

Indigenous Fathers' Involvement in Reconstituting "Circles of Care"

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Abstract This qualitative study, part of a Canadian national study of fathers' involvement, opened up First Nations and Métis fathering as a new area of inquiry. Conversational interviews with 80 Indigenous fathers illuminated the socio-historical conditions that have shaped Indigenous men's experiences of learning to be a father and becoming a man in the context of changing gender relationships and the regeneration of circles of care. Indigenous fathers' experiences unfold in a socio-historical context fraught with difficulties. However, the study findings suggest cultural strengths and sources of resilience unseen in research and community programs driven by Euro-western perspectives. This research can inform efforts to reduce systemic barriers and reconstitute positive father involvement following disrupted intergenerational transmission of fathering in Canada and elsewhere.

Keywords Fathers · Father involvement · Indigenous · Families · Circles of care · Generativity · Men and masculinity · Intergenerational transmission · Aboriginal · First Nations · Learning fatherhood · Historical trauma · Chronosystem

Introduction

Fathers may very well be the greatest untapped resources in the lives of Indigenous children. If we could support them to get involved and stay connected with their children, that would be a big

protective factor for these youngsters as they grow up. (John 2004)

Within British Columbia and across Canada, there is a pressing need to increase understanding and support for Indigenous fathers, especially in policy frameworks and programs aimed at improving the health and quality of life of Indigenous children and families. Currently, however, a number of inter-related barriers limit such inclusion. As detailed throughout this article, for social, political, and economic reasons rooted in colonialism, many Indigenous fathers face challenges in their daily lives that constrain their involvement in fathering and fathering programs to a greater degree than most non-Indigenous men. The relative invisibility fostered by these conditions is self-perpetuating: to the extent that Indigenous fathers are uninvolved or perceived to be uninvolved in fathering and fathering programs, researchers, social advocates, and policy and program developers tend to direct their attention elsewhere, resulting in a lack of information on the needs and goals of Indigenous fathers.

In community-based programs, the behaviors and needs of Indigenous fathers tend to be interpreted through a Euro-Western lens, partly as a result of the gap in knowledge about Indigenous fathers' experiences. A search of published research databases in Canada and the United States yielded only two research studies specifically focusing on Indigenous fathers (Hossain 2001; Williams et al. 1996). To develop effective community outreach efforts, practitioners need more knowledge about Indigenous fathers' living circumstances, needs, and goals, as well as their parenting intentions. The current research was a first step towards the development of new understandings of Indigenous fatherhood.

This study began in 2003 as part of the first Canadian national study of fathers' involvement, initiated by the

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Fathers' Involvement Research Alliance (2005). The study provides preliminary information for a larger research program that will examine: (a) whether the theories that currently dominate scholarship on fathers' involvement and parenting programs reflect the experiences of Indigenous fathers; and (b) what kinds of theoretical understandings and father support programs may be required to encompass Indigenous fathers' experiences, needs, and goals.

Historical and Demographic Barriers to Indigenous Father Involvement

There are over one million Indigenous people in Canada, including about 500,000 Status and non-Status Indians living off-reserve in urban centers and 200,000 First Nations living on reserves, mostly in rural areas, plus 300,000 Métis (mixed Indigenous and European heritage), and 70,000 Inuit living primarily in the far north (Statistics Canada 2001).¹ The current study was situated in British Columbia, which is home to about one third of the Indigenous peoples in Canada, representing over 200 culturally heterogeneous communities and a large urban Indigenous population.

Indigenous scholars have chronicled the devastating effects of colonial government policies over the last 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 (Lawrence 2004; Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples 1996). Systems of tribal community governance and extended family life were broken down and transmission of cultural knowledge and skills for living on the land was disrupted (Chrisjohn et al. 1997; Smolewski and Wesley-Esquimaux 2003). Colonial efforts to sever ties between children and parents included the Indian Residential Schools, where over half of the First Nations and Métis children in Canada were confined by 1960 (Miller 1996), and widespread foster placement and adoption in non-Indigenous homes that have continued from the 1950s till now (First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada 2005). Extensive physical and sexual abuse of Indigenous children in these government-enforced placements has been well documented (Fournier and Crey 1997; Ing 2000; Lawrence 2004).

¹ The 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.

Thus, most Indigenous adults today have not had the kinds of experiential learning, affection, and play that are the hallmarks of childhood in Euro-Western cultures and that have been conceptualized as foundational for psychosocial well-being and eventual successful parenting (Cowan and Cowan 1987; Haig-Brown 1988; Mussell 2005). In Canada today, it is generally acknowledged that most Indigenous men and women are either survivors of residential schools or have suffered secondary trauma as a result of being born to parents who lacked parenting role models (Lawrence 2004). As a result, when Indigenous men become fathers, most are venturing into a role that has no personal resonance. Forced relocations of villages and dispersions of clans, along with urbanization, have further disconnected Indigenous people from their heritage language, culture, and clans (Brown et al. 2005; Jantzen 2004; Lawrence 2004; Newhouse and Peters 2003; York 1990).

