

**Fathering in the Shadows:
Indigenous Fathers and Canada's Colonial Legacies***

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Abstract

An inaugural study of Indigenous fathers' involvement in Canada conceptualized a temporal horizon within which to situate challenges and opportunities for Indigenous father's involvement in caring for children following decades of colonial interventions that have diminished Indigenous men's roles. Through five community-university partnerships, conversational interviews were held with 80 First Nations and Métis fathers in British Columbia, Canada. Using a grounded theory approach, a conceptual model was constructed identifying six key ecological and psychological factors that combine to account for Indigenous men's experiences of fatherhood: personal wellness; learning fathering; socio-economic inclusion; social support; legislative and policy support; and cultural continuity. Elements within these domains, such as childhood experience of attachment and exposure to father role models, social capital, and generativity have been addressed in other models and research about fathers' involvement. Indigenous fathers' accounts additionally bring into focus systemic barriers to positive fathers' involvement, including socioeconomic exclusion due to failures of the educational system, ongoing colonization through Canada's Indian Act, and mother-centrism in parenting programs and child welfare practices. Policy and program reforms are suggested that could increase Indigenous fathers' positive and sustained engagement with their children.

Key words: fathers, children, Indigenous, Aboriginal, community-university partnerships, colonialism, social inclusion, social capital, social support, mother-centrism, multi-generational, Canada

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Fathering in the Shadows:

Indigenous Fathers and Canada's Colonial Legacies

Indigenous¹ fathers are arguably the most socially excluded population of fathers around the world. Personal and community histories of colonial government interventions disrupted Indigenous families and communities, combining with ongoing social inequities, to create unique challenges for Indigenous fathers. Removals of children from family care, removals of families from traditional territories, and high rates of incarceration of Indigenous men have produced a fissure in the sociocultural transmission of father roles across generations and created monumental challenges for Indigenous fathers' positive and sustained involvement with their children.

Theories of attachment and generativity suggest that fathering is reproduced through experiences of being cared for by father role models during childhood (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999). How do men constitute and identify with culturally authentic father roles when they have no experiences of being fathered and/or have few positive father role models in their communities? Situations that disrupt the intergenerational transmission of fathering – through government interventions, pandemics, political

conflict, migrant labour, and ecological and technological disasters — are tragically common across the globe. Understanding factors that increase or decrease Indigenous fathers' positive involvement in Canada can contribute to an emerging international literature on the revitalization of fatherhood following catastrophes (e.g., Hoffman, 2004; Richter & Morrell, 2006; Stover & Weinstein, 2004). This article reports on some influences that, combined, may affect the likelihood that Indigenous men can successfully join in caring for children in their families and as part of a regeneration of positive fathers' involvement in socio-cultural communities where the meaning and practice of father care for children has been drastically diminished.

Indigenous fathers' relative absence in children's lives is a lacuna in Canada's social landscape. A much higher proportion of Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous men do not have their paternity registered on their children's birth records (Clatworthy, 2004) and do not live with or provide for their children. Without effective interventions to create the conditions that enable Indigenous fathers' involvement in family life, by 2020, half of the burgeoning population of Indigenous children in Canada will be growing up without a father living in their family home. While non-co-residence does not always indicate a father's lack of involvement (Zontini & Reynolds, 2007), a trend towards decreasing involvement has been shown in research involving non-Indigenous fathers, especially if a father moves some distance away (Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 1998; Seltzer, 1991), or is incarcerated (Nelson, Clampet-Lundquist & Edin, 2002). Compared to other men in Canada, Indigenous men are much more geographically mobile (Statistics Canada, 2006), nine times more likely to be incarcerated (Government

of Canada, 2008), and three times more likely to complete suicide (Health Canada, 2003; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1995).

The literature on fathering (Lamb, 2004) largely represents the experiences of fathers of European heritage. Although there is a long tradition in anthropology of ethnographic research describing fathers' social roles, there is only a handful of known research investigations that have asked Indigenous fathers to give their own accounts of their experiences with their children. A search yielded no published studies specifically on Indigenous fathers' involvement in Canada and only two on Native American fathering experiences in the United States. In a descriptive study, Hossain (2001) found that Navajo fathers invested about 60% as much time as mothers in direct caregiving. In a quantitative study of 14 Ojibway fathers, greater father involvement in caregiving was associated with better academic achievement and social development among children, especially among boys (Williams, Radin, & Coggins, 1996). The latter study also suggested an intergenerational modeling effect: fathers who spent more time in caregiving tasks had themselves been fathered by men who were more involved in their upbringing. New research is beginning to surface from a 'Baba' movement in South Africa focusing on regeneration of positive involvement of African men with children and youth, and in changing notions of masculinity post-apartheid (Richter & Morrell, 2006). Apart from these few studies, the invisibility of Indigenous men in research is mirrored in the absence of policy and program initiatives aimed at encouraging Indigenous fathers' involvement. As a parent support worker in one of the research communities in the current study acknowledged: *"It's not so much that we have failed to reach Indigenous dads. It's more that we have never tried."*

Literature describing cross-cultural variations in fathering beliefs and behaviours (Harkness & Super, 1996; Levine, 1994; Toth & Xu, 1999) suggest the likelihood that there are important differences as well as similarities in the experiences of Indigenous fathers compared to non-Indigenous fathers. Intra-group differences should also be expected, given that Indigenous fathers are not part of a homogeneous group. There are over one million people in Canada who identify as Indigenous, including about 500,000 Status and non-Status Indians living off-reserve in urban centers and 200,000 First Nations² living on reserves, mostly in rural areas, plus 300,000 Métis (mixed Indigenous and European heritage), and 70,000 Inuit living primarily in the High Arctic (Statistics Canada, 2006). Significant cultural, economic, social, and political differences exist among the hundreds of cultural groups subsumed under the general terms Indigenous or Aboriginal.

