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Indigenous Fathers in Canada

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Introduction

First Nations, Métis and Inuit fathers in Canada are generally referred to as 'Indigenous fathers.' There is little published research on Indigenous fathers' involvement in parenting. This absence mirrors the reality reflected in demographic and social survey findings indicating that Indigenous men are the most socially excluded population in Canada.[1] The few relevant studies suggest that their experiences growing up and becoming fathers chart a unique trajectory embedded in historically conditioned social and economic circumstances that are the outcomes of ongoing colonial government policies that have disempowered Indigenous family and community systems in Canada for centuries.[2]

Prior to French and British colonization, Indigenous Peoples lived in tribal communities with cohesive systems of governance, language, culture, clan systems and family structures.[3] These cultural groups had a robust sense of extended family: Elders' roles were integral to preparing boys to become men, fathers, and Elders themselves.[4] Colonial government policies had a devastating impact on Indigenous men's roles in family and community life. Most notably, the 1876 Indian Act gave the government license to remove First Nations children from their families and place them in 'Indian Residential Schools.' The explicit government mandate of these church- and government-run schools was to strip Indigenous children of their cultural identity and connections to their land, family and community.[5,6] Many young mothers and fathers

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today were raised by parents who were first or second generation survivors of residential schools and consequently lacked parenting role models.[7] Efforts are being made in many First Nations and Métis communities to revitalize traditional, extended family systems and the culturally-based roles of fathers.[8,9]

Subject

Indigenous communities and organizations are working to recover cultural knowledge that was all but lost since the century of Residential Schools, which ended in 1996. To support healing from historic trauma,[10] some investments have been made by the Canadian government.[11] Yet, funding for Indigenous health, education and social development focuses primarily on women and children.[12] While existing programs in Canada and elsewhere are typically based on Euro-Western social service models and assumptions about the nuclear family, living in urban settings with access to resources typical of middle-class households.[13] These programs may be unsuitable for many Indigenous fathers, especially those living in poverty, with marginal literacy, no drivers' license, and sub-standard or no housing. As well, most Indigenous families seek support in helping their children to understand nature and learn skills for living on the land, and to experience a spiritual connection to life.[14] Whereas fathers of European heritage tend to describe the birth of their child as an immediately life-altering experience, Indigenous dads may not develop a relationship with their child until she or he is in adolescence or older,[15] describing fatherhood as a 'journey.'[1,2] A number of historical and demographic conditions contribute to this trajectory: Indigenous men often become fathers during adolescence; a disproportionate number of incarcerated men in Canada are Indigenous;[17] substance abuse, patterns of seasonal work that require periods of father absence; and a high rate of parent separation and divorce can interrupt fathers' connection with their children.[18]

Research Context

Given the sparse research on Indigenous fathers' involvement, there remains much to learn from studies involving Indigenous partners and fathers that might yield new insights and challenge orthodox theories in the otherwise large literature on non-Indigenous fathers' involvement and family life. As well, evaluation studies of approaches to support Indigenous fathers could disrupt Euro-western assumptions about needs and goals for Indigenous father involvement and improve practices in education, child care, health services, and corrections services. Efforts to engage Indigenous men in research must be sensitive to the troubled history of misrepresentation and

abuse of Indigenous people by ‘settler’ agencies and social scientists. Extensive work has been done in Canada on ethical principles for research involving Indigenous individuals and communities.[16] While survey research and empirical methods are viable tools, community partnered research that uses participatory methods are most likely to be positively received by Indigenous community leaders and funding agencies.[19] Research must be responsive to goals and needs identified by Indigenous people. Also importantly, research should focus separately on the experiences of First Nations, Métis, Inuit and urban Indigenous fathers.