Gaps in health status and social well-being between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada are well documented (Hackett 2005; Kelm 1998; Kirmayer et al. 2003). These gaps have been attributed to poverty, low quality housing, low education, and high unemployment (White et al. 2003). Demographic data about Indigenous men (Statistics Canada 2001) indicate that they have lower education and employment, and higher poverty, mobility, homelessness, and incarceration than all other populations in Canada. These key ecological antecedents help explain why Indigenous men have the highest rates of mental illness, addictions, and suicide among ethnic groups in Canada (Kirmayer et al. 2003).

These gaps in health status have been interpreted not only as products of contemporary Indigenous life conditions (White et al. 2003), but also of socio-historical factors that have created multigenerational challenges for Indigenous people to regain their health and social well-being (Hackett 2005; Kelm 1998). Research has found that the conditions that characterize many Indigenous men's lives create significant barriers to their positive and sustained involvement as fathers (Roopnarine et al. 1995). Indigenous fathers' elusiveness in their children's lives and in programs for families has been widely interpreted as indicating their indifferent attitudes (Claes and Clifton 1998; Mussell 2005). Yet, Indigenous men's marginal living conditions and extensive health problems, combined with overwhelming negative social stigma, are undoubtedly obstacles to their involvement as fathers.

Knowledge of the challenges faced by Indigenous men can inform programs to support them in their parenting roles and indirectly promote the well-being of Indigenous children. Research on non-Indigenous fathers shows clear correlations between father involvement and outcomes for children, mothers, fathers, families, and communities (Lamb 2004; Marsiglio et al. 2000). Positive father

involvement has been associated with children's cognitive and academic achievement (Flouri and Buchanan 2004; Yogman et al. 1995) and their social and emotional well-being (Allen and Daly 2002; Biller and Kimpton 1997; Snarey 1993). Father involvement has also been shown to have salutogenic effects on fathers' mental health (Milkie et al. 2002) and has been associated with an increase in well-being and a decrease in accidental and premature deaths, criminal convictions, hospital admissions, and substance abuse (Pleck and Masciadrelli 2004). Research has found that social support and parenting education can significantly increase the quality of fathers' involvement (Fagan and Iglesias 1999; Kissman 2001; Palm 1997).

Inclusion of Indigenous Fathers in Theory, Research, and Practice

Based on a review of the social conditions (White et al. 2003), demographic characteristics (Statistics Canada 2001), historically rooted challenges (Smolewski and Wesley-Esquimaux 2003), and the absence of research or social advocacy focused on Indigenous fathers, it can be argued that Indigenous fathers are the most socially excluded population in North America. Whereas many European-heritage fathers have maintained a hegemonic sense of masculine identity (Connell 1995) and have asserted their sense of entitlement in various fathers' rights movements (Gavanas 2004), Indigenous men in Canada remain on the margins of mainstream society and have no visible representation. Their culturally traditional male roles and entitlements in family and community structures have been forcibly stripped from them by government policies.

In place of culturally authentic roles for Indigenous men, which were often (though not uniformly) constituted within matriarchal societies, the colonial government in Canada introduced patriarchal systems of government for Indigenous tribes, inscribing men's exclusive entitlement to leadership roles in Indigenous community administration and representation. An analysis of these historical processes and their present-day consequences is beyond the scope of this article. However, it is important to note that hegemonic Eurocentric constructions of men's roles—as heads of households, clans and communities and as dominant decision makers in allocating family and community resources—may have been inconsistent with traditional Indigenous family and community structures and constructions of masculinity. Blind acceptance of Euro-western presumptions about normative performances of manhood and masculinity may obscure sources of resilience among Indigenous fathers that could be strengthened by policy reforms and programs grounded in Indigenous fathers' perspectives and Indigenous cultural systems (Dion Stout and Kipling 2003).

The literature on fathering (Lamb 2004) overwhelmingly represents the experiences of fathers of European heritage, as other investigators have noted (Cabrera and Garcia Coll 2004; Fischler 1985; Toth and Xu 1999; Yang 1999). A recent literature review conducted for this study yielded no published research studies focusing 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 et al. 1996). The latter study also suggested an intergenerational modeling effect: the fathers who spent more time in caregiving tasks had themselves been fathered by men who were more involved in their upbringing.

The relative absence of Indigenous men in research is mirrored in policy and program development. As stated by one parent support worker: "It's not so much that we have failed to reach Indigenous dads. It's more that we have never tried" (Ball 2005). Previous research has revealed important cross-cultural variations in family life (e.g., Adams and Trost 2004), parenting beliefs (Harkness and Super 1996), gender (e.g., Nanda 1999), and socialization (Valsiner 2004). Thus, it is reasonable to expect that there are important inter- and intra-group differences and similarities in the experiences of Indigenous fathers compared to non-Indigenous fathers.

