“Other” Mothers, “Other” Mothering

The previous chapter explored ways in which motherhood has been problematized from a mental health perspective. This chapter will look at some of the struggles faced by women and men who also mother as outsiders in relation to the dominant mother group in Western societies. Middle-class stereotypes depicting mothers, fathers, and families still largely dismiss poor, young, and mentally and physically disabled mothers as incompetent or unfit to raise children. Single mothers continue to be branded as deficient. Places still exist in the world where homosexuality is punishable by death (Goldberg, 2013), and while many Western countries legally recognize gay marriage, motherhood for gay and lesbian individuals and couples remains a site of tension. There are as many different ways to characterize “other” mothers as there are groups of women (and men) not fitting neatly into images describing the good mother. Indeed, discussions in previous chapters of this text that looked at mothers attempting to combine work with mothering, mothers who mother in poverty, and, as already mentioned, mentally disabled mothers, could readily fit into discussions of other mothers. This chapter will introduce three additional groups of parents who also mother outside of the boundaries of the good mother. These include single mothers, lesbian mothers, and fathers. What these three groups share in common is the primary role they fill as caretakers of children as well as their deviation from standards that define good mothers in Western
societies as married, heterosexual, able-bodied, able-minded, and (largely) white, middle-class women.

SINGLE MOTHERS

In the tradition of privileging heterosexual, married, white women as mothers, past research was focused on comparing the outcomes of children raised in families headed by single mothers with those raised in two-parent, mother-father families. The underlying goal guiding the research in this area was to establish that single mothers were not able to perform motherhood to the same high standard as mothers raising children in traditional two-parent families. As a starting point in isolating single mothers as deficient and to separate them from the norm, it was not unusual for research articles, particularly those looking at the behaviours of young, single mothers, to begin with statements such as “Children of adolescent mothers are at increased risk for intellectual and social-emotional problems” (Sommer et al., 2000, p. 87).

Historically, women became single mothers through divorce and widowhood, as well as by births occurring out-of-wedlock. The least socially acceptable pathway to single-motherhood has been childbirth outside the boundaries of marriage. To make this point, Sandfort and Hill (1996) drew attention to an article written by Charles Murray, a neo-conservative researcher, that was published in the Wall Street Journal in 1993 in which Murray stated: “Illegitimacy is the single most important social problem of our time—more important than crime, drugs, poverty, illiteracy, welfare, or homelessness because it drives everything else” (p. 311). While Sandfort and Hill patently disagreed with Murray’s analysis, they did highlight the fact that “by 1993, 72% of the births to teenagers were to unmarried women” (p. 312). Evidence suggested teenage mothers were much less likely to graduate from high school than were women delaying childbearing into their twenties. In concert with a lack of education, not surprisingly unmarried teenage mothers were also more likely to find themselves in a lower socio-economic status group and to be dependent on public assistance, with both of these factors often resulting in poverty for mother and child. Sandfort and Hill, however, suggested that “while out-of-wedlock birth may contribute to detrimental outcomes for young mothers, there are a number of different pathways open to them to reduce these negative consequences” (p. 323),
including gaining work experience, pursuing education, and delaying additional childbearing. All of these pathways require support; but each are likely to alter a young mother’s and her child’s life course in a positive way.

