

MORE THAN A PLAYMATE, LESS THAN A CO-PARENT

Fathers in the Canadian BSW Curriculum

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Abstract: To understand social workers' limited engagement with fathers in child welfare practice, the authors examine the educational preparation undergraduate students receive for work with fathers, specifically the fathering content found in the required readings of child welfare, family practice and family therapy, human development and human behaviour, Aboriginal studies, and child and youth social work courses in a two-thirds sample of Canadian bachelor of social work programs. While explicit content on fathering is minimal, it can be found in some of the texts used for these courses. In human development texts, references to fathers are brief and describe fathers as more active playmates than mothers and as compensatory attachment figures. In family practice texts, discussion of fathers is more extensive and includes issues such as gender roles, household work, outside work, changes with the birth of the first child, divorced fathers, single fathers, gay fathers, teen fathers, and the influence of the father's culture. No evidence of Canadian content nor any discussion of fathering in relation to child welfare was found. Six learning outcomes for the BSW curriculum are suggested, along with relevant resources with respect to gender awareness, variations in Canadian mothering and fathering, and practice with fathers in child welfare.

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Abrégé : Pour comprendre les rapports limités qu'ont les travailleurs sociaux avec les pères lorsqu'ils exercent la profession dans le cadre de l'aide sociale à l'enfance, les auteurs examinent la préparation scolaire que reçoivent les étudiants de premier cycle pour travailler avec les pères, en particulier le contenu sur le rôle de père que renferment les ouvrages à lecture obligatoire sur le bien-être de l'enfance, le service social familial et la thérapie familiale, le développement et le comportement humains, les études autochtones ainsi que les cours de travail social auprès des enfants et des jeunes d'un échantillon des deux tiers des programmes canadiens de baccalauréat en service social. Bien que le contenu explicite sur le rôle de père soit minimal, les textes sur le service social familial traitent un peu des pères dans la perspective de questions telles que le rôle des genres, les tâches ménagères, le travail à l'extérieur, les changements consécutifs à la naissance d'un premier enfant, les pères divorcés, les pères célibataires, les pères homosexuels, les pères adolescents et l'influence de la culture du père. Aucun signe de contenu canadien ni d'examen du rôle de père par rapport au bien-être des enfants n'a été trouvée. Six résultats d'apprentissage pour le programme de baccalauréat en service social sont suggérés ainsi que des ressources pertinentes sur la conscience des différences hommes-femmes, les variations entre les rôles de père et de mère au Canada et l'exercice de la profession avec des pères dans le cadre de l'aide sociale à l'enfance.

*F*ATHERING is receiving increased attention in today's popular media, accompanying a professional discourse about the importance of the involved father in child development,¹ nationally funded studies on fathering, self-help websites for fathers, and recent literature by parenting experts directed to fathers. However, it is unclear to what extent Canadian undergraduate social work students receive explicit education about fathering in the course of their social work studies. As part of our study of fathering and child welfare, we found that fathers and fathering persons² are visible to mothers and children who are involved in the child welfare system, but often not to child protection social workers. We also noted the limited extent to which child protection social workers engage with fathers as part of their practice, and we were curious about whether their social work education prepared them to engage with fathers. Towards this end, we examined the fathering content found in bachelor of social work degree programs in Canada to explore how social workers are educated about fathering in relation to mothering and the influence this may have on child welfare practice. From required readings and textbooks, we identify the major themes of the fathering content and assess its strengths and limitations. We also propose learning outcomes and discuss relevant resources for undergraduate social work curricula in relation to gender and fathers to prepare social work students for practice with fathers, particularly in child welfare.

Isn't parenting really mothering?

Bruno Bettelheim (1987), in the introduction to *A Good Enough Parent*, identifies his audience in the following complex way:

Throughout this book I have referred to a parent as “he” and “him” unless an example clearly refers to a mother, although I had mostly mothers in mind when writing it and assume that mostly women will read it.... I am convinced that while both parents contribute significantly to a child's being raised well (or not so well), it is the mother, particularly during the early years, who is apt to play the considerably more important role in the process.... (p. xiii)

Bettelheim, while appearing at one level to discuss semantics, is also simultaneously identifying his primary audience—mothers—and reflecting the patriarchal social relations in America, tipping his hat to the gender-neutral use of “parent” while placing his focus squarely on mothers. In this respect, he indirectly identifies the dominant discourse in North America about parenting—that it is really about the work of mothers. This leaves fathers in an ambiguous place. Although they may be important, it is unclear what their significance is to child development. A review of recent conference presentations at the annual Canadian Association for Social Work Education conference confirms the emphasis on mothering versus fathering in Canadian social work. In the period 2001 to 2007, there were 21 papers about mothers and only three about fathers. (Members of this research group presented two of the three papers on fathers.) A recent (February 2006) keyword search of the National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect (United States) library holdings found 3,031 “mother” documents and 1,023 “father” documents—a 3:1 ratio. Similarly, a search of the National Clearinghouse on Family Violence (Public Health Agency of Canada) found 1,419 “mother” documents and 300 “father” documents, close to a 5:1 ratio. The trend in psychology is similar to that in social work. Phares (1992) reviewed empirical and theoretical clinical child and adolescent literature and found fathers dramatically under-represented. More recent analyses (1996-2003 and 1998-2005) found fathers still neglected in child psychopathology studies (Cassano, Adrian, Veits & Zemon, 2006) and pediatric psychology research (Phares, Lopez, Fields, Kamboukos & Duhig, 2005).