Indigenous fathers' involvement is contested terrain in British Columbia. In some Indigenous communities, an emerging cultural disposition toward fathers' involvement competes with entrenched social stereotypes—including among Indigenous women—that question Indigenous men's potential to be responsible fathers. In addition, some First Nations cultures in British Columbia are historically matriarchal; women in these communities have traditionally taken primary responsibility for raising both girls and boys. Media depictions reinforce constructions of Indigenous fathers as deadbeat dads. The current study is a first step to move beyond these stereotypical views by exploring the heterogeneity of Indigenous fathers' experiences, perspectives, needs, and goals.

Methods

Research Context

As part of a macro-social agenda to increase Indigenous self-determination, Indigenous scholars, communities, and governing bodies in Canada have begun to articulate principles

and protocols for research involving Indigenous peoples (Castellano 2004; Interagency Advisory Panel on Research Ethics 2004; Piquemal 2000; Ten Fingers 2005; University of Victoria, Indigenous Governance Program 2003). The current study was conceived within this framework. Ethical pre-conditions of entering into the national study of fatherhood included: ensuring relevance of the topic to Indigenous peoples' goals for social development, establishing partnerships, and building Indigenous research capacity. An urgent need to understand and support Indigenous fathers of young children had already been expressed by the national and provincial offices of Aboriginal Head Start, which serves Indigenous young children and families. Low participation of First Nations and Métis fathers in programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers had been found in previous research by the author (Ball 2004).

Partnerships for the research were negotiated between the author, based at the University of Victoria, and five community partners. These communities asked to be included because they had already decided to focus on “doing more for fathers” as part of their community development plan, and the author saw these five communities as having the potential to yield a representative diversity of Indigenous men in Canada with respect to geographical circumstances and residence on and off of reserves. The community partners included one First Nation community² on reserve in southwestern British Columbia, three Aboriginal Head Start programs in central British Columbia, and one Dads' Group in northwestern British Columbia (a weekly social drop-in for fathers and their children). Community-university research agreements were signified by a memorandum of understanding between the investigator and a representative of each of the communities detailing the purpose of the project; planned project activities and outcomes; and ethical considerations such as the protection of participants' privacy, data storage and preservation, and dissemination of findings.

Participants

Participant Recruitment

To ensure feasibility, to remain within the time and budget constraints of the project, and to meaningfully involve community partners, participants were sought only within British Columbia. Community partners assisted with recruitment by announcing the project to parents whose children attended early childhood programs and by putting

up posters around the community. Most of the fathers who volunteered to participate were not affiliated with the community programs, but were members of the local Indigenous community or lived in larger urban centers. The study recruited participants who self-identified as fathers in some capacity, including biological fathers and men engaged in fathering roles as current or former partners of the mothers of the children with whom they were involved, as well as fathers with no active involvement with their children. Because the community partners wanted to know about Indigenous fathers with young children, the study recruited fathers with at least one child under 7 years of age.

Participant Sample

Seventy-two First Nations (90%), 7 Métis (9%), and one non-Indigenous father of First Nations children (1%) were recruited, for a total of 80 participants. Characteristics of the sample are summarized in Table 1. The sample was representative with respect to most estimates of the geographic distribution of First Nations and Métis fathers on and off of reserves and in urban and rural areas (Statistics Canada 2001). The number of children with whom participants reported being involved as fathers ranged from 1 to 11 ($M = 3.29$), with a smaller number of children living in the same household as the father ($M = 2.08$). The median annual household income among fathers who responded to this question ranged from \$20–39,000 (Canadian). Thus, the sample showed higher income levels compared to Statistics Canada's (2001) estimates for Indigenous households. However, nearly one quarter of the fathers declined to provide income information. One third of the fathers reported receiving financial aid from various government sources. Over one quarter of the fathers in this study reported having some kind of physical or mental disability. Compared to the non-Indigenous population in British Columbia, the Indigenous population is known to have a higher incidence of disabilities due to chronic diseases, fetal alcohol exposure, poor housing, malnutrition, alcoholism, and depression (B.C. Ministry of Health Planning 2002; Canadian Institute for Health Information 2004).

Procedure

There were four study components: (1) an analysis of Canadian census data to construct a profile of Indigenous fathers; (2) a demographic questionnaire capturing participants' family composition, living situations, arrangements with partners, and demographic characteristics; (3) a questionnaire on fathers' involvement with their children and program supports; and (4) a semi-structured interview. The current report draws on findings from the demographic questionnaire and the interview data.

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.

