important factor in understanding parenthood, within traditional frameworks, involving two prospective adoptive parents: it is not uniform. Whether in heterosexual or homosexual couples, despite their common engagement in the adoption process, it is noted that desires, expectations, and commitments are never perfectly equivalent (Hamad, 2002). The couple should not be viewed as a single unit, since the individual trajectories of each person, as well as the social demands they face, are often distinct. Aligned with this observation, psychological research frequently focuses on gender distinctions that shape parental trajectories. The aim is to understand which phenomena influence the construction of motherhood and fatherhood across diverse contexts, including insights on these aspects within the adoption scenario.

### 3 Motherhood and Adoption

The phenomenon of mothering has a complex historical evolution, marked by debates that shape constructions of the woman's role in relation to pre-established functions, among which is that of the mother. Ariès (1981) pointed out that, in the Middle Ages, the relationship between wealthy mothers and their children was often mediated by wet nurses, who outsourced affection, feeding, and care. In the context of enslaved Brazil, a similar phenomenon occurred, as the animalistic and vigorous conception that the white elite attributed to the Black population extended to enslaved women (Ariès, 1981). These women were forcibly placed in caregiving roles, having long been the primary nurses of the children of slave owners in the country (Silva, 2016). According to Ariès (1981), the high infant mortality rates in the Middle Ages were cyclically related to the neglect permeating these practices, since babies were not deemed worthy of careful attention due to the likelihood of death (Ariès, 1981). In enslaved Brazil, the mentioned neglect was

fundamentally sustained by practices of power and control over Black people that guided the actions established in that context. On one hand, this reality reflects a configuration of motherhood among the Western elite characterized by negligence and limited interactions; on the other hand, it highlights an extended family configuration that did not restrict its members by consanguineous ties, even though the roles occupied were dissident.

Starting from the Renaissance, childhood gained a distinct role. The figure whose attachment had to be measured in light of the possibility of death became the child worthy of protection and care (Ariès, 1981). This new configuration triggered a shift in views of childhood that, while seeking to specify this stage and attribute greater value to it, positioned it as vulnerable and in need of control. The family then assumed the role of guaranteeing such care and establishing discipline. According to Gradwohl, Osis, and Makuch (2014), the emergence of capitalism later highlighted distinctions between the public and private spheres and imposed greater differentiation of domestic roles (Gradwohl et al., 2014). The father remained responsible for providing sustenance for the household, while the mother took on the caregiving role, reiterating a position historically marked by patriarchy. However, history is not linear. The same childhood that emerged as worthy of protection also intensely occupied labor positions during the Industrial Revolution (Silva, 1999), provoking subsequent uprisings and the redefinition of childhood as a priority.

Although, in practice, women have never ceased to engage in the household economy, assisting or providing family sustenance, their crystallization in the caregiving role restricted female participation in formal employment positions. However, in the early 20th century, feminist struggles intensified, aligning with the updating of the prevailing production model, reinserting women into the labor market and, once again, generating intense modifications in family dynamics (Andrade, 2019). This occurred because the gradual insertion of women into the productive system did not keep pace with the reconfiguration of the Western conception of the woman's role, with the representations of the mother as caregiver – and, as Barbosa and Rocha-Coutinho (2007) warn, the existence of a supposed “maternal instinct” – persisting.

Thus, by understanding motherhood as a historical and cultural phenomenon, the experiences surrounding it vary according to the context in which they are established. Scavone (2001), for instance, recalls the emergence of feminist movements whose conception of motherhood

viewed it as a form of manipulation of the female body (Scavone, 2001). These struggles, however, centered on the right to freely choose motherhood, advocating for contraceptive methods and family planning strategies, including pregnancy termination (Gradwohl et al., 2014). It is assumed here that such a conception shaped the potential maternal relationships that could be established within that group. In parallel, the possibilities of motherhood have expanded as medical advances have promoted increasingly effective reproductive strategies (Sutcliffe, 2007). This has brought women – whose interests may have been suppressed – closer to an experience perceived as “natural,” reigniting a vision of motherhood as positive and, in many cases, desirable. At present, all these perspectives intersect, shaping the psychic and social dimensions that underlie modern motherhood, at times conceived as a fulfilling experience, at other times represented through the lens of its challenges and violations.