The current study took place British Columbia, home to about one third of the Indigenous peoples in Canada, representing over 200 culturally heterogeneous communities and a large urban Indigenous population. As Indigenous fatherhood opens up as a new focus of inquiry, it is important to avoid unsubstantiated, pan-Indigenous generalizations. The study begins to explore what kinds of theoretical understandings can encompass and guide responses to the experiences of Indigenous fathers in different kinds of circumstances, and with various experiences, goals, and needs. A further goal is to inform policy and programs to support reconstruction of Indigenous families, parenting and circles of kinship care for Aboriginal children following an historic apology from the Canadian Government to Aboriginal peoples on June 11, 2008 (Office of the Prime Minister of Canada, 2008).

Historical and demographic barriers to Indigenous fathers' involvement

Indigenous scholars have chronicled the devastating effects of colonial government policies over the past century that were aimed, first, at segregating Indigenous peoples from colonial society through a reservation system, and subsequently, at forcing them either to assimilate into colonial society or to subsist on its margins (Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Systems of tribal community governance and transmission of cultural knowledge were prohibited (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997). Forced relocations of villages and dispersions of clans, along with urbanization, have further disconnected Indigenous people from their heritage language, culture, and clans (York, 1990).

Colonial efforts to sever ties between children and parents included the Indian Residential Schools where, by 1960, over half of the First Nations and Métis children in Canada were confined (Miller, 1996). Widespread foster placement and adoption in non-Indigenous homes have continued from the 1950s till now (National Council of Welfare, 2007).⁴ Extensive neglect, physical and sexual abuse of Indigenous children in residential schools and foster homes has been well documented (Fournier & Crey, 1997). It is generally acknowledged that most Indigenous men and women in Canada are either survivors of residential schools or have suffered 'secondary trauma' as a result of being born to parents who lacked parenting role models (Ing, 2000). The multi-generational sequelae of these early experiences of abuse and neglect are gradually being recognized (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008). Most Indigenous fathers today have not had the kinds of experiential learning, affection, and play that are the hallmarks of a middle class

childhood in Euro-Western cultures and that have been conceptualized in ethological and development theories (Erickson, 1950) and research as foundational for psychosocial well-being and role modelling the contributes to involved fathering (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Hesse, 1999). Thus, when Indigenous men become fathers, most are venturing into a role and set of relationships that have little personal resonance.

Method

Research approach. The study was guided by principles and protocols suggested by Indigenous scholars for research involving Indigenous peoples (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, 2007). Following an announcement in a national newspaper about federal funding for the first national study of fathers involvement, including a component focused on Indigenous fathers in British Columbia, the author received requests from several First Nations communities and programs to participate, as well as from many individual First Nations fathers. The study was seen as timely because of the steady increase in Indigenous lone-mother headed households, persistence of Indigenous teen pregnancies and dawning awareness in community programs about the need to hear from Indigenous fathers themselves in the hope of increasing the effectiveness of efforts through family-involving programs such as Aboriginal Head Start to reach out to Indigenous fathers of young children. Partnerships were negotiated between the author, based at the University of Victoria, and five community partners, including two First Nations on reserves, two Aboriginal Head Start Programs, and one Dads Group in small urban centres. Memoranda of Partnership Agreements delineated a role for one Indigenous father nominated by each community to serve as a paid member of the

research team. These fathers helped to develop the consent, recruitment and data collection procedures. They recruited fathers through posters, door to door flyers, and direct contact. They interviewed fathers and convened data interpretation feedback sessions. Details of the research ethics and community-based research processes are described elsewhere (Ball & Janyst, 2008).

Participants. Because community partners wanted to know about Aboriginal fathers with young children, the study recruited fathers with at least one child under 7 years of age, including 72 self-identified First Nations fathers, 7 Métis fathers, and one non-Indigenous father of Indigenous young children.

Procedures. Data collection had two components: (1) two original questionnaires asking for each father's demographic characteristics, family composition, involvement with biological children and the children in their home (if any), and use of parenting resources; and (2) a 60 minute conversational interview with each father that was audio-taped and transcribed. Following the advice of fathers on the research team, interviews were semi-structured. The interviewer asked fathers to describe their household composition, how they balanced work and family, how they were involved with their children, any experience with programs, and other general conversational topics. Fathers on the team advised against probing about experiences with residential school, child welfare, adoption, substance use, mental health or other topics known to be common yet sensitive among Indigenous adults. However, nearly all participating fathers introduced these topics themselves during the free-flowing conversational interview.

Data analysis. Analysis of the interview transcripts used the grounded theory approach elaborated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and previously demonstrated in family

interaction research by the author and colleagues (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995). The author and Indigenous team members worked from line-by-line coding and theoretical memos to construct a conceptual framework that represented recurrent themes in fathers' accounts. Several months after their interview, all fathers who could be re-contacted were invited to a gathering at each community partner site to hear about the data analysis, help to elaborate the conceptual model, and advise on knowledge mobilization strategies. Across partner communities, a total of 19 of the 70 fathers participated in these sessions, which was seen as a very good turn out by administrators of partnering community organizations.