In community-based support programs to parents in one Canadian province, a similar trend was found. A study of infant and toddler programs offered to parents in Quebec's *Centres locaux de services communautaires* (CLSCs)³ found that, while the 146 CLSCs throughout the province offered such gender-neutral programs as self-help groups for future or new parents (71.4%), parental skills workshops (64.3%), and postnatal classes (61.2%), only 18.4 per cent offered self-help groups for

future or new fathers (Richard, Pineault, D'Amour, Brodeur, Séguin, Latour & Labadie, 2005). A content analysis of parent education program materials provided in British Columbia found fathers depicted in peripheral ways as sideline participants and helpers (Hodgins, 2007). Similarly, a study of the popular parenting literature (Fleming & Tobin, 2005) found that, although most books are written for the gender-neutral "parent," the images portraying adults with children are most frequently female (69.1%) in comparison to male (22.9%). In the use of language, gender-neutral terms predominate (63.8%), but "mother" terms comprise 24.9 per cent of references whereas "father" terms make up 11.2 per cent. Only 4.2 per cent of the content of the books refers to fathers' roles, and 30.7 per cent of the time the father's role is depicted negatively. This analysis suggests that mothers are the intended readership in spite of frequent use of the term "parent." In a discourse analysis of popular parenting materials in Britain and parenting magazines in the United States, the overarching discourse was "mother as full-time parent/part-time father," in which fathers do "little more than 'step in' and 'help'" (Sunderland, 2004, pp. 104, 118). Sunderland notes that absent from this literature are "shared parenting" or "full-time father" discourses. Generally invisible in the professional and popular literature is consideration of the "issues, strengths, and adaptive strategies" of gay fathers (Lero, Ashbourne & Whitehead, 2006, p. 125).

Research about fathers in the professional literature is relatively sparse in comparison to that concerning mothers, but, ironically, men are not absent from the field of (professional) child care. Today, they are most prominent in positions of managerial leadership in child welfare organizations (Christie, 2006, p. 391), university experts in human development, and consultants in parenting and childcare practice. Women, most prominent as first-level social workers, comprised 80 per cent of investigating workers in the first national profile of Canadian child protection workers (Fallon, MacLaurin, Trocmé & Felstiner, 2003, p. 45).

To investigate social workers' practice with fathers, we reviewed a random sample of child protection case files in a mid-size Canadian city. We included birth/biological fathers, stepfathers, and men providing emotional, financial, or social support to a child or children (Strega, Brown, Dominelli, Walmsley & Callahan, 2009). The files were dated between 1997 and 2005 and were restricted to those in which the mother was an adolescent (19 years of age or younger) at the time of the birth of at least one child. We were particularly interested in men who father children with adolescent mothers, as these mothers and their children are more likely to be involved with child welfare services than older mothers (Trocmé, Fallon, MacLaurin, Daciuk, Felstiner & Black, 2005). Our analysis of file data found almost 50 per cent of fathers were considered irrelevant to both mothers and children.⁴ Over half (60%) of the fathers

who were identified as a risk to children were not contacted by social workers and similarly not contacted 50 per cent of the time when they were considered a risk to mothers. Our findings about the lack of contact with fathers, whether they were perceived as risks or assets, are congruent with other studies of social work practice with fathers, as summarized by Daniel and Taylor (1999) and Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003). Evidence from other researchers as well as our own data suggest that, even though all children who come into contact with child welfare authorities have fathers, the fathers remain a ghostly presence in practice.

Lack of attention to fathers in the general social work literature (Strug & Wilmore-Schaeffer, 2003) and over-representation of mothers and under-representation of fathers in the child welfare literature (Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003) reflect the presence of mothers and absence of fathers in research about child abuse and neglect. While in anglophone North America all child welfare cases are referenced to a mother,⁵ except those in which a father is a single parent with custody of his children or those in which some other adult is the legal guardian (Risley-Curtiss & Heffernan, 2003), the absence of men holds true even in jurisdictions like the United Kingdom where files are referenced to children rather than parents (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Scourfield, 2003). Workers expect little from men, even when they are biological fathers. When not threatening or abusive, and sometimes when they are, men are generally considered irrelevant or rendered invisible, though men who perform even minor childcare tasks are frequently regarded as heroic figures (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Swift, 1995).

McKinnon, Davies and Rains (2001), whose interest in fathers resulted from their research about Canadian teenage mothers, note three dominant and sometimes overlapping constructions of the men in these mothers' lives: men as violent and irresponsible; men as romantic attachments; and men involved in fathering. Scourfield's (2003) ethnographic study of child welfare work in the United Kingdom describes six constructions of men in occupational discourse: men as a threat; men as no use; men as irrelevant; men as absent; men as no different from women; and men as better than women. None of these studies involved or interviewed men themselves. Although men and fathers exist in the lives of the women and children who are involved with the child welfare system, it is unclear to us what professional knowledge social workers might have obtained about fathers and fathering through their baccalaureate social work education. Towards this end, we were interested in identifying content about fathering that a student might obtain prior to beginning practice as a social worker.