Early research, in an effort to further stigmatize young, single mothers, suggested that children being raised by single mothers would be more prone to psychological and cognitive problems than those raised in traditional heterosexual, two-parent families. Sommer et al. (2000), for example, reported from their study of 121 adolescent mothers and their children that “less than 30% of the entire sample [of children]—which was generally healthy at birth—showed normal cognitive development, emotional functioning, and adaptive behavior at three years of age” (p. 103). While it was not emphasized, these authors did acknowledge the low socio-economic status and relatively unstable job histories of the mothers involved in the study. So while they may have concluded that “much like their children, mothers in the present study were themselves below average in intelligence and were experiencing adjustment problems” (p. 87), it would have been more productive to have focused on social and economic factors to explain children’s deficits rather than paying exclusive attention to age and marital status. In contrast to the discourses framing single-motherhood as the problem, age has also been highlighted as the root cause of “deficient” parenting (Barratt, Roach, & Colbert, 1991). While age could certainly be seen as a factor contributing to maternal competence, Barratt and colleagues pointed out how the effects of age could be readily mediated by other factors, including caregiving provided to infants by others in their social world. The overwhelming conclusion reached by Barratt and her colleagues was that with proper support “mothers faced with considerable adversity will not necessarily become incompetent parents and children faced with considerable adversity will not necessarily fail” (p. 453). In a similar investigation with a focus on designing interventions that would help adolescent mothers improve their interactions with and responsiveness to their children during play, Fewell and Wheedon (1998) found positive short-term results in the children’s developmental outcomes as a consequence of focused interventions. Other research has also highlighted the stability of the child’s environment, and not parental age, as the most important predictor of positive outcomes for children of young single mothers (Aquilino, 1996).
Children born out-of-wedlock, and often to very young women, represented one route to single-mother-headed families. Prior to the first half of the 20th century, the majority of families headed by single mothers arose as a consequence of the death of the father; from the 1950s onwards, divorce became the more common cause of single-motherhood (Biblarz & Gottainer, 2000). Earlier research on the effects of single-motherhood resulting from divorce and widowhood suggested different findings in relation to child outcomes from each of these two situations: “Compared to single-mother families produced by the death of the father, children raised in single-mother families produced by divorce have significantly greater odds of not completing high school, lower odds of entering and graduating from college, a lower average occupational status, and a lower average level of happiness in adulthood” (Biblarz & Gottainer, p. 533). The findings from Biblarz and Gottainer’s study were congruent with the literature they reviewed. Interestingly, while they found marked differences in socio-economic status between the widowed and divorced groups of mothers, they were not able to test whether these differences could explain the variations they found in children’s long-term outcomes. Instead, they concluded that a “family’s position in the social structure may be an important starting point for understanding variation in attainments among children from different kinds of alternative families,” including more “favorable public support for widows” (p. 545) as compared to divorced women. However, Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, McCartney, and Owen (2000) concluded, in terms of the effects of divorce on child development, that what was most important for children was not family structure or marital status per se, but family process. These researchers further found that children did best, regardless of whether they were living in intact families or single-mother-headed families, when mothers “had more education and adequate family incomes, were not depressed, and knew how to provide the children with stimulation and support” (p. 323).

Recent years have seen a rise in the number of women, referred to as “single mothers by choice” or “choice mothers,” who have actively elected to become mothers without partner involvement (Jadva, Badger, Morrissette, & Golombok, 2009). Technology has given contemporary Western women many options for becoming pregnant or creating a family. While fertility clinics and donor sperm banks, as well as technological innovation,
have released women from the need to involve male partners in their choice to actively become mothers, freeing women from the constraints of male-partnering has added a host of other burdens for women to negotiate as a consequence of choosing alternative paths to motherhood. Standing in stark contrast to the situations of many young women who entered parenthood out-of-wedlock, as well as those women who became single mothers through widowhood and divorce, is the group of women who have made the choice to create families, either through adoption or through new reproductive technologies. Typically, these women tend to be of European-American descent, upper middle-class, in their mid-to-late thirties, well educated, have well-paid jobs and to be financially secure (Segal-Engelchin, 2008). Distinguishing single mothers from those mothers who are raising children in typical, heterosexual, two-parent families has been a moral exercise and one that largely supports neoliberal discourses focused on promoting traditional family values. This focus relieves the state of its responsibility for the care of its members, placing it squarely on the shoulders of individual mothers. While it is clear that many single mothers, regardless of how they came to be sole primary caregivers for their infants and young children, face hardships that their counterparts living in secure and financially stable relationships may not be facing, being single is not the problem. The problem simply is that many single mothers lack the support that is needed to be able to care for their children.

LESAIN PARENTING

Like single mothers, lesbians have been set apart from the mothering norm and are required to prove competencies in terms of their parenting skills. Lesbian mothering is complicated not only by the construction of families created with two mothers rather than a mother and a father but also by the sexuality defining the relationship between the two mothers. The 1990s saw increasing numbers of lesbian couples in the US creating families together using donor sperm, a trend that has been referred to as the “gayby boom” (Layne, 2013). Statistics Canada (2012b) indicates that just over 64,000 same-sex couples were reported in the 2011 Census, a figure almost double that seen in 2006. Of this group approximately one third were same-sex married couples, a figure that has doubled since 2006; the remaining two thirds were same-sex common-law couples. Same-sex
couples could marry in Canada following the legalization for all in July 2005. In 2011, same-sex couples accounted for 0.8% of all couples in Canada, a share consistent with recent data from Australia, the UK, and Ireland. Although the figure is not directly comparable because same-sex marriage was not legal in most states of the US at the same time as the 2011 Census in Canada was taken, 0.6% of households in the US were then comprised of same-sex couples (Statistics Canada, 2012b, p. 8). The same Canadian Census data shows us that same-sex couples were more likely to be male than female and to be relatively young compared to individuals in opposite-sex partnerships. Further, the data from the 2011 Census shows us that more opposite-sex couples had children at home than same-sex couples; and that female same-sex couples were nearly five times more likely to have a child at home than were male same-sex couples. Overall the relative number of same-sex couples is small, but more than 80% of all same-sex couples with children in 2011 were female couples.

