

ABORIGINAL FATHERS LOVE THEIR CHILDREN TOO!

RESEARCH REPORT

June, 2014

Creating Hope Society

INTRODUCTION

This study of Indigenous fathers and grandfathers who had children involved with child and family services, was conducted in 2014 for Creating Hope Society, a group in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada that has worked for many years to improve the ways that this system interacts with Aboriginal families. The purpose of the study is to identify barriers that exist for Aboriginal fathers and father-figures when communicating with child and family services, a ministry of the Government of Alberta, as in most provinces. A review of the literature was conducted, although it must be noted that previous research in this area is scarce and therefore a small number of sources were used. The research must therefore be considered exploratory.

In keeping with Aboriginal ethics, efforts were made to ensure that Aboriginal world views and culture were respected. Indigenous people who held expertise in these areas participated in and were consulted to ensure that the research was ethical through this lens. A series of interviews were conducted early in 2014 with First Nations, Métis, and Inuit fathers, grandfathers, step-fathers, and uncles.

METHODOLOGY

Methods of data collection and analysis were guided by Community Participatory Action Research (CPAR); narrative collection and analysis of data, and OCAP: Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession.

OCAP has been developed to ensure that research is ethical to Aboriginal peoples and participants. This project was guided by Aboriginal world views as much as possible. During interviews, an Aboriginal person with expertise in culture began with a traditional Aboriginal smudge and prayer to respect the spiritual element of this world view and stayed in the room throughout the interviews. While initially, academic property was to be shared between Creating Hope Society (CHS) and their contracted researcher and project partner, the Centre for Race and Culture (CRC). This was amended so that CHS had sole intellectual property of the results. In order to ensure that Aboriginal world view was respected, an expert in Aboriginal ethics and research, Jo-Ann Saddleback, was sub-contracted to monitor the research process and the categorization of interview transcripts. She also read the final report. In her words:

Culture encompasses all our philosophies, history, knowledge, experiences and skills. Culture is our guide to spirituality, governance, processes, research, protocols, decision-making, evaluation, traditions, organization, safety, roles of men and women, raising children, giving birth, building homes, justice, and alignment of mind, body, emotions and spirit. Culture provides a process of prevention of ill health, social ills and crime in all areas; even how to do research – to dismiss it is asking us to give up our identity and the way it was given to us to live our lives which connects us to the Creator and all living things in the Universe.¹

Participants were encouraged to contact CHS or CRC if their experience telling their stories triggered any negative emotional reactions.

CPAR is defined as a process that, “enlists research respondents as co-researchers who participate in defining the research questions, establishing methodology and interpreting and applying the results”². This approach utilizes equity, participation, respect and inclusion, and is crucial element to our process given the traditional disconnection and power disparity Aboriginal fathers and grandfathers, Child and Family Services (CFS), and researchers. Further, CPAR “incorporates valuable knowledge acquired from the collective experiences of the people and with the people”³ and is consistent with the oral history tradition of Aboriginal peoples. The research “does what storytelling is supposed to do: get people to think, to feel and moved to action. It is the sacredness of the stories, the delicateness that make it precious and profound”⁴.

The principles and assumptions behind CPAR include: 1) a non-hierarchical dialogical consensus decision-making process; 2) all forms of knowledge are valued; 3) a focus on power relations important

¹ Saddleback, J. (2014). Aboriginal Community-based Research Ethics applied to “Aboriginal Fathers” Research Report. p.1.

² Rodgers-Farmer, A.Y. & Potocky-Tripodi, M. (2001) p.446.

³ Fals-Borda, O. (1988) p. 53.

⁴ Saddleback, J. (2014) p. 3.

to the research process; 4) the active consciousness-raising of all researchers; and 5) the identification of avenues by which political and social action can take place⁵⁶⁷⁸. The Aboriginal participants contributed to providing input to ways the Aboriginal and mainstream communities can take appropriate action toward resolution.

Interviews were open-ended, with a brief explanation of the purpose of the research offered at the beginning of each. The researcher indicated that information sought pertained to experience of Aboriginal fathers and their children in any of their interactions with Child and Family Services, any barriers encountered, and recommendations of ways such interaction could be improved. Participants were encouraged to begin their narrative as far back as their own and their extended family's experience. Questions of clarification were posed by interviewers occasionally, as well as gentle prodding for the eventual return to CFS related issues if the narrative included other institutions. Participants constructed their own knowledge, identified their own issues, and had control over sharing their stories. Castellano concludes that qualitative, open-ended interviews are best suited when "... any particular event or phenomenon ... (is) part of a larger whole.... Aboriginal ethics of reciprocal relationship and collective validation."⁹ The researcher developed a dialogical relationship with all participants. As Fraser indicates, the use of narrative style data collection allows stories that may not have been shared prior, to be told,¹⁰ and to become part of public discourse and turn their invisible experiences into visible ones¹¹. Saddleback commented that these participants, by sharing their own stories, had a "strong voice"¹². We recognize that as researchers, we become involved in the story-telling process by interpreting what was said and through our commitment to improving child welfare policy and practice."¹³

The researcher remained sensitive to issues of confidentiality of data, and maintained transparency regarding commitment to participant confidentiality. All participants signed an agreement giving permission for their interviews to be recorded and transcribed, with measures taken to ensure their confidentiality. Their names or information that may have led to revealing their names were not used in the data analysis and were only kept in a protected file, either locked in the researchers' office or password protected on the researchers' computer.

The following diagram is Saddleback's visual representation of the ways in which this research falls in with the teachings of the medicine wheel, which is central to Aboriginal understandings of the world.¹⁴

⁵ Cornwall, A. & Jewkes, R. (1995)

⁶ Fals-Borda, O. (1988)

⁷ Fals-Borda, O. & Rahman, M. A. (1991)

⁸ Smith, J. (2005)

⁹ Castellano. (2004) p. 104.

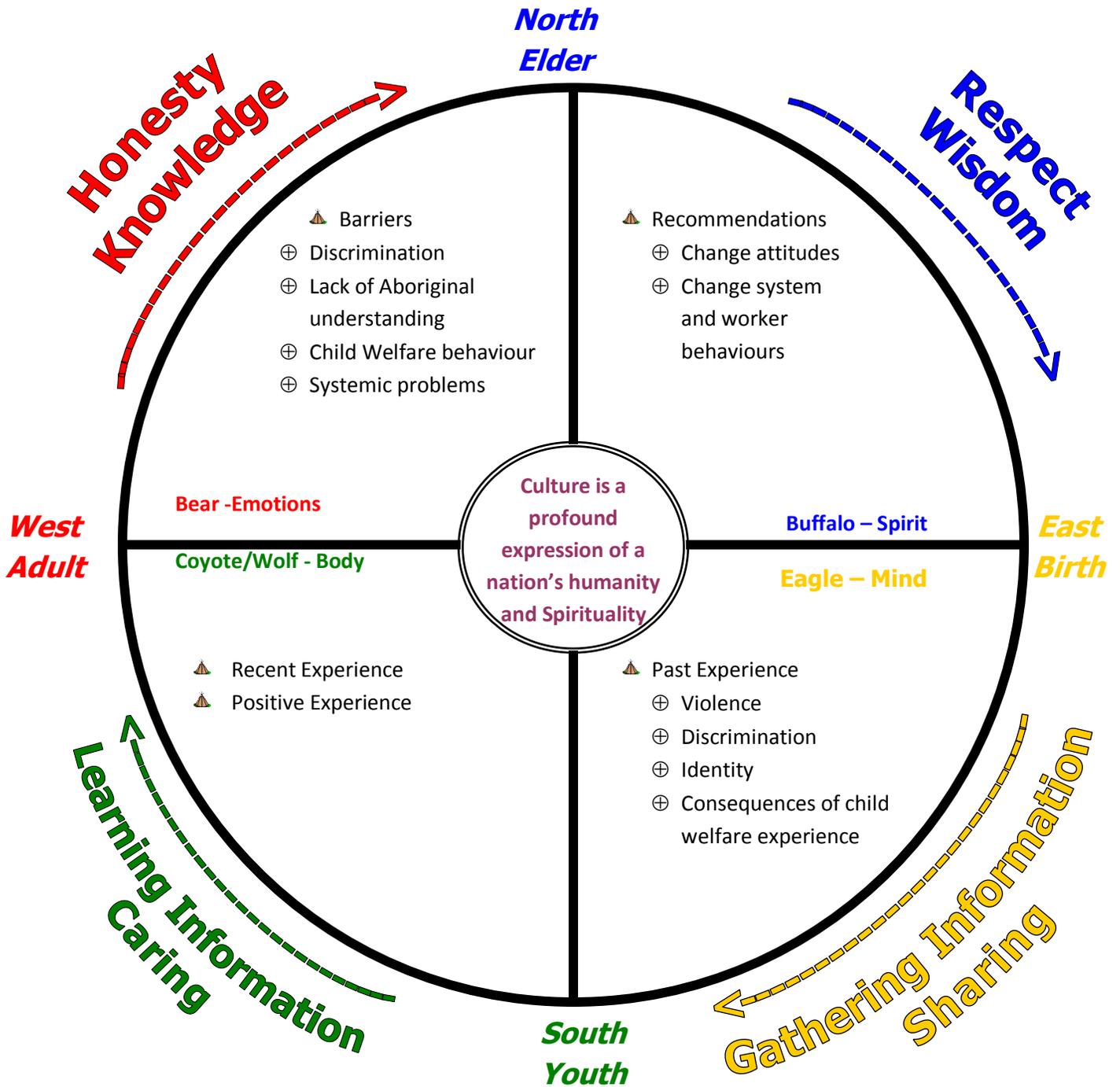
¹⁰ Fraser. (2004)

¹¹ Devault. (1999)

¹² Saddleback. (2014) p. 1.