Table 1 Self-reported demographic characteristics of participants

Characteristics	%	Frequency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
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		

Measures

Data-gathering decisions were made by a research team composed of Indigenous fathers, an Indigenous woman, and the author, a mother of Irish-English descent. Although Indigenous researchers currently prefer narrative or storytelling approaches in work with Indigenous peoples (Jackson 1993; Tuhiwai Smith 1999), the team chose a more structured approach. The team accurately anticipated that most fathers would be speaking publically about their experiences of fathering for the first time. The team was mindful of the documented widespread abuse in residential schools and adoptive homes when most of these men were children. Team members were concerned that if fathers were asked to engage in free-flowing commentary about their experiences of fathering, this could ‘trigger’ memories of abusive experiences with their own fathers or father

figures that could distress participants long after the interview. The Indigenous team members were novice interviewers, and interviews took place in participating fathers’ homes, often in rural settings where there was little or no access to crisis or counseling services. The team decided to use a semi-structured, conversational interview that would take no more than 1 hour to complete. The interviews were conducted, audio-taped, and transcribed by the Indigenous team members who received training in home-visiting, consent, interviewing, questionnaire development, administration, and coding, and transcription. In various ways, across all of the interviews, fathers were asked to share their experiences and explanations of the extent and nature of their involvement with their children, any co-parenting arrangements, how they were learning to be a father, supports for fathering, the impacts of their fathering on their community, and any changes they perceived in their

communities with regards to fathering. Following the grounded theory approach originated by Glaser and Strauss (1965) and see also Glaser (1978) and demonstrated in family interaction research by the author (Ball 1984; Ball et al. 1995), data collection and analysis were concurrent. Interview questions underwent four successive modifications to follow fathers' leads about meaningful dimensions of inquiry. After four successive iterations, the final 40 interviews used the same interview schedule. Data collection was stopped after 80 interviews had been analyzed and a hierarchy of core themes predictably recurred during the interviews and the themes could be substantiated with many examples from the participants' accounts.

Data Analysis

The same Indigenous team that collected the data worked with the author to conduct an inductive content analysis of the interview data, relying primarily on the *constant comparative analysis* process originated by Strauss and Corbin (1990) to identify similarities and differences across fathers' accounts. Since this was the first study of Indigenous fathers in Canada, it was important to avoid imposing an a priori content category scheme. Rather than aiming for "objectivity", a constructivist lens (Schwandt 1994) was used to construct superordinate themes from lower-level, line-by-line coding of transcripts, leading to increasing levels of abstraction. Practical limitations on the scope of the current study prevented the pursuit of an elaborated inductive theory. Thus, the findings are primarily descriptive at this point. However, the data analysis—in particular, the participating fathers' feedback about how the themes collectively represented the temporal, social, and personal dimensions of their fathering experiences—suggests some important shifts in emphasis for theory and future research.

Several months after their interview, fathers were invited to a gathering at each community partner site to hear and comment on the analysis and interpretation of the interview data. Fathers' feedback suggested a hierarchical and temporal ordering of the themes constructed in the data analysis. The theme *cultural reconstruction through circles of care* was superordinate, as it best represented the fathers' efforts to re-imagine and enact fatherhood, drawing upon whatever childhood memories they had of fatherhood as well as sources of social support and cultural knowledge of fatherhood available to them and their children. Fathers in all the communities agreed that the theme of disrupted fatherhood best accounted for the challenges they faced in becoming involved fathers (e.g., learning non-violent communication, overcoming anger with themselves, partners, and/or children; depression; not knowing how to be in a family or how to maintain a household). Against this causal, historical backdrop, fathers described several other

themes relating to the evolution of their role as fathers: changing gender relationships, becoming a man, learning to be a father, and mother-centrism.

Results

While the interview questions were intended to engage fathers in discussing their experiences of involvement with their children, 72% of fathers chose to talk primarily about their experiences of *learning* to be a father. They tended to cast this learning journey against a background of not having had positive experiences of being fathered themselves, and against a foreground of changing gender relationships that are instigating tentative reconstructions of what it means to be a man.

Eighty-four percent of the fathers' explanatory accounts invoked the theme of *disrupted intergenerational transmission of fathering*. This article highlights this theme not only because it was the most salient feature of the interviews, but also because it delineates the *chronosystem* in which the journey to involved fatherhood is situated for Indigenous men. In the ecological theory of development formulated by Bronfenbrenner (1979, 1986), the concept of the chronosystem refers to changes over time in the patterning of environmental events that influence an individual's development and life course. While the concept of the chronosystem has never been applied to changes in Indigenous expressions of fatherhood, it is particularly apt in encompassing the emphasis that fathers placed on socio-historical circumstances in accounting for their experiences of fatherhood.