Results

Participants. The interview began with a seemingly simple inquiry: Who are the children to whom you consider yourself to be a father? What are their first names, ages, where do they live, and how are you involved with each of them? Fathers' lengthy and convoluted responses revealed the complex, frequently changing and blended composition of most fathers' households. Most fathers were co-resident with one or more child, though they did not uniformly identify as either a biological or social father of children living full- or part-time in the same home. Many fathers acknowledged not knowing how many children they had biologically fathered, and several stated that they had at least one child with whom they had never been involved. The sample of 80 fathers included 67 (84%) who were biological fathers of at least one child under seven years old: nearly all were currently involved with one or more of their biological children. The remaining men in the sample (n = 13;16%) were social fathers of at least one child under

seven years old, mostly through co-residence with the child’s mother. The minority of fathers who had no involvement with one or more of their children at the time of the study generally reported that their child was in government care or in the sole custody of the child’s mother or adoptive parent. At the time of the interview, four fathers had no contact with their children as a condition of their parole or by court order. All the other fathers in the study had some form of contact with at least some of their children, if only occasional visits or phone calls.

Table 1

Self-reported Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	%	Frequency	M	SD
Identify as First Nations	90.0	72		
Identify as Métis	8.75	7		
Identify as non-Aboriginal father of Aboriginal children	1.0	1		
Living On-Reserve	45.0	36		
Living Off-Reserve	55.0	44		
Age			38.00	11.89
Number of children identified as theirs			3.29	2.13
Number of children in home			2.08	1.49
Number of adults in home			2.11	0.90
Living with a spouse or partner	55.0	44		
Highest level of education				
Some high school	36.4	29		
High school diploma	21.3	17		
Trade/college certificate or diploma	2.5	18		
Some university	11.3	9		
Bachelor degree or higher	5.1	4		
Other	3.8	3		
Total household income				
Under \$10,000	15.0	12		
\$10 – 19,000	12.5	10		
\$20 – 39,000	20.0	16		
\$40 – 59,000	13.8	11		

\$60 – 79,000	10.0	8
\$80 – 99,000	2.5	2
Over \$100,000	2.5	2
Refused	23.8	19
Receiving institutional financial assistance	32.5	26
Partner receiving institutional financial assistance	8.8	7
Currently employed or self-employed with an income	61.3	49
Partner currently employed outside the home	37.5	30
Physical or mental disabilities or special needs	27.5	22

Table 1 conveys the challenging economic, education, employment and other

conditions characterizing the sample overall. Yet, as a group, participants reported more social capital than has generally been found in demographic studies of this population, and as a result were probably more empowered to be involved with their children.

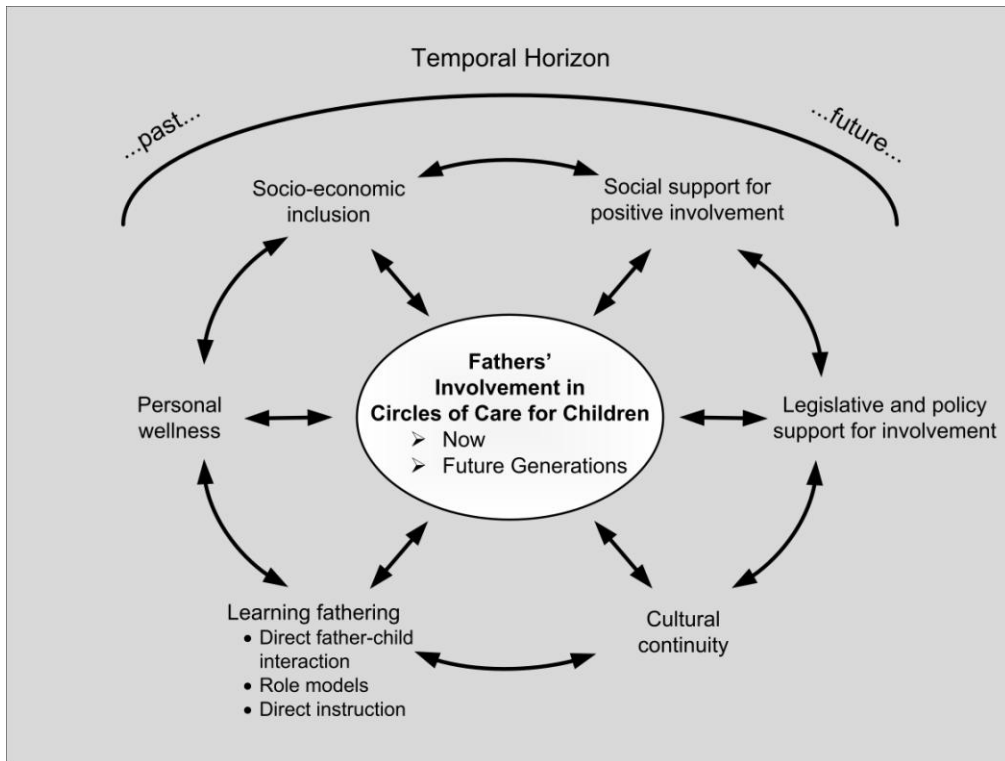
Several fathers who took part in the current study referred to themselves as ‘success stories’ and were proud of the quality of relationships with their children that they had achieved without much help from community programs, child welfare services, or society as a whole. Many stated that they sought to participate in the study in order to show other Indigenous men that *“there is hope”* and *“if I can do it, you can do it.”* Some fathers were struggling to sustain involvement with their child or whose relationships with their children had been disrupted due to separation, divorce, child protection, or a ‘no-contact’ court order. They expressed their goal of using the study to *“let people know what we have to go through”* and *“how many roadblocks are in our path”* towards a desired quality of involvement as fathers.