¹³ Dominelli, Lena; Strega, Susan; Walmsby, Chris; Callahan, Marilyn; Brown, Leslie. (2011) p. 354.

¹⁴ Saddleback. (2014) p. 4.



Sampling

Criterion sampling was used to identify participants, Aboriginal male parents or grandparents who had children with prior involvement in Child and Family Services. There were three participants who did not precisely conform to the criteria: one who was a step-father and one who was an uncle who had cared for children of his nephew. One participant had never interacted with CFS. Participants were contacted through a snowball technique. Both Creating Hope and Centre for Race and Culture have large networks that include Aboriginal male parents or those who have contacts with such participants. Notices were circulated widely in the networks of both organizations, and through electronic networks in the City of Edmonton that reach a large Aboriginal population. A total of 14 Aboriginal male parents participated through 11 interviews.

Research Activities

1. Systematic Literature Review

A systematic review of literature regarding Aboriginal fathers involved with Child and Family Services was conducted. This included the gathering and review of academic research literature, grey literature, and online information related to the research focus. The critical review of the literature was then used to provide direction for the research and to inform the project of potential issues or areas of concern.

2. Data Analysis

Interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim. Tape recordings and field notes were examined along with original recordings to check for accuracy and completeness. Transcripts were analyzed for themes using qualitative analysis: line-by-line coding of the data, examination of the interconnection of emerging codes within the data, and identification of emergent patterns and themes. Inductive analysis was used to create a coding framework with recurrent themes. Each interview was analyzed by identifying and categorizing commonalities found throughout the data, breaking the data into discrete segments with particular and unique meanings. Initial categories were expanded or collapsed as the analysis proceeded.

Limitations

The sample is small and not representative of Aboriginal male parent figures. Caution should be used in identifying trends. The validity of participant' expressions have not been compared to social workers' perspectives. Portrayed are the perceptions of the Aboriginal fathers and father-figures.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Historical Background

1. Colonization

Upon the arrival of the first Europeans to Turtle Island (North America), there was a huge diversity of Aboriginal peoples that had occupied this land for many thousands of years. Aside from occasional conflict, they lived in communal, holistic societies where respect for the land was paramount.

In the late 15th century, Indigenous peoples refer to 'first contact', their initial interactions with Europeans. From this time until the end of the 17th century (the 'first period'), according to Bennett, Blackstock & LaRonde, 2005; trade relationships were established and for the most part interaction was characterized by tolerance and respect.

The 'second period'¹⁵ spanned the time up to the 18th century. It saw increased trading and the introduction of military alliances. Europeans relied upon Aboriginal peoples for protection and as allies in their wars with both France and Britain.

A royal proclamation by George III of England in 1763 stated that the British colonies would not interfere with Aboriginal peoples and their land. Though they were deemed British subjects, the proclamation referred them as autonomous peoples who could enter into treaties with the British Crown. The 'third period' witnessed the influx of many more Europeans and an increased level of conflict with Indigenous peoples. With the Europeans came diseases Aboriginals had never been exposed to and much illness and death resulted. Aboriginal peoples were labelled as 'Indians' who Europeans had discovered. During this 'age of discovery', the Latin term 'terra nullius' was used to refer to empty, barren, uninhabited land. As there were indeed peoples on Turtle Island, the term was expanded to refer to land with no 'civilized' people.

During this period, a "saga of expropriation, exclusion, discrimination, coercion, subjugation, oppression, deceit, theft, appropriation, and extreme regulation through education and legislation ..." began.¹⁶ Many more immigrants arrived from Europe, what is commonly referred to as 'illegal occupation'. On recognition of the spiritual practices of Aboriginals, their religion was judged inferior and conversion to Christianity deemed imperative, with force if necessary. This ended the period of non-interference. "The government needed a buffer between Aboriginal people and the advancing settlers, and rather than acting as an impregnable wall, it chose the more limited goal of temporarily protecting First Nations until they could be assimilated into Canadian society."¹⁷

The 'fourth period' encapsulated negotiations after World War II with Aboriginal peoples and their formal complaints against the encroachment on their territory. This resulted in the White paper of 1969.

¹⁵ Bennett, Marilyn; Blackstock, Cindy; LaRonde Richard. (2005)

¹⁶ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 11.

¹⁷ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 13.

“Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau and his Minister of Indian Affairs, Jean Chrétien, unveiled a policy paper that proposed ending the special legal relationship between Aboriginal peoples and the Canadian state and dismantling the Indian Act. This white paper was met with forceful opposition from Aboriginal leaders across the country and sparked a new era of Indigenous political organizing in Canada.”¹⁸

2. Treaties

Treaties were developed and enforced between 1670 and 1921, beginning in what is now Eastern Canada and ending in Alberta. There are no treaties with Aboriginal peoples in British Columbia. Aboriginals initially took the treaties as good faith negotiation between nations. However, not all treaties were signed and many have not been honoured. Reservations were created for Aboriginal peoples, usually in their traditional areas, but much smaller and often with inferior land. Some groups were entirely relocated. “Governments and courts in Canada consider treaties as instruments of surrender rather than compacts of co-existence and mutual benefit.”¹⁹

3. Legislation

Canada’s first Indian Act of 1876 was a unilateral document created with no consultation with Aboriginal peoples. In subsequent revisions of the Indian Act, Indigenous people’s traditional ceremonies were outlawed, they were not allowed to leave their communities without a pass, land was taken away but buying land was prohibited. Aboriginal people were not allowed to vote until 1960. Their communities were not permitted to manage their own land or funds; this was done by federal Indian agents.

With regard to child welfare, the Indian Act assumed that all Aboriginals were wards of the state. In 1951 the Indian Act was revised, allowing the provinces to have some jurisdiction over child welfare, which was previously reserved only for the federal government.²⁰ Currently, Indigenous “... rights are governed by Canada’s 1985 Indian Act (the last major revision), which holds them as ‘children before the law.’ As such, they enjoy fewer rights, services, and supports, and far more barriers to accessing them, compared to other Canadians,”²¹ With regard to fathers, “... mothers may have to prove that they are not in a spousal relationship in order to maintain their benefits (according to Indian Act), which may serve to decrease men’s help, support and contact with children.”²²

4. Residential schools

Residential schools were started up in the late 1800s. Schools for orphans and the poor in Britain and the United States served as the model for Canada’s residential schools for Indigenous peoples, administered by churches and financed with government funds.²³ More than half of First Nations and

¹⁸ Indigenous Foundations, home page.

¹⁹ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 12.

²⁰ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 19.

²¹ Ball. (2009) p. 26.

²² Brown. (2009) p. 28.

²³ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 15.

Métis children were taken from their families to residential schools by 1960.²⁴ Visits from families were not encouraged. This all occurred during the 'third period', the time of strife between Aboriginals and European colonizers.

Physical conditions in these 'schools' were horrendous. Living conditions were crowded. Little and poor quality food for students led to famine. Recent evidence has been released that medical experiments were performed on Aboriginal children in the schools.²⁵ There was much illness in the malnourished bodies of the children, with smallpox, tuberculosis, and flu widespread. Huge numbers of children died in these schools and within the recent past there have been discoveries of mass graves near the schools. "So far, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has determined that more than 4,000 of the school children died."²⁶ "Extensive neglect, physical and sexual abuse of Indigenous children in residential schools and foster homes has been well documented."²⁷ Some describe these actions as genocide as defined by the United Nations.

In terms of providing an academic background, the schools failed to do this. Of students who left the schools, 75% had achieved below a grade three level and only 3% passed grade six. Students who managed to overcome all barriers and complete high school could only go to University if they gave up their Aboriginal status.²⁸ Assimilation was the stated goal of the schools. Students were not allowed to speak their first language, and were punished when caught doing so.

There can be no doubt of the physical and emotional scarring that being torn away from their families and communities left on the survivors of residential schools. They lost connection with their families, communities, and cultures. Neglected and abused, survivors suffered immeasurably and in returning to communities after release, most no longer were able to function in healthy ways. "Empathy is the key to developing relationships, and residential schools have had a profound impact on our relationships." "Residential Schools taught Aboriginal people ... your parents have far less wisdom and authority than the people who run the institution – and that has far-reaching consequences."²⁹ With regard to fathers who had been survivors of residential schools or were children of survivors "... raising children is

²⁴ Ball. (2010)

²⁵ "Aboriginal Canadians were not only subjected to nutritional experiments by the federal government in the 1940s and 1950s but were also used as medical test subjects, says the chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission." (CBC News, 2013)

²⁶ "Over 130 residential schools were located across the country, and the last school closed in 1996. These government-funded, church-run schools were set up to eliminate parental involvement in the intellectual, cultural, and spiritual development of Aboriginal children. During this era, more than 150,000 First Nations, Métis, and Inuit children were placed in these schools often against their parents' wishes. Many were forbidden to speak their language and practice their own culture. While there is an estimated 80,000 former students living today, the ongoing impact of residential schools has been felt throughout generations and has contributed to social problems that continue to exist." (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada) Following the formal apology to Aboriginal peoples of Canada in 2008, an agreement was made to conduct the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, in order to track the history of events in Residential Schools. The last of 7 national events was held in Edmonton in March of 2014, during the data collection phase of this research project. The government of Canada has indicated that it may take years to release the proceedings of these hearings.