The three inter-related themes of *changing gender relationships*, *becoming a man*, and *learning fatherhood* underscore the dynamic context of Indigenous fatherhood. Related to the latter themes, the issue of *mother-centrism* is also highlighted because it captures what fathers explicitly hoped would be learned from the study for changing policy and practice. Finally, the superordinate theme of *cultural reconstruction through circles of care* is discussed—offering an expanded definition of the theme of generativity that currently dominates theorizing about fathers' involvement.

Disrupted Intergenerational Transmission of Fathering

Although the Indigenous fathers on the research team decided against asking participants direct questions about their own experiences of being fathered or about their current personal challenges, virtually every father in the study raised these issues. They explained how their own childhood experiences with their fathers and father figures, including step-fathers and priests in residential schools, set

the stage for their own journey as fathers. Over two thirds of the fathers stated emphatically that they did not want to be like their own fathers. More broadly, many fathers gave accounts of the impacts of colonial government interventions that had diminished their families, communities, and cultures, including men's roles within these contexts. One father's account is reproduced at length to illustrate this overarching explanatory framework:

The Indigenous 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 Indigenous 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 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 kinds 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.

Historical loss and trauma figured prominently in most fathers' accounts as a monolithic causal factor accounting for their experiences as fathers. Seventy-two percent of fathers described in some way how they were recovering from residential school trauma or "second generation residential school trauma" resulting from being raised by parents who grew up without their mothers or fathers in residential schools. Many men 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.

Eighty-two percent of fathers referred in some way to the disruption of intergenerational bonds and transmission of language and culture in their explanatory accounts of the harsh living conditions, psychological problems, or challenging relationships in their lives, including father-child relationships.

My father was not involved in my life. 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 and then when I was nine, his brother murdered him. He was stabbed in a knife fight. 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.

Changing Gender Relationships

Fifty-six percent of fathers described broad shifts in gender roles in their partner relationships, families, and Indigenous communities. One quarter of the fathers pointed to the increasing participation of women in continuing education and the labor force, and the accompanying pressure on fathers to become more involved in caring for children.

More and more the women are going to work, which allows fathers to build a closer relationship with their children. And less and less Indigenous fathers are running away from their children; they are actually staying with them now.

One quarter of the men described their perception, corroborated by current government policies and the changing economic base of British Columbia, that there are many more opportunities for Indigenous women than men to upgrade their education, obtain short-term technical training, and secure employment in technical trades as secretaries, receptionists, teaching assistants, nurse's aids, child care workers, and in similar service and paraprofessional vocations.

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.

At the same time, they described changes in their own understandings of what it means to be a man, mirrored to some extent in greater community acceptance of men in caregiving roles. Forty percent of the fathers said they had been pushed to learn fathering skills in order to care part-time for their children on their own as a result of separation from their children's mother and alternating care arrangements. Five of the fathers in the study had been thrust into lone parenting when their partners died, moved away, or went missing.

Concurrently, jobs that traditionally took Indigenous men away from families for long periods, such as trapping, fishing, mining, and logging are less available, given the dependence of these industries on diminishing natural resources. As a result, whereas Indigenous men were traditionally the family breadwinners, men no longer maintain a monopoly over economic life. While a majority of Indigenous men have been dislocated from the world of work, a few fathers have become very involved in domestic life. Some fathers commented that what is lacking is a ready replacement for men's traditional skills and economic roles.

I'll go out and try looking for a job and they tell me I don't have the right education... they give me the run around. All the education programs are geared towards single mothers and they tell me that they can't help me.

Becoming a Man

Forty-five percent of fathers described in various ways how learning to be a father was helping them to "become a man". "I told my daughter recently that I didn't become a man until I had her. I said: 'I was learning how to be a man, thinking I was a man, until I saw you'". Several fathers elaborated that being a father makes them "feel like a man" because of needing to "protect" their child or because they are a "security blanket" for their child.

A father who was raising his daughter alone described how being separated from his partner pushed him to develop himself as a parent:

After the wife and I split, I had to really take a look at things with a mother's perspective, step away a bit. The father's role is firm, while the mother's role is gentle. I was going to be a single parent, so I had to make sure I showed both characteristics and that was hard.

Whereas some 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 effective or involved

fathers. They pointed instead to socio-historical conditions as the root cause of their lost boyhoods and challenges in becoming a man. As the father quoted earlier explained, historical events exerted different but also challenging pressures on 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 pride as persons and as Indigenous Peoples.

Some of the fathers' narratives described how they had moved from adolescence into young adulthood enacting a hegemonic masculinity borrowed from mainstream media depictions and observations of non-Indigenous men. Some fathers described how they gradually repudiated their "macho" personas. "Yah, so I was macho. A real tough guy. Whup-di-do ... so what? It left me spiritually bankrupt and totally isolated". All the men interviewed in the study who were actively involved with their children described undertaking a process of recovery from substance abuse. Many also described personal histories of self-harming behaviours, depression, issues with violence and anger, and other mental health challenges. Most of these fathers volunteered that they had completed one or more formal treatment programs. Seven fathers said they sought help with addictions, often through Twelve-Step Programs. In the context of treatment programs, they had begun to recalibrate their approach to relationships with partners and children towards more "balance", "respect", and "equality", a pattern also described by Irvine and Klocke (2001) in their study of men involved in a Twelve-Step program. Many Indigenous men described "beginning a journey of healing" as a turning point during which they became involved with their children's mother(s) and with their children in sharing parenting tasks and arrangements.

