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Indigenous Fathers' Journeys in Canada: Turning Around Disrupted Circles of Care

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Introduction

When Canadian federal government funding for a study of Indigenous² fathers of young children was announced in a national newspaper, the author, who was leading this component of the first Canada-wide study of father involvement, was inundated with phone calls from Indigenous fathers wanting to “tell my story” and from Indigenous communities wanting to become partners in the study. Recurrently, fathers explained that: “I just want to shed some light on our journeys to learn what it means for a First Nations man to become a father.” They noted that: “As far as I know, this is the first time anyone has paid attention to us and wanted to know what it takes for us to learn to be fathers.” With initial funding sufficient to interview 40 fathers, the author was compelled to limit the research sample to 80 fathers, with many more fathers asking if there could be a ‘waiting list.’

This spontaneous outpouring of enthusiasm for the study was unprecedented and remarkable for two reasons. First, ‘research’ is often referred to by Indigenous people in Canada as a ‘four letter word.’ After centuries of gross misrepresentations of Indigenous people in North America by explorers, cartographers, photographers, artists, historians and social scientists, Indigenous people and communities are generally extremely reluctant to participate in studies or engage as partners in community-engaged research. Repudiation of standard research practices has led Indigenous scholars to articulate ways to ‘decolonize’ research³ and to require distinctive approaches to negotiating ethical practice in research involving Indigenous peoples.⁴ Toward that end, researchers working with Indigenous people typically strive to make their research beneficial or meaningful to their community partners. Yet the national study of father involvement does not offer any tangible benefit in terms of social action or program support. Fathers who asked to be in the study were told they would receive their choice of a children’s book authored by an Indigenous writer or a back pack. Repeatedly, fathers explained that it was more than enough to have the chance to be seen instead of hidden “in our dark little holes.” Many were motivated “to have this chance to tell other First Nations men there is hope – if I can do it, you can too.” A father who was raising his young daughter alone after his partner joined the many missing Indigenous women on Canada’s ‘highway of tears’ in northern British Columbia, explained: “I just want people to know what I have to go through to raise this child on my own.”

The outpouring of interest by Indigenous fathers to participate in the study was also remarkable because some of the fathers had a rather tenuous hold on their engagement as fathers. In studies of fathers, it is generally recognized that fathers who volunteer to participate are probably unusually motivated, more established in their relationships with their children, and more connected with resources and services than other fathers. Volunteer fathers may also want to present themselves in a positive light, which is known to be a potential bias in research. In contrast, many Indigenous fathers volunteering for the study were struggling to sustain a home, sustain connections with their children, sustain their own mental and physical health, and sustain positive communications with the mothers of their children. Yet all of them wanted to convey their strong identification with being a father, their desire to be positively involved – whether this was full-time as a co-resident father or in small ways as a father living apart from their child. Their goal was to make their fatherhood journey known to others – to increase the visibility of Indigenous fathers as a whole, and to share their vision for a transformation in Indigenous fathers’ involvement within circles of care for current and future generations of Indigenous youngsters. The importance of enhancing awareness and understanding of the roles of fathers in promoting quality of life for children

and families has been emphasized internationally by organizations such as the World Health Organization⁵ and the United Nations Secretariat.⁶

General Overview of Indigenous Fathers and Families

This section provides demographic, socio-economic, historical and cultural information essential for understanding contemporary First Nations fathers' diverse experiences. Included is a section on the quality of life and emerging trends in Indigenous family life that point to dimensions of continuity and change.

Demographic Features

In 2011, the Canadian census recorded 1,400,685 people who self-identified as Indigenous, representing 4.3% of the total population.⁷ Among the total Indigenous population, 60.8% identify as First Nations, 32.3% identify as Métis (mixed First Nations and European heritage), and 4.2% identify as Inuit. The largest numbers of Indigenous people live in Ontario and the western provinces. Indigenous people make up the largest proportions of the populations of Nunavut and the Northwest Territories. The most remarkable trends among Indigenous populations in Canada are the high birth rates and corresponding young age: the median age was 23 years among Inuit, 26 years among First Nations, and 31 years among Métis. Between 2006 and 2011, the overall Aboriginal population in Canada increased by 232,385 people, or 20.1%, compared with a growth of 5.2% of the non-Aboriginal population.⁸ It is projected that by 2031, the Indigenous population will comprise approximately 4.0-5.3% of the Canadian population.⁹

The population of First Nations people living in land-based communities (known by the government as Indian reserves or settlements) is rapidly growing: of the 637,660 First Nations people who reported being Registered Indians¹⁰, nearly half (49.3%) live on a reserve or settlement. The last four censuses have also shown a steady migration to urban centres, with more than half of First Nations and Métis people living in cities, predominantly Winnipeg, Edmonton, Vancouver and Toronto. Indigenous adults are incarcerated at about nine times the rate of non-Indigenous adults. Although Indigenous people comprise only 4% of the adult population in Canada, they make up 23.2% of the inmate population.¹¹ In the authors' meetings with Indigenous men in correctional institutions, all interviewees reported that they are fathers.

