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**Policies and Practices Affecting Aboriginal Fathers' Involvement
with their Children¹**

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Introduction

This paper offers a perspective on how Canadian federal and provincial policies and practices may be affecting Aboriginal fathers' involvement with their children. Canadian history has resulted in a series of legislative acts that have ingrained racism and secured the social exclusion of Aboriginal peoples. Systemic racism occurs when institutions such as government agencies and organizations responsible for developing and maintaining public policy, health care, education and social services function in ways that limit rights or opportunities on the basis of ethnic identity (Moffatt & Cook, 2005). Provisions in the Indian Act effectively work to diminish the population eligible for federal entitlements as Status Indians. Jurisdictional ambiguity for First Nations people's health and social services has reduced the transparency and accessibility of services. Domination of social services by non-Aboriginal agencies and personnel has limited the cultural acceptability of services to Aboriginal children and families. In addition to being harmed by racist legislation, insufficient funding and lack of appropriately trained personnel has meant that even when promising policies are in place, there is persistent and pervasive failure of service systems to deliver in timely and needed ways.

Within this difficult context, First Nations fathers have been especially excluded both as a stakeholder group and as a resource for Aboriginal children and youth. Over the past decade, Aboriginal groups have worked hard to improve developmental conditions for Aboriginal infants and young children, for example, through quality child care, innovative Maternal and Child Health Programs, and Aboriginal Head Start. Yet, much remains to be done to recognize the contributions that fathers can make to children and families. The Grand Chief of the First Nations Summit in British Columbia, Ed John, asserted in a recent symposium on Aboriginal Early Childhood Care and development: *"Fathers may very well be the greatest untapped resources in the lives of Aboriginal 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."* (Aboriginal Early Childhood Development Leaders Forum, Vancouver, April 27, 2004, quoted with permission). Research involving non-Aboriginal fathers shows clear correlations between father involvement and developmental outcomes for children, mothers, fathers, families, and communities (Lamb, 2004; Marsiglio, Day & Lamb, 2000; Flouri & Buchanan, 2004), as well as improvements in fathers' mental health (Milkie, Bianchi, Mattingly & Robinson, 2002) and fathers' social well-being (Pleck & Masciadrelli, 2004). Steps need to be taken to reduce systemic barriers and create supportive environments for Aboriginal fathers to initiate and sustain positive relationships with their children.

An opportunity to conduct the first research study of First Nations and Metis fathers in Canada came about through an initiative of the Fathers Involvement Research Alliance of Canada (FIRA). Grant funding was obtained from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada – Community University Research Alliances program (SSHRC, 2005) to conduct a national study of fatherhood. This collaborative study is exploring the experiences of seven populations of fathers, including First Nations and Metis fathers' experiences. The study is focused understanding factors that affect on fathers' involvements with their children and fathers' views about needed reforms to legislation, public policies, community resources and supports (Daly & Ball, 2005).

Method

Research ethics

The current study was conceived as part of a larger agenda of reparative social justice (Ball, 2005a). The research has been guided by current principles and protocols for research involving Aboriginal peoples (Castellano, 2004; Interagency Advisory Panel, 2003; Piquemal, 2000; Ten Fingers, 2005; University of Victoria – Indigenous Governance Program, 2003). Ensuring relevance, establishing partnerships, and building research capacity were seen as ethical pre-conditions of entering into the national fatherhood study. Because of time and budget constraints, the study was conducted only in B.C. An urgent need to understand and support Aboriginal fathers had already been expressed by the national office of Aboriginal Head Start, and by agencies in British Columbia serving Aboriginal children and families, such as the First Nations and Inuit Health Branch Early Childhood Program and the Aboriginal Child Care Society. Low participation of First Nations and Metis fathers in programs for infants and toddlers in B.C. was found in previous research (Ball, 2005b), and this is a frequently reported concern at meetings of Aboriginal child care practitioners. Aboriginal practitioners in B.C. responded enthusiastically to an inquiry about whether to proceed with a study component focused on Aboriginal fathers.

Community-university partnership agreements to conduct the research were negotiated with one First Nation on reserve, and two community-based agencies serving First Nations and Metis children in Prince George. After news of the study spread, the research team received an outpouring of requests from First Nations and Metis fathers, communities, and agencies to participate. Due to limitations on time and travel for the study, the research plan could be expanded only slightly to encompass two on-reserve First Nations and fathers affiliated with three off-reserve community programs, as well as 18 fathers without affiliations to the community partners who asked to contribute their stories.

Research plan

First Nations fathers and one woman of Aboriginal descent worked on the study team, contributing variously to the design, collection, transcription, and interpretation of data, and holding feedback sessions with community partners. Information gathering had three components: (1) a demographic profile of Aboriginal fathers in Canada using census data; (2) a questionnaire asking each father about their children, their involvement with their children, their roles in relation to their children's mother(s), and their use of community programs; and (3) a conversational interview about fathers' experiences. Details about the research method are described elsewhere (Ball, 2006).