Nevertheless, even today, the “myth of motherhood,” as named by Motta (2001), remains strong, representing a set of factors associated with the condition of being a mother, often linked to notions of the sacred, instinctive love, and care presumed to be inherent in women (Motta, 2001). The defense of compulsory motherhood – frequently disguised as the protection of childhood – gains momentum within conservative regimes, creating political barriers to access contraceptive methods and voluntary pregnancy termination procedures, even in extreme cases. In Brazil, recent legislative proposals have been filed aiming to prohibit and criminalize abortion in cases of fetal malformation and even in instances of rape.

The few advances in this area bring back to the history of child protection, in which motherhood was often marked by the pressure to abandon, fueling the so-called “roda dos expostos” (foundling wheels) and overcrowding religious institutions that offered care to infants. By the twentieth century, numerous institutions were created to shelter children who did not fit the elite profile (Jacinto, 2019). However, questions remain regarding the lack of support provided to women who did not have the option to carry out motherhood – whether due to disinterest or social pressures that hindered this role. Although classical psychological approaches have often interpreted abandonment as a sign of maternal disorders or dysfunctions in the mother-child dyad, such explanations may not be the most adequate when the phenomenon is viewed in its broader social and historical context.

In this regard, Motta (2001) identifies multiple factors that may lead to the practice of abandonment, including lack of social and state support, social judgment, financial hardship, and unwanted pregnancy (Motta, 2001). She argues, therefore, that the term “abandonment” should be replaced with “relinquishment” (entrega, in Portuguese) and should not be regarded as an act that violates the supposed myth of motherhood and the maternal instincts often attributed to it. The act of relinquishing a baby for adoption does not occur without psychological investment on the part of those involved – typically, the mother. The experience of loss is not absent, and evidence points to a mourning process experienced by these women, even though they are often socially perceived as perverse.

While maternities are relinquished through the process of giving a child away – triggered by the factors previously discussed – new forms of motherhood emerge within the legal and social framework of adoptive practices. As previously noted, the motivations for adoption are diverse. Infertility is not the only factor that initiates an adoptive plan for women. Same-sex relationships (Tombolato et al., 2019), the planning of single-parent families (Leão et al., 2017), or even the decision not to biologically bear a child (Maux & Dutra, 2009) may emerge as motives that further complexify the possibilities for configuring motherhood in this context.

Zornig (2010) emphasizes that motherhood does not require the biological event of conception in order to take shape within a woman’s symbolic universe. Even those who do not wish to become mothers have likely imagined themselves bearing a child at some point (Zornig, 2010). The relationships that may emerge with an impending motherhood are shaped by each mother’s ontogenesis, with personal history providing foundational elements for the maternal construction. The author presents studies that associate a woman’s relationship with her own mother as a key factor in understanding the quality of attachment she later establishes with her children. It is also well established that planning and goals related to pregnancy, as well as the desire to become a mother, are predictors of smoother caregiving relationships and, consequently, better health outcomes for children (Albright & Tamis-LeMonda, 2002).

According to Sonogo and Lopes (2009), particularly in circumstances related to infertility, motherhood that takes shape without biological conception may be situated within the framework of a narcissistic wound (Sonogo & Lopes, 2009). This is because motherhood – even when understood as socially influenced – remains closely tied to the construction of female identity. In cases of infant adoption,

the absence of breastfeeding further emerges as a point of tension. Breastfeeding, as thoroughly discussed in Winnicott's writings (1977), plays a crucial role in the development of the mother–infant relationship and in the child's psychic constitution (Winnicott, 1977). Gomes (2006), however, reminds us that the impossibility of breastfeeding can be compensated for through maternal acts that strengthen the mother–infant dyad, provided that continuous caregiving is ensured and the child is not subjected to impersonal treatment during feeding (Gomes, 2006).

Adoption, in this context, fulfills a significant function by circumventing the impossibility of gestation and enabling the realization of the desire for motherhood. For this to occur, however, women's perceptions of the maternal phenomenon must be taken into account. In interviews with adoptive mothers, Sonogo and Lopes (2009) observed that, much like in biological processes – where mothers seek to become familiar with the fetus, which may initially be perceived as a foreign object – adoptive mothers often engage in mechanisms to bring the child, not born of their own body, into a more personal reality (Sonogo & Lopes, 2009). Thus, it is common to hear that adopted children resemble their adoptive mothers or that they match the profile of the children these women had imagined. Motherhood, therefore, is realized in the legal act of adoption, although it also involves a symbolic gestational period.