²⁷ Ball. (2009) p. 7.

²⁸ Bennett, et.al. (2005)

²⁹ Aboriginal Healing Foundation. (2014)

something they feel they are doing blind, with no role models, few resources, and little support.”³⁰ As one father in Jessica Ball’s study said, “I make it up as I go, one day at a time.”³¹

5. Child welfare

The slow process of closing residential schools began in the 1950s, with the last one closing in 1996. Upon release, Aboriginal children began attending public schools that were ill prepared to receive them. Widely recognized as a continuation of their removal from their families, child welfare practices fell directly on the heels of residential schools. Ever since this time, institutions of child welfare have been apprehending these children from their families. This practice increased substantially after the Indian Act was changed allowing provinces jurisdiction over child welfare and funding for child welfare increased. Apprehension of Indigenous children increased drastically in the 1960s. Patrick Johnson, a “... researcher Canadian Council for Social Development coined the term 60s scoop”³² to refer to this phenomenon. Indigenous children are highly overrepresented in child welfare across Canada; in 2009, half of the children in child welfare in British Columbia were Aboriginal.³³

The “... evidence overwhelmingly indicates that the current legislation, policy and practice of child welfare are not making meaningful differences in supporting the well-being of Aboriginal children and youth.”³⁴ There was little screening of foster homes, and levels of neglect and abuse of Aboriginal children in care have been high. In Alberta in early 2014, a series of newspaper articles in the Edmonton Journal and the Calgary Herald revealed the very high number of deaths of Aboriginal children while in care, most of which went unreported.

“Once placed in foster care or adopted out, few would ever return home. Most were sent to live with non-Aboriginal families, often in other provinces, the United States, or other countries.”³⁵ Aboriginal peoples demanded that their children not be taken out of province. Reaction was very slow but Manitoba finally stopped this practice in 1985.³⁶

Gradually some First Nations have taken control of their own Child and Family Services. However, “the First Nations Child and Family Services Agencies (FNCFSA) and the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs conducted a study in 2000 which suggested that 22% less funding is available to FNCFSAs than their provincial counterparts, and that there is inadequate funding for ‘least disruptive services’ – those which would allow children at risk to safely stay in their own homes.”³⁷

The historical effect on Indigenous fathers

³⁰ Aboriginal Healing Foundation. (2014)

³¹ Ball, p. 16.

³² Bennett, et.al. (2005) p.20.

³³ Ball. (2009)

³⁴ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p.20.

³⁵ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 20.

³⁶ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 21.

³⁷ Blackstock, et. al. (2005) as cited in Dominelli (2011)

The stripping away of traditional cultural systems, traditional care of children, and the sum total of the removal of rights of Aboriginal peoples wrought devastation on all aspects of their society. "Systems of tribal community governance and extended family life were broken down and transmission of cultural knowledge and skills for living on the land was disrupted."³⁸ These losses led to fear, self-hate, anger, and loss of identity. "The damage caused indescribable pain."³⁹ Most children lost the ability to speak their first language. As they became young adults they were caught between two cultures without ability to survive in either.⁴⁰ The disruption of parenting through several generations resulted in few children ever developing the ability to form healthy relationships or parenting skills.⁴¹

For Aboriginal people, the imposition of western patriarchy on predominantly matriarchal societies meant further disruption, particularly in the care of children. There was a new sexist domination unfamiliar to Aboriginal people. The nuclear family was also imposed. Traditionally many community members had cared for children and in Ball's study, participants often referred to 'circles of care' that operated in these collectivist communities.⁴² The prohibition of "(s)ystems of tribal community governance and transmission of cultural knowledge ..."⁴³ removed the father's role of educating children through the cultural histories. Fathers had also been the breadwinners, with hunting and gathering central to their roles. They would do this with the children, sharing history and educating along the way. As modern western life descended on them and their traditional hunting grounds and nomadic lifestyle were severely restricted with their loss of land, fathers also lost this role. "The malice of the created environment, one bereft of the benefits and guidance of traditional law-makers and cultural role models, robbed Aboriginal men especially of their basic human rights to foundation as individuals and within family and community."⁴⁴ This "... left a big empty gap for males. They didn't know what to do, where to go, what to say, when to say it, or anything."⁴⁵

Fathers learn from role models – their own fathers and other males in their lives. "Theories of attachment and generativity suggest that fathering is reproduced through experiences of being cared for by father role models during childhood."⁴⁶ Ball's study found that 86% of her participants had "... disrupted intergenerational transmission of fathering."⁴⁷ With the change in role imposed by colonial rule, the experiences of neglect and abuse, and the intergenerational disruption in Aboriginal parenting, who were new fathers to learn from? Were they to model male religious leaders and teachers who were the instruments of state assimilation policy and many of whom were their abusers? Or other Aboriginal males who had lost their traditional role, were suffering and lost, often resorting to drugs and alcohol to quell their pain, abusing others as they had been abused, and being incarcerated at an extremely high rate?

³⁸ Ball. (2010) p. 2.

³⁹ Bennett, et.al. (2005)

⁴⁰ Ball. (2009) p. 23.

⁴¹ Aboriginal Healing Foundation, p.1.

⁴² Ball. (2010)

⁴³ Ball. (2010) p. 7.

⁴⁴ Hammill. (2001) p. 21.

⁴⁵ Ball. (2010) p. 28.

⁴⁶ Ball. (2010) p. 3.

⁴⁷ Ball. (2010) p. 14.

Fathers who do more caregiving are more likely to have had fathers to learn from. For Ball's participants, nearly half were not involved with their first children. Unlike non-Indigenous men, "...most were involved with children who came later, usually through a subsequent partnership." For most, "becoming a father was a slow and gradual process of identifying with the role..."⁴⁸ "These patterns contrast sharply with findings of studies involving European-heritage fathers indicating that the birth of their first child typically has an immediate, momentous impact on these men."⁴⁹

In the contemporary institution of Child and Family Services (formerly child welfare), and given the constraints at being involved as fathers, researchers and policy people tend to exclude Aboriginal fathers.⁵⁰ Traditionally Indigenous parents had the primary role of caring for their children. If they became unable to parent, extended family or other community members would assume the care. Child and Family Services (CFS) operates from a western value system with the nuclear family having sole responsibility for children. The tendency is to take children away from parents who are having difficulty providing care and those parents often have little contact with their children subsequently. Traditionally the birth family was not forgotten.⁵¹ 50% of Aboriginal children living on reserve grow up without fathers. In urban areas the rate is 33%.⁵² In spite of all of the above, there are twice as many lone Aboriginal fathers as non-Aboriginal fathers raising their children.⁵³

6. Current demographic profile

Statistics Canada:

- 1,800,000 have some Aboriginal ancestry
- 1,400,000 claim Aboriginal identity (4.3% of total pop)
- 1996 – 2.8%, 2001 – 3.3%, 2006 – 3.8%, 2011 – 4.3%
- Aboriginal population has increased by 20% from 2006 – 2011
- 25% who reported as First Nations were not registered
- Aboriginals under 14 years – 28% of total Aboriginal population (non-Aboriginal – 17%)
- Aboriginals aged 15 – 24, 18% (non-Aboriginal – 13%)
- Aboriginal seniors 6% (non-Aboriginal – 14%)

"Compared to other men in Canada, Indigenous men are much more geographically mobile⁵⁴, nine times more likely to be incarcerated,⁵⁵ and three times more likely to complete suicide".^{56 5758}

⁴⁸ Ball. (2010) p. 9.

⁴⁹ Ball. (2009) p. 19.

⁵⁰ Ball. (2010)

⁵¹ Ball. (2009) p. 24.

⁵² Ball. (2009)

⁵³ Ball. (2009)

⁵⁴ Statistics Canada. (2006)

⁵⁵ Government of Canada. (2008)

⁵⁶ Health Canada. (2003)

⁵⁷ Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples. (1995) cited in Ball (2009)

⁵⁸ Statistics Canada and others say because the long-form census, which in 2011, was no longer mandatory there is a "... '... non-response bias', which holds that marginalized groups – the very groups most in need of services – are the least likely to

B. Indigenous father barriers

The historical litany of experiences of Aboriginal fathers serves to create barriers to their involvement with their children and with child and family services. Additionally, there has been a very small amount of research on all fathers in areas related to children.^{59 60} “Whereas many European-heritage fathers have maintained a hegemonic sense of masculine identity and have asserted themselves in various fathers’ rights movements, Indigenous men in Canada remain on the margins of mainstream society and have no visible representation.”⁶¹

Social exclusion is manifest in the contemporary realities of Indigenous fathers: poverty and unemployment, little opportunity with western education, violence to others and to themselves (including substance abuse), and high rates of incarceration. Assimilation has failed. Aboriginal peoples resisted it and mainstream Canadian society then refused to welcome them into society as equals.⁶² “In Canada, First Nations peoples have been subjugated, segregated and in some cases, completely annihilated by racist assumptions, policies and action.”⁶³ The experience of racism, especially over generations and by entire communities, frequently becomes internalized. Oppression belittles and makes recipients feel unworthy. They experience cultural shame, self-hate, frustration, and anger. They frequently do not believe they have value and begin to blame themselves for their difficulties. Recipients then tend to adopt the oppressors’ values, oppress themselves, and oppress others in their communities. The term lateral violence describes this phenomenon.