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.

Learning Fatherhood

Over half of the fathers volunteered that the birth of their first child was not the decisive event that caused them to "become a father". Nearly half of the fathers had little or no contact with their first-born child or children from an

earlier partnership, but most were involved with children who came later, usually through a subsequent partnership. At the time of the interview, four fathers had no contact with their children as a condition of parole or court order due to violent behavior associated with drug use. These four fathers wished to establish contact with their children. 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.

In most fathers' accounts, becoming a father was a slow and gradual process of identifying with the role, in the course of gaining a firmer grasp on their own health and well-being, managing relationships with other adults in order to sustain contact with children, and learning fathering skills. As a group, fathers' commentaries suggested two developmental pathways: "learning through play" and "stepping up to responsibilities". While not always occurring exclusively and not characterizing every father's journey, different fathers tended to emphasize one pathway or the other in their account of "what it took" to become involved fathers.

Eighteen fathers referred explicitly to "growing up" in the context of caring for their children. Some fathers found that engaging in play activities with their children evoked their own sense of playfulness and afforded them an opportunity to work through the loss of their own childhood as a result of family dysfunction and disruption. Several fathers reported that engaging with their children evoked painful memories or glimpses of childhoods that had been punctuated by abuse or family violence, death of a parent, or abruptly changing circumstances, such as residential school or apprehension by child protection services.

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.

Some fathers described "becoming a mature adult" as they began to acknowledge their obligations to protect, provide for, or be engaged with their child.

I think I am doing the best I can to raise him and I changed my life all for it. Instead of being young and partying all the time, I settled down and decided to raise him. I get a good outcome for him and that makes me the happiest.

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. One such father described himself as a "mama's boy" and described how he "felt the love" which is what he gives to his daughter now.

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.

Mother-Centrism

Sixty-one percent of fathers perceived some degree of social bias favouring mothers. Many fathers called for broader acknowledgement of fathers' increasing involvement in child care at the level of social policies and programs.

The times have changed, the cultures have changed, people have evolved as a culture and policies need to be updated With the whole separation from her [my child's] mother and the custody case at the courthouse, they all assumed that I was the bad guy. That "he is the male, these are the things that happened" and they put all the weight on my shoulders. They just left her alone and asked me all the questions and I was the one who had to fill out all the paperwork. Meanwhile, I had already had our daughter for nearly two years before this court case happened ... Her mother had only been around for three days, but the social workers assumed that she was the one that was bringing her up ... I know that there are a lot of single mothers out there, but for my case, they sort of just left me high and dry. There was no support for me ... I just want them to understand what I have had to do to bring this child up.

Fathers expressed their acute sense of social exclusion in what seems to them to be a mother's world of prenatal care and education, child care, parent education, health services, home-school liaison, social services, and other forms of social support for parenting.

There needs to be provided more male-based information, programs and workshops for men. I went there [to a parent support program] and there were all mothers. When I go to things like that, I just do not feel comfortable. 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.

As discussed, many fathers described their challenges in learning to be fathers, especially after difficult experiences with their own fathers and in residential schools, and yet there are few supports for them.

For years it has been the single mother ... So the people that are trained to deal with parenting and children are so focused on the woman ... family support workers, education, daycare workers and people like that need to be trained to deal with fathers. They need to know that there are fathers out there that are trying and they should be pushing for that.

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: "Nobody has even tried to talk to us; they haven't made an effort".

Cultural Reconstruction Through Circles of Care

Thirty-six percent of fathers offered broad commentaries on the future prospects for Indigenous men, families, or peoples, seeing increased fathers' involvement as an important avenue for recovery of Indigenous peoples' health or Indigenous ways of life following historical disruptions.

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.

Some fathers specifically related reconstituted gender roles as a pathway to reconstructing communal circles of care.

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.

Several fathers spoke movingly about their hope for revitalizing fatherhood within the context of extended family involvement in child care.

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. Now I know I *do* have a family that will help me no matter what, and they are all helping me in raising my girls, and that is good. It's our traditional way. And these girls are seeing that, and I think it will change how they raise their families.