In describing the affection they feel for their adopted children, mothers often attempt to equalize or erase the differences related to a biological motherhood – whether real or unattainable (Sonogo & Lopes, 2009) – or they emphasize the intensity of their love by highlighting the unique qualities that make the adoptive bond even more special than the biological one (Paulina et al., 2018). The affection experienced is interpreted in an idealized manner, although it is lived in real terms. This idealization appears to be consistent, serving to affirm the authenticity of motherhood established through adoption and to foster the bonds that emerge from it.

In studies on single-mother families formed by choice, the social challenges of motherhood without the presence of a partner, or the difficulties in managing work time and time spent with the children, were more prominent than potential issues related to affective bonding (Leão et al., 2017). The authors also indicate that, in cases of adoptive single parenthood, the exclusivity of the relationship between mothers and children provided a more fertile ground for the

development of attachment, although there is a possibility of emotional dependency, which can be detrimental to the development of the dyad. Notably, attachment theory highlights that, despite the initial dependence inherent in the mother-child relationship, under ideal circumstances, this bond gradually becomes more permeable, allowing the child increasing opportunities for autonomy (Mahajan & Dhillon, 2025).

It is concluded that the exercise of the maternal role within the context of adoption presents complexities distinct from those of biological motherhood, although similar processes and phenomena are involved. A woman's understanding of her new role is constructed throughout her life trajectory and intensified during the gestational period or adoptive planning, being fully realized with the physical presence of the child. All these stages provoke the emergence of psychic processes of accommodation to new understandings and skills elicited by the new role.

#### 4 Paternity and Adoption

Similarly to the transformations observed in definitions of motherhood, the paternal role has also evolved throughout history. Gradyoh *et al.* (2014) argue that paternity reconfigures its place in alignment with the social function of motherhood and its repositioning (Gradwohl et al., 2014). The traditional view of the father solely as provider is being challenged, and efforts – albeit belated – to include the male figure in child caregiving have emerged, even though such caregiving responsibilities remain unevenly distributed (Pereira et al., 2018).

Zerzan (2010) identifies patriarchy, a major marker of Western history, as having become more complex especially at the onset of the capitalist era, reinforcing the sexual division of labor and reaffirming socially constructed roles for each gender (Zerzan, 2010). Within this context, the role of the man in the family was consolidated as that of provider and maintainer of a supposed disciplinary order, to the detriment of the caregiving function traditionally exercised by women. Costa (2014) emphasizes that “new gender relations imply redefinitions of individual, conjugal, and parental identities, which means that: gender, marriage, motherhood, and fatherhood today are increasingly complex issues, as there are no longer traditionally established patterns and experiences become particularized and multiple” (Costa, 2014).

Thus, it is evident that the historical construction of gender within the family has significantly influenced the

nature of relationships between parents and children. Variations in labor market participation, coupled with socially differentiated expectations regarding expressions of affection by women and men, have yielded important insights into how family dynamics are formed. Russell and Russell (1987) examined the behaviors of fathers and children, comparing them to those of mothers and children aged 6 to 7 years (Russell & Russell, 1987). Although their findings did not indicate greater maternal responsiveness or increased paternal restriction and control, maternal behaviors characterized by care and attention to children's needs (including school activities, health, and clothing) were observed more frequently than paternal behaviors. Conversely, fathers engaged more often in play interactions. These data reveal significant distinctions in the relational patterns between fathers and children versus mothers and children. Fathers are generally associated with more playful activities and fewer caregiving responsibilities, which may contribute to different modes of attachment. Notably, the child's gender did not affect these outcomes, suggesting a uniformity in the relationships identified in the study. Subsequently, Russell and Saebel (1997) conducted further research on this topic and confirmed that the interactions within father-son and father-daughter dyads exhibited minimal variation, with no statistically significant differences (Russell & Saebel, 1997).

Paternal relationships are also shaped by the historical context in which they occur. Contemporary tensions reflect new family configurations and reorganize the relational dynamics within this group. Cúnico and Arpini (2013) identify three distinct periods that mark forms of family constitution (Cúnico & Arpini, 2013). The first, or traditional, period prioritized the transmission of property and heredity within unions. In a second phase, the bourgeois nuclear family, previously described, emerged, delineating the social spheres occupied by each gender: men were guaranteed access to the public sphere, while women were relegated to the private domestic environment. However, in contemporary times, a new family model has arisen – though the term “model” is somewhat inadequate due to the considerable diversity in family compositions. This shift is related to advances in the recognition of rights, such as the facilitation of divorce and the establishment of health policies addressing sexual and reproductive rights. In this context, the father no longer occupies an essential role, much less that of primary provider of the family unit. His absence in many families reinforces this observation. A key indicator of this transformation is found in Brazil's legal evolution,

where the term “pátrio poder” (father-related authority), prevalent in the Civil Code until 2002, was replaced by “poder familiar” (family power), ushering in a new paradigm that diminishes the paternal figure as the ultimate authority in the household.