Methodology

Current course outlines in the areas of child and family welfare, family therapy, family practice, human development, human behaviour and the social environment, and Aboriginal issues were requested during 2006 and 2007 from the 33 BSW programs in Canada. Twenty-two schools responded (two-thirds sample). The course outlines were reviewed, first to identify explicit fathering content that was required or recommended reading, and secondly to identify the required textbooks to review them for explicit content (index references) about fathers and fathering. Tables were created to show the content appearing in the required texts that had index references to fathers. Since human behaviour/human development texts contained only brief references to fathers, this content was summarized and presented according to theme. Two family practice texts contained more extensive references to fathers, and this content was summarized and analysed by major content theme. Key points emerged from this analysis.

Required course readings on fathering

We could identify only three courses at three Canadian schools of social work (two francophone, one anglophone) in which fathering content formed at least part of one class in a course of 13-15 weeks. From 59 course outlines in six topic areas, a total of four required readings related to fathers or fathering were found (see Table 1).

Index references to parents, mothers, and fathers

A review of the required texts currently in use in BSW courses on child welfare and social work with children and youth found few explicit references to fathers. In the case of child welfare texts, only one (Swift, 1995) makes any reference to fathers, and elsewhere the most common reference is to the gender-neutral term "parent." Fewer than half of the texts refer explicitly to "mother." In courses on social work with children and youth, only Davies (2004) refers explicitly to "mothers" or "fathers." In the required texts for family practice courses, our analysis found the gender-neutral term "parent" preferred by most authors. Only Carter and McGoldrick (1999) and Walsh (2003) refer to "mothers," "fathers," and "parents." Some texts selected for human behaviour courses make no reference to parents, mothers, or fathers (three out of 11), and most refer to parents (eight out of 11 texts); only four refer to mothers, but six out of 11 make explicit reference to fathers. With respect to texts selected for Aboriginal social service courses, indexes do not identify parent, mother, or father as categories. A scan of the titles reveals the content is broader than family, parenting, or childcare practice.

TABLE 1
References to Fathers/Fathering in Required Course Readings

Child welfare

(12 course outlines analysed)

Dulac, G. (1999). "Family Policies in Québec: Is There a Place for Fathers?"
Canadian Review of Social Policy 44, 83-87.

Family practice

(13 course outlines analysed)

No references to fathers

Human behaviour

(18 course outlines analysed)

Marcil-Gratton, N. (1998). *Growing up with Mom and Dad? The Intricate Family Life Courses of Canadian Children*. Ottawa: Statistics Canada, catalogue no. 89-566-XIE.

Aboriginal social work

(11 course outlines analysed)

No references to fathers

Social work with children and youth

(3 course outlines analysed)

No references to fathers

Rapports de sexe, vie privée et intervention sociale

(2 course outlines analysed)

Marcil-Gratton, N., C. Le Bourdais & H. Jubé (2003). "Être père au XXI^e siècle : vers une redéfinition du rôle des pères auprès des enfants." In V. Piché & C. Le Bourdais (eds.), *La démographie québécoise. Enjeux du XXI^e siècle* (pp. 144-175). Montréal: Presses de l'Université de Montréal.

Quénariat, A., & F. Fournier (1996). "Les pères décrocheur : au-delà des apparences et des discours." In *Comprendre la famille. Actes du 3^{ième} symposium de recherche sur la famille* (pp. 65-78). Trois-Rivières: Presses de l'Université du Québec.

Fathering content

Human behaviour texts appear to discuss fathers more frequently than the texts in other areas, but the content is brief and the references are fleeting. The strongest theme to emerge from this analysis is the role of the father as the active playmate of the child. Five texts discuss this theme: "Fathers spend less time with the baby than mothers do, but when they do spend time that usually involves playing more than caregiving. Fathers are more physical and rough with their babies" (Ashford, Lecroy & Lortie, 2001, p. 228).

The second most prominent theme is the significance of the father's attachment to the child: "Dads who get involved with the day-to-day care of their babies, seem to develop stronger attachment relationships with their babies" (Bee, Boyd & Johnson, 2003, p. 133). Another text notes that, when a child has an insecure attachment with a mother, a secure attachment with a father can take on a compensatory protective

function (Davies, 2004, p. 19). Two texts discuss teenage fathers, finding them increasingly interested in parenting and not wanting to abandon their babies. However, the authors note that many teenage fathers stay close only during the first year of the baby's life, with involvement tapering off in the second year (Ashford et al., 2001, p. 401). These texts also briefly describe some challenges facing adolescent fathers (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, p. 234).

Two human behaviour texts briefly discuss issues related to divorced fathers, noting that their withdrawal from their children's lives can be problematic for both boys and girls (Davies, 2004, p. 76) and that the absence of a father can lead to aggressive behaviour and poor adjustment, particularly for male adolescents (Dacey & Travers, 2002, p. 311). One text states that custodial rights are usually given to the mother, and half of the mothers with custody refuse to permit the father to see the child (Dacey & Travers, 2002, pp. 192, 311). There is very little discussion of single fathers, with the exception of the following observation: "Fathers become the custodial parent when the mother is judged incompetent or doesn't want custody and the father accepts the idea of single parenthood" (Dacey & Travers, 2002, p. 191).

Child welfare texts do not discuss fathers with the exception of Swift (1995), who provides a brief discussion about how social workers describe fathers in contrast to mothers in child protection files. Fathers are not negatively assessed in terms of household cleanliness or poor childcare. In fact, any contribution a father makes is regarded positively, as he is not expected to do household or childcare work. In child neglect cases, this can reflect badly on the mother, as the father appears to be doing her work (p. 105). Swift observes that fathers' complete abandonment of children produces no comment at all in the files, nor do social workers describe the quantity, quality, or frequency of fathers' financial input. Fathers are usually not described physically in the files.