Key themes. Fathers who gathered to participate in data interpretation in all the partner communities agreed that the theme of lack of exposure to positive fatherhood in their childhoods and in their communities best accounted for many of the challenges they faced when they became fathers. Their over-arching vision for change was for Indigenous

fathers to increase their positive involvement with their children and for revitalization of Indigenous fathers' roles in what some referred to as "circles of care", "kinship care" or "shared care" of children by Indigenous peoples in Canada. These terms are often used to contrast with foster care and adoption placements of Indigenous children in non-Indigenous families, or to underscore communal or clan-based provisions for child care as opposed to child-rearing centred in nuclear family structures. Fathers saw reconstruction of circles of care within a temporal frame as part of a process referred to by Indigenous peoples in Canada as a "healing journey" for Indigenous peoples as a whole, laying a strong foundation of Indigenous fatherhood "for generations yet to come."³ They also confirmed a conceptual framework that identified key influences on the degree and nature of their involvement with their children, illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Reciprocally interacting factors in the ecology of Indigenous fathers' involvement



Like Bronfenbrenner's (1979) concept of the chronosystem, inclusion of a temporal horizon in the framework encompasses fathers' understandings of the socio-historical conditioning of their challenges, recognizing the long shadow cast by colonial government interventions in Indigenous societies, and the desire to "*turn things around.*" This multi-generational view, extending both backwards and forward in time, was the most salient theme in the fathers' accounts. In addition, the conceptual framework includes six domains of influences that were frequently invoked in fathers' accounts: (1) Personal wellness; (2) Learning fathering; (3) Socioeconomic inclusion; (4) Social support; (5) Legislative and policy support; and (6) Cultural continuity. Elements of some of these domains are addressed in theories that have informed fatherhood research to date, such as attachment theory, social capital theory, and generativity theory. The ways that fathers' accounts evoked these factors indicated that they are reciprocally interactive. For example, recovery from addictions (personal wellness) enables sustained labour force attachment (socioeconomic inclusion), and income generation (socioeconomic inclusion) decreases the probability of addiction relapse (personal wellness). Fathers' accounts had many examples of how they saw these factors interacting to enhance or deter their involvement and how they could effect recovery of positive fathers' involvement among Indigenous peoples as a whole. In ecological models, person and environment variables are bilateral. In this case, a father's positive involvement can affect changes in the ecological conditions (for example, engaging with a child in a sports program can increase opportunities for social support), forming a mutually causal cycle with an overall negative or positive impact on the quantity, quality and continuity of fathers' involvement now and, potentially, in future generations. The following report on these

themes draws links to converging theory and research to illustrate the potential utility of the framework to inform hypothesis testing research, rather than drawing these connections in a discussion section at the end.

Fathering out of “thin air.” Sixty-nine (86%) fathers’ explanatory accounts referred in some way to the theme of *disrupted intergenerational transmission of fathering*. The generative fatherhood model (McAdams & St. Aubin, 1998), theoretical frameworks drawing on ethological research, and investigations of attachment emphasize the ongoing transmission of fathering through father-child relationships across generations (Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Hesse, 1999). Some evidence supports a multi-generational effect, whereby highly involved fathers are more likely to have sons who are highly involved with their own children (Williams, Radin, et al., 1996). As described earlier, due to the fracturing of Indigenous circles of care during the hundred years of Indian Residential Schools, many Indigenous fathers have no positive experiences of being fathered.

The impacts of historical trauma on Indigenous men, as well as the vestiges and potential rekindling of communal caregiving roles, must be integrated into emerging constructions of Indigenous fatherhood and family organization. A developmental, lifespan perspective (e.g., Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997) cannot fully accommodate the significance of these socio-historical challenges and changes in the lives of Indigenous peoples as they came under colonial rule and as the process of truth and reconciliation is just beginning (Aboriginal Healing Foundation, 2008). A majority of fathers in the study explained how their own childhood experiences without a father or with abusive fathers and father figures, including step-fathers and priests in residential schools, set the stage

for their own journey as fathers. One father described how he feels he has to draw an image of fatherhood “*out of thin air....He just wasn't there. Really I had to raise myself. I just came crawling into my life after residential school as a grown person without any idea what that meant. I crawled around in the gutters and on the streets until I went to prison and got into a treatment program. So I'm on my feet but really there isn't much to draw on. I make it up as I go, one day at a time.*”

Many fathers stated emphatically that they did not want to be like their own fathers.

He was abusive. I was only a year old when he left, and so I don't know if I ever saw it or experienced it [being fathered]. He left.... I can remember seeing him and wishing he were more involved. After he died, I had dreams of him and he didn't recognize me. There was a lot of stuff that I had to deal with as I grew up. But, I knew that was not what I wanted for my children. I wanted my children to have a father and to understand the joys and rewards of having both parents in their lives.

Research with Indigenous fathers offers opportunities to test a compensation hypothesis, whereby men who regret not having a positive relationship with their father may try to redeem the father-child relationship as fathers with their own children.