Discussion

Overall, Indigenous fathers' accounts offered a multigenerational perspective on becoming a father, emphasizing their struggle to learn what it means to be a father after the disrupted transmission of fathering caused by various colonial government interventions. Indigenous fathers described the births of their children as having an important but gradually unfolding impact on their development. In contrast, research involving non-Indigenous men has found that fatherhood can be the single greatest shaper of men's lives (e.g., Palkovitz et al. 2001). While the biological fact of becoming a father did not always instigate identification with fatherhood, many fathers noted personal recovery, pressures from partners and other family members, the absence of a child's mother, or changes in gender role arrangements as catalytic events. Many men described the sociocultural shift in images of manhood in some Indigenous communities and in Canadian society generally as an enabling contextual factor in becoming involved fathers. In this study, men's mothers and female partners (not necessarily the mothers of the children in their care) played important roles in the transmission of fathering capacities, both in their capacity to form intimate relationships with their children and to develop skills to become engaged caregivers.

Theoretical Implications

Theories of fatherhood draw heavily on normative descriptions of lifespan development such as the "generative fatherhood model" (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997) informed by Erikson (1950) and on assumptions of ongoing transmission of fathering through father-child relationships across generations (Lamb 2004). Within the policy and practice frameworks informed by current psychosocial theory and research, it is generally understood that, for men, being able to realize one's potential as a father rests on a foundation of secure parent-child attachment in the early years (Bronfenbrenner 1991; Cassidy and Shaver 1999). As described earlier, due to the fracturing of Indigenous circles of care during the height of the colonization movement, most Indigenous fathers have not had this experience (Lawrence 2004). In addition, Euro-

Western models of the nuclear family, in which one father figure (along with one mother figure) is intended to meet all of a child's needs for guidance, discipline, affection, and support, have never characterized traditional Indigenous communities. Research into Indigenous fathering has the potential to reveal new conceptions of men's roles in the lives of children and to highlight sources of resilience that have not yet been glimpsed in theories or in community program models. In particular, participants' explicit reference to "circles of care" evokes a conception of family that is consistent with culturally and 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.

The developmental, lifespan perspective cannot fully accommodate the significance of the challenges and changes in the lives of Indigenous fathers. Bronfenbrenner's (1979, 1986) concept of the chronosystem resonates with the cultural and temporal perspective that Indigenous fathers bring to their descriptions of learning fatherhood and becoming a man. To develop an understanding of Indigenous men's journeys and needs as fathers, it is essential to grasp that the psychological development and family life of contemporary Indigenous fathers unfold within an ecological chronosystem fraught with difficulties. The impacts of historical trauma, social exclusion, and poverty on Indigenous men, and the vestiges and potential rekindling of communal caregiving roles, must be integrated into emerging constructions of Indigenous fatherhood and family organization.

Practical Implications

Indigenous fatherhood should not be understood within what some have called the "deficiency paradigm" (Hawkins and Dollahite 1997). At the same time, the monumental challenges facing Indigenous fathers and families should not be underestimated. Becoming a father was described by participants in this study as extremely challenging, 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 poverty, unemployment, and suicide among Indigenous men, and the associated large numbers of Indigenous children raised solely by mothers. All of the fathers who were positively involved with their children described a personal process widely referred to among Indigenous peoples in Canada as a "healing journey" (e.g.,

Aboriginal Healing Foundation 2006). The fathers in this study were eager to tell their stories and proud of what they had achieved over many years of learning how to be involved as fathers without having much exposure to positive fatherhood in their own lives. Their stories suggest the potential for a re-generation of involved Indigenous fathers as Indigenous peoples continue to gain strength to resist the vicissitudes of colonization and begin to reconstitute their cultures, including their constructions of what it means to be men and fathers within their communities.

This study has numerous implications for the cultivation of an environment that recognizes, supports, and promotes Indigenous fathers' involvement. First, the study uncovered a strong desire on the part of Indigenous fathers to tell their stories, to be "found" in relationships with both older and younger family members, and to construct a way forward to engaged and sustained fathering. This finding is encouraging for community-based programs that see father involvement as an important support to Indigenous children and families. Only one quarter of the fathers in this study reported using any parenting support programs; usually, this use was confined to accessing printed information. However, some fathers identified child care programs as a support for their parenting role. In feedback sessions held in research partner communities, fathers confirmed that child care programs were the best access point for father outreach and support initiatives.

Second, fathers in this study articulated a mandate for community-based agencies as well as political bodies to get involved in supporting healing programs, reducing negative stereotypes of Indigenous fathers and families, and actively reaching out to support fathers in their fatherhood journey. A mother-centric paradigm has dominated parenting research (Rohner and Veneziano 2001). Around the world, mothers have overwhelmingly been the beneficiaries of parenting outreach, support, and education programs (Evans 1995). Fathers in general remain largely invisible in social service training programs and in child welfare practice (Este and Amand 2003). Many researchers and practitioners recognize the deficiencies and need for transformation of the "motherhood first" paradigm (Rohner and Veneziano 2001). In the communities and agencies that partnered in the current study, father outreach efforts have met with almost no success. Results of a short survey given to fathers in the current study (to be reported elsewhere) revealed that the most frequent reasons fathers gave for scant participation in community programs were that: the program information seemed to be directed at women/mothers; they did not know programs existed; their schedules were too unpredictable to participate; or they lacked transportation. In Canada, further research on Indigenous fathers is timely, as more community programs are seeking information to develop more effective outreach

and support programs for Indigenous fathers, and policy reforms in some provinces are responding to calls by Indigenous leaders to embrace a “kinship care” approach involving all relatives when a child requires protective custody (Gleeson 1996).