More significant than the fathering content that appears in these texts is the content not discussed. For example, there is no research reported about the extent of fathers' involvement in childcare or household work, with the exception of one reference to fathers' limited involvement in changing diapers (Lefrançois, 1999). There is no indication whether the extent of involvement in this work varies by class, culture, or the nature of parents' work outside the home (for example, shift work, part-time work, travel to/for work). Nor is there discussion about the opportunities and challenges of fathers' engagement with children across the stages of childhood except the references to the father as a more active playmate than the mother with babies and pre-school children. What do we know about how fathers are involved with their children in elementary school years, as teenagers, or as young adults? What are the challenges that gay fathers or fathers from racialized groups face in parenting?

Although the theme of fathers' involvement is implicitly stated as a virtue, we know little about the social practices that encourage or discourage fathers' involvement at conception, during pregnancy, at childbirth, in infancy, in the pre-school and elementary school years, or at adolescence and young adulthood. We know next to nothing about the role health care, educational, and social service professionals have in encouraging or discouraging fathers' involvement in the lives of their children. Similarly, the challenges that poor, incarcerated, Indigenous, Afro-Canadian, or new immigrant men experience as fathers in becoming more actively involved with their children are not discussed. Only brief references to the challenges teen fathers face living in poverty suggest realities that some of these fathers may experience.

These texts generally regard the absence of fathers' involvement as a negative factor for children and youth, but should their involvement always be regarded as positive—something every child needs, and in greater quantity? The discussion of fathers in these texts does not consider the situation of children who have fathers with addictions, mental health challenges, or a history of violent or abusive behaviour to their partners or children. The implications for children having greater involvement with these fathers are not considered.

In family practice and family therapy courses, only two texts, Carter & McGoldrick (1999), *The Expanded Family Life Cycle: Individual, Family, and Social Perspectives* (3rd ed.), and Walsh (2003), *Normal Family Processes* (3rd ed.), provide extensive discussion of fathers and fathering in the context of the family. Both analyse the changing balance between wage economy work, household work, and gender roles in the family while discussing the evolution of the family in the United States from pre-industrial to post-industrial times under the complex influences of industrialization, urbanization, and the social construction of gender. They identify the reified ideal of father as breadwinner and mother as homemaker, now a minority of families, as a representation of the continuation of male domination and privilege adapted to the industrial economy of the twentieth century. Noting that the two-paycheque family is now the norm and that the traditional nuclear family has shrunk to 25 per cent of all households, they observe that 50 per cent of American mothers with children under the age of six now work full-time outside the home (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, pp. 131, 251-252). They discuss the length of the average work week (50.5 hours for men, 40.6 hours for women) and the ways in which the workday is expanding through unpaid overtime, work-related travel, and the practice of bringing work home. These conditions create considerable stress for the family, affect marital relationships in two-parent families, and influence gender roles as well as the division of household work and childcare responsibilities.

Both texts discuss the distribution of household work, observing that in today's dual-income families, fathers are more involved in childcare

than their own fathers were. However, they note that the birth of the first child is a crisis that realigns the vast majority of couples towards a neo-traditional pattern, in spite of many couples' egalitarian ideals about the division of household work. Both texts discuss divorce as another crisis that significantly alters fathers' involvement. With about 50 per cent of first marriages and 61 per cent of subsequent marriages in the United States ending in divorce (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, p. 373), over 80 per cent of the mothers from these marriages have either full or primary physical custody of their children. Fathers often experience an increase in emotional distance or the serious possibility of losing contact with their children. The challenges facing single fathers and young fathers are described, as are some of the challenges facing the estimated 5 million lesbian mothers and 3 million gay fathers in the United States (Walsh, 2003, p. 354). One text provides some discussion of how fathers' involvement varies by culture (Carter & McGoldrick, 1999, pp. 75-85, 336-337).

The discussion of fathers in these texts is rich, nuanced, and complex. It sets consideration of today's father in economic, social, cultural, and gender contexts. It discusses how a number of life changes affect fathers as well as mothers. It gives some consideration to fathers in gay families and fathers from different cultures in American society. However, other than work outside the home, it gives little attention to conditions that create stress for families. While poverty and unemployment are discussed in the context of African-American families, the consequences of economic cycles, relocation, major illness, disability, mental health, addiction, or violence within the family are not generally considered. How might these conditions affect fathers' involvement as well as the dynamics among fathers, mothers, and children?

Discussion

Overall, this description and analysis reveals the paucity of content on fathering in Canadian BSW programs. Where content is evident, aside from the four required articles, it is found only in some human development, human behaviour, and family practice texts. Only the two family practice texts listed above take into consideration fathers' economic, social, cultural, and gender contexts as well as their sexual orientation. Virtually all the fathering content Canadian social work students receive is derived from American textbooks that use United States society as the context for the description and analysis of fathers. This begs the question whether Canadian and American societies are identical with respect to fathering and the family. It also raises the question whether Canadian literature on fathers and fathering is available. Do Canadian social work faculty have no choice but to use American material?

While the content on fathering described here summarizes the full range of material that social work students in Canada could potentially receive in the course of their BSW education, it is not representative of the content an individual student would receive. Any given student might receive only a fraction of this—possibly only a reference to fathers as children’s playmates or as substitute attachment figures. Only students enrolled in a family practice or family therapy course, who would be required to read one of the two texts listed above, would receive a substantive discussion of fathering issues—albeit largely from an implicit middle-class and American perspective.