As a consequence – researchers, policy people, and CFS social workers tend not to include Aboriginal fathers. “Media depictions reinforce constructions of Indigenous fathers as deadbeat dads.”⁶⁴ “The discussions of fathers in (social work course) text(book)s does not consider the situation of children who have fathers with addictions, mental health challenges, or a history of violent or derisive behaviour to their partners or children.”⁶⁵ If CFS workers do not understand the root causes of behaviour, they make judgment based on the behaviour alone. There are nearly insurmountable obstacles the involvement of Aboriginal men as fathers.⁶⁶

1. Poverty

The level of poverty among Indigenous peoples in Canada compares to third world conditions. If the United Nations Development index was applied to Indigenous peoples, they would rank 80th in world,

volunteer information, which means their status is under-represented.” (Freeman, 2014, p. 1) “Critics say the move ... could allow the government to justify a reallocation of money away from programs for members of under-represented groups and that the data could be more easily manipulated by people with particular agendas.” (Freeman, 2014, p.2) The long form had a 94% response rate. Its replacement achieved a 69% response rate. Some communities had a response rate of 25% and some had 0. This produces completely unreliable data for planning.

⁵⁹ Walmsley, et.al. (2009)

⁶⁰ Ball. (2009)

⁶¹ Connell. (1995) cited in Ball (2009) p. 3.

⁶² Bennett, et.al. (2005)

⁶³ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 7.

⁶⁴ Ball. (2010) p. 3.

⁶⁵ Walmsley, et.al. (2009)

⁶⁶ Ball. (2010) p. 2.

while Canada as whole ranks first.⁶⁷ There is inadequate housing, water, sewage, food and high levels of illness associated with poverty. "Children in poverty suffer from twice as many physical, social, and emotional health disabilities as non-poor children."⁶⁸ Macdonald cites the following statistics from the 2006 census:

- Child poverty all Canada – 17%
- Indigenous child poverty – 40%
- Status First Nations child poverty – 50%

Poverty has powerful effects on parents' relationship with their children. In Letourneau, et.al.'s study of the quality of parent/child interaction among Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal groups, the results were not different, but for both groups who lived in poverty, scores were lower.⁶⁹ Stay-at-home fathers who are middle class are seen as making the choice to be with their children, but with poor stay-at-home fathers, the perception is that they are unemployed.

"Poverty has a direct and indirect influence on father involvement. When men are unable to relocate to be near to their families, when they are unable to afford transportation to and from services designed to support themselves and their families, and when they are unable to fulfill the role of provider with respect to food, adequate housing and financial support, their role and involvement in their families is marginalized."⁷⁰ "The psychological impact on a father of not being able to provide adequately for his children can be significant, and this can negatively influence the maintenance of father involvement."⁷¹ A large proportion of the homeless population is Aboriginal.

2. Violence

The depression, frustration, and anger of historical and modern social exclusion, and their own experience of violence, lead to a level of violence perpetrated by Aboriginal men that is alarming. The violence may be directed internally, through substance abuse and addiction or to suicide, especially in males aged 15 – 29. Bennett, et.al. state that Aboriginal suicide is caused by a lack of identity, of understanding one's own culture, racism, low education, low economic base, and having less land. Aboriginal male deaths related to injury occur at four times that of the general population.⁷² Whatever the cause, "... young Aboriginal men die at a higher rate than the rest of the Canadian population"⁷³ Or violence may be directed at others.

3. Education

Education provided to Aboriginal students is of inferior quality; they achieve at a lower level, and graduate at a much lower rate than all Canadian students. Because of the residential school legacy, most

⁶⁷ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 7.

⁶⁸ Letourneau, N.L.; Hungler, K.M.; Fisher, K. (2005)

⁶⁹ Letourneau, et.al. (2005) p.550.

⁷⁰ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 5.

⁷¹ Blackstock & Clarke. (2004) cited in Brown, et.al. (2009) p. 5.

⁷² Edmonton Journal. (2014)

⁷³ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 3.

parents do not trust the education system. There is a high absenteeism rate. Even if they manage to acquire an education, they have less access to good jobs, when qualifications and experience are considered.⁷⁴

4. Social work practice

a) Power

Aboriginal fathers see child and family services as highly suspicious of them and always watching what they do, anticipating that there will be problems with their attitudes and actions.

CFS social workers have the power to take children away from families. That is the nature of their roles, but the literature indicates that Aboriginal peoples perceive considerable misuse of this power and they have tremendous fear of it. In Strega, et.al.'s analogy of the 'ghosts' of CFS, they refer to "(t)he Godly Ghost (which) is the omnipotent, all-powerful, and unstoppable ghost."⁷⁵ Even when social workers exhibited "(s)ympathy with their plight (this) failed to prevent ... (Aboriginal fathers) being fearful of the enormous amount of power that practitioners exerted over their lives."⁷⁶

CFS Management

There can be no doubt that the past decade has seen severe funding cuts to any type of human services funded by government and it is therefore inevitable that social workers carry a heavy case load. This certainly affects the quality of service they can offer to their clients. Brown describes a new type of management style used in child and family services that models the private sector. With this model, working with fathers is an inefficient use of resources.⁷⁷

b) Jurisdiction

Social services are constitutionally a provincial responsibility, but in the case of First Nations peoples, the responsibility is federal. Prior to the 1985 amendment of the Indian Act, all CFS were delivered under federal jurisdiction. Since then, the provinces have delivered all social services except in the cases where bands have set up their own child and family services systems, which are funded at a lower rate. This creates confusion when Aboriginal families move between reserves and outside reserves. There is also "(f)ragmentation in this system (that) creates difficulties for parents when a case is opened in one jurisdiction and parent(s) or child/ren move to another, making communications within and across agency borders problematic."⁷⁸

c) Mother bias

⁷⁴ Hay, C., Khalema, E., Van Bavel, J., Lake, B., Bajwa, J. (2004)

⁷⁵ Strega. (2009) p. 85.

⁷⁶ Strega, et.al. (200), cited in Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 355.

⁷⁷ Brown. (2009)

⁷⁸ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 352.

Rarely were fathers involved in discussions with CFS workers regarding the welfare of their children.⁷⁹ When fathers did try to become involved, they saw a bias toward the mother of their child/ren. In Ball's study in B.C., 61% "... perceived some sort of social bias favouring mothers."⁸⁰ For example, in one case, "(s)ocial workers did not engage directly with Todd, speak to or interview him about his child or demands for access. Practitioners relied on the mother for information and presumed accuracy." (Ball, 2010) Walmsley found 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."⁸¹ Other research discovered that mothers were also relied upon to communicate with the father on the social worker's behalf. "The system of making women responsible for controlling fathers required rethinking if it is to promote the needs of mothers, fathers and children."⁸² And "... among fathers who had limited or no contact with one or more children who were in government care, many described in various ways their sense of being intimidated or helpless to establish working relationships with child welfare workers, to access legal advice, or to manage the transportation and scheduling to sustain contact with their child."⁸³

"In this gendered discourse, women are responsible for the effects of their behavior on children but men are not."⁸⁴

d) Formal records

Two practices exacerbate the CFS tendency to deal almost exclusively with mothers. One is that all CFS files, except in Quebec, are listed under the mother's name. The other is the extremely low registration of paternity on Indigenous birth records.

"The practice of organizing child protection cases through the mother's name is a significant contributor to practices that ... ignore fathers."⁸⁵ Ball found almost no information on fathers was included on CFS records in B.C. In Quebec, where files are listed under the child's name, there was no more information included about children's fathers.⁸⁶

A variety of factors contribute to the very low registration of paternity on Indigenous birth records compared to non-Indigenous records.⁸⁷ There may be insufficient knowledge of the importance of registering fathers, an inability of fathers to travel to the place of birth, or a lack of desire of one or both parents to have the father registered on children's birth records. Parents may not realize that registering the father is necessary "... to establishing a child's entitlement to registration." Also, "(t)here is a higher rate of unstated paternity in communities which do not have community based maternity facilities and

⁷⁹ Strega, et.al. (2008) p. 706.

⁸⁰ Ball. (2010)

⁸¹ Walmsley, et.al. (2009) p. 80.

⁸² Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 359.

⁸³ Ball. (2009) p. 26.

⁸⁴ Strega, et.al. (2009) p.74.

⁸⁵ Strega, et.al. (2008) p. 707.

⁸⁶ Strega, et.al. (2009)

⁸⁷ Ball. (2009) p. 4.

are at a greater distance from maternity facilities.”⁸⁸ Alternatively, the mother may be worried about the parent’s relationship with each other, the father may not admit paternity, the mother may not want people to know who the father is, or the mother may fear losing her status.⁸⁹

When not registered on birth records of their children, it is extremely difficult for fathers to become formally involved in their children’s lives. Combined with the CFS bias toward dealing with mothers, when CFS apprehends children, “... this may often mean that father-child relationships are severed or severely challenged.”⁹⁰

e) Indigenous father stereotypes

Fathers in various studies feel judged according to the stereotype of the irresponsible, unemployed, drug and alcohol addicted man who is unlikely to care for his children and more likely to commit criminal acts that will land him in jail. In spite of the historical reasons for many Aboriginal men and women having these problems, it is not reasonable to assume that every parent fits the stereotype. As with all people, Aboriginal fathers need to be judged on who they are as individuals without negative preconceptions.⁹¹ In one case, CFW workers would “... ask me (Aboriginal father) the same questions four or five different ways to try to trip me up ... it was just basically undermining.”⁹² They feel that they are constantly being watched for exhibiting stereotypical behaviour. Tony was persistently suspected of using drugs, submitted to numerous drug tests which all came back negative. “Tony was upset by the lack of apology for his mistreatment and lack of respect for him and his family.”⁹³ A participant in another study, in dealing with CFW and court, stated “...they all assumed that I was the bad guy.” This particular father had raised his child for two full years “... but the social workers assumed she (the mother) was the one bringing her up...”⁹⁴ Working class fathers are seen by CFW workers as ‘risky’. If they are unemployed or in jail they are ‘double risky’.⁹⁵ If they are also Aboriginal, perceptions are even worse.