Personal Wellness

Indigenous men have the highest rates of mental illness, addictions, and suicide among ethnic groups in Canada (Kirmayer, Simpson & Cargo, 2003). Dimensions of personal wellness figured prominently in fathers' narratives, including their struggles with depression, suicidality, substance mis-use, violence, and other problems. Several

fathers volunteered that they had completed one or more treatment programs for substance mis-use or anger management. Some described how participation in these programs had helped them to approach their relationships with partners and children with more “respect” and “equality” and participation. Fathers who were positively involved with their children described caring for their children as part of their “healing journey.”

I'm a recovering alcoholic and addict, and I'm just trying to learn how to relate to my kids and how to help her [ex-partner] in whatever way I can, one day at a time. Starting over—well that's just not how I see it—because my past deeds and history are still there, they happened, and I have to face up to that and accept responsibility for that, instead of playing the shame and blame game, for a change. Every day that I'm with my girls is another day to make amends and to try to give them, and my ex- and myself something positive.

Similar outcomes were described by Irvine and Klocke (2001) in their study of non-Indigenous men involved in a Twelve-Step program.

Whereas some non-Indigenous men blame women for their lack of a sense of place within their families or societies (Ferber, 2000; Gavanas, 2004), few Indigenous fathers in this study blamed women for barriers to being effectively involved fathers. Some fathers explained that colonial legacies had exerted different but equal challenges for Indigenous women. Several men spoke of the need for both Indigenous women and men to achieve “balance” and “wholeness” by following a traditional healing path to recovering their Indigenous Peoples and their capacities to parent and live together as families.

Twenty-two (27 %) fathers reported that engaging with their children evoked painful memories of childhoods that had been punctuated by abuse or family violence, death of a parent, or abruptly changing circumstances, such as being taken away to Residential School or apprehension by child protection services. Eighteen (22 %) fathers referred explicitly to “growing up” in the context of caring for their children. Some fathers reported that playing with their children helped them to work through the loss of their own childhood. Their descriptions of play as a pathway both to engage as fathers and to heal themselves illustrates the dynamic interaction of factors that can increase positive father involvement.

While it is probably not helpful to understand Indigenous fathers within what some have called a “deficiency paradigm” (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), at the same time, Indigenous fathers’ accounts suggest that their challenges should not be underestimated. Even though many referred to themselves as “success stories” relative to other fathers in their communities, some participants were pessimistic about the future for Indigenous fatherhood in terms of recovering Indigenous forms of family life and men’s roles as teachers, guides, providers, and guardians of the spiritual life of the family. They pointed to the pervasive abuse of alcohol, high rates of early school leaving, dependence on income assistance, domestic violence and suicide among Indigenous men, and the associated large numbers of Indigenous children raised solely by mothers or by the state.

Learning fathering

Forty-nine (61%) fathers focused their interview primarily on experiences of beginning their involvement with their children and *learning* to be a father. The biological fact of becoming a father often did not instigate identification with fatherhood.

Nearly half of the fathers had little or no contact with their first born child. Most were involved with children who came later, usually through a subsequent partnership. These patterns contrast sharply with findings of studies involving European-heritage fathers indicating that the birth of their first child typically has an immediate, momentous impact on these men (e.g., Palkovitz, Copes, & Woolfolk, 2001). Some fathers explained that when their first child was born, they did not see themselves as having the qualities prerequisite to being involved fathers.

Back then, I didn't have any communication skills like normal fathers had. The affection of a loving father-child relationship, like normal fathers have, like kissing your younger children. I only learned years later, that that was what it takes to love a child. Over the years, I have learned to love myself. Then I'll be able to learn to love my child. There was nothing like that when I was growing up in a residential school. Because I was in residential school until I was 18 years old, so I really didn't learn anything. No love and no hugs from the priests or the nuns. I just came out cold.

Many fathers described conditions that catalyzed their initial engagement with their child, including: their efforts to improve personal wellness; pressures from partners and other family members; learning to manage relationships with other adults involved with their children in order to sustain contact with their children; and the absence of a child's mother due to her death, disappearance, incarceration or departure. "Bravery" was a term used by several fathers as they described needing time, healing, and social support to "get up the courage to reach out to my kids."

Father-child interactions. A majority of fathers described “*what it took*” to learn to be a father through “*trial and error*” in their interactions with their child: “*learning as I go*” and “*try to get to know them, and let them get to know me.*”

My father was not around, so you have to learn right from the beginning, when you have a baby sitting right there in front of you and you have to be a dad.

Many fathers explained that, in playful interactions with their children, they were overcoming shortcomings of their own development as children, and “*opening myself up to being able to love them.*”

When I am with my children I am playing, always playing. When I had my first child, it was the first time I had ever played. Before I went to residential school, I was raised by my uncle and auntie, and they were always drunk, and I don't have any memory of playing. And in residential school, well they just beat the Jesus out of you, and there was no playing there. So having my kids, I am making up for lost time I guess.

Role models: fathers. Fathers described actively searching for clues about how to ‘do fatherhood.’ Many emphasized being able to observe other fathers, including fathers in sit-coms and even in home improvement programs on television, as opportunities to learn what to do as a father.

Being able to see how other fathers handle different situations is big. Because honestly, there are a lot of fathers out there who weren't raised by a father, or were raised by an abusive father, and don't know how to be a father.