Participant recruitment

The study recruited 80 First Nations and Métis men who self-identified as fathers in some capacity, including biological fathers and men engaged in fathering roles as partners or former partners of the mothers of children with whom they are involved, as well as biological fathers with no active involvement with their children. Because the

community partners wanted to know about Aboriginal fathers with young children, the study recruited fathers with at least one child less than 7 years of age.

Data analysis

Data analysis used a grounded theory approach originated by Glaser and Strauss (1965; Glaser, 1978) and demonstrated in family interaction research by one of the authors (Ball, Cowan, & Cowan, 1995).

Results

Participants

Characteristics of the participant group are summarized in Table 1. Seventy-two First Nations (90%), 7 Metis (9%), and one non-Aboriginal father of First Nations children were recruited, for a total of 80 participants. This included 42 (52.5%) fathers living off-reserve in urban centers, 35 (43.8%) fathers living on-reserve in rural areas, and 3 (3.75%) fathers living off-reserve in rural areas. The sample was representative with reference to estimates by Statistics Canada (2001) of the distribution of First Nations and Metis fathers living on and off reserve, based on self-reported Aboriginal identity. Estimates based on the broader definition of self-reported Aboriginal ethnic origins reported during the 2001 census show 78.4% of the Aboriginal-origin-based population living off-reserve in rural and urban non-reserve areas (Statistics Canada, 2001, with 57.5% of this population living in urban areas (Siggner, 2003).

Table 1.

Self-reported Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Characteristics	%	Frequency	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Identity as First Nations	90.0	72		
Identity as Metis	8.75	7		
Living On-Reserve	43.8	35		
Living Off-Reserve	52.5	42		
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

Findings

Long and winding roads to becoming fathers

First Nations and Métis fathers in the study described their struggles to accept a father role or even to acknowledge the birth of their child, sometimes years after their first child was born. In contrast, studies of European-heritage fathers indicate that the birth of children typically has an immediate and momentous impact on these men (e.g., Palkovitz, Copes, & Woolfolk, 2001). In the current study, nearly half of the Aboriginal fathers had little or no contact with their first born child or with children from an earlier partnership until these children were adolescent or older. However, most fathers were actively involved with children who had come later, usually through a subsequent partnership. Thus, most fathers described a gradual process of identifying with fatherhood, of learning fathering skills, and of learning to be positively involved with their children.

When I became a father it took me a long time to learn those things: how to show love, how to play with my kids, how to be a father. And I finally feel I'm getting there, and it gives me so much hope.

Many also described needing time to learn to manage relationships with their children's mothers, extended families, foster parents, and family service workers in order to have some sustained contact with children. Nearly half of the fathers said they wished for more involvement with their children. Given this unique and often halting journey towards becoming involved fathers, what were some of the causes and barriers that make the transition to fatherhood and the goal of sustaining desired levels of involvement with their children more difficult for these Aboriginal fathers?

Disrupted intergenerational transmission of fathering

The accounts of Aboriginal fathers in the study variously described how the legacy of racist legislation and policy has left Aboriginal people in a disempowered and disadvantaged position in Canadian society. Recognition of the pervasive impacts of colonial policies on Aboriginal children and families has only just begun. Fathers described historical trauma as a monolithic set of causal factors shaping their experiences

of being fathered when they were children, and of stepping up to the role of father in their own children's lives.

One thing I notice is a lot of Non-Aboriginal fathers going out with their kids, doing stuff with their kids and it is something I don't really see Native guys doing. [Why do you think that is?] I think it has a lot to do with how they were raised and how they grew up in their own family. It was one thing I noticed was that I didn't do those things before, because I was never taught those things, I never did those things with my family. It is kind of hard.

Most fathers described their loss of clarity about their roles as men, fathers, husbands, and cultural mentors for their children as a result of the loss of connection to cultural and linguistic communities and ancestral lands. They referred to various colonial government policies that have disrupted teaching and learning about positive fathering from one generation to another.

Back then [when my first child was born], 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 eighteen 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.

Government policies have resulted in the dispersion of children and extended family groupings through residential schooling, foster care, adoption, forced relocations of villages, and incentives for assimilation and urbanization. For example, one father described visits he has now with a daughter he had with a non-Aboriginal mother whose family members had arranged to have his daughter adopted.

It makes me feel so happy to be called 'Dad.' With my older children, I did not have a chance to be part of their lives. My oldest daughter lives with her grandparents in [another province] and I haven't seen her since she was a newborn.