In the case of one Indigenous father who had allegedly assaulted his child, the system assumed it was true and took the child into care.⁹⁶ Elements of truth lead others to assume that if an Aboriginal man is accused of violence, then it must be true.

“These fathers often cast social workers as ‘the enemy’ – professionals to stay away from ...”.⁹⁷

f) Social worker profile

⁸⁸ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 4.

⁸⁹ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 4.

⁹⁰ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 5.

⁹¹ Ball. (2009) p. 24.

⁹² Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 362.

⁹³ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 361.

⁹⁴ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 356.

⁹⁵ Blackstock & Clarke. (2004) cited in Brown, et.al. (2009)

⁹⁶ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 358.

⁹⁷ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 356.

The vast majority of FCS workers are white and female. Indigenous fathers occasionally had experiences with male and/or Aboriginal workers and felt that these groups should be more highly represented because they tended to show greater understanding and skills. "... most child welfare workers are white, at least half of the families that they work with are indigenous or non-white."⁹⁸ Social workers, in one study, were 80% female. When men were employed in these departments and related organizations, they tended to be managers of child and family services and University experts.⁹⁹

g) Social workers change

When relationships with social workers were going well, Aboriginal fathers did report difficulties when the replacement worker did not work out. In the case of Alex, "(h)is plan to become 'survivor dad' fails when a promising working relationship slips as his worker is replaced by one who is unsupportive." Bill worked with a social worker who visited him in jail and asked if he would like to be part of the life of his child. The enthusiastically positive response led the worker to bring the baby to him for weekly visits. Upon release, Bill was given sole custody of the child. When the original worker was replaced, she did not mirror the initial worker's trust but instead judged unfairly and interfered.¹⁰⁰

h) Parenting programs inappropriate

When parenting programs were mentioned by Aboriginal fathers, they felt the programs were not appropriate for them. In parent education programs in B.C., "... fathers (were) found depicted in peripheral ways..."¹⁰¹ Parenting books in print were assessed as gender neutral but 69% of the images with children are mothers and only 23% were with fathers.¹⁰² Fathers indicated a preference that parenting programs for them be run by men, preferably Indigenous men.¹⁰³

i) Fathers work hard

Compared to the non-Aboriginal population, Aboriginal men are more likely to be fathers and are more often lone parents of their children. Of all men aged 20 – 29, in the Aboriginal population 19% are fathers, compared to 6% of non-Aboriginal men.¹⁰⁴ There are twice as many Aboriginal men who are lone-parents than there are non-Aboriginal men.¹⁰⁵

"Many fathers described conditions that catalyzed their initial engagement with their child, including: their efforts to improve personal 'wellness'; pressures from partners and other family members; learning to manage relationships with other adults involved with their children in order to sustain

⁹⁸ Blackstock & Clarke. (2004) cited in Brown, et.al. (2009)

⁹⁹ Walmsley, et.al. (2009) p. 46.

¹⁰⁰ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 360.

¹⁰¹ Walmsley, et.al. 2009) p. 46.

¹⁰² Walmsley, et.al. 2009) p. 46.

¹⁰³ Ball. (2009)

¹⁰⁴ Ravanera. (2008)

¹⁰⁵ Ball. (2009)

contact with their children; and the absence of a child's mother due to her death, disappearance, incarceration or departure."¹⁰⁶

The following two examples illustrate the challenges and successes of Indigenous fathers.

Jack said that he survived "... colonizing child welfare practices." He was ashamed of being Aboriginal. Jack's parents were sent to residential schools and he grew up with violence and alcohol. Jack's child's mother grew up in foster care and was heavily involved with alcohol and drugs. CFS apprehended their first two babies at birth and then adopted them out. The parents finally got the children back and when the parents broke up, Jack parented both children and cares for them well. He collects social assistance and has one part-time job. Jack puts much effort into appearing to do everything right.¹⁰⁷

Eddie had a history filled with alcohol and violence and had lived in foster care on an ongoing basis. He had three children from his first relationship. "He sobered up and works hard to look promising to child welfare." Eddie said he acted like a white person. He is proud of himself and his family. He talks to his children about alcohol. With his CFS worker, he is very honest and is in turn strongly supported by that worker.¹⁰⁸ It is interesting that both of these fathers seemed to know that CFS used a white mainstream value system and they acted accordingly.

"Their accounts about learning to be fathers suggested that they were rallying all their personal resources to become effective and stay involved in spite of the relative lack of social or economic support and in spite of legislation, policies and social and health services that favour mothers."¹⁰⁹

"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 people."¹¹⁰

"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."¹¹¹

j) Lateral Violence

Included here is one example of internalized oppression being aimed at an Aboriginal father. It is part of this review because of the many similar cases that were found in the upcoming data set. Henry was wrongly accused of sexual abuse by the mother of his child. CFS worker attitudes to him were overpowering and he said they ruined his life.¹¹² His lawyer happened to work with someone who knew the mother of his child and had shared details about falsely accusing him. The woman gave an affidavit and the charges were dropped. He then got sole custody of the child.¹¹³

k) Barriers outside CFS

¹⁰⁶ Ball. (2009) p. 19.

¹⁰⁷ Strega, et.al. (2009) p. 79.

¹⁰⁸ Strega, et al. (2009) p. 80.

¹⁰⁹ Ball. (2009) p. 31.

¹¹⁰ Ball. (2009) p. 4.

¹¹¹ Ball. (2009) p. 10.

¹¹² Strega, et.al. (2009) p. 78.

¹¹³ Strega, et.al. (2009) p. 79.

The following quote is included because of its relevance in the research findings below. “When a child is removed, former custodial parents receiving income assistance are cut back to the level for accommodating a single person, making it difficult to provide a suitable home for the return of the child.”¹¹⁴

¹¹⁴ Ball. (2009) p. 23.

C. Recommendations

1. Recognize benefits of involved fathers

When fathers are involved in their children's lives children are healthier, they achieve better in school, have more healthy emotions, and better social interaction. "It's good for fathers too – they can show less distress, less substance abuse, improved marital stability and happiness, and greater capacity for attachment."¹¹⁵ On the whole, these relationships help the entire community to heal.

2. Reduce racism

For Indigenous fathers to have better success as parents, child and family services must take steps to "... reverse the assumptions of racism and assimilation that still shape and constrain Aboriginal life chances To bring about this fundamental change, Canadians need to understand that Aboriginal people are nations... political and cultural groups with values and life ways distinct from other Canadians. They lived as nations – highly centralized, loosely federated, or small and clan-based for thousands of years before the arrival of the Europeans."^{116 117}

3. Social work education

One article described a study of the course outlines of all Bachelor of Social Work programs across Canada. Two thirds of the courses (59) responded to the request. With regard to issues of fathering, only three programs had fathering as part of one of their courses and two of them were Francophone institutions.¹¹⁸ The study concluded by saying that "(s)chools should... consider a course on 'masculinities'... explore gender relations, patriarchy, domination, and violence, as well as the ways boys become men and men become fathers across classes, cultures, and sexual orientation."¹¹⁹ "The discussions of fathers in ... (social work education) texts does not consider the situation of children who have fathers with addictions, mental health challenges, or a history of violent or derisive behaviour to their partners or children. The implications for children having greater involvement with these fathers are not considered."¹²⁰ In his study of social work courses, there was not much about the support that would help fathers and nothing about single fathers or joint custody. Very little information was found about what abusive fathers need.¹²¹

This responsibility lies both with pre-service education and with professional development while on the job. "Workers ... need to be trained to deal with fathers. They need to know that fathers are out there trying and they should be pushing for that."¹²² This can be successfully accomplished with carefully

¹¹⁵ Ball. (2009)

¹¹⁶ Bennett, et.al., (2005) p. 9.

¹¹⁷ Ball. (2010)

¹¹⁸ Walmsley, et.al. (2009) p. 46.

¹¹⁹ Walmsley, et.al. (2009) p. 91.

¹²⁰ Walmsley, et.al. (2009) p. 81.

¹²¹ Walmsley, et.al. (2009) p. 90.

¹²² Ball. (2010) p. 10.

planned professional development programs, including conferences that build knowledge of Aboriginal and other marginalized fathers, and all fathers.