Some fathers specifically pointed to shifting gender roles as a pathway to reconstructing circles of care at a community level. A few described incidents when they

had seen a father taking good care of their child and learned by watching what they did, or where they had modelled caring for their child and contributed to social change.

I've actually seen dads pushing their daughters in baby carriages around and I didn't see that too much before. I can't say that I influenced that but since I've started doing it here, more people have been doing it. I've actually seen other mothers saying, "Well, how come he stays home with his daughter and how come you don't do that?" Actually, it's happening more. Our circle has always been like that with our children. Men and women and the whole community pitching in to raise our children.

Role models: mothers. Learning how to be fathers from their own mothers or from their female partner was a theme in 13% of fathers' accounts. Most of these fathers were raised primarily or exclusively by their mothers.

I have fathered the complete opposite to how I was fathered, completely. I learned a lot from my mother and how she parented, but it is completely opposite from how my father parented. I have looked at a lot of the good things from my mom and duplicated that. Like reading to him and teaching him about different countries, languages and stuff. My mom did all of that sort of stuff with us kids.

Direct instruction. Eleven fathers volunteered examples of being told by their partner or another family member what to do with their baby or young child.

She's just had more experience, because she already had the two girls before we got together, so she tells me what to do, and I listen! I could not be the father I am today without what she does for me. Helping me to learn and to know. I owe so much to her, to what she's shown me and taught me.

These fathers expressed considerable receptivity to direct instruction. In a questionnaire about programs that the father would attend if offered for free in their community, the three most popular program topics were Understanding Children's Development, Promoting Your Child's Health and Safety, and Getting Your Child Ready for School. Fathers also identified a need for information packets and digital media explaining child health, safety, dental care, teaching techniques for preschoolers, and ways for fathers to handle new situations with their children, especially with daughters (e.g., bathing, toileting, leisure time interests, and puberty).

Socio-economic inclusion

Indigenous men in Canada have the highest unemployment, greatest poverty, lowest education, highest homelessness, highest mobility, lowest marriage, and lowest household incomes among population groups in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2006). Fathers in the study who identified poverty as a barrier to fathering and family well-being attributed this to various government policies and interventions.

We don't have much. We are losing our rights. Whether it be hunting or fishing, we lose everything. And our people seem to be getting poorer and poorer. There is no end in sight. Soon as you get a little bit ahead, the government puts up a policy. A never ending battle with colonialism.

Socio-economic exclusion interacts with other factors to produce high rates of physical and mental illness, suicide, transience, and low self-worth. Fathers in the study who were living apart from their children variously described how being poor affected their involvement, for example being unable to relocate to live near their children, unable

to cover transportation costs to visit their children regularly or at all, and unable or less inclined to access programs that may be available for fathers or families.

The poverty and the cultural aspect make it a little harder to access services.

Aboriginal young families, in general, in my own experiences I have found that they are a little more transient, moving from town to town or house to house. They are not as fixed, regardless of how many kids they have. And the poverty issue makes for the same hardships as for non-Aboriginal families who are poor, but culturally Aboriginal families are less apt to go for services that are not specifically for Aboriginals.

Some fathers in the study described feeling inadequate or ashamed of not being able to provide a suitable living space, food, clothing, recreation or entertainment for their children.

Poverty accounts in part for the over-representation of Indigenous children in Canada's child welfare system⁴. Compared to other children, Indigenous children are twice as likely to be removed from family care as a result of neglect rather than abuse or other concerns (Trocme, Fallen, et al., 2003). Neglect is often a result of poverty, lack of education, poor parenting skills, and father's or mother's stress or illness. In turn, poverty reduces the prospects of fathers or mothers being able to retrieve a child who has been removed from the home and placed in the protective custody of the government. When a child is removed, former custodial parents receiving income assistance are cut back to the level for accommodating a single person, making it difficult to provide a suitable home for the return of the child. When parents are separated, mothers who retain custody of

children and who are poor may be highly transient, making it difficult for a father to find his children in order to sustain his relationship with them.

The conditions that characterize many Indigenous fathers' lives have been found in research involving non-Indigenous fathers to create significant barriers to positive and sustained father involvement (e.g., Roopnarine, Brown, et al., 1995). Indigenous fathers' elusiveness in their children's lives and in programs for families tends to be perceived by the Canadian public as indicative of their indifferent attitudes (Claes & Clifton, 1998; Mussell, 2005). Yet, these fathers' narratives challenge racialised stereotypes of Indigenous fathers as constitutionally irresponsible, self-involved, or promiscuous men who do not want to be involved with their children. Socio-economic exclusion interacts with lack of positive father roles models, lack of social support, and low self-esteem to produce a poor prognosis for positive and sustained involvement with children.

At the same time, dislocation from the world of work may make it more possible for men to be involved in caring for children. This pattern was described by five fathers in the current study, including two who were lone fathers.

Now, we have moved to such a society that women are more in the limelight of career opportunities. That's a great thing. Now there's a shift going on, where there has to be a balance where both parents have equal involvement in their kids' lives. I think it's the economy that dictates how it's being done.... There's a lot more fathers staying home now, instead of going to work. I'm a stay-at-home dad and my brother just became a stay-at-home dad.