Many of the fathers in the current study were separated geographically from their cultural and linguistic communities of origin and expressed anger or regrets about not being able to share their cultural and linguistic heritage with their children.

Not 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.

Several of the older fathers had lost their connection to their cultures of origin over the course of many years spent in residential schools. Several younger fathers had become disconnected from their ancestral roots as a result of placement in foster care and adoptive homes far from their cultural communities. Some of the fathers in the study reported that they were trying hard to re-establish and pass down their cultural identity, knowledge, and family relationships.

My adopted sweat family has been really helpful. I was boarding with the sweat keeper and his wife would always help me with things or teach me different things that I did not know. I used to take him [my son] out to the sweats with me and took him out to the pow-wow when he was about two. We used to talk and I used to make up stories about warriors, princesses and chief and council. Smudging – he knows about that. I have my smudge kit right there and he knows about how it protects you, keeps the negativity away, and helps you throughout your day. He is well informed about that. But dancing...I would like to get him into that. But there are time constraints and only having him half time, there are a lot of things that we cannot do that maybe full-time fathers could do.

Aboriginal scholars have chronicled the devastating effects of colonial government policies that were aimed, first, at segregating Indians from colonial society through a reservation system, and subsequently, at forcing Aboriginal peoples either to assimilate into colonial society or subsist on its margins (Fournier & Crey, 1997; Ing, 2000; Lawrence, 2004; Miller, 1996; York, 1990). Over the course of seven generations, systems of tribal community governance and extended family life were broken down, and the transmission of cultural knowledge and skills for living on the land was disrupted (Chrisjohn & Young, 1997; Smolewski & Wesley-Esquimaux, 2003). Urbanization has disconnected Aboriginal people from their heritage language, culture, and clans (Brown, Higgitt, Wingert, Miller, & Morrisette, 2005; Jantzen, 2004; Lawrence, 2004; Newhouse & Peters, 2003). Colonial efforts to sever ties between children and parents meant that most Aboriginal adults today have not enjoyed the kinds of experiential learning, affection, and play that are considered hallmarks of childhood in western European-heritage cultures and foundation for psychosocial development and eventual parenting (Bronfenbrenner, 1990; Cassidy & Shaver, 1999; Lamb, 2004).

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.... 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.

Institutional barriers

In addition to historical and ongoing policies resulting in loss of traditional territories, cultures, language, and social support systems, Aboriginal fathers in the study perceived several other barriers to sustained and satisfying involvement with their children. The most frequently cited barriers are discussed subsequently in this paper, including: legislation and practices affecting establishment of paternity; mother-centred programs of support for parenting, child care, education, and health; legal and community-level custody and guardianship decisions favouring care by mothers or mothers' extended family members; lack of Aboriginal child welfare agencies and disruptions in family care caused by non-Aboriginal welfare agencies.

Establishing paternity

Paternity designation has implications for determination of Aboriginal identity and, in the case of First Nations, registration (or not) under the 1985 Indian Act. Research with non-Aboriginal fathers has shown that paternity designation has implications for involvement of fathers with their children (Argys & Peters, 2001; Bergman & Hobson, 2002), with fathers more likely to provide financial support and be involved with children whose birth records show that they are the father. According to Clatworthy (2004), nearly one in five children born to Registered Indian women between 1985 and 1999 did not have a father of record on official documents. Various people may play a role in this omission, including fathers themselves, mothers, community health care and hospital staff, provincial birth registrars, First Nations regional administrators, and federal regional managers of Indian registration involved in the birth registration process. Clatworthy found higher rates of unstated paternity in communities that do not have community-based maternity facilities and where maternity facilities are far from communities and fathers may not be present to sign birth documentation. In the research by Clatworthy, First Nations registration administrators attributed lack of paternity designation to a number of factors, including: fathers' denial of paternity to avoid responsibility for the mother or the child; fathers' lack of understanding about the registration process and the importance of paternal designation for establishing a child's entitlement to registration under the Indian Act; mothers' wishes, based on concerns about safety for themselves or the child, or a desire to hide the child's paternity from family and community; and financial costs to amending birth registration that may prohibit delayed paternity designation.

The ways in which fatherhood is constructed and held in the community may also affect paternity designation. For example, in some First Nations communities that are traditionally matrilineal, mothers and their families may view the children as belonging most importantly to the mother and her family, and may regard paternity designation as less important. Prevalent social stereotypes of First Nations fathers as dead-beat dads may encourage mothers to avoid registration of paternity. Some fathers in the current study explained that they had not claimed paternity on records for one or more of their children because they felt undeserving: in their own evaluation, they had nothing to offer their child or wanted to hide their identity to save the child from negative stigma. Some First Nations women in B.C., commenting on the current study noted that, in addition to birth registry, legal marriage is an institution that was introduced by European settlers. Traditionally, neither marriages nor births were matters of legal, written records.