Quality of life

While some First Nation and Métis families are thriving, poverty and other socio-economic indicators show that a majority of Indigenous families are struggling, and Indigenous men have the greatest disparities compared to non-Indigenous peoples on virtually every indicator. Indigenous people suffer disproportionately from poverty: the average household income of Indigenous families in Canada in 2011 was little more than one-third that of non-Indigenous families. The 2011 census estimated between 41-52.1% of Indigenous children live below the poverty line (depending on criteria for defining poverty and whether estimates include children with Indigenous identity or ancestry). One in four First Nations children living in land-based communities lives in poverty, compared to one in six Canadian children as a whole: approximately 43% of First Nations children live in a household with an annual household income of less than \$20,000.¹² Indigenous unemployment rates exceed the jobless rate of the population as a whole in every province, with rates in Saskatchewan and Manitoba – two provinces with the largest proportion of First Nations and Métis men - more than triple the overall rate. While educational attainment is improving among Indigenous people, a gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous education persists, with 48.4% of Indigenous adults completing a post-secondary qualification (trade certificate, college diploma, university degree) in 2011, compared to 64.7% of non-Indigenous adults.¹³

Based on findings from the Canadian census, post-censal surveys, and Health Canada sources (e.g., Health Canada, 2003), Indigenous men are arguably the most socially excluded group in Canada. They have the highest rates of poverty, homelessness, geographic mobility, mental illness, addictions, suicide and incarceration and the lowest levels of education, employment and household income.¹⁴ Their

children are more likely to be apprehended (primarily for neglect rather than abuse) than non-Indigenous children.¹⁵ Combined with social stigma, negative media stories, and pessimistic expectations for their capacity to manage intimate relationships and care for children, First Nation and Métis men face formidable structural and social obstacles to positive involvement as fathers. In the study of Indigenous father involvement, 61 of the 80 fathers reported three or more of the above-mentioned problems as creating difficulties for connecting with their children, playing a role in family life, or sustaining connection with their children across changes in their relationships with their children's mother or other changes in their lives.¹⁶ Virtually all of the 80 men described past or current challenges with mental health, addictions, or anger management, and one-third were struggling to generate a living wage and to secure adequate housing. These factors have been shown in research involving other populations of fathers as deterrents to positive father involvement.¹⁷ Research about non-Indigenous fathers shows significant correlations between father involvement and developmental outcomes for children, mothers, and fathers.¹⁸

Low Visibility

Indigenous fathers' social exclusion is reflected in their relative invisibility in formal systems such as their child's preschool program, school, health clinic, and recreation programs. Not being seen in their child's world outside the home often generates public perceptions that many Indigenous fathers are 'dead-beat' or indifferent towards their children.¹⁹ There is little acknowledgement in family support programs of the unique challenges faced by these men, most of whom have no memories of positive experiences with a father or father figure in their own lives as children and youth. And while there is a trend toward increasing numbers of lone-father-headed households, there are no programs specifically designed to help First Nation and Métis men become effective supports for their children's health and development (Ball and George 2007).

However all of the father participants in the inaugural study reported thinking a lot about their children, even if they saw them rarely, and wishing they could be more involved. Even many of those who were co-resident with their children and reported considerable involvement expressed a goal of being better at caring for their children and being a dad. Some described being invisible to social service and health workers: *My ex-partner had so much support from the Ministry and from parenting and child care programs. She had it all set up for her. But then, when we split up, all that left with her. I went to a parent support program and there were all mothers. Nobody has even tried to talk to me or to me and [my daughter]. They haven't made the effort...* An educator at an Aboriginal Head Start program in one of the partner communities recounted: *I realized that in fact I always asked for the mother when calling or visiting the children's homes. It was understanding that something as simple as this leads to alienating our dads.* The pattern of low visibility extends to a lower rate of Indigenous fathers' paternity registration on their children's birth certificates compared to the rate for non-Indigenous fathers.²⁰ Indigenous fathers' names and contact information are frequently missing from child protection files, making them virtually invisible to child welfare workers and making it difficult and sometimes impossible for fathers to find, stay in contact with, and become reunited with their children.²¹ Making Indigenous fathers invisible in child welfare pushes men away from being accountable and receiving support from programs and services.²² As Brown et al. note, ignoring vulnerable fathers can create risks for children as well as lost opportunities to develop and secure a potential asset for Indigenous children and their mothers. Grand Chief Edward John of the British Columbia First Nations Summit provided the impetus for the study of Indigenous fathers when he commented, in 2003: *Aboriginal fathers may well be the greatest untapped resource in the lives of Aboriginal children and youth.*²³