Social support

Some fathers explained that in order to sustain contact with their children, they needed time to learn to manage relationships with their children's mothers, extended families, foster parents, and family service workers. Only one quarter of the fathers in this study reported using any parenting resources and, for most, their utilization was confined to accessing printed information. However, some fathers identified child care programs as a support for their parenting role, and six of the 19 fathers who participated in feedback sessions at the end of the study expressed their view that child care programs were the best access point for father outreach and support initiatives. They also explained that parenting programs need to be led by men, and preferably by Indigenous men, who understand the conditions affecting Indigenous men's involvement in family life.

Many fathers in the study described a bias favouring mothers in home-school outreach, community programs and government services.

There needs to be provided more male-based information, programs and workshops for men. I was going to go to the "Nobody's Perfect" program, but it is nothing but females in there! I would like to go in there and just start advocating for the fathers.

The five fathers in the study who were raising their children as lone parents were particularly vocal in expressing the sense of being left without help to figure out how to raise their child, whereas they perceived that there were program and social supports for mothers.

Nobody has even tried to talk to us; they haven't made an effort... I just want them to understand what I have had to do to bring this child up.

Many investigators have discussed the need to transform the motherhood-first paradigm that drives a variety of forms of social support for parenting (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001, Hodgins, 2007).

Legislation and policy

Fathers' accounts contained a litany of critical incidents where they had encountered roadblocks to accessing paperwork and notary services for registering their paternity on children's birth records, accessing legal advice to establish or enforce shared custody or visitation with a child after separation or divorce, or accessing treatment services or parenting supports to meet criteria for the return of a child from government care. It is helpful to put fathers' concerns in legislative context, which is more complicated for Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous fathers in Canada. The affairs of members of First Nations fall uniquely under federal rather than provincial jurisdiction. Their rights are governed by Canada's 1985 Indian Act, which holds them as 'children before the law.' As such, they enjoy fewer rights, services, and supports, and far more barriers to accessing them, compared to other Canadians.

For Indigenous fathers, if the mother is non-Indigenous, mothers are typically given custody. Several fathers in the study who had lost custody of one or more children expressed their view that: "*When you go to court, it doesn't matter what the situation is, the courts are always in favour of the women.*" On a similar note, among fathers who had limited or no contact with one or more children who were in government care, many described in various ways their sense of being intimidated or helpless to establish working relationships with child welfare workers, to access legal advice, or to manage the transportation and scheduling required to sustain contact with their child.

Regarding paternity registration, one father described how his pregnant partner moved from their remote settlement to a town some 200 kilometres away to be near medical facilities before the birth of their child. He was not present to sign the birth record. First Nations fathers must have their signature on a birth record witnessed in order to establish paternity of a First Nations child (Mann, 2005). Barriers to registering paternity that this father identified included lack of funds to have his signature notarized as required, lack of transportation to complete legal paperwork, and a reluctance to engage with government bureaucrats over the signing of legal documents – a practice that historically has not served Indigenous peoples. This father’s account sheds light on some of the reasons why there is a much higher rate of non-registration of paternity on the birth records of Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous children in Canada (Clatworthy, 2004). Research with non-Indigenous fathers has shown that fathers who voluntarily register their paternity on their child’s birth record are more likely to provide financial support and to be involved with their child (Argys & Peters, 2001; Bergman & Hobson, 2002), even after parents separate (Mincy, Garfinkel, & Nepomnyaschy, 2005). No fathers’ names on birth records has been found to be a risk factor for infant mortality (Gaudino, Jenkins, et al., 1999).

Cultural continuity

The need for a cultural frame around support services for Indigenous fathers and for positive reflections of Indigenous men in caregiving roles has been implied in much of the foregoing discussion. For example, several fathers identified the need for print materials and programs specifically tailored for Indigenous fathers.

I know that John Howard has that but it is not specifically for Aboriginal fathers. I think that there is a high degree of cultural shame amongst Aboriginal people and I think that if they [Aboriginal fathers] could identify with other Aboriginal fathers, share their experiences, share their strengths, then maybe they could step out of that and teach their children how to be proud of who they are.

Many participants in the research expressed regrets about not being able to share their cultural and linguistic heritage with their children.

Knowing about your culture has a huge impact on your parenting because if you have no knowledge of where you come from or your roots, it leaves a gap in your child's upbringing, their identity, self-esteem, and self worth.

Jobs that traditionally enabled Indigenous men to constitute culturally authentic father roles as breadwinners and teachers of skills, cultural histories and ceremonies are rapidly vanishing. For example, as access to land and jobs in industries depending on natural resources have diminished, few Aboriginal fathers have the means to take their children out on trap lines, fishing boats, or hunting grounds.

The Aboriginal male, their job title used to be hunting and gathering. They used to have to hunt and if you weren't hunting or fishing you were preparing to go hunting, fishing, gathering food, making shelters and doing all those things. So, that whole thing with the Europeans coming in and wiping it all out... First it was the residential school and they took away the language, or tried to take the language away. They took the entire role of the male in the Aboriginal community away so that left a big empty gap for males. They didn't know what to do, where to go, what to say, when to say it, or anything. They had to be fit in and

women had to play another role in telling the male what to do, but the women kept their jobs. The women looked after the kids; they did all the food preparations and things like that. That stayed. The women fit in a lot easier than the men I think. It wasn't easy for women, but they had certain jobs that they were able to do. Whereas the men, they had to go off, they had to go and learn how to build certain kind of houses and they had to relearn how to live in society, how to get a wife and what to do as a husband, as a father and as a member of a community.