One tool that has been used to erode traditional roles for fathers within First Nations family systems and communities is legislation in the Indian Act that has caused families to have their Indian Status revoked and to be removed or forbidden to live on reserve with their cultural community. This has mainly been enacted by the designation of Indian Status in the Indian Act, designations which dictate that an individual must live in residence on reserve with a community of origin. This colonial policy, consisting in a kind of legislated forceful relocation, has been similar in effect to the better known forced relocations of the communities of Davis Inlet and Cheslatta. As a result of enfranchisement and forced relocation, some say nearly 60% of First Nations in Canada now live off reserve, and most have lost their entitlements to federally administered

benefits. Other sources, such as the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples (CAP, 2006), interpret 2001 census data as showing that there are 80% of Aboriginal peoples living reserve. This large population of Aboriginal peoples is not entitled to many of the unique benefits and supports that the federal government is obligated to provide to Status Indians on reserves, including funding for programs specifically designed to support Aboriginal families or fathers.

Hastening the decline of First Nations family and community unity and support has been legislation in the Indian Act that causes women who marry non-Aboriginal men to have their status revoked women and precluding entitlements for children whose fathers were not registered as status Indians. Common sections of the Indian Act pre-dating 1985 were Sections 12(1)b and 12(1)a:4. Section 12(1)b caused loss of status to women marrying non-Indians or Metis and non-status Indians. Section 12(1) a: 4, or the double mother clause, caused children to lose status at the age of 21 years if their mother and father's mother were non-Indian. The Indian Act continues to differentiate between Status, Non-Status, and off-reserve Indians (see Erasmus & Dussault, 1996), and in so doing can be viewed as violating the United Nations Covenant of Civil and Political Rights (1976) that guarantees all citizens the rights to community, culture, and language.

Status. My children are having problems getting their status. The rules are getting so blurry. I know an East Indian girl who has her status! I mean how does that happen? The rules keep changing. And you would think that they [Indian Affairs] would be pushing – with the state that society is now with all of the First Nations being pulled apart and people moving to cities – they don't do enough to draw the people in and to get the people to stay in their community. They don't encourage people to get their status and teach them the rules and benefits and rights they have as First Nations people. I believe that when you get your Status card, you should get a booklet with the information about your rights, your place in the community, and what you can do to support your community and the people around you. Right now, it's a shot in the dark, like: 'Here you go, here's your card. Hopefully your grandfather is around to tell you something about it.'

The effects of these colonial policies are felt by mothers and fathers, as well as their children, and numerous position papers have advised changes to the Indian Act that would result, in principle, in greater equity and government accountability to Aboriginal peoples (e.g., Quebec Native Women's Association, 2000). However, even when needed policy reforms have been achieved, for example, in the case of Bill C-31, whereby certain Indians living off reserve acquired status, resources have often not been committed to make these changes meaningful in the lived experiences of Aboriginal families.

Meanwhile, the system invites manipulations in order to reduce the derogatory and debilitating effects of the Indian Act. For example, anecdotal reports suggest that in some situations, paternity may be designated to a Status Indian man who, although he is not the father, is able to secure a child's entitlement to registration as a Status Indian under provisions of the Indian Act. As one father in the study noted:

The Indian Act is a breeding formula, with recipes for what needs to show up on birth records in order to produce a status Indian child who may be able to pass on their status to their own offspring, depending on the status of the person they

have the child with. That's why we're called alphabet Indians. Some Indians have learned their alphabet and use paternity designation to produce children that meet the criteria for entitlements.

Poverty

Among broad determinants of Aboriginal fathers' capacity for positive involvement with their children, one of the most significant is poverty. In the current study, 37.5% of participating fathers were living below the poverty line, based on their family size, size of community of residence, and household income. Only 61% of the fathers were employed. This is consistent with 2001 census data (Statistics Canada, 2001). Census data for 2001 also indicate significantly higher prevalence of inadequate housing and food among Aboriginal families, both on- and off-reserve, compared to non-Aboriginal families. Fathers in the study who identified poverty as a barrier to fathering and family well-being attributed this to various government policies and intervention.

We have just been colonized. 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.

Poverty marginalizes fathers' involvement through both direct and indirect effects. For fathers living apart from their children, poverty often means that they are unable to relocate to live with or 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 for 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 of the 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. Over one-quarter of the fathers in the study did not have a phone, many did not have driver's licenses, and few owned their own vehicle. Several had changed addresses within six months after their interview. Four had no home at all and were "couch surfing", living in temporary shelters or on the streets. One was living in a half-way house. All of these manifestations of poverty contribute to the challenges that many Aboriginal fathers encounter in trying to maintain contact with their children and engaging comfortably and in suitable settings with them.