Historical Contexts of Indigenous Father Involvement

Hereditary Chief William Mussell²⁴ is the only male Indigenous scholar in Canada who has written specifically about the struggles and healing journeys of First Nations men. He has attributed these struggles to the negative effects of colonization, especially the intergenerational repercussions of Indian Residential Schools. The devastating effects of colonial government policies in Canada over the past 400

years have been extensively chronicled, most extensively by the 1996 Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples,²⁵ and more recently by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission.²⁶ From their earliest encounters, Indigenous Peoples were coerced by European newcomers to change the way they managed their families. This was not simply because the newcomers disliked the way Indigenous peoples raised their children (although Indigenous child-rearing practices were radically different from those in seventeenth-century Europe); rather, Indigenous family systems came under attack because they stood in the way of colonization. Kinship systems supported Indigenous relationships with the land and vice versa. Settlers perceived that all of these relationships would need to be dismantled to get rid of ‘the Indian problem’ and clear a path for them to claim title to the land. Forced relocations of villages, dispersions of clans, unfamiliar combinations of tribes within a system of Indian reservations, along with urbanization and incentives for legally disavowing Indigenous identity resulted in a shattering of the foundations of Indigenous family life, cultures, languages, and spirituality.²⁷ Systems of tribal community governance and extended family life were broken down and transmission of cultural knowledge and skills for living on the land were disrupted.²⁸ Female missionaries were charged by religious organizations supported by the colonial government to convert Indigenous women to Euro-Western norms of conjugality and domesticity.²⁹ Indigenous motherhood, which was the foundation for family decision-making and governance in many Indigenous communities, particularly in the Plains of Central Canada, came under attack.³⁰ The heteropatriarchal nuclear family was forced upon Indigenous people, disrupting the social, cultural, spiritual and economic roles of Indigenous fathers and mothers and causing a loss of identity, pride, and knowledge about positive father and mother involvement in caring for children. Referring to a similar process of colonization in the United States, Stremlau recounts: “*Reformers concluded that kinship systems, especially as they manifested in gender roles, prevented acculturation by undermining individualism and social order, and they turned to federal Indian policy to fracture these extended indigenous families into male-dominant, nuclear families, modelled after middle-class Anglo-American households.*”³¹ Persisting high levels of violence towards and within Indigenous communities have been linked to the imposition of a heteropatriarchal family structure and system of community-government relations.³²

Beginning in 1879 and operating until 1996, Indian Residential Schools operated by church organizations contracted by the federal government forcibly took over the role of raising Indigenous children. Although they resisted, many communities lost whole generations of children; by 1930, almost 75 per cent of First Nation school-aged children were in Residential Schools.³³ Many children were sent as far as possible from their communities and never returned; those who did return often found themselves alienated from their families, lands, and cultures and unable to communicate in the language of their parents and Elders. Extensive physical and sexual abuse of children in Residential Schools has been well documented³⁴ and eventuated in an apology by the federal government in 2008.³⁵ Once the children, who were the heart of communities, were taken, the wellness of Indigenous people began to deteriorate: Elders had no one to teach, women had no one to care for, and men had no children to provide for and protect.³⁶ When Residential School survivors became parents, many struggled because they had not experienced being affectionately cared for or observed positive parental role modelling.³⁷ Many lost confidence in their capacity to engage in the kinds of nurturing social interactions with young children that promote attachment and intimate social interaction.³⁸ Through Residential Schools and foster care, interactions with racist peers and teachers in public school and with professions in health care and child welfare, many Indigenous people learned not to trust others and have recurring difficulties sustaining intimate family relationships. This psychological fallout has been variously described as ‘historic trauma’,³⁹ ‘the soul-wound’ or ‘post-colonial traumatic stress’ which is passed on from generation to generation of many Indigenous people.⁴⁰

Today, only half of Indigenous children aged 14 and under (49.6%) are living in a family with both their parents, either biological or adoptive, compared to three-quarters (76%) of non-Indigenous children living with both parents. There is a long-standing and increasing trend towards Indigenous fathers being non-co-resident with their children; the number of Indigenous lone-mother-headed households is high and steadily increasing. About one third of Indigenous children (34.4%) live in a lone-

parent family, most often with their mother, compared with 17.4% of non-Aboriginal children. The trend towards non-co-residence may reflect in part the extremely high frequency of adolescent motherhood especially among Inuit and First Nations young women.⁴¹ Indigenous adolescents who give birth often live with their parents, who sometimes serve as gatekeepers limiting or even excluding fathers' involvement. It could be speculated that non-co-residence is also related to low rates of legal marital unions in the Indigenous compared to non-Indigenous population: historically, legal marriage was not part of Indigenous cultures but was introduced by the colonial government and often linked to retaining custody of children. At the same time, many fathers who are not co-resident with their children and their mother remain involved, including some who take turns being lone caregivers in an often informal custody sharing arrangement, as was found in the study of Indigenous fathers. Extensive involvement of the child welfare systems in each province and territory has resulted in widespread foster placement and adoption into non-Indigenous homes; about half of the children in government care are Indigenous.⁴² Colonialism remains a strong force affecting the lives of many Indigenous people in Canada, particularly those living on reserves. Disparities in indicators of wellness⁴³ and social inclusion point to persisting inequities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in access to resources for wellness and success in life.⁴⁴ Though some men are doing very well, as Mussell points out, the repercussions of these experiences are evident in the challenges facing many Indigenous men.