A few fathers identified cultural activities and involvement in Native Friendship Centres and in Aboriginal Head Start programs as culturally safe and father-friendly avenues to engage with their children and to develop their own cultural and heritage language knowledge and skills to pass along to their children. Some fathers referred to “circles of care” as an important aspect of cultural renewal, consistent with their historically collectivist communities, in which deeply intertwined relationships among family members provide a network of care for children, as opposed to the nuclear unit of care characteristic of western European family life.

Fathers are trying to get more involved with their children. They are trying to get back into the circle. Our circle has been broken for so long and now it is going to make us stronger as a people.

Thirty-six per cent of fathers offered positive forecasts for Indigenous fathers' involvement, and many saw increased fathers' involvement as an important avenue for recovery of Indigenous peoples' health or Indigenous ways of life following historical disruptions.

I look at all these young people experiencing that family life, with fathers involved as much as the rest, and I have such a sense of hope. It means we're turning things around.

Discussion

Indigenous fathers in Canada remain on the margins of mainstream society with no previous research or focused social advocacy. Indigenous children are greatly over-represented in the child welfare system in Canada (Ball, 2008; National Welfare Council, 2007), while Indigenous fathers are greatly under-represented in family life and other normative social institutions in Canada. Indigenous fathers brought a multigenerational perspective to understanding their involvement in caring for children, underscoring the need for long-term investments in policy reform and programs to reduce structural, personal, and social barriers to Indigenous fathers' involvement. Extreme socio-economic exclusion, oppression under Canada's Indian Act, and mother centric biases in parenting and child care programs and in child welfare and custody practices no doubt deter many Indigenous fathers from initiating and sustaining connections with their children. The multi-dimensional conceptual framework constructed to represent fathers' accounts suggests numerous entry points for effecting positive change. Equitable access to children by Indigenous fathers after separation, divorce, or placement of children in foster and adoptive homes requires policy reforms and funding to implement provisions that may already be articulated. A conceptual framework encompassing conditions affecting both the quality and continuity of Indigenous fathers' involvement must go beyond individual father characteristics and family interaction variables to include institutional tools that can enhance or obstruct fathers' access to opportunities to be involved.

The current exploratory study uncovered strong motivation on the part of First Nations and Métis fathers who volunteered for a study of Indigenous fathers' involvement men to tell their stories, to be "found" in relationships with younger and older family members, and to construct pathways towards engaged and sustained fathering for themselves and for Indigenous peoples collectively. The large population of Indigenous men who are homeless, incarcerated and have other characteristics that typically disrupt father-child relationships also need to be considered in developing conceptual models, research, and interventions that address their experiences, needs, and goals in relation to their children.

Because of colonial government interventions that placed many of these men or their parents in Residential Schools that were rife with abuse, most participating fathers had no exposure to positive father role models when they were growing up. Their accounts about learning to be fathers suggested that they were rallying all their personal resources and were determined to become effective and to stay involved in spite the relative lack of social or economic support and in spite of legislation, policies and social and health services that favour mothers. As one father said, "*I don't have much support. It's just me, myself, and I.*" They described searching for clues about how to father and how to engage with children anywhere they could find them, including from television sit-coms, women's coaching and encouragement. Their stories are reminiscent of the challenges that Daly (1993) found among fathers who faced a void with respect to identifiable and meaningful father role models. Fathers in his study tended to observe and select particular behaviours to incorporate into their roles without much internal consistency or over-arching concept of fatherhood. Indigenous fathers' stories point to

the need for investments in programs for fathers, including social fathers, delivered by fathers, with an initial emphasis on helping fathers understand what children need and how, concretely and with few resources, fathers can meet their needs.

Longitudinal qualitative research with a small number of Indigenous fathers could illuminate different trajectories in response to the births of their children over time, the interacting effects of fathers, children, and other family members upon one another, the social and psychological processes that enable men to develop empathy for children and for their children's mothers in the absence of a personal experience of an emotionally nurturing family, and fathers' readiness to participate in different kinds of support programs at different times during their fatherhood journeys. Research with Indigenous men struggling to reconstitute fatherhood in the shadow of colonial legacies can shine new light on pathways that compensate for and repair fault lines in the transmission of positive father-child bonds across generations, illuminating and refining our understandings of ecological factors that promote continuity or change.

Footnotes

¹The terms Indigenous and Aboriginal are used almost synonymously in Canada to refer to people who identify themselves as descendants of the original inhabitants of the land now called Canada. The term *Aboriginal* was coined in the 1800s by the Canadian colonial government as a catch-all label. Some people refrain from using this term because of its colonial origins. Many people prefer the term *Indigenous* because of its connection to a global advocacy movement of Indigenous peoples who use this term, notably the Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

² First Nation is a term that can apply both to individuals and to communities. First Nations communities are culturally distinct, federally registered entities comprised mostly of Status Indians living on lands reserved for them by the federal government.

³ Generations yet to come is a common saying among First Nations peoples in Canada, or more completely: It took seven generations for colonial policies to bring us to the nearly depleted state we are in today, and it will take seven generations to rebuild our pride, our cultures, and our Nations.”

⁴ Estimates suggest that between 30 to 40 percent of children in government care in Canada are Indigenous, and that there is a greater number of Indigenous children in care today than there were during the height of the Residential Schools movement in the 1950s (Ball, 2008; National Council of Welfare, 2007). An additional large number of Indigenous children have been permanently placed in adoptive homes.

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