Poverty also reduces the prospects of fathers or mothers being able to retrieve a child who has been apprehended and placed in protective custody. When a child is apprehended, 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. Mothers who are poverty stricken but who retain custody of children

may be highly transient (e.g., couch surfing, living in transition homes), making it difficult for a father to find his children in order to sustain his relationship with them.

Dislocations from the world of work

Jobs that traditionally enabled Aboriginal men to be family breadwinners, such as trapping, fishing, mining, and work in the forest industry, have become less available as these industries depend on diminishing natural resources. Not only did these jobs traditionally give men an important role in the economic life of their families, but the world of work was traditionally a forum for fathers to engage with their children, teaching skills for living on the land and transmitting the stories of their lives and cultures. Few Aboriginal fathers have opportunities to take their children out on trap lines, fishing boats, or hunting, or to teach their ancestral language to their children. At the same time, many First Nations men have not completed high school, and may be out of step with their children's achievements or goals in formal schooling. Some fathers in the current study perceived that there are currently more opportunities for women to enter the work force in office jobs, especially in urban centres. They also perceived more opportunities for women to receive funding and support for vocational training and education.

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.

Fathers commented that what tends to be lacking is a ready replacement for men's traditional skills and economic roles, as the following account illustrates.

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.

Mother centric outreach and services

While a large proportion of Aboriginal men have been dislocated from the world of work, it appears that more fathers have become very involved in domestic life, including a few who are primary or lone caregivers.

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.

Yet, most fathers in the study 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. I want to go in there and say, 'This is a good program, but you have to expand it to include the father's point of view, give them a voice.' And when I try to speak up about it, people just brush it off. They say they have 'enough work to do' and 'we only have a certain amount of time to talk about these issues and maybe we'll just talk about it next time.' Nothing happens.

Indeed, community-based program managers who were interviewed in another study (Ball, 2005b) commented that, until now, Aboriginal fathers have not been seen as a source of support for infants, children and mothers. One parent support worker admitted: *"It's not so much that we have failed to reach Aboriginal dads. It's more that we have never tried."*

Mothers have overwhelmingly been beneficiaries of parenting outreach, support, and education programs. Many fathers in the study described their challenges in learning to be fathers with few supports in terms of Dad's groups, father outreach workers, or information about how to handle situations with their children. Among the top five kinds of help fathers in the study identified were information packets and DVD programs explaining: health, safety, and dental care; teaching techniques for preschoolers; and ways to handle new situations with their children, especially with daughters (e.g., bathing, toileting, interests, and puberty). Fathers wanted these resources to be specifically tailored for Aboriginal fathers in terms of reading level, realistic vignettes, and prevalent concerns.

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. If there is policy about women and mothers, there needs to be policy for men and fathers. You know - 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.

One father described his perception that there were many more supports for him through his female partner, until the partners separated.

It should be equal rights for the male and the female..... She (my child's mother) had so much support from the Ministry and through the parenting programs; she had it all set up for her. But then, when we split up, all that left with her.

Fathers in the study called for social policies and community programs to recognize fathers' increasing involvement in child care. Several fathers described how they feel excluded when health centres, child care programs, recreation centres, and other institutions in their community focus on the child's mother, citing as examples: phoning and asking to speak to the child's mother; asking for mother's daytime telephone numbers on forms; and holding parent-teacher meetings without informing fathers in advance. In their interviews, fathers variously asserted that they were not "irrelevant" as many institutions seemed to view them, and suggested that institutions have policies that require fathers as well as mothers to be notified about significant appointments (diagnostic assessment reports, immunization visits) and events (e.g., accident reports).

In addition to formal exclusions of fathers, fathers described settings and events where they experienced a socially hostile or dismissive attitude, as if they were intruders. For example, one father described how he felt like he was being looked at with suspicion when he walks down the city street with his four year old daughter: "*as if I might be abducting her.*" Another father reported that he had been pointedly asked at the community swimming pool where his daughter's mother was. Most fathers described situations where they had felt uncomfortable or unwelcome because the program was expecting mothers rather than fathers (e.g., Mother-Tot program, Mothers' Morning Out, Mother Goose). One father described: "*I walk in there [to the child development program] and all the ladies who work there look up almost like guilty, as if I've broken into their coffee klatch and I might have overheard their secrets.*"

Virtually all fathers in the study identified a need for more support to learn to be a father, including support groups specifically for Aboriginal fathers.

I think that father's support is big and being able to see how other fathers handle different situations. 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, like 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. 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 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.

Four fathers in the study were raising their children as lone parents, and 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.*" Two of the lone fathers in the study were raising their young daughters after their child's mother had gone missing. Both were isolated on small rural reserves, and reported that they had received little or no support from health, education, or social services.