Cultural Contexts of Indigenous Father Involvement

The foregoing overview of key demographic characteristics and socio-historical conditions of Indigenous Peoples provides a context for some of the unique experiences of Indigenous fathers' that were uncovered in the only study of Indigenous father involvement in Canada, conducted by the author. This inaugural report forms one of seven component parts in the first national study of father involvement in Canada.⁴⁵ Other components involved community-university partnerships to explore experiences of young fathers, divorced fathers, new fathers, gay fathers, immigrant and refugee fathers and fathers of children with a chronic health conditions. The study of Indigenous fathers involved the author in a collaborative data collection process with First Nations and Métis fathers in five Indigenous communities in the province of British Columbia, Canada. One father from each of the first partnering communities worked with the author to plan, pilot and implement data collection, involving a questionnaire about family life, a questionnaire about programs and other resources the father had accessed and would like to access, and one-hour, audio-taped, conversational interviews using a set of conversation themes and probes.⁴⁶

Initially it was intended that all component studies would use the same questionnaire to obtain a basic profile of each father participant, their family context, and care arrangements, including questions on topics such as: the number of children in the family, marital status, employment, work-life balance, the division of household labour, forms of involvement in caring for children, and which partner tends to take time from work to care for a sick child. This questionnaire seemed relevant and useful for the other six component studies. However, the questionnaire did not work readily with Indigenous fathers. The five Indigenous collaborating fathers found the generic questionnaire impossible to answer succinctly, including seemingly straightforward questions such as: How many children do you have? How many children live in your household? As well, they doubted the relevance, suitability, or comparative importance of many questions, such as about marital status, work-life balance, and partners' division of domestic labour and caring for children – questions that are typical in studies of father involvement. Some of these questions were eliminated for the study of Indigenous fathers. Questions that were initially closed-ended or had limited number of response options were replaced with more open-ended questions, and were asked in an interview rather than as a self-administered procedure. Much more time was allocated for Indigenous fathers to describe their often highly complex and dynamic family composition and care arrangements compared to the time needed to gather this information from non-Indigenous fathers in other parts of the national study.

The qualitative, exploratory study involved research team members in a grounded theory analysis of taped and transcribed, semi-structured interviews conducted by Indigenous research team members with 72 First Nations and 8 Métis fathers (all with at least one child under 5 years old). While detailed findings are presented elsewhere,⁴⁷ highlights are presented in this section along with interpretive commentary drawing from Indigenous cultural contexts that contribute to developing understanding of Indigenous fathers' experiences and roles. It should be noted that there are many Indigenous cultures in Canada, with diverse cultures and responses to colonization. However, some generalizations are widely understood in Canada to apply to most Indigenous groups. The following discussion focuses on prevalent patterns described in historical accounts and reports by Indigenous fathers in the study, recognizing that within any group, there are always outliers. Overall, the fathers' accounts spoke to the unique socio-historical experiences and cultural features of this population and substantiated the dynamism, flexibility, and challenges of family life for Indigenous fathers consistent with national survey data and context-setting historical accounts.

Colonial Contexts of Fathers' Journeys

Fathers who collaborated on the research insisted that participants should not be asked directly about whether or how experiences of Residential School, foster care, or adoption had affected their fatherhood journeys. They expressed concern that this could be too overwhelming for some fathers, who may not have talked previously with anyone about their experiences of being a father and who may be struggling with historic trauma. However, they agreed to ask an open ended question towards the end of each interview, encouraging fathers to share anything else they thought was important. Virtually all of the 80 participants described their perceptions and experiences of colonial government policies or interventions, direct or indirect effects of the Indian Residential Schools, and/or experience within the child welfare system, either as children or as fathers. Fathers in all five partner communities agreed that the theme of disrupted fatherhood best accounted for challenges they often faced in becoming involved fathers including for example: learning non-violent communication, overcoming anger with themselves, partners, and/or children; depression; and not knowing how to be in a family or how to maintain a household. A father commented: *We have lived in the shadow of the Residential Schools and what that took from us as far as knowing how to love our children, how to care for them, how to live harmoniously in families. The government has said it's sorry, but that doesn't fix the harm done.* Another father described the lack of emotional care and development experienced in Residential School: *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.* One father commented on the novelty of having multi-generations living together now that the era of Residential Schools is finally over: *Some of the older men in our community were remarking recently on how new it is to have young people in our community. Some of our communities don't have activities or wisdom about how to meet the needs of youth, because we didn't have young people in our communities. They were all in Residential School and only the adults were left with no one to care for or provide for. Getting used to having the children and youth among us is still a new experience for some communities.*

Complex Families

Most fathers had large and complex families. As a group, they ranged from having one to eleven children, including children from different relationships and variously related to them biologically, socially, and in terms of the father's direct involvement as a caregiver. Some fathers were living with their children; some were not co-resident with their children but had formal or informal custody for some periods of time; some had infrequent contact with their children (e.g., when they visited the community where they child resided, when they met for lunch at a community centre, when they had supervised visitation). Six of the fathers were lone fathers: their children's mothers were missing, deceased, or had de facto handed them full custody. Most fathers were living with one or more adults, including a partner who, in various cases, was the mother of all, some or none of the children living in the home, as well as relatives, most often their own mother, aunt or sister.