Although lesbian families are relatively scarce compared to the one mother, one father or the single-mother-headed family models, research on lesbian mothers has been ongoing since the 1970s. Johnson (2013) describes this research as occurring in “waves,” with the first wave focusing on the mother’s concerns about the consequences of disclosing her sexuality to her children, as well as the impact of disclosure on custody issues. Since many lesbian families at that time were originally created in heterosexual relationships, early studies were used to compare lesbian mothers with those mothers in heterosexual relationships. From the 1980s through to the 1990s, the research focus shifted to the effects of lesbian parenting on child adjustment. Johnson notes how, in spite of the fact that many lesbian mothers were experiencing the pressures and challenges of homophobia, “in all cases, children, adolescents, and young adults with lesbian mothers were doing well or better than children with heterosexual mothers” (p. 46). Topics of concern to both legislators and legal systems,
extending beyond children’s physical and psychological well-being, also inspired research on lesbian (and gay) parenting, with questions focused on children’s sexual identity, stigmatization by peers, abuse by parents, and their resulting sexual identification as adults. Such studies consistently showed that children brought up in lesbian families fared well in terms of their psychosocial development but, perhaps more importantly, that “child wellbeing is more likely influenced by the quality of family relationships than the sexual orientation of the parents” (Gartrell, Bos, Peyser, Deck, & Rodas, 2013, p. 1212).

Beginning in the 1990s, planned lesbian families began to emerge. Lesbian-headed families were created through adoption, foster parenting, and conceiving through alternative insemination methods. And with this shift came more research with an interest in comparing children raised in intact heterosexual families with those raised in planned two-parent lesbian-headed families. “After three solid decades of research on lesbian mothers and their children, a consistent pattern emerges: lesbian mothers appear to be as or more effective than heterosexual parents in establishing functional households, adult parenting relationships, and performing as parents to raise well-adjusted and highly functional children and adolescents” (Johnson, 2013, p. 47). The longevity of established, planned lesbian families has allowed for an increase in the number of research studies assessing adolescent well-being in relation to same-sex parenting. Gartrell and colleagues (2013) reviewed three large-scale cross-sectional and longitudinal studies, from the US and UK, that compared adolescents from two-mother households with those from heterosexual households. As with some of the earlier small sample studies, findings again showed no significant differences between the two groups of adolescents on a number of variables, including psychosocial adjustment, peer relations, romantic relationships, sexual behaviour, school outcomes, substance use, delinquency, or victimization. Indeed, Gartrell and colleagues reported that two of the studies demonstrated that “offspring from female-headed families [not necessarily lesbian] had significantly higher scores on global self-worth, scholastic competence, and sense of humor than offspring from heterosexual two-parent families” (p. 1213). As well, 17-year-old adolescents taking part in the US National Longitudinal Lesbian Family Study (NLFFS) that began in 1986 as a prospective study on planned lesbian families were not only no more
likely to identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual than adolescents brought up in heterosexual families but “were rated significantly higher in social, school and academic, and total competence, and significantly lower in social problems, rule-breaking, aggressive, and externalizing problem behavior than an age-matched normative sample of American youth” (Gartrell et al., p. 1214). Although many of the youth in the study had experienced homophobic stigmatization, Gartrell and colleagues noted that family closeness helped to counteract the negative effects of the prejudice they faced growing up.

Research unequivocally shows that lesbian-headed families, regardless of how they are formed, provide positive spaces for raising children and indeed offer children and adolescents advantages that are sometimes absent in heterosexual families. Notwithstanding this fact, laws, social policies, and cultural representations continue to endorse the two-parent, heterosexual, white family as the ideal, with representations of the good mother reflecting these values. For women to parent outside of this paradigm is still largely viewed as deviant. As such, lesbian parents have been pathologized by both media pundits and politicians who portray “them as egocentric and immoral and their relationships as unstable” (Padavic & Butterfield, 2011, p. 179). Lesbian parents continue to struggle with a parental identity because they are still largely operating within social and cultural environments that question their legitimacy; lesbian parents confront restrictive language surrounding motherhood that describes the one-mother, one-father family and does not adequately reflect the context of their parenting or the structure of their parenting roles. In addition, the non-birthing parent in a same-sex relationship is often not granted the same rights and legal ties to the child as is the partner who physically conceived and gave birth (Padavic & Butterfield). Padavic and Butterfield’s interviews with 17 co-parents revealed that the women faced internal assaults to their sense of selves as parents, largely because of conflicts between internalized motherhood scripts and the realities of motherhood for themselves. External assaults on their sense of selves as parents came in the form of constant reminders through “play groups, schools, doctors, children’s friends, and perhaps most importantly the law” (Padavic & Butterfield, p. 179), all of which explicitly challenged these women’s identity claims as mothers. Further, Padavic and Butterfield note that these anguished identity struggles for many of the women arose “because they felt like their lesbian parenting fit neither
the biologically inflected ‘mother’ category nor into the father category, the only other possibility the language offers in a binary gender system” (p. 179). Although it is true that, at least at a theoretical level, “lesbian parents have the unique opportunity to experience parenthood and raise children outside the gendered heterosexual context, and by doing so, they can destabilize gendered arrangements” (Padavic & Butterfield, p. 177), the day-to-day realities faced by many lesbian co-parents make this a very difficult, if not impossible, assignment.