Recent Research Results

The only national study of fathers in Canada included a component led by the author, focused on Indigenous fathers’ experiences, needs, and goals. Using a community-university partnership approach and participatory research methods, five First Nations and Indigenous service organizations helped design the research ethics and consent protocols, methodology, survey tools and interview protocol. An Indigenous research team recruited and interviewed 80 First Nations and Métis fathers in the partner communities. Interviews asked men to describe their living conditions, transition to fatherhood, roles, needs and goals with their children (both biological and social) and other family members, and understandings of factors influencing their experiences as fathers. The team transcribed and interpreted the data, and participated in meetings with the partner communities to conceptualize the findings and plan knowledge mobilization tools. Virtually every father’s accounts of his struggles with developing and sustaining positive father involvement highlighted the destructive roles of Indian Residential Schools, child welfare involvement, adoption and loss of connection to their heritage culture, language, spirituality, and Elders. Nearly all fathers described father involvement as a set of skills that must be learned because they had not experienced positive relationships with men themselves as children. The study also pointed to institutional barriers that interrupt Aboriginal fathers’ involvement with their children, including: lack of paternity designation on children’s birth records and child welfare files; poverty; marginal or seasonal employment; incarceration; residential treatment programs that do not include family members; jurisdictional obstacles to accessing support services; disruptive child welfare interventions; and mother-centric outreach and services.[15] Most Indigenous fathers described their goal of learning and practicing culturally-based ways of caregiving, including for example the use of traditional foods, activities ‘on the land’, oral story-telling, songs and dance, and spiritual practices led by Elders and revival of traditional, extended and blended family circles of care for children.[20]

In 2013, the Public Health Agency of Canada commissioned a national survey of programs in Canada that promoted Indigenous fathers' positive involvement.[8] The authors contacted 130 relevant individuals or organizations; 35 sustained programmatic efforts and promising practices were identified. A majority of these programs were grassroots initiatives by Indigenous Head Start Programs, Friendship Centres and Tribal Councils, while a few were federally funded programs. The study also uncovered a diverse array of successful programs, each tailored to the available funding, specific culture, context and community-identified needs and goals. The survey found that in the absence of stable public funding dedicated to promoting positive father involvement, efforts to reach out to Indigenous fathers are often 'hidden' in other publicly funded programs, such as maternal and child health, early childhood care and development programs, Community Action for Children, and Canada Prenatal Nutrition Programs. Major obstacles to starting or sustaining these programs included precarious funding, lack of qualified male program facilitators, and lack of guidelines for delivering father-oriented, culturally informed program content and activities. Subsequently, the Public Health Agency of Canada funded the development of a guide booklet for Indigenous father involvement programs.[21] An international survey of Indigenous father involvement similarly suggested that successful research, evaluation and programs must incorporate local cultural ways of knowing and roles for fathers caring and protecting their children and supporting mothers.[22]

Research Questions

1. Effectiveness research on Indigenous father support programs is needed to identify promising practices in varying contexts and strategies for overcoming common obstacles faced by Indigenous fathers and communities seeking to support them. There is clear demand from Indigenous communities for program funding and models that can be adapted to incorporate local cultures and respond to fathers' needs and goals.
2. Research should explore how First Nations, Métis and Inuit fathers define, assess and understand determinants of 'success' in their journeys to become positively involved fathers. Ethical and culturally valid research should use Indigenous ('emic' - meaning from the perspective of the subject) goals and ways of measuring goal attainment, rather than imposing a dominant Eurocentred cultural lens.
3. Case study research could usefully explore new forms of family formation and mutual support involving Indigenous fathers that incorporate culturally-based values, concepts, forms of interaction and living together.[23]

Conclusions

The few studies to date on Indigenous fathers' journeys and community outreach services to Indigenous fathers are first steps in what could become a growing Indigenous father involvement movement. However, the field of fatherhood studies needs to open up mainstream conceptual frameworks and methodologies to comprehend the historical inputs, cultural foundations, and contemporary goals of Indigenous fatherhood. Father involvement research and social service programs are strongly driven by preconceived, Euro-western notions of what counts as 'involvement' – but whether these standards are always the most meaningful for diverse populations of First Nations, Métis and Inuit children, mothers or fathers is an empirical question. It is timely to open up the field of fatherhood studies to a greater range of fathers' expressions of caring, responsibility, and family participation.

Implications for Parents, Services and Policy

The research cited in this article confirms a pressing need for outreach to Indigenous fathers, including: sustained public funding to train Indigenous father support workers, operational funds for Indigenous-led program initiatives, and the creation and dissemination of culturally-based resources and adaptable program modules. Support efforts must be tailored to local community and family contexts, needs and goals. While this broad policy shift is an overarching goal, immediate enhancements should be made to reach Indigenous fathers in the most likely points of contact. For example, prenatal and parenting education programs, maternal and child health programs, childcare and early childhood programs could shift from the predominant mother-centric bias to provide father-friendly environments, practices, and hours of operation, and more Indigenous and especially male staff. There is a distinct need for a cultural frame around services[24] and creative ways to harness Indigenous fathers' knowledge and skills that reinforce their involvement and build on strengths.

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