Male role models were essential if fathers were to be successful. If men are to be encouraged to take on roles as leaders such as teachers and social workers there is a "... need to support Indigenous fathers in communities, programs, research and policies in Canada."¹²³

Support fathers

Given the serious challenges faced by Aboriginal men in their ability to become successful in their roles as fathers, if they are given assistance with this role, they will then have a vastly improved ability to succeed. At the very least, CFS workers should not present obstacles to willing fathers being involved with their children. One Aboriginal father said "You know... instead of letting the willow bend, you know, you don't have to snap the damn thing in half. You can let it bend and let it go back and it'll swing on forever."¹²⁴ "... men are not absent from their children or communities by choice." Trauma must be seen and addressed, then they can be good parents."¹²⁵

This is best begun with modes of prevention, prior to young men becoming fathers. It is recommended that Indigenous fathers be trained to work with male youth to postpone fatherhood and develop relationship skills.¹²⁶ It would also be helpful if Aboriginal youth are prepared to "... recognize paternity by promoting registration on birth, health, school and child welfare records."¹²⁷

When social workers engage with Aboriginal families, they must have a good understanding of the life experiences over generations that have caused most of their challenges. Then workers need to develop supportive ways to work with the families in order to increase their ability to raise children in healthy ways. There is a demonstrated tendency when an Indigenous father shows signs of trauma, to remove the child from the situation. It is of course the responsibility of the workers to protect the safety of the children. But sending them in large numbers to foster care has not proven to improve their lives in most cases. Children want and need to live with their families and among their cultural communities.

Aboriginal fathers, when given appropriate support, can and do become involved with their children in positive ways. If they misuse alcohol and drugs, or become abusive, then the best strategy is to provide support for them to deal in healthy ways with the root causes of these behaviours. "Children, mothers and fathers suffer when workers fail to engage with fathers and father-figures. To move toward true inclusiveness in both protecting and supporting children, practitioners need to proactively assess and engage with all significant men in a child's life, understanding that some may pose risks, some may be assets, and some may incorporate aspects of both."¹²⁸ Fathers need support and suggested that social workers: "listened actively to their views and trusted that they, too, have the best interests of their

¹²³ Aboriginal Healing Foundation. With Dad: Strengthening the Circle of Care, Panel Discussion. p. 1.

¹²⁴ Strega, et.al. (2009) p. 86.

¹²⁵ Aboriginal Healing Foundation. With Dad: Strengthening the Circle of Care, Panel Discussion. p. 3.

¹²⁶ Ball. (2009)

¹²⁷ Ball. (2010) p. 4.

¹²⁸ Strega, et.al. (2008) p. 713.

children at heart....”¹²⁹ Aboriginal fathers and their children benefit when social workers assist them through their process of healing, over the long term.

Few formal programs for Indigenous fathers exist, but they do need resources to help them father better. When such programs are offered they work. “... most child welfare workers are white, at least half of the families that they work with are indigenous or non-white.”¹³⁰ “Fathers, as well as mothers, who experience parenting skill deficits as a result of the impact on themselves or their own parents of residential school experiences, may be particularly reluctant and averse to attending group meetings or therapy when such meetings are held in institutional settings or are conducted in a manner that is insensitive to this legacy.”¹³¹ The document *With Dad: Strengthening the Circle of Care* describes fathers as a huge untapped resource for Aboriginal children when their needs are understood, their perspectives are respected, involvement is encouraged, and healing is supported.¹³²

Some suggest that fathers be involved in all programs involving children; others indicate that programs specifically for men work best. Programs that incorporate father-friendly activities: teepees, bannock, barbeques, land skills, paddling, martial arts, drumming, building canoes, hiking to traditional campsites, hunting, and fishing incorporate elements of the traditional Indigenous father and can be very successful.

4. Culture

The most successful way of integrating Aboriginal fathers into family life is through the use of traditional practices and philosophies. Incorporating Elder wisdom, re-connection with culture, and incorporating mentorship often work well. “The standards of child welfare are rooted in middle-class white culture, and its imposition on Aboriginal fathers and their families haunts all their stories”.¹³³ “Social policy development and the design of appropriate institutional practices and community services, that facilitate the inclusion and involvement of Aboriginal fathers in their families’ lives require creative and locally constructed and delivered solutions. These solutions will honour the distinctive heritage of Aboriginal peoples and the values and circumstances of First Nations and local communities.”¹³⁴

Since the late 1970s Aboriginal organizations and communities have been creating their own child welfare organizations. In 2005 there were 125 agencies across Canada, most of them under provincial governments, although many want independence from the provinces. These organizations use more culturally appropriate services. CFS is also using more Aboriginal practices, such as circles, family meetings, the medicine wheel, and involving Elders.¹³⁵

Following are some examples of cases where culturally-focused work with Aboriginal fathers have been successful. Attendance at public school taught an Aboriginal father shame of himself. After he found out

¹²⁹ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 356.

¹³⁰ Blackstock & Clarke. (2004) cited in Brown, et.al. (2009)

¹³¹ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 6.

¹³² Hammill. (2001)

¹³³ Strega, et.al. (2009) p. 86.

¹³⁴ Dominelli, et.al. (2011) p. 6.

¹³⁵ Bennett, et.al. (2005) p. 27.

where he was from and began to learn about his culture, he changed from self-conscious and distant to realizing that he had things to offer.¹³⁶ Leo Hébert shared that his parents had been taken to residential school. When he got to know his grandmother and family elders, they taught him traditional ways. This helped him to believe in himself as a father.¹³⁷ Dion Metcalfe at this same panel discussion described his trauma that led to alcohol and drug abuse, which all changed when he discovered his culture.¹³⁸

5. Policy

In order for systemic change within child and family service institutions to occur, change needs to occur beyond the individual social worker practice. Indigenous dads highlighted "... the need for long-term investments in policy reform and programs to reduce structural, personal, and social barriers to Indigenous fathers' involvement." Change "... must go beyond individual father characteristics and family interaction variables to include institutional tools that can enhance or obstruct fathers' access to opportunities to be involved."¹³⁹

¹³⁶ Behrendt. (2009)

¹³⁷ Aboriginal Healing Foundation. With Dad: Strengthening the Circle of Care, Panel Discussion. p. 3.

¹³⁸ Aboriginal Healing Foundation. With Dad: Strengthening the Circle of Care, Panel Discussion. p. 4.

¹³⁹ Ball. (2009) p. 30.

RESEARCH REPORT

I. Past Experience

The narratives from research participants most often included descriptions of their own experience with child welfare. Only two participants reported being raised consistently in a home with their birth parents, and each of these had at least one parent who had been to residential school. Some of them moved back and forth to their birth families. Participants almost exclusively felt unloved by foster parents and believed that child welfare workers did not care about them. There was a tragic level of neglect; and sexual and physical violence committed against them as young people. These men were given little to no opportunity to develop their identity as Aboriginal.

Many participants began running away from foster care as soon as they were able. There were reports of subsequent poverty and homelessness, alcohol and drug abuse, and involvement with criminal activity. Nobody reported any level of trust with child welfare workers or with the system and several had developed a vehement hatred of child welfare.

There were a very few instances of intermittent kinship care that had occurred.

Derek was apprehended at age 4, lived with 6 foster families until age 18, and reported that not one of them were good. He described his foster parents as "... a lot of church people wanting to save the savages." His mother went to residential school where she contracted tuberculosis and was a heavy drinker.

Randy felt treated like a number, not a person. He believed he was only important because of the dollars generated for his care. When he met two of his child welfare workers later in life, he became uncontrollably angry. He said "Yeah, they're not the ones that beat me, they're not the ones that starved me and stuff like that. It was them that could have done checks on me, could have told me where I was from And it was all their fault, it was social service's fault, right?" "And so after I turned 18 ... I had this mad crazy hate for social services Angry, angry at social services for the way I was treated and me and my brothers were treated and stuff. And yeah, so I will be healing for the rest of my life." Allan described child welfare workers as "... just mean every time I saw them, coming to get us. They are coming to get us again. And it's like a cold dark curse when they come to get you because you don't know, you are afraid of where they are taking you."

Two participants described their initial foster placements being with one or more siblings. In both cases, siblings were later separated and those events had a powerfully negative impact on them. Derek was with two of his siblings "... from about five until eight years of age. And then we were split up again ... we were all slit up. Yeah, you'd think they would try and keep kids together." Allan said through his tears "... then you're just off again because they had no room for all three of us. So it was like that most of my life, you didn't want to love anymore because you just got thrown away again. And I find that affects a lot of my relationships as an adult. I am always preparing for rejection." The sibling relationship had been a powerfully positive factor in their lives.

A. Violence

Reports of sexual and physical violence were common. Cliff's foster parents "... were very abusive. Just because they were hardline religious, they blamed me for everything and they told me that I was gonna burn in fire and brimstone just for being me." Allan was curious about animals and nature. "I found a little round fluffy ball ... and put it in my dresser. A few days later, my whole bed and there were spiders everywhere, all over the wall. And I got strapped 15 times on my bare ass for that." Scott "... was abused physically, emotionally, told stuff like – it's bad enough you're an Indian, you don't have to act like one." He was also sexually abused by one foster father. In one situation, he reported abuse to a social worker. "And the social worker told the foster parents what I had said and then left! ... Great so you know what happened..." He then shared that the abuse increased in severity.

Randy described extensively forms of abuse that were so severe his life was in danger. When he was living with this foster family, he was wetting the bed, which seemed to cause the severity of the abuse. His earliest memory is of his foster mother poking him with safety pins. He was forced to drink urine from others: "... like who makes a four year old drink pee? For wetting the bed. Who, who, who does that?" Randy had his wet underwear forced down his throat and was locked in a cold bathroom with a concrete floor for entire nights. He had to chew on chili peppers without swallowing, and his hand was held over a fire resulting in severe burns after he lit matches. The most dangerous abuse involved his foster mother dragging him upstairs by his heels and dunking his head in and out of a rain barrel, nearly drowning him. "... some mornings I would wake up and I would have a wet bed.... I would just be waking up, wake up inside this rain barrel and come to my senses And I could look up and I would see that woman over top of me, holding my ankles. Look up at her and just to see that mean look on her face." The woman was later holding his head "underneath the running tap full blast and just held my head there. The only thing that saved me was her daughter ... came around the corner and she kicked her and said you're killing him, you're killing him!"