FATHERS

Social Construction of Fatherhood

Although there has been an increase in Western societies in the number of women choosing to conceive and have children outside the constraints of heterosexual relationships, historically mothering has seldom occurred in isolation from fathering. Whether the relationship between these two practices was close or distant, there was relationship. At a private level, a mother’s life and that of her children can be profoundly affected by the quality and quantity of fathering; at a socio-political level, the ways in which fathering is coming to be understood in contemporary society may also profoundly affect mothers and the practice of mothering.

Gregory and Milner (2011) describe two divergent discourses framing current discussions of fathering and fatherhood in contemporary Western societies. One is an optimistic perspective which largely credits early feminist movements that welcomed men’s increased involvement in the private sphere as a necessary requirement for women’s equality; the second is a pessimistic one, largely driven by anxiety about changes over the past few decades in family structure represented by increases in divorce rates, changes in reproductive technologies, and state concerns about financial responsibility for children raised in lone-parent families. Although both perspectives provide the rationales for policy and legal interventions in family life, they do so in dramatically different ways. As well, each inspires different views of fatherhood, resulting in different research, legal, and policy agendas. The ways in which notions of fatherhood are constructed will ultimately lead to different understandings about the relationships between mothering and fathering. From an optimistic perspective, fatherhood is constructed variously as a valuable resource and is discussed in
terms of fathers’ responsible presence and involvement in the lives of their children as well as changes in men’s gender roles that affect both their attitudes and their practice as fathers (Gregory & Milner). As Gregory and Milner note, pessimistic discourses on fatherhood tend to emphasize a lack of paternal presence in children’s lives, leading to stigmatization of fathering behaviours, particularly in relation to certain socio-economic and racial groups.

Today, the issues surrounding fathers and fatherhood are expansive. Not only have men’s roles and responsibilities in relationship to the family changed, but there is now a recognition of and “appreciation for the increasingly complex set of social, cultural, and legal forces associated with the multiple pathways to paternity, social fatherhood, and responsible fathering” (Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000, p. 1175). Unlike much of the research that occurred prior to the 1990s, research in fatherhood now brings with it the recognition of the need to move beyond simply looking at fathers’ physical presence or absence in households.

FATHERS AS PART OF A HETEROSEXUAL TWO-PARENT FAMILY

Today, by far the largest proportion of fathers in Western societies are found in dual-earner heterosexual families. Just over three decades ago, nearly 50% of American families were dual-earner families (Hanson, 1985); in 2008, three quarters of couples with dependent children were dual-earner families, up from just over one third in 1976 (Marshall, 2009). From an earlier chapter we saw what this has meant for working mothers. Although the roles of men and women in Western society have undergone dramatic changes, studies continue to show that women are still doing the majority of work in the house and in child care regardless of their employment status (e.g., Gere & Helwig, 2012). We can no more separate constructed notions of masculinity from our understandings of fatherhood than we could femininity from motherhood. Connell (1992, 1995, from Shows and Gerstel, 2009), contrary to early understandings of masculinity that conflated notions of sex and gender, suggests that diverse masculinities are really a consequence of the social dynamics of gender relations. These dynamics vary across different social locations, including class. Shows and Gerstel summarize two dominant models of masculinity that determine the ways in which men negotiate family and paid work. The first is the still
dominant neotraditional model of masculinity in which men put breadwinning at the forefront, relying on their partners for child care; the second is a more egalitarian model, or what Cooper (2002, cited in Shows & Gerstel) labels as a “newly constituted masculinity,” where substantial sharing of child and household responsibilities is combined with paid employment. This dichotomy may in fact represent a theoretical, rather than practical, understanding of contemporary fatherhood. For many middle-class men their ability to solely fulfill a breadwinning role is waning. Indeed, men in working-class jobs, although they may emphasize a hyper-masculinity, assume more responsibility for family work than did middle-class men who ostensibly defined their fathering role as egalitarian.