This analysis describes some of the barriers fathers face in their involvement with children such as long hours of work outside or away from home, young age, divorce, and remarriage. Yet how fathers identify the challenges they face to increased involvement with their children is not considered. Similarly, there is little consideration of how class, culture/race, and sexual orientation might influence fathers’ involvement with their children. Nor is there much discussion of the kinds of support fathers need to take a more active role in caring for their children. The voices of fathers trying to balance breadwinning with active caregiving are not described, nor are the challenges of unemployed fathers, who might have time to care for children but experience society’s stigma because of their lack of fulfilment of the provider role. Similarly, the perspectives of single fathers, fathers in joint custody arrangements, and gay fathers are missing. A description of how one becomes an involved father is not provided, nor is there discussion of who is influential in the process.

The relative absence of explicit or required content on fathering in Canadian BSW programs points to an area in which curriculum should be strengthened so that students develop an understanding of fathering and mothering as well as their interrelationships. Six important themes, identified here in learning outcome language, could be infused in the BSW curriculum using the curriculum resources discussed below.

Be able to describe how Canadians “do gender”

“Doing gender means creating differences between girls and boys and women and men...that are not natural, essential or biological” (West & Zimmerman, 2008, p. 98). The process is interactional and institutional in character, and, although social situations are not always clearly sex-categorized, “any social encounter can be pressed into service in the interests of doing gender” (p. 99). The social process of becoming a mother or a father, as well as the practice of “mothering” and “fathering,” represent opportunities to “do” gender. From workplace policies to family discourse, pre-natal care programs to hospital birthing practices, parent and tot programs to coaching sports—each becomes a moment in

the creation of gender differences. As Sunderland (2004) notes, fatherhood has traditionally meant only the act of procreation, and the verb “to father” normally has no female equivalent, whereas “to mother” implies to care for, protect, and raise children and has no male equivalent. Motherhood also has idealized assumptions: all “normal” women desire to be mothers; mothering takes place within a heterosexual family; women and men play complementary rather than functionally equivalent roles; and motherhood takes its shape as a biological imperative rather than a social role (Nelson & Robinson, 2002, p. 349). Beginning a reflective discussion with students about the social practices that define and express gender, that construct feminine and masculine spaces and identities, and about institutional policies and practices that reinforce the gendering of childcare and household work is an essential starting point to an informed understanding of fathering in Canada today.

Be able to identify mothering and fathering practices in Canada that reflect differences in “race”/culture, gender, sexual orientation, and class

The dominant hetero-normative discourse of mothering-fathering in Canada is similar to that in the United States: “Mom’s responsible; Dad helps out.” This does not give voice to the many intricate ways in which the work of childcare is undertaken today. Social work students need to be introduced to some of the significant variations, with an emphasis on Canadian practices. Doucet (2006), for example, studied 118 primary caregiver Canadian fathers to understand how they cared for their children. One of her key findings is how profoundly fathers rely on mothers to define their own fathering. She also found that “men care and nurture in ways that very much resemble what are often considered maternal responses” (p. 218). A new model of fathering, called “stimulative parenting,” was found by Paquette, Bolte, Turcotte, Dubeau and Bouchard (2000) among two-parent French Canadian families living in a “disadvantaged environment.” These fathers, characterized by more secure social relationships, provided more emotional support to children and frequently introduced children to new activities. Preston, Rose, Norcliffe and Holmes (2008) examined the effect of shift work on the division of childcare and domestic work in three Canadian mill towns. They found women did most of the adapting to their husbands’ shift schedules and that “father care” was an unintended outcome rather than a planned strategy of changing shift schedules. Shimoni, Este and Clark (2003) studied fathers’ engagement among 24 immigrant and refugee fathers in Canada and observed stress related to unemployment and underemployment. The absence of extended family, as well as social isolation and egalitarian gender norms in Canada, are challenges that face immigrant and refugee fathers (Lero et al., 2006, pp. 100-101). In a study of young Québécois fathers aged 19 to 25, Quénart (2003) found the model of

childcare practice to be that of “parental partner” rather than the “helpful spouse” or the “provider and homemaker” model, as in previous generations. Deslauriers and Rondeau (2005) found that young fathers who experienced the disengagement of their own fathers were strongly motivated to be present and involved in their children’s lives. Fathering research has been of considerable interest in Quebec (Deslauriers, 2002; Gaudet & Devault, 2006), particularly the study of young fathers (Deslauriers, 2004, 2005; Devault, Lacharité, Ouellet & Forget, 2003; Ouellet, Milcent & Devault, 2006). In a study of Aboriginal fathers in British Columbia, Ball and George (2006) observed that 50 per cent had little or no contact with some of their children until adolescence, and most described a gradual process of identifying with fatherhood and learning to become an involved father. Being a gay father in Canada means contending with stigma, covert assumptions, and discrimination, all of which affect child custody decisions in divorce proceedings, access to adoption and foster care, and greater biological challenges to becoming parents. While large cities like Toronto and Vancouver have significant supports for gay fathers, these are generally lacking in smaller communities (Lero et al., 2006, pp. 125-130).