The effects of the abuse are described in detail below. In the case of Randy, while in a youth facility he attempted suicide and later became involved in crime to the point where he committed manslaughter.

B. Discrimination

Racial discrimination from white people and discrimination from other Aboriginals (referred to as lateral violence¹⁴⁰) was reported by several participants. This occurred in school, while playing sports, and in general interactions. Derek "... was always being teased and called names and stuff because there were only three Aboriginal kids in the whole school." Allan played hockey and lacrosse. He "... always ended up fighting because I was called a wagon burner or something, or an apple – red on the outside, white on the inside." With Scott, he was moved to an area in Alberta where the Aboriginal people there were not from his Nation. Scott was not aware of this but eventually discovered that he was picked on because he was Cree and they were not.

¹⁴⁰ Lateral violence is a recognized phenomenon that occurs among oppressed people who, when they see others like them being successful, then oppress that person. The oppressed oppress each other because that is what they know.

C. Identity

A small number of those interviewed were very familiar with their Aboriginal identity and those few were able to negotiate their difficulties in more positive ways. Another group who went back and forth between birth home and foster care were able to gain some cultural knowledge that way. The third cluster had very little or no knowledge of what it meant to be Aboriginal, with one man growing up thinking he was white. When they did start to learn about their history and cultural practices and values, they were first angry and in disbelief that this important part of them was not shared. They were also confused about who they were and several reported not feeling comfortable in either society. Those few who were in intermittent kinship care had some exposure to their culture and one participant mentioned learning by associating with other Aboriginal youth outside of his home community. A number of the men stated that gaining this knowledge was the beginning of their healing journey. For Randy, nobody "... let us know that we are Aboriginal, we are the First Peoples of this country" when he was in foster care. At age 11 or 12, child welfare tried to introduce him to the community of his birth by bringing him to visit his grandmother. "And culturally I didn't know nothing. I didn't know who I was. I didn't know, I thought I was a white guy....) At age 12 or 13, Scott "... started realizing the realities about native people in Canada and our society. I had a lot of culture shock going on and because they didn't teach me anything." For Allan, "I still feel misplaced in this society, still not really accepted by either. Because I grew up learning the white way to live. And I come to the reserve once I wasn't a ward of the government no more and then to them I was just white" Then he moved to the city, he said with great sadness, "... and I still don't know who I am."

Derek's young life was in child welfare. He had a traumatic reintroduction to his community. "... when I was 15 they came and told me my Mom was dying and she wanted to see me.... And they ... told me I couldn't go see her.... Two weeks later she died and they thought it would be a good idea if I went to the funeral so I could meet my relatives."

Few of the participants had positive Aboriginal male role models to learn fathering skills from. Randy's role models were "... some guys in belly chains and shackles and they had these green jackets on. And that became my idols.... I became that person in the green jacket, the person in the green belly chains and tattoos." Others' role models were frequently changing foster fathers, some of whom were their abusers. Once again, those few who grew up in their birth families had the best experiences acting as fathers, seeming to be much better 'equipped'.

Jerry's role model was his older sister. After he ran away from foster care, he "... ended up staying with my sister". She showed him how to help care for the children in the house, prepare meals, how to drive, and helped him find a job. He then started contributing to the household financially. Jerry also helped care for his younger brother, who had been unmanageable by anyone else.

D. Consequences of child welfare experience

Once these men had developed enough skills to live on their own, many of them ran away from foster care. Some would be found and brought back, but if they had reached the age of 14 or 15, they often did not return. Most moved to the city, and survived on the streets. Two of the participants were homeless

at the time of their interview. Randy started running away at age 11, because of the severe abuse he experienced due to his bed-wetting. He was looking for his brother from whom he had been separated at age eight. He ended up being placed in a home for troubled youth. “And to stop me from running away there they locked me in a room with a window and a mirror and a bed. That was it. And like I was chronically running away all the time.”

Their life experiences, in many cases combined with life on the streets and finding means of survival often led to involvement with crime and drugs. Fred left his dysfunctional home at age 14 and “... used to be the biggest bootlegger and drug dealer out in that reserve.... And the thing is that people respected me and everyone looked up to me.... I was a really bad guy before. You know I’d go up beating up drug dealers.” Fred’s own son later emulated his behaviour. Randy’s life of crime began with stealing and spending time in young offender centres where he would meet other criminals. “Hah, every young offender centre across Alberta I’ve been in, every adult centre, every adult prison, federal and provincial I’ve been in. The escalation, it escalated all the way to manslaughter. From theft to manslaughter.”

II. Recent Experience

There was a level of resiliency in this group of fathers, grandfathers, uncles, and step-fathers they had managed to acquire that may be surprising given their traumatic early experiences. Although most of these men had gone through periods in their lives where they dealt with addiction and crime – poverty and homelessness, they had all sought out ways to ‘heal’ from their trauma, and were all devoted to their children. There was a resounding voice of not drinking or using drugs; of working to improve themselves by dealing with their issues, going back to school, and working to earn a good living. In most cases the healing journey involved reconnection with Aboriginal world view, cultural practices, and beliefs. They were proud of themselves – what they had done as individuals and with their experiences of being fathers. And they were proud of their children. Although most continued to struggle with various aspects of life, relationships, and parenthood, an inspiring sense of hope was shared.

Some male participants were still struggling with some of these issues. Aaron, who was homeless at the time of the interview indicated that CFS could not talk to him about getting custody of his son because he needed to have a home first. His son was living with his mother who was heavily involved with alcohol and drugs and Aaron was frightened about the effects on his child. He was caught in a Catch 22 type situation where he could not get financial assistance to care for his child until his child was with him but he couldn’t bring his child into a homeless situation.

There were many instances of the mothers of children living with addiction and related issues, unable to care for their children properly. Fathers who wanted to bring their children into their healthy homes were not listened to by CFS workers, because of their perception of the mother-centric bias. Both Fred and Scott reported being physically abused by their partners. They were forced to leave but child and family services and other social services were not equipped to help them. For Scott, “My girlfriend, she has come from years of trauma and it is like her boyfriends screaming at her and abusing her to the point where she doesn’t want to be with me if I don’t do that That is not something I am capable of, I am sorry. And that is where our son is, (she is) smacking me in the face while (I am) holding our son and

stuff. And I didn't know what to do at that point so I just left." Fred was "... beaten up daily ... by my ex, hey? And finally I got thrown out (with his children). And there was the women's shelter and I called them and asked is there anything for a man, like any services around here? They are just like no.... What about, men get beaten up too, like thrown out on the street, where the hell"

A. Children apprehended

All but two participants had children apprehended at some point and these were all working on having their children live with them because the situation at the mothers' homes were not healthy, or the mother had left the home. For most of the fathers, their custody was intermittent with the mother and/or foster care. For the mother of Scott's child "... from what I have seen of her trauma, it's almost impossible for her to be able to function as his mother. That is a fragile state for her and now she's lost her third son...." The mother of Jerry's child "... during this time that I wasn't with her, she has been stabbed in the underneath the arm because she got into a fight drunk on the streets. She had another guy choke her until she was unconscious One of her nephews beat on her and cracked her head open, where she has got still to this day a severe concussion.... My daughter wants to come stay with ... me. And the mother wouldn't give her back..."

Only Paul, Arron, and Dennis had always had custody but Dennis had still dealt with CFS due to an unfounded complaint from his children's mother. Paul and Dennis were always extremely careful because they knew they were being monitored closely. For Randy, it was his grandchildren he wanted to care for and Brian had taken in a child of his nephew. And with the exception of Aaron, they had all cared for their children for various lengths of time, in their homes. Aaron was under 18 at the time of the interview, and though his child's mother was not providing good care, CFS could not talk to him until he reached age 18.

Almost all participants had experienced a friend or family member calling CFS to complain about their parenting, complaints which they all said were unfounded and most often came from the child's mother who had fabricated stories. Dennis had cared for his children for eight years but was continually dealing with child and family services due to such unfounded complaints. For him, CFS workers had arrived with police carrying rifles who then surrounded his house. This happened again shortly after the interview. His daughter was once apprehended from school, a situation that also occurred with other fathers. CFS was continually "harassing" him though he had cared for his children for 14 years.

Sam, who still lived with his partner and mother of their three children, had his first child apprehended when CFS workers used false pretenses to enter the home and hold the baby. They then left the home with the child. The next two children were apprehended at birth. Sam and his partner have been working for 5 years to get them back and visited the children weekly. The children were having difficulty determining who their actual parents were. Jerry had his brother babysit overnight. His brother had left the children unattended the next morning and CFS apprehended the children from the playground.

B. Kinship care

Kinship care had occurred outside the purview of CFS in two cases. Brian's "... nephew was having a hard time with addictions And so we offered to look after his daughter.... And it was really something where we felt really good about being able to kind of rescue her.... Eventually ... he took his daughter back." Afterward, the daughter was doing well when the nephew quit using drugs and provided a good home for her. Randy has custody of one grandson and is working on having another grandson live with him. "They're five and six.... I'll teach them how to do beadwork. I'll teach them how to wrap feathers and stuff like that.... I just want what's best for my grandchildren ... so that they'll have that connection with family, that people know who they are, Aboriginals you know."