Until very recently, work-family scholarship focused almost entirely on mothers. Since 2000, there has been a growing body of research attending to men’s work-family experiences (Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011). Some of this research suggests that not only is fatherhood associated with an increase in the time men spend in paid work but some married couples become more traditional following the transition to parenthood. From this perspective, mothers may spend less time in paid work, whereas fathers spend more. However, less traditional, more egalitarian fathers, in an effort to spend more time in the caregiving role, spend less time in paid employment. For many men, gender ideology, work, and caregiving are integrally related. Glauber and Gozjolko, for example, found that working-class and middle-class men practised different types of fatherhood and different types of masculinities. The former tended to emphasize the breadwinning roles of masculinity; the latter, egalitarianism. It should be noted, however, that couples who “express egalitarian ideals do not always divide household and paid work equally” (Glauber & Gozjolko, p. 1135).

Although there are a variety of factors that impact the role of fathers in the sharing of child care, many studies show the importance of gender-role attitudes in egalitarian sharing of family responsibilities. What the research tells us is that the more egalitarian the attitudes of both men and women, the more likely that equal sharing of household duties will occur (Gere & Helwig, 2012). Given the trend towards unequal sharing of household and child care duties in dual-earner households, what is also not surprising is that men tend to hold more traditional gender-role attitudes than do women. One reason for this is that men tend to benefit more from traditional family
roles. Some have suggested socialization practices and differences in men’s and women’s opportunities outside of the home as explanations for men’s lesser and women’s greater participation in the household and child care. Less frequently, biological and religious explanations have been used to justify discrepancies between men’s and women’s domestic participation (Gere & Helwig). Past studies examining young adults’ acceptance of men and women taking on various family roles have found higher levels of approval for mothers staying at home to care for children and for fathers providing financial support to the family. And, when asked about their future roles, young adult men expect to be breadwinners in the future; young women not only expect to stay home with their children but also to do more household and child care chores than their male partners (Gere & Helwig). Askari, Liss, Erchull, Staebell, and Axelson (2010), in exploring whether there was a discrepancy between ideal and expected participation in future household and child care chores of young adults, found that women, but not men, expected to do significantly more chores than ideally they wanted to. Further, while men imagined a more egalitarian division of household and child care labour, women imagined they would likely be doing more of this work than their male partners. Interestingly, young women holding liberal feminist attitudes expected to do fewer household and child care chores; and men with similar attitudes expected to do more. Overall, and despite the fact that more men expected equality, women expected that inequality in relation to child and household care would define their future relationships. Perhaps women’s attitudes are simply born out of a realism that reflects their experiences and knowledge of past and present situations regarding the division of labour in the household. Contrary to folk wisdom, although there appears to be no significant difference in men’s and women’s drive to marry and have children, both men and women assume that women are more invested in ideals of marriage and parenthood (Erchull, Liss, Axelson, Staebell, & Askari, 2010). As such, Erchull and colleagues suggest that because both men and women assume women’s greater investment in the partnership, women hold less relational power, thereby leading to their greater sense of obligation in terms of both household labour and child care.

Given that actual practice does not reflect equality in sharing household labour and child care, even in families where egalitarian attitudes are espoused, it is perhaps not surprising to find that attitudes formed
in childhood and adolescence indeed reflect this reality. In examining visions of future family life, Fulcher and Coyle (2012) found overall, from a diverse ethnic sample of US children, adolescents, and young university adults that boys and girls, and young men and women, are planning for gendered future family roles. Adolescent boys and university men especially endorsed the male breadwinner–female caregiver model. While female participants, younger and older, were less likely than male participants to imagine that they would desire to work while parenting young children, male participants, younger and older, anticipated that they would continue to work while parenting, even though both males and females indicated that work and family were equally important to them. Young children and adolescents not only expect that they will engage in traditional family gender roles in adulthood, but they also expect mothers rather than fathers to take on the demands of the “second-shift” when both parents are working and to evaluate the role as more unfair for fathers than for mothers (Sinno & Killen, 2011). Sinno and Killen found that children’s and adolescents’ reasoning about second-shift participation, although complex, was based both in social conventions of family structure and societal expectations about mothers as nurturers and as better able to fulfill the caregiving role. Miller (2010a, 2010b), in exploring new fathers’ transitions into parenthood, found that while many of the men espoused discourses surrounding caring masculinities and egalitarian participation in child care within a few short weeks or months following the birth of their first child, they later slipped back into practices confirming patriarchal habits. What Miller found was that antenatally men’s accounts showed an intention to disrupt traditional patterns of caring, although hands-on caring was always described by men through supportive and secondary task-based acts rather than seeing themselves as primary caregivers. Miller suggests this is only possible because men see their partners as having primary responsibility for child care, and indeed society positions women that way. The narratives of these first-time fathers as they moved from pre- to post-birth showed that “whilst there has been a move away from a ‘single model of unified masculinities’ and evidence of more emotional engagement in fathering practices, elements of hegemonic masculinity and associated subjectivities, agency and power endure” (Miller, 2011, p. 1103).
Clearly broad factors such as class, race, and culture play crucial roles in defining parenting behaviours and levels of involvement as well as types of engagement (Shows & Gerstel, 2009). But, typically, women and men parent differently, with women providing more of the daily necessities and men engaging children in play (Dufur, Howell, Downey, Ainsworth, & Lapray, 2010). As well, women and not men tend to take care of more of the messier tasks associated with infant care (DeMaris, Mahoney, & Pargament, 2011). In looking at how class shapes gendered relations and the way men behave as fathers, Shows and Gerstel found that physicians, defined as upper-middle-class fathers, tended to “fit the daily demands of fatherhood on the edges of their jobs” (p. 180), contributing significantly to their families’ material well-being, and engaging in public displays of fathering while at the same time distancing themselves from the daily demands of their children. In contrast, Emergency Medical Technicians (EMTs), defined as working-class fathers, valued and were deeply involved with both public displays of fathering as well as “the more routine tasks of daily parenting that sometimes pull them home and sometimes push them into alternate schedules on the job” (Shows & Gerstel, p. 180).