In a broader social analysis of the Brazilian reality, fatherhood has been abdicated by a significant portion of fathers (Costa, 2014). This abdication may manifest concretely with legal implications, such as denial of the child's surname and its associated consequences, or, in more extreme cases, through the severing of ties and loss of contact between the father and the child's family. Another facet of paternal abandonment is the denial of affection toward the child (Moreira & Toneli, 2015). According to these studies, both situations produce significant effects on the development of the children involved, ranging from behavioral problems to potential mental health implications. Thus, it is confirmed that the relationship with a paternal figure reverberates throughout family development, regardless of the figure's absence or presence.

According to Cúnico and Arpini (2013), even in families where paternal presence occurs, contemporary relationships are diverse (Cúnico & Arpini, 2013). The authors challenge the psychoanalytic discourse regarding the maternal function as central, given that the paternal figure has been portrayed at times as a function with great symbolic power, and at others as having minimal participation in explanations of infant development. This discourse aligns with patriarchal constraints that distance men from the attribute of being sentimental, reinforcing the notion that their affective contribution to family relationships is less significant than that of women. Consequently, the prominence of men as family protagonists diminishes, since their caregiving does not fully encompass the needs of their dependents. In line with this, the number of women heading households has increased, establishing a social reality that undermines the traditional male qualification to assume the role of provider.

Although embedded within a contemporary framework, paternal experiences exhibit particular configurations. The construction of fatherhood is an ongoing process that does not conclude with the birth of the first child. It relates to the father's past experiences and evolves as relationships with the children develop. Gabriel and Dias (2011), aiming to understand the particularities of paternal experience, interviewed eight first-time fathers (Gabriel & Dias, 2011). They found that fathers expressed a desire to engage more affectively in their children's lives, yet social barriers reflecting gendered roles obstructed this involvement. Faced



with these challenges, the construction of fatherhood occurs amidst various tensions, balancing personal expectations of being a “good father” with the often frustrating realities of parenting. It was also observed that in non-male single-parent families, fathers perceive themselves as involved in child care. However, this externally positioned view highlights existing segregation: fathers see themselves as secondary participants rather than protagonists in family experiences. Similar to what has been discussed regarding mothers, new fathers mirror their own childhood experiences, shaping their attitudes based on their fathers’ behaviors. This ontogenetic relationship serves as a behavioral model to be either emulated or rejected.

Adoptive fathers experience similar challenges, as demonstrated by (Ruiz et al., 2019). The scientific literature on adoption has tended to overemphasize the role of the mother, often reproducing traditional stereotypes associated with maternal functions. Perhaps following this trend, fatherhood is underrepresented in the studies cited by the authors in their literature review. In the identified studies, paternal involvement with adopted children primarily involved emotional support and everyday caregiving tasks. This mode of exercising fatherhood continues to be characterized as atypical, diverging from the historically constructed models of masculinity that shape paternal roles. This raises a critical question: why is it that when a woman performs caregiving work, it is seen as natural and unremarkable, yet when a man does the same, he is regarded as exceptional?

Regarding this point, an empirical study sought to identify the particularities of fatherhood in the context of adoption (Bueno et al., 2016). In this scenario, fatherhood was marked by the anxiety caused by the wait for the conclusion of legal proceedings. This waiting conflicts with the social pressure experienced by the men interviewed to become fathers and fulfill the role of progenitors of offspring. On the other hand, this waiting does not imply a rupture in the maternal bond with the child (Andrade, 2019), thus equalizing or closely approximating the experience of the spouses – heterosexual in this case – regarding the symbolic gestation of the adopted child. After adoption, the experiences reported include feelings of gratification, concerns about the children's future, and the emergence of affective experiences. To what extent, then, do these experiences differ from biological fatherhoods? Moreover, the presence of affection, protection, and transmission of values in adoptive filial relationships has gained relevance even in legal texts, as noted by Silva Jr. and Furoni (2014),

where socio-affective fatherhood prevails over purely biological ties (Silva Jr & Furoni, 2014).