Canadian BSW students receive American data about fathering and the family, but Canada is different in significant ways. For example, the 2006 census reveals the number of same-sex couples grew 32.6 per cent between 2001 and 2006,⁶ more than five times the growth observed for opposite-sex couples (5.9%) (Statistics Canada, 2006a). In 2005, Canada passed Bill C-38 giving legal access and recognition to same-sex marriage, and now most Canadian provinces legally recognize same-sex marriage (Lero et al., p. 128). Between 2001 and 2006, common-law-couple families increased 18.9 per cent, compared to a 3.5 per cent gain for married-couple families, and lone-parent families headed by men increased 14.6 per cent, more than twice the growth of lone-parent families headed by women (6.3%). The number of divorces in relation to marriages is lower in Canada than in the United States. The 30-year divorce rate (married couples who divorce before their thirtieth wedding anniversary) is 37.9 per cent, whereas the comparable rate after 50 years of marriage is 41.3 per cent. Only in Quebec do these rates approximate those of the United States at 48.4 per cent after 30 years and 52.4 per cent after 50 years (Statistics Canada, 2006b). In Canada, fathers receive sole or joint custody in 51 per cent of cases, with many joint custody cases reflecting shared responsibility for decision-making as opposed to equal time in living arrangements (Lero et al., 2006, p. 106).

Research on work-life conflict in Canada (Higgins & Duxbury, 2002) found women and men devote approximately the same number of hours per week to home chores and childcare,⁷ suggesting men and women may be almost equal partners in some households. Forty-four per cent of men perceive responsibility for childcare to be shared equally within the

family, while only 33 per cent of women had the same view. However, more than 50 per cent of male and female respondents agreed women still have primary responsibility for childcare. This suggests that, while some changes are occurring, women retain responsibility for childcare, possibly within a more complex gendering of home and childcare responsibilities.

Be able to describe key moments and processes of fathers' disengagement in children's lives

The analysis of family practice texts above makes evident some conditions that exacerbate fathers' disengagement from their children. If the father's work requires extensive travel (as in the case of truckers, for example), necessitates leaving the family in one location to find work in another (as new immigrants or resource industry workers might be compelled to do), involves extensive commuting for work (as is the case for suburbanites), or requires extensive shift work, these conditions alter the mothering-fathering balance to the point where it might become "Mom is totally responsible; Dad hands over his paycheque." A more emotionally complex situation for a family is a father's incarceration, hospitalization, or institutionalization. These conditions enhance the possibility of fathers' disengagement. Yet some fathers have meaningful relationships with their children at a distance, whereas others do not. Supportive workplace policies can make a difference in some cases (Lero et al., 2006, p. 93), but overall an informed understanding of the challenges of fathering "at a distance" requires further research.

Young fatherhood, the birth of a child, marital separation or divorce, and remarriage are significant moments of fathers' disengagement, but not all fathers disengage from the lives of their children at these times. New fathers are stressed by their economic role and need information, emotional support, and practical experience under supervision to become involved fathers (Steinberg, Kruckman & Steinberg, 2000, p. 1269). How might the child's mother, her extended family, the father's extended family, his friends, and professionals influence a father's engagement or disengagement at these times? If some in the father's network encourage, support, and expect his engagement, will he not only maintain an economic support role, but actively contribute to the care and nurturing of his children? Further research is needed to understand "the circumstance that deter ongoing father involvement" (Lero et al., 2006, p. 111).

Be able to describe support fathers need to become actively involved in the care of their children

Most men spend little time thinking about or preparing to become fathers. To the extent that they do, it is largely limited to physical tasks such as painting a bedroom, installing a car seat, or assembling a crib.

Although some may actively anticipate fatherhood, they lack knowledge about how to care for a baby. To become involved, the father of a baby requires support and encouragement to gain competence and confidence in the work of active childcare. The child's mother is an obvious choice to provide this support, but the maternal and paternal grandmothers are other possibilities. Yet how these three women "do gender" in the first weeks of a baby's life can influence how the father also "does gender." Does he get the message that this is their work, not his, and he should focus on his career and the economic support of his family, or are there ways in which he is included, supported, and encouraged to become an active caregiver of his child? Similarly, what messages do the men in his life give about childcare? Do brothers, male friends, and father figures "do gender" by taking initiative to teach him ways to care actively for his child so that he expects inclusion and participation in the work of childcare, or do they define childcare as women's work?

The idea that nurturing and caring is the gendered work of women extends before childbirth into pregnancy. Pregnant women know they are involved in caring—their body gives them many signs, and they receive the attention and support of other women and experienced mothers and family members. What constitutes an involved "father-to-be" at this stage? Recent research describing men's experience of the confirmation of pregnancy shows that, although they wished to be involved with their partners' pregnancy, many felt "one step removed" and relied on the secondary accounts of their partners for their sense of involvement (Draper, 2002). Some men, involved in pre-natal classes and prepared as labour coaches, found themselves relocated into an unfamiliar private arena of "bodies and birth" at labour. They experienced a cultural double bind—their presence was requested, but their feelings were not. If hospital staff were welcoming, they could feel involved, but the sense of being an outsider was heightened if they felt unwelcome or vulnerable and useless during labour (Draper, 2003).