Fathers' accounts conveyed the complex, fluid, and mobile nature of many Indigenous families. Although this has often been cast in a negative light, it may also be seen as strength to build on. According to the findings of the 2006 Aboriginal Children's Survey, First Nation and Métis children may enjoy the benefit of multiple caregivers and fathers may benefit from being supported by a community, rather than resorting to the nuclear and patriarchal family model that was imposed by colonial authorities.⁴⁸ Indigenous Elder Brant Castellano describes how some Indigenous families, particularly in urban settings, are reviving traditional forms of care by knitting together family members and friends to create "families of the heart."⁴⁹ Families in urban centres may expand to include more distant relatives from rural or remote communities who come to the city for school, work, or special programs. Families may informally adopt a niece or nephew or even a neighbour. Sometimes an adult family member may leave the family unit temporarily or permanently because of difficulties in the primary-couple relationship. The remaining parent may welcome a new partner and one or more of his or her children or other relatives. The 'open doors' found in many First Nation and Métis families no doubt stem from the traditional extended family structures that were ubiquitous before colonization.

This kinship model is used in some traditional parenting programs, such as one focused on creative 'home making' facilitated by a 'grandmother' of the heart, described by Indigenous scholar Arnott.⁵⁰ Indigenous scholars Harvard-Lavell and Corbiere-Lavell point out: *Even in its contemporary manifestation, as opposed to the more historical notions of communal tribal living, for most members of the Aboriginal community everyday survival is still dependent on extensive networks of family and friends who support and reinforce one another. Unlike the non-aboriginal middle-class whose adult members can generally afford to pay others to assume their familial responsibilities, such as child and elder care, those who have almost no economic opportunity, much less actual economic security, must rely heavily upon the help of others.*⁵¹

Between extended families and 'families of the heart', there are cultural models for Indigenous fathers to learn and contribute to positive involvement in meetings children's needs as part of a circle of mutual support.

Variable Living Situations

Indigenous fathers' often live in complex, rapidly changing households with variable employment patterns. As would be expected based on findings of national surveys such as those highlighted earlier in this chapter, many fathers in the study described persistent housing difficulties and poverty, as well as prevalent health problems, injuries, needs for hospitalization and residential treatment. Among the 80 father participants, four were homeless (living intermittently on the street or as "couch-surfers") and therefore did not live with their children, three were living away from their children because they had seasonal employment that required temporarily living far from home, and over half were not currently living with the mother of one or more of their children. Another four did not have contact with at least one of their children because of a legal restraining order or condition of parole.

Interruptions in Father-Child Involvement

Many fathers described having disrupted involvement with their children over time. The most common reason was because of ruptures in their relationship with their child's mother that in some cases were recurrent and in some cases were ongoing. For some of these fathers, partner relationships were repaired enough to enable continuous involvement with their child either by being co-resident with the child and the mother or by having visitation or shared custody. Other reasons for disrupted involvement included the father spending time once or more often in residential treatment programs for problematic substance use or in correctional institutions and the child spending time in government care. Another reason for changes in fathers' involvement in direct care capacities with children was father's temporary or intermittent participation in employment that required moving away from the community. Across Canada, and especially in rural communities and in the north, many Indigenous communities have far more women than men because men relocate to remote sites for weeks or months at a time to work in extractive industries. Geographic distances put a strain on father-child relationships, especially when

combined with lack of funds for phones, computers or travel that could help to maintain contact between fathers and children. For a proportion of Indigenous fathers, incarceration also creates monumental challenges to sustaining connections with their children.

Families on the Move

Although Indigenous men are often described in popular Canadian media as having itinerant and unstable lifestyles, from a more strength-focused perspective, father participants in the study conveyed lifestyles characterized by frequent change and adaptation to changing family needs, opportunities, and critical incidents. First Nations living off-reserve and Métis families move nearly twice as often as non-Indigenous families.⁵² For example, various members of a family may move on and off reserve lands in order to obtain services that are more readily available in urban settings or to find housing that is more readily available (though often crowded and low quality) on reserves. In some cases, Indigenous youth and adults are transient due to family discord and/or homelessness. Mobility may also be due to the need to seek education, employment, or services, including Residential School recovery programs and substance abuse treatment programs.⁵³ As described earlier, Indigenous family boundaries tend to be permeable: family members may transition from one home or town to another, one set of relationships to another, or divide their time among more than one place they call home.