Third, the findings of this study offer an initial framework to further investigate the kinds of assistance individual fathers may be receptive to at different points in their fathering experience. Different kinds of support are needed to help fathers work through issues associated with their own lost childhoods, to recover psychologically and spiritually, to learn fathering skills, and to achieve balance in their lives and family relationships. Longitudinal case study research with a small number of Indigenous fathers could illuminate different pathways in the transition to fatherhood; the intersecting themes of becoming a man and learning to be a father; the interacting effects of fathers, children, and other family members upon one another; and fathers’ readiness to participate in different kinds of support programs at different times. Community action research is gaining acceptance in many Indigenous communities around the world, including Canada (Kowalsky et al. 1996; Marsden 2002) and Aotearoa/New Zealand (e.g., Barnes 2000). This approach combines community participation and control with immediate tangible benefits. Community action research provides opportunities for comparative intervention studies that could identify critical periods to influence decisions about father involvement; the process of learning fatherhood; critical events, challenges, and factors that mediate the nature of fathers’ involvement; and culturally responsive outreach and support programs for Indigenous fathers.

Clearly, given the demographic data on Indigenous fathers’ circumstances, there is an urgent need to reduce systemic barriers to social inclusion. Poverty, low social status, racism, and policies that constrain Indigenous fathers’ efforts to establish paternity (Mann 2005) and to sustain connections with children (Blackstock et al. 2006), as well as a lack of effective outreach to fathers in rural and remote villages, combine to perpetuate the social exclusion of Indigenous fathers. The multigenerational perspective that Indigenous fathers brought to their understandings of fathering highlights the need to situate policy reforms and systemic program solutions within a long-term, post-colonial, social justice agenda.

Situations that disrupt the intergenerational transmission of fathering—government interventions, pandemics, political conflict, migrant labor, and ecological and technological disasters—are extremely common across the globe. New understandings of how Canadian Indigenous men are learning fatherhood can contribute to an emerging international literature on the reconstitution of fatherhood

following catastrophes (e.g., Hoffman 2004; Richter and Morrell 2009; Stover and Weinstein 2004; Tolfree 2004).

Limitations and Future Research

It is probable that the fathers who participated in this study were not representative of the population of First Nations and Métis fathers even within British Columbia with regard to the extent of their involvement with their children. Within British Columbia, it is generally acknowledged that a large proportion of Indigenous fathers have little or no knowledge or contact with their children. Thus, the research sample most likely represented a highly engaged end of the continuum of father involvement. Also, there are some 605 culturally distinct First Nations in Canada (Frideres and Gadacz 2005), and many sources of variation among Indigenous peoples living in urban centers across the country. The population of Indigenous peoples in British Columbia is even more diverse than in the rest of Canada. For example, the participants in the current study were heterogeneous with respect to linguistic group, spiritual practices, tribal affiliations, governance, and matriarchal or patriarchal clan systems. To avoid an over-generalized, “pan-Indigenous” interpretation of Indigenous fathers’ experiences, future research might explore the constitution of fathering and patterns of fathers’ involvement in various cultural groups and settings with varied historical and current circumstances.

No information was collected that could be used to triangulate fathers’ accounts with the experiences of their partners or children. During research feedback sessions with two of the community partners, several Indigenous women stated emphatically that First Nations women are more responsible and more competent to protect and raise children and that they did not wish to see any changes in women’s dominant roles in families. However, all the women were in favor of community-based initiatives to bring First Nations fathers into more active supporting roles with their children as members of family caregiving circles. The current study focused on eliciting the subjective accounts of fathers rather than on obtaining a measure of their behavior. Research on fathers frequently relies on maternal reports (Coley and Morris 2002); there is no shortage of women working in Indigenous communities and agencies who are willing to offer their views about Indigenous fathers. Indigenous fathers’ voices have rarely been heard in research or in community programs. This study offered Indigenous fathers the opportunity to speak without concerning themselves with other people’s views. The fathers in the current study shone a light on the potential for positive father involvement and the creation of new knowledge about cultural reconstruction and resilience following historical trauma and loss—in the words of one

father, “how to overcome fears and self-doubts and begin to learn to be a father despite never having had a father role model” (L. Joe, personal communication).

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