Fathers sometimes only become active caregivers of their children when necessity demands it—when they become single fathers, after separation or divorce in a joint custody arrangement, in dual-income couples, or when the shift work of one partner demands the father "pick up" where the mother has left off. The ongoing household work of cooking, cleaning, shopping, and maintaining a home, as discussed above, is undergoing change, but what of childcare work, which also involves extensive cooking and cleaning? To what extent do fathers take the initiative with these tasks as well as the relational work of childcare such as listening, discussing, reading, telling stories, or helping with homework? Some fathers, active as coaches in their children's sports activities, can be viewed as extending their vigorous play role with young children into the next stages of child development, but the more subtle tasks of active relational caregiving seem to have less father involvement. When fathers

do engage, is it because they are comfortable with these tasks from their own experience of being fathered, or does it come from a desire to give their children something they had hoped for but did not have in their own childhood? How do fathers actively engage with their children during the challenges of adolescence? Is it primarily the mother's role to discuss sexuality, addictions, relationships, personal safety, and responsibility? Can fathers do more than "help out"? At present, little research explores these questions. Perhaps if fathers are actively engaged with their children at pregnancy and infancy, engagement becomes natural throughout their children's many developmental stages.

Some fathers describe becoming an involved parent as a "trial and error" process they learned on the job, often by aiming to be better than or different from the male figures in their lives (Steinberg et al., 2000). They often comment on the lack of educational resources specifically directed to men. Recently, though, new materials for fathers have become available. A series of booklets published by the Father Involvement Initiative (Ontario Network), include titles such as *Daddy I Need You: A Father's Guide to Early Childhood Brain Development* (Hoffman, 2008) and *Full-time Dad, Part-time Kids: A Guide for Recently Separated and Divorced Fathers* (Father Involvement Initiative, 2009). From another source, *Dads Make a Difference* focuses on the basics of baby and toddler care for new fathers (Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre, 2007).

Be able to describe how social workers "do" gender in the workplace and the influence this has on practice, particularly in child welfare

Most first-level child protection social workers in Canada are women, and historically child welfare has been viewed as a practice that takes place between women (Scourfield, 2006). Since women provide a wider range of care than men and influence men to provide the care they do, caring work is generally seen as feminized activity (Christie, 2006). Yet men are present in social work, over-represented at managerial levels, and have an "often ambiguous, contradictory and, at times, paradoxical" presence (Christie, 2006, p. 390). They may be treated with suspicion because they are viewed as not being able to obtain "real" men's work or because they may be looking for an opportunity to exploit children. More generally, men are simultaneously the creators of welfare problems (violence, abuse, neglect), the recipients of welfare services, avoiders of care or control, and resolvers of welfare problems, both professionally and in the private sphere (Hearn & Pringle, 2006). Men in social work have been represented in at least two ways—as the "heroic action man" or the "gentle-man." In the former, men "save the day by working long hours and managing social crises, particularly when violence arises in the office setting" (Christie, 2006, p. 400). "Gentle-men" are "soft and caring, upright and moral, and adhering to particular codes of conduct"

(Christie, 2006, p. 403). Men as clients are represented quite differently, however—as threats, as useless, or as irrelevant (Scourfield, 2001). At the same time, a gendered occupational discourse in child welfare supports men who absent themselves and sees mothers as responsible for the effect of men's behaviour on children (Scourfield, 2003; Strega, Brown, Dominelli, Walmsley & Callahan, 2009; Swift, 1995). Men's potential violence becomes a reason to avoid them in child protection practice (Buckley, 2003), but the feminization of the workplace becomes a reason for men to express reluctance in seeking help, as they see these services as either designed for women (Devault et al., 2003) or mother-centric (Ball & George, 2006). The ways in which men and women social workers are constructed, the workplace culture, the construction of women and men clients in the workplace, and clients' constructions of the gendered experience of social work intervention are important areas to begin reflection and analysis.

Be able to describe what social workers need to know and be able to do to engage effectively with fathers in child welfare practice

Childcare and the protection of children are primarily understood to be the work of mothers, yet men are in the lives of children with child welfare involvement, although often invisible to social workers (Buckley, 2003; Strega, Fleet, Brown, Callahan, Dominelli & Walmsley, 2008). There are a few heroic fathers, of course—often single parents who commit time and energy to their children and emerge from a social work evaluation as highly deserving of encouragement, support, and resources. A significant number of men and fathers in the lives of children involved in child welfare present greater challenges. They may be abusive, controlling, violent, addicted, or involved in criminal activity or have mental health challenges. Social workers need to be able to assess whether these men are a risk to children, but they also need to assess whether these men are capable, in any way, of playing nurturing, caring, supportive roles to mothers and children. To assess these fathers' potential risks as well as their potential assets and to work effectively with them, social workers need a high level of training to face the lack of trust, hostility, and control these men present and to move beyond this, if possible, to explore with them the potential they might have for active engagement with their children. Social workers need “to be able to engage with fathers' versions of events in an open and exploratory way” and “to keep an open mind as to whether or not a father is interested in his child” (Family Rights Group, 2008). Initiating these processes, though, implies the social worker and the child welfare system are committed to engaging with fathers and are operating from a father-inclusive framework. Scourfield (2006) argues child protection social workers should insist on men's participation in assessments and family interventions when they are involved

with children, recognizing this may mean working outside regular office hours. Featherstone, Rivett and Scourfield (2007), Daniel and Taylor (2001), the Fathers Matter Research Reports (Family Rights Group, 2008), Ferguson and Hogan (2004), and Ryan (2000) provide practical guidance with respect to fathers' engagement. From a Canadian perspective, Parent, Saint-Jacques, Beaudry and Robitaille (2007) describe strategies utilized by child protection workers to include "stepfathers" in their interventions. We also discuss important practice principles in working with fathers such as recognizing there are many ways to be a father, holding fathers who are violent responsible and accountable for their behaviour, and recognizing the multiple oppressions that construct fathers' worlds (Brown, Strega, Dominelli, Walmsley & Callahan, 2009).

