

Indigenous Fathers Cluster Executive Summary Father Involvement Community Research Forum Spring 2006

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INDIGENOUS MEN LEARNING FATHERHOOD

Using a community-university partnership approach, informed by Indigenous research ethics, this study opened up Indigenous fathering as a new area of inquiry in Canada. Conducted as part of a national study of fathers' involvement, conversational interviews with 80 First Nations and Metis fathers illuminated the socio-historical conditions associated with colonialism that have shaped Indigenous fathers' self-reported challenges in 'learning to be a father' and 'becoming a man.' Qualitative analyses guided by grounded theory methodology suggested three patterns of response to becoming a father: an avoidance pattern termed fathers-in-waiting; learning fathering through play; and stepping up/settling down to fathering responsibilities. Fathers described a gradual process of accepting and learning fatherhood, often years after the birth of their first children. Widespread shifts in gender roles and constructions of masculinity were identified as reciprocally influential conditions that have enabled some Indigenous men to become more involved in care-giving roles with their children.

Findings from this study and further research can extend fathering theory beyond a focus on Euro-Western men, and extend community practice beyond a persistent focus on mothers. Supporting Indigenous fathers' involvement requires sustained, macro-system efforts to reduce barriers to initiating and sustaining positive engagement with children. Steps include increasing information about and access to declaring paternity on birth records, engaging Indigenous fathers with adolescents (e.g., in schools) to promote awareness of how fathers' can be important in children's lives; increasing acknowledgement of fathers in children's programs and decision-making about children, and implementation of 'kith and kin' policies in child protection programs to keep children closer to home.

Introduction

"I grew up on the rez and life is different here. I grew up with a lot of social, economic, and spiritual chaos, and I suffered a lot of spiritual, emotional, and mental pain because of it. We all did. The growth of spirit, mind and body that is needed for recovery is not for the faint of heart. My healing process was very taxing. I either had to learn or die. It took a long hard time to mature into becoming a father, long after my kids were born. With 39 years of life behind me, and with the help of my wife, I feel like I'm finally becoming a man. I am finally growing strong, spiritually, socially, emotionally, and as a father." (Leroy Joe, father of five young girls, Lil'wat Nation)

Indigenous¹ fathers are arguably the most socially disenfranchised population in North America with monumental systemic barriers to well-being and little social advocacy. Indigenous children and families have been under-represented in demographic, social, educational and health surveys, and little is known or understood about the experiences of Aboriginal fathers. This summary describes the first research investigation of Indigenous fathers in Canada. The study was intended to provide preliminary clarification for a larger program of research examining whether theories that dominate scholarship on fathers' involvement and that guide parenting programs resonate with the experiences of Indigenous fathers. The study was motivated by the question: What kinds of new theoretical understandings, policy reforms, and community initiatives may be needed to represent and support Indigenous fathers' experiences, needs and goals?

Indigenous research ethics

The research was guided by emerging principles to for establishing ethical research practices involving Indigenous peoples, including: ensuring social relevance, establishing partnerships, strengthening Indigenous research capacity, and privileging Indigenous vetting of key messages derived from data interpretation. The study was conducted in B.C. where some First Nations and Aboriginal Head Start programs had already identified a need to understand Indigenous fathers' needs and goals and how to reach out to this population. As one program staff said: *"It's not so much that we have failed to reach Aboriginal dads. It's more that we have never tried."*

Partnerships

Community-university partnership agreements to conduct the research were negotiated with one First Nation on reserve (Lil'wat Nation), and three community-based agencies serving First Nations and Metis children in the vicinity of Prince George. As the study progressed, one community partner in Prince George dropped out of the project due to difficulties implementing the project at the recruitment stage. After news of the study spread, the research team received many requests for participation, and the study expanded to include a total of one on-reserve Aboriginal Head Start program (Esketemc), one off-reserve community program (Terrace Dad's Group), as well as 18 First Nations and Metis fathers without affiliations to the community partners who asked to contribute their stories to the project.

Research plan

An Indigenous research team worked with Jessica Ball to design, collect, transcribe, and interpret data, and to hold feedback sessions with community partners. A total of 80 fathers (72 First Nations; 8 Metis) participated. Information gathering included: (1) a demographic profile of Aboriginal fathers in Canada using census data; (2) an original Personal Characteristics Questionnaire and an original Father Involvement and Supports Questionnaire; and (3) a one-hour, audio-taped, semi-structured interview with each father about their experiences as fathers.

Findings

Study results to date have emphasized the lasting negative impacts of residential schools and other colonial government interventions that have promoted removals of Indigenous children from their homes and that forced the dispersion and diminution of Indigenous families, clans, communities and cultures. For nearly all fathers in the study, the legacy of disrupted of intergenerational relationships meant that they had negative or no experiences of being fathered themselves. Most fathers' narratives described a long and winding road to accepting fatherhood, learning what it means to be a father, learning how to play, and stepping up gradually to the responsibilities of fatherhood. One quarter of the fathers described learning about caring for children from their own mothers as well as from their female partners. Most fathers

¹ The terms Indigenous and Aboriginal are used almost synonymously in Canada to refer to the population of peoples who identify themselves as descendents of original habitants of the land now called Canada. Some prefer the term Indigenous because it connects to a global advocacy movement of Indigenous peoples who use this term, most notably the Maori in Aotearoa/New Zealand. The term 'Aboriginal' was coined in the 1800's by the colonial government in Canada as a catch-all label, and some people refrain from using this term because of its colonial derivation.

emphasized the joys of experiencing a child's love and watching their children learn and grow while feeling important in their child's life.