Zornig (2010) highlights that the construction of fatherhood involves a dual pathway (Zornig, 2010). On one hand, there is the perceived necessity by fathers to transmit intergenerational values to the child. On the other hand, the responses elicited by the child serve as a basis for guiding parental attitudes. This interaction forms a dialectic of reflective construction. In cases of adoption, there is often a tendency for parents to prioritize the transmission of family values in an effort to erase supposed negative remnants from institutionalization or the child’s pre-institutional experiences. Conversely, in these situations, the feedback provided by the children tends to be more intense, especially when the adopted children are older, as they carry experiences that their new parents have not witnessed. Thus, the assumptions about their histories constructed within the paternal imagination, together with the real behavioral manifestations previously learned and exercised in the post-adoption trajectories, foster experiences of greater imbalance in the father-child relationship.

## 5 Filial Relationships and Adoption

Understanding the phenomena related to caregivers – both fathers and mothers – who play central roles in adoption trajectories involves a complex interplay of factors. As noted in the preceding discussions, it is not possible to conceive of motherhood or fatherhood, as expressions of parenthood, without considering the processes associated with them. These phenomena are expressed through their dynamism and multidetermination, with interpersonal relationships serving as a crucial catalyst.

It is therefore understood that adoption represents a series of possible abandonments. The first, and most frequent, is that enacted by the parents, since most institutionalized children are unaware of the whereabouts of their biological parents. A second rupture, which may or may not constitute abandonment, refers to the detachment of the biological mother from children who are institutionalized and whose parental rights have been revoked. Institutionalized children undergo multiple ruptures inherent to their experience of being housed in care institutions, where bonds established with peers or significant figures can be severed by brief judicial decisions (Jacinto, 2019). Sustaining new bonds amidst these ruptures is a continuous challenge for all parties involved in the adoption process. This phenomenon marks the context of psychologists' and social workers' practices

within the justice system engaged in adoption proceedings, where understanding the child's adaptation to the new family and life trajectory – including conflicts and attachments formed post-adoption – becomes a fundamental element.

For Zornig (2010), from a psychoanalytic perspective, understanding parenthood involves comprehending the relationship between parents and children (Zornig, 2010). This relationship, it is reiterated, precedes the actual lived experience that concretizes it. The desires and expectations formulated during pregnancy or, in the case at hand, during the planning of adoption, serve as guiding principles for the exchanges that will be established.

Ariès (1981) provides historical data that allow for a critical examination of this phenomenon (Ariès, 1981). The author argues that the role of the child within the family underwent significant changes beginning in the Renaissance period. Previously, in the medieval Western context, the child – depicted here as a miniature adult – barely figured as an entity with developmental particularities. The concept of childhood – the notion of this particular stage in development – was not well delineated. Thus, although affective relationships existed between adults and children, expectations directed at the child population remained focused on high mortality rates and the lack of distinction between children and adults. “The very young child, still too fragile to mingle with adult life, ‘did not count’” (Ariès, 1981). Consequently, the relationships established between families and children were shaped by the filter of impermanence.

Zornig (2010, p. 454) revisits this theme, noting that “with the Enlightenment discourse and the importance of Romanticism, love between couples and between parents and children gained priority, and conjugal alliances began to be established based on affection.” (Zornig, 2010).

Western modernity reinforces the distinctions between the public and private spheres, and this positioning directly impacts family organization. This study sought to understand how adoption occurs among diverse peoples, aiming to identify both continuities and differences. To date, no anthropological texts specifically addressing this issue have been found. However, it is evident that the notion of family is not uniform, and distinct communities present different family configurations. In some traditional Indigenous communities, childcare is shared collectively by all members of the tribe (Sacchi & Gramkow, 2012), which challenges the privatized notion of family and presents diverse possibilities for parental relationships. In these contexts, adoption as a judicialized phenomenon (or its

analogue) has no space, since abandonment and neglect – primary causes of child and adolescent institutionalization in conventional urban settings – lack fertile ground to emerge. If parenthood can be observed through the reciprocal relationships established between children and their fathers, mothers, and the family as a whole, it is important to specifically consider this dimension.