Employment

As a group, the fathers in the study could be characterized as having low and atypical patterns of employment. Indeed, in Canada, Indigenous men's participation in the labour force cannot be readily characterized according to the descriptors fitting non-Indigenous men, and this was one area where the demographic questionnaire planned for the Indigenous fathers study was least suitable. Among the 80 fathers in the study, 11 described themselves as "self-employed" including as artists, musicians, groundskeepers, builders, fishermen, farmers, and truck drivers. Many fathers described their employment as "limited", "intermittent" or "seasonal." Many fathers described a pattern of working when, where and as they are able to find work and able to accept work depending on their health. Some fathers reported being unable to work due to mental health or substance use problems. Some are unable to work because they lacked a high school diploma or trade certificate.

Work-life Balance

Questions about work-life balance – typical in studies of parental involvement and domestic labour - did not resonate with Indigenous father participants, in some cases they were not currently employed, or employed only very part time, and in some cases they worked in jobs that required them to be absent from the community intermittently for periods ranging from days to several months. Although the study did not ask specifically about partners' employment, some fathers described their partners' work as similarly irregular and changeable. Another reason why questions about work-life balance did not seem to be the most important questions to ask this population of fathers was that their arrangements for caring for children typically involved several more people than only their primary partner or the child's mother.

Pathways for Indigenous Father Involvement: Connecting Past, Present and Future

The theme *cultural reconstruction through circles of care* was superordinate in the analysis of fathers' accounts of their fatherhood journeys. Fathers variously described their 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 through their families, Elders in their communities, and Indigenous organizations. This section expands on this theme, as it reflects the histories and experiences of many Indigenous fathers and may anticipate the future for a proportion of Indigenous men in care-giving relationships with children and youth.

Web of Extended Family Relationships

As discussed, Indigenous cultures hold that children thrive in an extended web of relationship. 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. Historically, Indigenous people lived in extended family groupings which were the core economic and social unit and source of belonging, and keepers of traditional cultural and spiritual knowledge such as sacred stories, songs, and medicine.⁵⁴ Child-rearing was typically shared in family groups; traditional Aboriginal communities were the prototypical model of 'it takes a village to raise a child.' Children were raised with siblings, cousins, aunts and uncles, grandparents and great-grandparents, great-aunts and great-uncles. Although children knew their biological siblings, parents, and grandparents, other members of the extended family could be equally considered a parent, grandparent, or sibling. The names people used to refer to one another are telling in this regard: a child might refer to any elderly person in his or her community simply as 'grandmother' or 'grandfather.' Likewise, elders would refer to young people in the community as 'grandchild' and treat them accordingly. In Algonquian and Haudenosaunee societies, the words to refer to one's mother and her sisters were similar and the offspring of one's mother's sister or father's brother would be considered a sibling. Thus, a child could have many mothers and fathers, grandparents, and sisters and brothers who played intimate roles in their upbringing. Roles relating to discipline, teaching, and play were distributed in a systematic way among kin so that children received comprehensive guidance and continuity of care across their lifespan and across changing family composition and circumstances. A father in the study recounted: *Our circle has always been like that with our children. Men and women and the whole community pitching in to raise our children.*

'Family' meant life itself, as Nuu-chah-nulth hereditary chief Richard Atleo has expressed:

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In the Nuu-chah-nulth worldview it is unnatural, and equivalent to death and destruction, for any person to be isolated from family or community. Nuu-chah-nulth life, therefore, is founded by creating and maintaining relationships.⁵⁵

[end block quote]

Colonial interventions to dismantle Indigenous family systems stripped adults of their culturally prescribed roles in child care. Men's roles as providers and protectors were particularly devastated as the settlers' destroyed animal herds, introduced policies restricting Indigenous access to hunting and fishing grounds, architected economic dependencies on the colonial government, and enforced Residential Schooling as a substitute for family-based care and child welfare systems for child protection. This cultural-historical background contextualizes the trend toward complex, fluid and dynamic Indigenous households, and provides a temporal context for the form that re-building family and community life is taking for many Indigenous people in Canada whose goal is to revitalize cultural values and ways within the context of contemporary lifestyles.