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.

Separated and divorced Aboriginal fathers

Fair, equitable access to children by Aboriginal fathers after separation or divorce is an area where policy reforms are needed and commitments of funding are required to implement provisions that may already be articulated. For all fathers in Canada, there is the appearance of bias in favour of awarding custody to mothers. For Aboriginal fathers, if the mother is non-Aboriginal, historically the custody goes to the mother, very often with no access to the father. Several fathers 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.*

First Nations child and family service agency staff who were consulted for this study noted several ways that Aboriginal fathers are currently under-represented in custody decision-making and where there are gaps in services. For example, Shelly Johnson, Executive Director of Victoria's Surrounded by Cedar Child and Family Services Agency, identified the following barriers to sustained father-child relationships in situations involving child welfare interventions: long wait lists for separation and divorce mediation; lack of Aboriginal court workers; reluctance of mediators to take cases involving alcohol or other substance abuse; minimal legal representation; lack of appropriate education to inform fathers about their rights to legal aid; lack of staff to supervise father-child visits; lack of suitable, accessible places for supervised visits; lack of training for staff to supervise visits; and lack of clarity and follow-up when a non-Aboriginal mother refuses an Aboriginal father access to children (Johnson, personal communication, 2006). In a survey done by the Victoria Urban Aboriginal Steering Committee Society, separation and divorce mediation counselling was identified by First Nations people living on- and off-reserve as one of their program priorities (Johnson, 2001).

Jurisdictional ambiguities in access to support services

For Aboriginal fathers, access to resources, programs and services is more complicated than for non-Aboriginal fathers. There are several levels of government involved in providing funding, services, and other resources for Aboriginal peoples, including federal, provincial, and First Nations self-government, and First Nations or Inuit specific legislation. There are different policy frameworks in each provincial and territorial government for the administration of government services to Aboriginal peoples, and different fiduciary responsibilities with respect to different populations of Aboriginal people. For example, the federal government provides a wide range of services to First Nations on-reserve and to Inuit, primarily through Indian and Northern Affairs Canada and Health Canada. Apart from this unique relationship, provincial

governments have jurisdiction over health services, housing, education, and child and family services for Aboriginal peoples living off-reserve. Thus, the specific designation of the father's Aboriginal identity, as well as the geographic location(s) in which a father and his child reside, influence what kinds of services are available as well as how to access them. The situation is doubly complex when a child has a different identity with regard to Aboriginality or status, and/or lives in a different geographic location under a different jurisdiction.

Jurisdictional confusions, overlaps and gaps reflecting the multiple levels of government involvement in financing and delivering programs and services cause fragmentation, redundancies, inconsistencies, instability and lack of transparency of services for Aboriginal fathers and their families. A 'client-centred' or 'customer-service' orientation are not characteristics of most child and family service agencies. In particular, social assistance and child protection services tend to be more professional-oriented and designed to meet the needs of the government system and its preoccupations with their own standards and liability, rather than the family system, with its preoccupation to survive and provide some quality of life for family members. Navigating and negotiating needed resources and services requires far more tenacity, ingenuity, time, and resources than most Canadian men or women have at their disposal. In addition to the labyrinthine nature of service delivery for Aboriginal peoples, many First Nations and Metis people find the system even more intimidating than other cultural groups because of the history of oppressive relations between European-heritage Canadians and Aboriginal peoples and the lack of culturally competent staff or a cultural frame around services.

Child welfare: least disruptive interventions

Aboriginal children are over-represented in the child welfare system. The national First Nations Child and Family Caring Society estimates that 30-40% of children in the care of child welfare agencies are Aboriginal. According to this agency, Aboriginal children are most often identified as needing care as a result of neglect (almost twice the rate of non-Aboriginal children removed for reasons of neglect) as opposed to abuse or other concerns. Spence (2005) Top of message.....Despite the fact that 4% of the population of B.C.MCFD..... Neglect is often a result of poverty, lack of education, poor parenting skills, and father's or mother's stress or lack of wellness. Removal of children from their homes and communities is a common cause of disrupted father-child relationships, and several fathers in the study described this as the primary reason for lack of contact with one or more of their children.

Within the context of Canadian legislation recognizing certain special rights and legal status of Aboriginal people, government child welfare policies have gradually provided for Aboriginal people to assume authority over child welfare services for Aboriginal children. The extent and type of services offered by Aboriginal child and family welfare agencies depends upon the identity of the child, where he or she lives, and the type of agreement in place in that particular jurisdiction. Jurisdictional ambiguity for Aboriginal child and family services has limited or restricted access to services that fathers need in order to maintain contact with their children when their relationships with the child's mother is ruptured. Fathers in the study who had lost custody of their children,

or whose children had been placed in foster care or adoptive homes described feeling caught in an uninterpretable web with no legal representation or program support. Apprehension about dealing with government authorities, low levels of literacy, lack of transportation, language barriers, and personal difficulties interfering with daily functioning are just some of the barriers that fathers described as factors compounding the challenge of navigating the complexities of child welfare services.