Conceptualization

While their journey to learning fatherhood nearly invariably took a hesitating and circuitous route, all but four of the Indigenous fathers who volunteered for the study currently had contact with at least some of their children. Most reported that they had sustained some degree of positive involvement over time, especially with children born after they had matured and recovered from substance abuse or other personal challenges. Thus, a key message from the study was: It's about time! Bronfenbrenner's construct of the 'chronosystem' is useful for framing Indigenous fatherhood within a socio-historical perspective, appreciating that it will take time for Indigenous families and communities to reconstruct cultural, social, and personal meanings of fatherhood and how fathers' involvement fits into reconstituted gender role relationships.

Recommendations

Fathers pointed to a lack of supports, especially in rural and remote settlements, and especially for men who were raising their children alone. All fathers described incidents where they felt that programs, policies, and society as a whole are biased in favour of mothers. Fathers recommended reforms to legislation in the Indian Act governing registration as Status Indians, and changes to make the process for designating a child's paternity more accessible. In order to sustain father-child relationships, they urged more funding for legal representation, mediation and counseling in custody decision-making, as well as implementation of kinship care policies when children are taken into protective custody, so that children remain in the community.

Knowledge dissemination and mobilization

The research team has engaged in dialogue about the study findings with three of the five community partners, and has given presentations to academic and professional gatherings in Victoria and Vancouver. Jessica Ball presented a paper on the study, co-authored with Ron George, at the Aboriginal Policy Research Conference in Ottawa on March 23, 2006. The paper, entitled *Policies and Practices Affecting Aboriginal Fathers' Involvement with their Children*, is under review for an edited volume of papers on Aboriginal policy research. Jessica Ball has submitted an invited paper to the *American Journal of Community Psychology*. The study has been described on the website of one of the community partners, Lil'wat Nation, following a gathering of participating fathers in that community on March 2, when the interpretations of data collected for the study were 'vetted.' At this gathering, fathers prioritized a documentary conveying stories of Indigenous fathers in their own words. Fathers hoped such a documentary could be shown on APTN, the mass media, and in high schools. Documentary footage has been shot with the help of a small grant from CIFVF, and will be produced on DVD pending funding. Applications for funding to produce a guide for fathers and a guide for community-based practitioners, as well as for further research, are in progress.

For more information on the work of the Indigenous fathers cluster and links to publications and PowerPoint presentations, visit <http://www.ecdip.org/fathers/index.htm>.

FATHER INVOLVEMENT RESEARCH ALLIANCE* CURA

Immigrant Fathers Cluster

Focus: The challenges faced by immigrant men (Russian and Sudanese) as they parent in Canada including role reversals of parents and children due to children's rapid acculturation; racism and its impact on immigrant fathering; family and neighbourhood isolation and the impact of un/under-employment on fathering. Based in Calgary with links to Toronto and Montreal, and led by Dr. David Este, University of Calgary.

Gay Fathers Cluster

Focus: The effects of homophobia on gay fathering; social, legal, and cultural barriers to fathering for gay men; access to services for gay fathers and what can be learned about parenting from men operating outside of traditional gender dynamics. Based in Toronto and led by Rachel Epstein, coordinator LGBT Parenting Network/David Kelly Services, Family Service Association of Toronto (FSAT).

Separated and Divorced Fathers Cluster

Focus: The salient legal, emotional, and financial issues faced by separated and divorced fathers; the strengths they bring to their family relationships; identification of patterns that sustain and interfere with positive father involvement; identification of needs and evidence based solutions. Based in Vancouver and Vancouver Island, and led by Dr. Edward Kruk, School of Social Work and Family Studies, University of British Columbia.

New Fathers Cluster

Focus: The support services provided to fathers through the first eighteen months of the child's life, including pre-natal period; the impact of becoming a dad on the father's physical and mental health and on the father's personal development; and examination of the degree of support afforded to fathers by the health care system. Based in London, York Region, and Toronto, and led by Ed Bader, Co-Chair FIRA (Community): Catholic Community Services of York Region.

Young Fathers Cluster

Focus: The multiple dimensions for young fathers that need support (work, school, housing, relationships); challenging the negative perceptions of young fathers as expressed through social services and the courts; identification of programming needs for young fathers. Based in the Ottawa/Hull Region and led by Dr. Annie Devault, Université du Québec en Outaouais.

Fathers of Children with Special Needs Cluster

Focus: The challenges of fathering a special needs child and determining the factors that limit or facilitate involvement; improving the practice of "family-centred" care with fathers of children who experience a chronic health condition and/or a physical disability. Based in Toronto and London, and led by Dr. Ted McNeill, Director of Social Work, The Hospital for Sick Children.

Indigenous Fathers Cluster

Focus: The unique issues affecting Indigenous fathers' caring for young children (0-6) enrolled in centre-based child care; improving community outreach to Indigenous fathers; creating meaningful roles for Indigenous fathers involved with their children in child care and development programs; and to alter program structures, program materials, and program activities in order to better serve fathers. Based in Victoria, Vancouver and northern British Columbia, and led by Dr. Jessica Ball, University of Victoria.

*Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), Community-University Research Alliance Program

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