A changeable household composition and having multiple caregivers have tended to be seen in a negative light from the perspective of dominant, European heritage models of the nuclear family and child development. However, families of the heart can afford opportunities for children to experience continuity of care despite changing circumstances and for fathers and mothers to share in learning parenting. A father described how: *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.* In particular, extended circles of care may provide opportunities for fathers who have a tenuous hold on fatherhood or are unsure of their ability to respond emotionally or engage skillfully in care tasks to become involved without shouldering more responsibility than they may be ready for. For example, a father said: *I have to give thanks to my partner and my aunties for teaching me how to show care and love to my kids. I learned a lot from my mother and how she parented and duplicated that. Like reading to him and teaching him about different countries, languages and stuff.*

Many fathers emphasized the roles of multiple family members, especially women, in helping them step into the role of father and learn parenting skills. *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.*

The pattern of complex households and extended family care-giving found in the fathers study was one of the most remarkable ways in which the original questionnaire planned for the national study could not be readily used by participating Indigenous fathers to characterize their involvement with children and describe care arrangements such as who undertakes which child care tasks according to what schedule, given what work-life balance arrangements, and so on. One father's response to a question asking which partner makes accommodations to care of a child with an emergency seems to weave together several threads sewn through this chapter:

This question about who takes time from work to take care of an emergency involving one of our kids.....You're talking about someone being sick or child getting hurt as an emergency. There is always someone around in our community who can do whatever is necessary. Usually someone is not working, and someone can be there. That's not the kind of emergency, or not the most important one, we're dealing with. The damage from Residential Schools is the real emergency – the crisis – for us, for our families, in our communities, in this country. That's our emergency, and we are all involved in some way in our healing from that.

Generativity

Many of the Indigenous fathers in the study conveyed what Erikson termed 'generativity': they were conscious of and concerned about the well-being of the next generation of young people, and about the wellness of Indigenous people in general.⁵⁶ An oft-heard saying among Indigenous people is that it took seven generations to all but destroy Indigenous families and communities and will take seven generations to heal the 'soul wound'⁵⁷ and rebuild the family, which is the foundation of Indigenous life – a process widely referred to among Indigenous peoples in Canada as a "healing journey."⁵⁸ Many Indigenous people see the present time as 'the turn-around generation.' As one father remarked: *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.*

One father explained: *I stepped up to my responsibilities and am learning all I can about how to be a dad to him so that he will know how to do it when he becomes a dad.* Another father commented: *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.* These fathers may have been precocious in this regard: generativity theory and research has usually identified generativity as a preoccupation of adults in mid-life.⁵⁹ Findings from the Canadian national study suggested that fatherhood, including at a young age, can and commonly does shape a more generative self-identity and outlook in men, although through diverse pathways.⁶⁰

Fathers and Children Revitalizing Indigenous Culture

Traditional Indigenous cultures see children as gifts from a Creator, on loan to this world from the spirit world.⁶¹ While intergenerational transmission of knowledge of how to nurture children physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually has been interrupted by colonial interventions, this underlying value and knowledge still exists and is often conveyed in teachings by Indigenous Elders. In the study of Indigenous fathers, many expressed their yearning for the kinds of cultural underpinnings that could anchor them and their children and promote their resilience as they navigate through the life cycle, as one father described: *That sense of knowing who he is, where he comes from, what his culture is about, his traditions – that will give him strength to face the adversities that will come his way in this society. It will give him pride and resilience. It's a strength he can hold onto and that connects him to me, to his family, to his ancestors going back through time.* Developing relationships with Elders is often a key for many men to gather culturally based insights and tips for raising their children; most Indigenous communities in Canada have Friendship Centres offering programs and special events to facilitate these

intergenerational connections, and many fathers in the study recounted taking their children to cultural events there. One father who did so explained: *I didn't know any of the songs. Now that she likes to Native dance I kind of have to learn the songs so she has something to dance to!* Fathers and their children – young and old – have described setting out on a journey of renewal together. An adult daughter of one of the collaborating fathers in the study explained: *My Dad and I have talked a lot about the upbringing I had and the things that went on in our family and it's been really hard. And our relationship wasn't always good. But now as adults, after a lot of forgiveness and getting the help we needed, we are both on our healing journeys and we are going to potlatches and sharing circles and living our culture together, and we have a tight bond because of what we've faced and where we're headed, together.* Indigenous fathers and children have the potential to be significant sources of reciprocal affection and social support in their efforts to be part of the 'turn around' generation for themselves and for Indigenous people.

Future Directions and Policy Implications

Across Canada, and around the world, there is a pressing need to enhance understanding and support for Indigenous fathers who have faced tremendous losses of roles within families, communities, and nations, and who continue to face significant barriers to health, education, employment and social inclusion that limits their capacity to be positive involved as fathers. Policy reforms and program innovations need to target improved health and quality of life for Indigenous families and enhanced social inclusion for Indigenous men. Few studies in the English literature have focused specifically on Indigenous fathers. To date, the study by the author remains the only known research study in Canada focused specifically on First Nations and Métis men's experiences of fatherhood. Effective policy and program evaluation identifying meaningful community interventions requires more information and insight about Indigenous fathers' parenting goals, needs, experiences, circumstances, and outcomes.