In general, child welfare agencies need to be able to operate within the parameters of 'least disruptive interventions' whereby children considered to be in need of an increased level of care or protection are kept in their own homes, with extra supports, or in the homes of relatives or friends close to home. This kind of 'kith and kin' approach is consistent with Aboriginal perspectives on the roles of extended kinship networks in caring for children, and it increases the probability of continuous relationships between children and their parents. However, there is inadequate funding to implement least disruptive services. According to a study by the First Nations Child and Family Service Agencies and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, federal child welfare agencies serving on-reserve children and families receive 22% less funding than their provincial counterparts (Blackstock, Clarke, Cullen, D'Hondt & Formosa, 2004; FNCFS, 2005). In B.C., guardians of children living in the home of a relative for purposes of child protection receive a lower rate of pay and receive no support services compared to if the child is placed in a foster home with a non-relative. This policy means that children who are retained closer to home and family are more likely to live in poverty without needed supports, and there is a financial disincentive for relatives to keep children within their family network.

First Nations control over welfare services to children and families living off-reserve is disputed in many parts of Canada (Gough, Blackstock, & Bala, 2005). Again, pervasive ambiguities and inconsistencies make it difficult for fathers to navigate the system in order to sustain contact with their children (e.g., what exactly constitutes adequate care and protection, what constitutes a suitable home in which to place a child for alternative care, what fathers need to do to be eligible for supervised access to their children).

Recommendations

What do the study of First Nations and Métis fathers and other sources of evidence and commentary suggest in terms of improving the policy and program environment to promote Aboriginal fathers' positive involvement with their children?

Implement recommendations in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples.

The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP, 1996) is a public policy landmark that can serve as a primary reference point for deliberating steps towards policy reform and provision of needed resources and services to promote social justice for Aboriginal peoples in general and for Aboriginal fathers specifically. This five-volume, 4,000 page report has 440 recommendations. Volume 2 builds on the historical review

provided in Volume 1 by making the case for Aboriginal self-government within the Canadian context as the primary means for Aboriginal people to gain control over their affairs, including matters of child care, protection, and family well-being. Implementation of the recommendations in this report, deliberated over six years of consultations, would significantly improve conditions for Aboriginal children and families. While nation-to-nation negotiations are the preferred approach to renewing relationships between Aboriginal Peoples and provincial, federal and territorial governments in Canada, many recommendations in this document could be implemented while this larger agenda unfolds.

Reduce systemic barriers to social inclusion.

Progress needs to be made to reduce systemic barriers to Aboriginal fathers' social inclusion. Poverty, low social status, racism, and policies that prevent Aboriginal fathers from establishing paternity and sustaining connections with children combine to perpetuate Aboriginal fathers' social exclusion and a vacuum of support. The multigenerational perspective that Aboriginal fathers in the study brought to their understandings of fathering casts the need for policy reforms and systemic program solutions within a post-colonial, social justice agenda that requires a long-term commitment.

Facilitate paternity designation.

Research on fathers' involvement has only recently begun to explore the significance of establishing legal paternity, and yet there are enormous legal rights and responsibilities as well as social, emotional, and cultural implications that flow from the designation of paternity on a birth certificate – perhaps no more so than for Aboriginal peoples, given the distinctions among Indigenous peoples constructed by the Indian Act. It is important to hear from First Nations and Métis mothers and fathers their understandings and motives surrounding registration of maternity and paternity and the meanings of their decisions with regards to their involvement as parents.

Effective steps are needed to ensure that both fathers and mothers are aware of the process of registration and that the implications - legal, social, and cultural - of unstated paternity are understood. Processes and opportunities for paternity registration need to be explained and made readily accessible and free of charge to fathers at the time of a child's birth as well as for an extended period subsequently to the birth. Special efforts need to be made to reach out to fathers in rural and remote areas where maternity facilities are far from home and transportation restrictions may prevent fathers from being present at their child's birth.

Cultural continuity

Continuity of father-child relationships means that children are continuously given opportunities to learn about and consolidate Aboriginal cultural knowledge and identity. Aboriginal fathers are also given opportunities to re-constitute and reproduce culturally meaningful roles for fathers following the diminution of father roles during the height of the residential school and adoptions movements. Disrupted father-child relationships exacerbate the challenges for both Aboriginal children and their fathers to

elaborate cohesive and positive Aboriginal identities, especially for those living off-reserve, away from their cultural and language community. The Canadian Constitution affirms children's right of cultural continuity, stating that: "First Nations children have a right to learn, maintain, and preserve their respective language(s) and cultures." The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child also recognizes that "traditional cultural values are highlighted as essential for the protection and harmonious development of children."