‘Good’ fatherhood remains connected to the role of men as breadwinners, but it now carries an added expectation that men will be emotionally involved in the everyday lives of their children (Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012; Such, 2006). Given that the role of men in the family continues to be shaped by paid employment, the amount of time available for parenting remains limited—although, with an increase in dual-earner families, this situation also defines women’s positions in the family. However, the women in dual earner families are more likely to dispose of their own personal leisure time “to facilitate the leisure activities of the men” (Such, p. 196). Notwithstanding this fact, the nature of men’s paid employment further informs the relationship between time spent with children and the types of activities men engage in with their children. For most fathers, weekends provide the time to spend with their children. However, Hook (2012) notes that approximately 25% of British and American parents regularly engage in paid work on the weekend, with the figure increasing significantly when occasional weekend work is included. Fathers who regularly work on weekends spend considerably less time with children and further are “unable to recoup lost time with children on weekdays” (Hook, p. 639).
Although the “new fatherhood” suggests or even demands men’s fuller engagement in the domestic sphere, the actual time fathers spend with their children has increased only marginally over the past three decades (Coakley, 2006). Coakley refers to an insightful discussion by Anna Gavanas about the politics of fatherhood in the US wherein she notes “that sports, as largely homosocial arenas, serve as convenient sites for men to negotiate masculinity and be involved as fathers without being forced to make a choice between domesticating masculinity or masculinizing domesticity” (p. 157). Leisure and sport are major sites for “doing” fatherhood, providing fathers with opportunities for communicating and sharing with their children and instilling values (Harrington, 2006). Not only are men able to share time with their children, but through play and sport men are able to promote both “orthodox” masculine values, including risk taking and competitiveness and an “inclusive” masculinity which allows space for expressiveness and encouragement (Gottzén & Kremer-Sadlik, 2012). In summarizing the research on fatherhood and youth sport, Gottzén and Kremer-Sadlik suggest three dominant themes: fathers’ participation in sport is often motivated by a desire to spend more time with their children; sport provides a venue for fathers to develop close relationships with their children; and sport offers men opportunities to teach children skills and values, findings echoed in their own research. Interestingly, Such (2006) notes in relation to men’s and women’s use of leisure time that “being with children is frequently highlighted as a priority for fathers,” whereas for women the discourses “of care and emotional responsibility of being there for the children” (p. 194) remain qualitatively different.

**Stay-at-home Fathers**

Growth in the participation of women in all sectors of the labour force has seen a concurrent decline in the traditional breadwinner-homemaker family structure. As well, increased divorce rates along with a greater acceptance of single-parent families have contributed to the scholarly and media interest in fatherhood generally and stay-at-home fatherhood in particular. Interests have also focused on what this new form of parenting means for family, child, and father outcomes. Decisions for fathers to become primary, stay-at-home caregivers are informed by interests in the financial well-being of the family as well as the emotional and physical
well-being of the children. Factors include, for example, whether or not the mother’s job or career provides a better source of income and benefits for the family compared to their own; a shared belief that a parent, rather than a person outside of the family, is the most suitable caregiver; or, in some instances, the fact that paid daycare is not an affordable option regardless of which parent stays at home. In some instances, parents might agree that the father, rather than the mother, is better suited to handle the day-to-day demands of caregiving (Doucet, 2006; Doucet & Merla, 2007; Fischer & Anderson, 2012). In some cases the father’s flexible work schedule, a current job loss, or an intention to change careers may also be relevant factors (Doucet, 2006). Particularly in secure economic partnerships, fathers may choose this role simply because they want to be stay-at-home fathers (Fischer & Anderson).