In the judicial adoption process, the child's perspective is not always the primary consideration. The initiation of adoption is characterized by the decision and application of the couple to the national registry of prospective adoptive parents, and they are the first to be heard, providing the criteria for the child who may occupy the role of daughter. The child, in contrast, faces an almost compulsory insertion, although psychosocial preparation occurs both before and after the judicial process that legally establishes the filiation. As Weber (2001) warns, it is still possible to observe that the legal system continues to seek children for families, rather than ideal families for children waiting for adoption (Weber, 2001). On the other hand, Sonego and Lopes (2009) highlight that most published work on adoption centers on understanding the mechanisms of the child's adjustment to the new context, revealing an attempt to comprehend the processes that facilitate integration and avoid unfavorable outcomes (Sonego & Lopes, 2009). However, this focus may also indicate that, within psychology, adoption failures and impasses are predominantly attributed to the child and their presumed inability to harmoniously integrate into the substitute family.

Despite the understanding of the developmental specificity imposed by inclusion in a substitute family, Hamad (2002) reminds us that the adopted child is not a child with “particularities” in the negative sense of the term. In this regard, Weber (2001) highlights cases where psychologists associate adoption with psychopathology, cautioning professionals when making recommendations involving an “adopted child,” as if this were a symptomatic definition (Hamad, 2002; Weber, 2001).

The understanding of heredity, both by the family and especially by the child, permeates the relationships established within the family and the social context in which they are inserted. Cultural or social heredity (Hamad, 2002) predominates over biological data. The adopted child bases their behaviors and values on those of the adoptive parents, assimilating and guiding their own conduct accordingly. Assuming the superiority of genetic transmission over symbolic relations would lead us back to eugenic delays that attempt to explain cognitive and moral development based

on biology. This argument, by the way, permeates the imagination of much of the population, which fears adoption believing that the child may inherit traits from the biological parents, placing prospective adoptive parents before constant dilemmas. Such concerns have brought more obstacles than benefits to the configuration of adoption processes.

If understanding the child's history is fundamental to satisfying doubts that adoptive parents may have, aiming to resolve questions that may reverberate in their treatment of the child, the same applies to the adopted subject. Even during institutionalization, efforts to reaffirm the child's place in the world and their prior history yield important results (Jacinto, 2019). The goal is to situate the child as a complete being independent of the legal affirmation established by the enactment of a possible adoption.

On the other hand, whether or not they are aware of their history, Hamad (2002) states that the child expresses fantasies about their origin, their parents, and their journey to insertion into the new family (Hamad, 2002). Even children who know about their non-biological relationship with their adoptive parents may maintain unconscious elaborations about their biological parents and, it is added here, about the possible reasons for the separation between them.

It is understood, however, that the construction of the “true parents” occurs daily, and the dialogue established within the family or in other spaces of self-reflection (such as psychotherapy) facilitates this understanding on the part of the child. Thus, the process of identifying paternity and the place of the child within the family happens for all children, regardless of their legal civil status.

## 6 Conclusion

This study examined the complexities of adoptive parenthood through a multidimensional analysis of its social, emotional, and identity-forming processes, while juxtaposing it with biological parenthood to elucidate both distinctions and parallels. Grounded in psychological and sociological frameworks, the research delineated the structural and interpersonal challenges adoptive families encounter, including bureaucratic barriers, societal stigmatization, and the intricacies of familial integration. A critical examination of Brazil's National Adoption Registry (CNA) further uncovered entrenched biases in adoptive preferences, mirroring systemic inequities related to race, age, and disability.

The findings affirm that adoptive and biological parenthood converge in their fundamental processes of identity construction and relational adaptation, thereby contesting conventional kinship paradigms centered on biological determinism. By foregrounding the role of affective bonds and legal-cultural dynamics in shaping family identity, the study advances a more inclusive understanding of parenthood. Importantly, it underscores the necessity of robust pre- and post-adoption support systems to mitigate systemic challenges and promote familial stability.

The implications of this research extend beyond theoretical discourse, advocating for policy reforms that address discriminatory adoption practices and prioritize the holistic well-being of adoptive families. Future scholarship should pursue longitudinal and intersectional analyses to further unravel the evolving narratives of adoptive parenthood and its societal implications. Ultimately, this study calls for a paradigm shift – one that recognizes and validates the diverse manifestations of family, unbound by biological essentialism.

## 7 Limitations and Suggestions

As this is a theoretical study, it is essential that future empirical research be conducted in the field. There is a notable lack of studies in the area of psychology, as identified by the author in his doctoral research.

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Authors contributed equally to this article.

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