Be able to describe when increased father involvement should not be supported or encouraged

The benefits of fathers' involvement with their children are argued to be numerous, but not all fathers or fathering persons are beneficial. Some are deeply engaged in their own anger, addictions, violence, illegal activities, and mental health challenges, and to suggest they have a capacity to nurture and care is a denial of the harm their involvement can have. Not all men with the struggles listed above totally lack the capacity to care effectively for children some of the time. Deciding whether involvement with a particular fathering person should be limited or restricted to ensure the prevention of harm to a child and the mother is complex. There are extensive literatures on fathering, men who batter, and the impact of violence on children, but little research considers men who batter as fathers (Guille, 2003; Peled, 2000). Studies about battering from the point of view of the male batterer are scarce, and "it is even more rare to find a study that explores their perspective regarding their children and their roles as fathers" (Guille, 2003, p. 155). As Scourfield (2006) notes, "Abusive men are indeed the cause of most child protection concerns, often directly as abusers, or at least at one remove, perhaps as a threatening presence that affects a mother's parenting" (p. 441). However, he notes, "Most children want contact with most fathers" (p. 441). Research on children with violent fathers finds that children are caught between strong opposing emotions, seeing either the good and loving father or the bad and abusive one, and are often unable to deal with the contradictions (Peled, 2000). At the same time, family policies have focused on maintaining family links, constructing fatherhood as non-violent, and seeing virtually any involvement by fathers as "good-enough" fathering (Eriksson & Hester, 2001).

Little research exists on the outcome of parenting education work with abusive men, and these men are simply "let off the parenting hook" (Peled, 2000, p. 33), while mothers become responsible for managing

these men in their children's lives. Nevertheless, Scourfield (2003) argues that social workers should work with abusive men, as not to do so is dangerous to women and children and adds to the pressure on non-abusing women. Scott and Crooks (2004) provide a list of principles for engaging with abusive fathers, noting that overly controlling behaviour, a sense of entitlement, and self-centred attitudes are primary problems to address, and therefore child management skills should not be the initial focus of intervention. Abusive fathers are generally not initially ready to make changes in their parenting; since they have eroded their children's emotional security, they need to rebuild trust with their children. In addition, Scott and Crooks argue that existing parenting programs may not be helpful, as they can support problematic attitudes and behaviours. They also note families, in some situations, should be supported to end contact with fathers. These include "men who are withdrawing from their family, who have already caused substantial harm to their children, and who are actively avoiding services that challenge their behavior" (Scott & Crooks, 2004, p. 107). In other cases, where men may be able to benefit from services, they should have contacts with their children supervised. In the absence of substantive research to guide decision-making, ending or limiting contact with fathers requires a carefully developed retrospective and prospective assessment of the harm ongoing contact may cause to children and mothers.

Conclusion

Parenting is an activity that needs to involve women and men, but our research has found limited content on fathering in the curriculum of Canadian BSW programs. Where such content exists, it is primarily derived from American sources and ignores a small but growing Canadian literature on fathering. Over the past decade, British and European researchers have grappled with questions of gender and child welfare, and in recent years British and Canadian Gender and Child Welfare Networks have developed and hosted conferences, workshops, and websites (Gender and Child Welfare—Canadian Branch, 2009). This work has not found expression in Canadian undergraduate social work curricula.

Canadian social work educators need to include explicit content about the social construction of gender as well as content about men and fathers in courses on child welfare, human development/human behaviour, family therapy, and family practice. Units that explore the relationship of father absence and mother blame should be required content in child welfare policy and practice courses. These courses should also give students explicit direction in methods to include and work with men and fathers at all stages of child welfare practice. Schools that have not introduced undergraduate courses on fathering might consider doing so.⁸ Schools should also consider a course on "masculinities" to create a

space for reflection on masculine identities in capitalist societies. Such a course would explore gender relations, patriarchy, domination, and violence, as well as the ways boys become men and men become fathers across classes, cultures, and sexual orientations. Educating social workers to include men and support them in playing an equal role to women in childcare will improve the lives of generations of children to come.

NOTES

- 1 The development of this discourse can be dated to the publication of the first edition of *The Role of the Father in Child Development* by Michael Lamb in 1976.
- 2 An adult male who is not the biological father or legal stepfather but who has a parenting role with a child.
- 3 Local or community-based health and social service centres.
- 4 Categories of “risk,” “asset,” and “irrelevant” were quantified based on social workers’ expressed description of fathers (in both formal and informal file recordings), actions taken or not taken by social workers in relation to fathers (for example, instituting or not instituting risk assessment procedures or including or excluding fathers in parenting assessments), and the number and type of contacts or attempted contacts social workers had with fathers.
- 5 In Quebec, child welfare cases are referenced to the child.
- 6 Same-sex unions were first formally counted in the 2001 Canadian Census (Lero et al., 2006, p. 126).
- 7 Home chores: women 12.2 hours, men 10.1 hours; child care: women 11.1 hours, men 10.5 hours.
- 8 Anglophone universities have not established such courses, although three Quebec universities have apparently done so.

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