Although there has been a lot of hype in the media about this phenomenon, the numbers of stay-at-home fathers reported through Census data suggest that this form of parenting still represents only a very small proportion of all child caregiving scenarios. “In 2014, 11% of single-earner families [in Canada] with a ‘stay-at-home’ parent had a father who was staying home—up from only 2% in 1976” (Battams, 2016). The US Census Bureau defines a stay-at-home parent as “those who had a spouse in the labor force all 52 weeks last year while they were out of the labor force during the same period to care for home and family” (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013, p. 26). Using this criterion, the 2012 census data showed “that a decline in stay-at-home mothers produced an overall decrease in stay-at-home parents during the recession; the percentage of married fathers who stayed at home did not change. Before the recession began in 2007, roughly 24 percent of married mothers with children under the age of 15 were stay-at-home parents” (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, p. 26), and while there were some fluctuations post-recession, 2012 still saw approximately the same percentage of mothers staying at home as pre-recession. On the other hand, the relatively small proportion of fathers who, using the above definition, were stay-at-home has changed little between 2006 and 2012 (from 0.8 percent to 0.9 percent). The US Census Bureau suggests that the modest increase in stay-at-home fathers can be attributed to disproportionately higher unemployment rates from men during the recent recession coupled with a small decline in stay-at-home mothers who entered or
returned to labour force to compensate for their husband’s employment and income loss (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013). Although the proportions of stay-at-home fathers in the US appear to be relatively small, some critics suggest that the ways in which the US Census Bureau counts stay-at-home fathers (and mothers) does not paint a realistic picture of the actual numbers of men who may be assuming the primary caregiving role for their children. Excluded from the count are fathers who are primary caregivers but may have worked, even for a brief period of time, during the previous 52 weeks, or those who may have been a primary caregiver for a significant period but less than the 52-week criterion; the definition also excludes those who are gay, single, divorced, or living in a cohabiting (but not marital) relationship (Latshaw, 2009). However, the counts for stay-at-home mothers are calculated in the same way, and while these rigid criteria may underestimate overall the number of stay-at-home parents, they do provide enough information to at least say that when there is a stay-at-home parent, it is still much more likely to be a mother rather than a father.

The popular press has picked up on the aforementioned counting issue, with a recent article in The Atlantic (Wiessman, 2013) suggesting that “the growth of stay-at-home fatherhood makes for a nice story. But it’s a misleading one”; another in Time (Drexler, 2013) stating, “If American society and business won’t make it easier on future female leaders who choose to have children, there is still a ray of hope that increasing numbers of full-time fathers will. But based on today’s socioeconomic trends, this hope is, unfortunately misguided.” Notwithstanding the skepticism about an actual revolution in the gender balance of child care, fathers who are choosing (or having the choice made for them) are popping up in popular press stories all over the place. A recent article by Alex French (2013) in GQ, “Breaking Dad: The Stay-at-Home Life,” discusses the trials, tribulations, and internal struggles that he faced in coming to terms with giving up a career to be a stay-at-home dad (SAHD). After several years with son Jack and daughter Jill, French came to the conclusion that “being a stay-at-home dad wasn’t for me. I had convinced myself of something I didn’t believe” and that “three days a week with Jill was a blessing. But it was also enough” (p. 5). Although the number of stay-at-home fathers has doubled in the UK since 1993, in a recent Guardian (July 2013) article, “My life as a stay-at-home dad,” Tim Dowling, a man who has been a primary
caregiver for two decades, comments that “this is not quite the revolution-
ary inversion of gender stereotypes it sounds—there are a million fewer
stay-at-home mums, but only about 100,000 extra stay-at-home fathers
taking up the slack” (p. 1).