Resource outreach and support programs for Aboriginal fathers.

The study documented a strong desire on the parts of Aboriginal father participants to tell their stories, to be "found" in relationships with both older and younger family members, and to construct an approach to engaged fathering. This is encouraging for community-based programs that see father involvement as important for in supporting Aboriginal children's development.

Many practitioners recognize the deficiencies of the motherhood-first paradigm and the need for its transformation (Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Policy and program development to enhance Aboriginal fathers' involvement needs to occur at the level of communities or community agencies representing the particular needs, goals, and circumstances of particular Aboriginal groups. These initiatives are best directed by Aboriginal people themselves. 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 Aboriginal fathers and families, and actively reaching out to support fathers in their journey of learning fatherhood.

Increase transparency and Aboriginal control of child welfare services.

Most fathers in the study conveyed their experiences of the entire system of child and family services as bewildering, intimidating, mother centric, culturally foreign, and often inaccessible. Focused efforts can make the system of supports for Aboriginal children and families more transparent, accessible, and father-friendly. There is an urgent need to increase the transparency of child welfare processes and agencies, through appropriate print materials and Aboriginal staff who can serve as guides to help fathers navigate the child welfare system.

There is an immediate need to fund and support the development and operation of Aboriginal-controlled child and family service agencies. Policy reforms in some provinces are responding to calls by Aboriginal leaders to embrace a 'least disruptive interventions' approach including kinship care whereby children requiring protective guardianship are placed in the homes of relatives (Gleeson, 1996). Policy reform is needed to provide for equivalent levels of funding and access to support services (e.g., counselling, respite, transportation) as are available when children are placed in the care of non-relatives. The kinship care approach needs to be given time to mature and to be evaluated with a view to improvements in implementation.

While Aboriginally-controlled child welfare agencies are evolving, existing service agencies can be improved by providing culturally appropriate supports and

interventions around services, and by providing language interpreter services and outreach. The cultural competence of professional service providers and community program staff can be enhanced through training delivered by Aboriginal people. Funding to deliver training in communities and Indigenous post-secondary institutions can strengthen the capacity of Aboriginal people to join the social service workforce and to assume positions of authority in child welfare agencies. Parent support programs, legal consultations, mediation, and family interventions need to be offered in settings that are accessible and sensitive to the legacy of residential schools and other government interventions.

Support research focused on Aboriginal fathers stories.

Aboriginal fathers' voices have rarely been heard in community programs or research. Practitioners have called for more knowledge about Aboriginal fathers' intentions in regards to parenting, their living circumstances, needs, and goals in order to inform community outreach efforts. Community response to this exploratory study, and insights gleaned from fathers' stories, suggest that research about Aboriginal fathering can fill a distinct gap in knowledge about fathering, which primarily represents men of western-European heritage. The current study was welcomed by Aboriginal fathers as an opportunity to tell their stories. One father reflected the importance of listening to fathers:

I think it's really important that Aboriginal people are heard in this survey and I'm honoured to be asked to take part in this. The more that we do this, the more that we work on hearing the voices of Aboriginal males and other males in Canada then the government will get a better understanding of what it is they're dealing with ...instead of telling us what we need to be doing, asking us what we, you know asking from input from us and getting out of what I'm saying and all the other men that your going to talk to or listen to or read about, put it all together and you're going to get some answers, and programs and services are going to be put together in a way that's going to come from down in the ground here.

There are some 605 culturally distinct First Nations reserves in Canada, and many sources of variation among Aboriginal peoples living in urban centers across the country. As we know, there are significant differences in policies affecting different Aboriginal populations and policies vary across all ten provinces and the territories. In particular, access to resources varies greatly between the largely urban, off-reserve population and the more rural on-reserve population of First Nations men. To avoid an over-generalized, 'pan-Aboriginal' interpretation of Aboriginal fathers' experiences and changes needed to policy and practice, future research should explore the constitution of fathering and patterns of fathers' involvement across specific cultural groups and settings with varied historical and current circumstances.

Concluding comments

Whereas many men of European-descent have asserted their sense of masculine identity and their entitlements as fathers in various father rights movements and policy forums (Connell, 1995; Gavanoas, 2004; Hobson, 2002), Aboriginal men in Canada remain very much on the margins of mainstream society with no focused social advocacy or previous research. There are monumental challenges facing Aboriginal fathers and

families. However, 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 with little help from community programs, child welfare services, or society as a whole. Their stories suggest the potential for a new generation of positively involved Aboriginal fathers that urgently needs to be recognized and supported through policy reforms and resources to put policies into practice.

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