While Indigenous fathers face unique difficulties as a result of historical trauma and ongoing colonialism, there are cultural strengths and sources of resilience not commonly reported in research and community programs driven by Euro-western perspectives. Available information suggests that many Indigenous fathers want to contribute to their children's wellness to a greater extent than might be immediately visible. 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. Yet, the population of Indigenous men as a whole is only dimly perceived within Canadian society; living on reserves in rural and remote areas, living in poverty, and spending more time in correctional institutions than any other population of fathers, they are no doubt perceived by service workers – if they are seen at all – as a hard to reach population. As one service worker explained in the inaugural study: *It's not so much that we have tried and failed, it's more that we haven't tried.*

Programming for fathers as a whole is a fledgling field in Canada. A Father Involvement Network in each of three provinces receives provincial government funding for a network coordinator to manage a website, distribute resources, and deliver workshops. While these may be useful for some Indigenous fathers to some extent, different kinds of support are needed to help Indigenous 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.⁶² Education and training is needed to enhance practitioners' capacity to work with Indigenous men. In the inaugural study, many fathers said they would be more likely to attend an information session or support group if it was facilitated by an Indigenous man. There is no funding in Canada to train men – or anyone – specifically to work with Indigenous fathers. Lack of specific preparation, combined with gendered discourses and practices in health and social services, including parenting education, create challenges to changing practices.

A gathering of Indigenous father outreach programs in 2011 showcased established and emerging programs.⁶³ One of the longer-running programs is Neah Kee Papa (I Am Your Father), offered by the Manitoba Métis Federation since 1999. It is a flexibly structured, eight-session, parenting enhancement

program covering topics including effective communication, anger management, understanding rights as single parents and in custody relationships, the father's role, and life skills. This program offers Indigenous fathers information and referral to other programs and resources, including counselling, guest speakers, library passes, and peer resource groups. The first province-wide gathering for Indigenous fathers was held in 2013, hosted by the Creating Hope Society, which is an Indigenous child welfare agency. Discussion at this meeting suggested that grass-roots, community-based efforts to create and implement strategies to support Indigenous fathers' involvement are slowly growing.

In 2013, the Public Health Agency of Canada's Healthy Child Development division supported a national scan of programs targeting Indigenous father involvement.⁶⁴ The scan surveyed 130 organization nation-wide and yielded descriptions of 35 successful programs, many of them provided by Aboriginal Head Start programs, the Canadian Prenatal Nutrition Program, Maternal and Child Health, and Child and Family Services Agencies, and many of them in the provinces of British Columbia, Saskatchewan and Ontario. Programming varied in terms of content, frequency and logistics, ranging from weekly drop-in groups to 12-week violence prevention programs. Despite their diversity, program coordinators repeatedly emphasized that the strength and success of their program was rooted in the program's specific cultural relevance. Communities that ran successful weekly, monthly or annual events for fathers reported that these programs generally increased fathers' confidence and direct involvement, strengthened families by fostering healthy relationships, and encouraged cultural connectedness. These promising practices warrant further documentation and impact evaluation. Many organizations reported a number of obstacles to initiating and sustaining programming for fathers including difficulties finding and paying capable father outreach workers, as well as challenges attracting fathers or sustaining their involvement over more than one or two sessions. These latter challenges were variously attributed to transportation barriers, underemployment and sporadic/seasonal employment, and residual effects of Indian Residential School experiences that make some fathers reticent to connect or stay connected with structured programs, especially if these are located in schools or government buildings.

A set of resources for Indigenous father involvement that grew out of the inaugural study, including a documentary featuring six First Nations fathers' journeys, has been used across the country and in Indigenous communities in Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand, the United States and South Africa, to inspire and guide less mothercentric and more culturally based forms of engagement of early childhood educators, teachers, child protection workers, and health care practitioners with Indigenous fathers.⁶⁵ Social media may help to increase the visibility of Indigenous fathers. A recent documentary produced by Canada's national broadcasting company, called *Blind Spot: What happened to Canada's Aboriginal Dads*, won national acclaim.⁶⁶ A current project called *ininiwag dibaajimowag: First Nations Men's Digital Stories on the Intergenerational Experiences of Residential Schools*, conducted by the Canadian Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, aims to encourage public dialogue and understanding of the legacy of residential schools on Indigenous men.⁶⁷

Conclusion

Historical and ongoing colonial interventions have created multigenerational challenges for Indigenous men to find their place within circles of care for children, not only in Canada but in many countries around the world. Revitalization of culturally congruent ways of living in families and supporting men and women to successfully parent and share their cultures with their children can promote healing and learning for all Canadians. The pathways described by Indigenous men in Canada suggest new conceptions of men's roles in children's lives and sources of resilience that are not often the focus of family theories or community program models. This is a foundation upon which to build a program of research that can provide direction for fathers and families, and for policy decision-makers and practitioners focused on families, about how to enhance and make visible the positive contributions that Indigenous fathers can make to the wellness of children, families and communities.

NOTES:

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Quotes are from fathers who participated in the project and who gave their written permission to be quoted.

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² The terms *Indigenous* and *Aboriginal* are used almost synonymously in Canada to refer to people who identify themselves as descendents of the original habitants 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. 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.

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Suggested Index:

Indigenous fathers (Aboriginal fathers)
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 Revitalization