Father-headed Single Parent Families
In Canada, of the over 5.5 million families with children identified in the
2011 census, slightly more than 4 million were comprised of couples (mar-
ried or common-law) leaving over 1.5 million families head by lone parents
(Statistics Canada, 2012b). Of this group, just over 1.2 million were headed
by single females; just over 300,000 by single males. Thus 5.8% of Can-
adian families with children are headed by lone fathers compared to 21.2%
headed by lone mothers. Men in lone-parent families parent fewer chil-
dren (average of 1.4) than women in lone-parent families (average of 1.6)
(Statistics Canada, 2016), and not surprisingly, in Canada men in 2011
saw significantly higher average incomes after tax ($55,100) than women
($43,000) (Statistics Canada, 2013). The US has seen a similar increase in
the proportion of fathers who have primary responsibility or sole custody
of their child(ren), from 1.1% in 1970 to almost 5% in 2005 (Bronte-Tinkew,
Scott, & Lilja, 2010); by 2012 the US figures showed 24% of children living
only with mothers and 4% with fathers (Federal Interagency Forum on
Child and Family Statistics, 2013). The proportion of lone fathers in the EU
varies strikingly across countries, with, for example, a low of 3% in Lithu-
ania to a high of 30% in Sweden (Chzhen & Bradshaw, 2012). However, as
in Canada and the US, the overall numbers of lone fathers in the EU are
relatively low.

In looking at “single-custodial-father families” specifically with ado-
lescent children compared with other family structures, using a sample
of close to 4000 youths from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth,
Bronte-Tinkew, Scott, and Lilja (2010) found that single-father families
were less disadvantaged than single-mother families, suggesting again that
single-father families experience less of the financial strain associated with
parenting than single-mother families. In terms of parenting styles, these
researchers also found that “single custodial fathers exhibited less authori-
tarian and authoritative parenting than did two-parent families” but they
were also “less involved than parents in single-mother, two-parent, and
other families” (p. 1121).
While much research has been conducted on the impact of single parenting on children’s and mothers’ physical and mental well-being, little is currently known about the prevalence of psychiatric disorders among lone fathers (Wade, Veldhuizen, & Cairney, 2011). Contributing to this lack of research is the fact that the proportion of the population represented by lone fathers is relatively small. Nevertheless, there is limited evidence from small sample studies to suggest that lone fathers are at greater risk for some of the same affective disorders that lone mothers are experiencing. Wade, Veldhuizen, and Cairney, using data from a nationally representative community health survey conducted by Statistics Canada, compared lone fathers with lone mothers as well as married fathers and mothers. Their findings indicated that lone mothers, compared with married or cohabiting mothers, had higher rates for mood and anxiety disorders as well as others defined by the DSM-IV. Among lone parents, mothers experienced higher rates of mood and anxiety disorders than did fathers, but the proportions of mentally distressed lone mothers and fathers were not significantly different when substance use disorders (SUD), including alcohol and drug dependence, were added as part of a composite measure of mental health (i.e., mood, anxiety and/or SUD). These findings suggest that more lone fathers compared to lone mothers are dealing with SUD; whereas more lone mothers compared to lone fathers are dealing with depression and anxiety issues. These authors concluded that “lone-parent status is a disadvantaged social status for both men and women, with both groups showing significantly higher rates of psychiatric disorder, compared to their married counterparts” (p. 572). Of concern is the fact that men are less likely to seek psychiatric care than are women and thus lone fathers may experience their distress in isolation from professional help.

CONCLUSION

There are different ways in which fathers might come to be absent from their children’s lives, including, for example, situations where children are born to mothers who are not in a relationship and who have no interest in paternal involvement in any significant measure, beyond perhaps some financial support. Whereas in earlier times the law was concerned about enforcing the financial responsibility of unmarried fathers to mothers and children, today the dominant theme in social, legal, and policy discourses is
framed in terms of searching “for ways to recognize, protect and entrench unmarried fathers’ relationships with their children” (Sheldon, 2009, p. 373). Past images of unmarried fathers as unworthy, irresponsible and disengaged are increasingly being supplanted by depictions of unmarried fathers “as a discriminated group who are often deeply committed to their children yet find themselves denied access to them, being left unfairly dependent on the whims of sometimes hostile mothers” (Sheldon, p. 374). While father absence versus presence has been a major theme in public debates about fatherhood, it is a complicated discussion. The interests of the state in families providing for and looking after themselves, coupled with neoliberal discourses, favour a return to values supporting a traditional two-parent family structure. At the same time as we are seeing an emphasis on the importance of paternal involvement in children’s lives, divorce rates in Western societies are increasing, which translates, for children, into parents living apart. The images of a new fatherhood as intimately involved, connected, and critical to children’s day-to-day lives are juxtaposed against anxieties surrounding the “absent father” and “deadbeat dads” (Adamsons, 2013; Skevik, 2006). Regardless of the parenting role that fathers could or should play in the caregiving of children, dominant discourses on motherhood continue to shape and limit the choices that women and men make about their lives. The weight of responsibility for childrearing remains on the shoulders of women. And still, there are many women who mother outside of the powerful image of the good mother and are held up as examples of women who do not know how to mother or who are trying to mother in situations not conducive to proper mothering.