C. Fathers improved their lives

Interviews included a number of reports of quitting drugs and alcohol and taking other steps to improve their lives in order to become better fathers. Paul had never used alcohol or drugs. "... I've always lived that traditional life, I've danced pow-wow for many years and so has my son and we've danced together and travelled together. And you know it's just doing those things and keep a healthy family together." Allan "... left my foster home when I was 15 one day and I've been on my own ever since. I've taken carpentry and learned the survival game." Derek "... wasn't gonna depend on the welfare system for anything. Once I got free, that was it, it was like leave me alone you know." Sam had quit drinking for several months and was very proud of this. Randy is now highly involved with "... artwork, a lot of beadwork, I dance traditional. I'm still trying to find out who I am, an Aboriginal man." "I don't want people to fear me. I didn't want people to be scared of me.... I'm doing what I can for my grandchildren and my girlfriend."

D. Teenage children

Inevitably, some of the children of these men experienced their own trauma and there were three descriptions of teenage children who were having serious difficulties, two of them were moved back and forth between their mothers and fathers because neither could control the child's behaviour.

Cliff had a 15 year old step-daughter and had lived with her and the mother for seven years. When the step-daughter was 11, "... she was sexually abused by her cousin." The traumatized girl reacted, in part, by falsely accusing a number of men of raping her, one of whom was her step-father. "So she told her teachers that I had raped her and the teachers called child welfare ... and they came over and did a big investigation." "They ... concluded that you know she was lying. She accused me a second time of molesting her" Cliff and his partner then initiated their own healing circle, which they video-taped. Following this, CFS dismissed the case and did not press charges. Cliff's reputation as a professional had been in jeopardy.

For Fred, who had been involved with selling drugs earlier in his life, his son became involved with similar criminal activities, knowing the reputation of his father. The mother was unable to control their son and asked Fred to care for him, which he did for a year. "Yeah, but even here he was already getting little gang together himself from school, you know.... gone all night. Like you could tell he was hung over or still burnt out from smoking weed or something." Fred's son continued being rebellious and was, at the time of the interview, in a rehabilitation centre.

The daughter of Jerry, when she turned 12 began to break family rules and stayed out all of one night. "... I ended up getting the cops and everybody involved in trying to find her and hunt her down and she didn't like that." His daughter stole a vehicle and was "charged with theft over \$5000 and break and enter...." The girl returned to her mother very briefly. When the mother couldn't handle her, she returned to her father and continued to rebel.

E. Good kids

A number of fathers were extremely proud of the accomplishments of their children. Paul's son "... he's a fine young adult and has done well.... He'll be 21 this summer and he works ... knows the value of work. He knows he's got to get up every day and go to work. And it's only because he saw me do that and come home every day and make supper, clean clothes, you know. Brian's children are "... all independent and they all work for a living and have good hearts ... I have told my son for example many times, you have a good heart and you take care of people and the world will take care of you ..." Dan said "... I think my kids are doing OK. My daughter is going to U of A in sciences next year, she graduated early, top of her class." And Jerry's son "shows up to school every day, shows up with report cards of A's. And he ... cleans the house. He's out looking for work.... Because he saw Dad doing it every day.... Dad's still going to school, Dad worked"

F. Fathers have capacity

Half of the men interviewed spoke of how they loved their children and enjoyed the role of parenting, through good times and bad. If they didn't currently have custody, they were working hard to have their children with them. Sam and Aaron both wanted to be with their children so they could teach them how to be good people. They would love to be spending time with their children, caring for them, and playing with them. Paul's wife left the home and never had involvement with CFS, because he was extremely cautious that there was never a reason for it. He asked his former wife for a home study, on his own, because he suspected there were problems there. She never did agree to the study and Paul had sole custody until his son could decide to visit his mother at her home. He would not have his son stay with a sitter. "Yeah, it was, like every night, every day for five years. He never left me.... would I have traded? No because my bond with him now is just heightened, it's just beautiful." "You know as men I think we're more than capable of taking care of our children in those situations.... That's a warrior's way I think..." Sam feels "... so blessed to be able to be a father.... being a father for me is a privilege and an honour..." Scott "... moved in and I took right to changing diapers. And I loved it and we spent every day together..." Jerry currently does not have custody of his youngest child: "I miss growing up with my son, I miss coming home from work and having my son run to me, Daddy! And give me that big hug, I miss sitting there feeding him. I miss him yelling at me, screaming, crying over toys, I miss all of that."

III. Positive experience

A. Indigenous Culture

The fathers who did find support, found it within their cultural communities and practices. This gave them strength to be good fathers. Dan attributed his success as a father and his children's success not just to himself, but to family and friends. "... it was a community thing. That really helped them (my

children). I guess the ceremonial ways and cultural stuff, ... (my kids) really gravitate to that.” “Like I would have crumbled a long time ago.... the ceremonies, moral support, the people checking, my buddies’ wives...” Brian, who had taken care of his nephew’s child and had a healthy family, discovered his culture at age 30 and had been participating in ceremonies ever since. “... what it comes down to , the identity, knowing who you are from, what your stories are, your language, where you belong and how important it is to be part of a family. One of my favorite sayings ... in ceremony is the term ‘all my relations’”. To help him through the traumatic time of his step-daughter falsely accusing him of raping her, Cliff had initiated his own healing circle with the mother and the step-daughter. “... we all smudged and we let (step-daughter) talk first, and we all said our piece.... And basically she just apologized for everything. She said like I don’t know why I’m telling these things to people about you. It was great.”

B. Good CFS procedures

Several of the Indigenous fathers spoke of isolated but positive experience with child and family services. There was one good placement and three instances of supportive social work practices. Scott was adopted by a non-native family who were very good to him. Sam described how he recently worked with a male social worker who was working with him to get his 3 children back from foster care. During supervised visits with his children, he realized that instead of the rather cold supervisor who just wrote notes and did not speak, he could ask for a support worker who gave them suggestions on how to interact positively with their children. This kind of support was appreciated and helpful. After an unfounded complaint by his children’s mother, Dan appreciated that procedures had changed so that when he was cleared, the instance was taken off of his record. This meant he would not be affected in his professional life.

Scott was very pleased, when he first went to foster care, that they connected him “... with a youth worker who was a native guy.... And he would come and like meet me once a week and go hang out and cool stuff like maybe we would go to a pow-wow.”

In Jerry’s case, after a long period of time where the mother of his children and others were calling in complaints to CFS about his parenting and CFS was conducting an excessive number of visits, Jerry had “bent over backwards to prove that he was this so called perfect father”, attended numerous types of sessions to improve his skills, and finally challenged two levels of supervisors; the head supervisor ultimately agreed to put a flag on his file so that any complaints made against him so that there was first an investigation of the complainant. Social workers then discovered that complaints from the mother were unfounded and realized that she was not a competent mother and had 3 other children who had been apprehended. Five other families who had made complaints against Jerry had been incompetent parents and subsequently lost their own children. The system had recognized that Jerry was a victim of lateral violence.

IV. Barriers

A. CFS worker attitudes

1. Discrimination

Nearly all participants described attitudes and behaviours toward them that were discriminatory. Perceived discrimination revolved around racial and male stereotypes. The fathers felt social workers expected that they would abuse alcohol, likely be unwilling or unable to parent children especially as a single parent, and be trouble-makers who were likely to be violent. Aboriginal fathers were upset that they were unfairly judged, and judged using a value system that was not their own. Cliff said "... there is a moral high horse somewhere in child welfare that everyone gets to sit on once in a while and cast judgment on what is best for the child". Allan thought "... these people are supposed to be looking after us and being nice to us but they treat us like we're a bunch of dogs in an animal pen or something". Brian believed that CFS would "... apprehend children just in case you mess up." The CFS system seemed to Scott to believe that "It's better to have children with woman.... Archaic kind of ideas about the man..."

The case of Jerry was particularly poignant because he had cared for his children for 14 years and had "bent over backwards" to take every program he was asked. The mother of his children, on the other hand, was dealing cocaine, refused to take any improvement programs, was not paying her bills, had been badly beaten, and had severe arthritis. The police had visited her home and made arrests of people doing drugs while the child was present. The mother had a previous child taken away from her. Jerry thought she was totally incapable of caring for his children. Jerry stated that "... child welfare is a bunch of BS. Like they sit there and they say we're out to protect the children. No. They're not."

2. Lack of Aboriginal understanding

Social workers judged those who engaged in traditional practices through a western cultural lens. Brian said CFS workers "... don't know who we are and they are still living in some kind of world with a colonial mentality." Dan had grown up on a trap line, hunting and fishing for a living. He was living in the city and had no previous experience with child and family services. His culture was essential to him and he was teaching it to his three children. The mother of his children had made a complaint to CFS when he had taken them out hunting and fishing. "And it was spring and it was cold and we were staying in the bush and obviously you've got to keep a fire to keep warm.... So you know, my son was 7 or 8, my oldest, and he wanted to learn how to make a fire so I worked with him and we did. So the allegation was that the kids were cold and freezing and a 7 year old boy had to make a fire to keep his brother and sister warm.... From a child welfare perspective ... I can be accused of, they're getting cold, they're around guns, they're around open fire, there's no hospitals nearby.... It was like holy man I look like a terrible person...."

B. Child Welfare Behaviour

Child and family services workers seemed, to these Indigenous fathers, not to care about the children or their parents, not to enjoy their work, and to only be there for the money they earned. Sam had worked with six social workers and only the most recent, a male, had been very helpful. Cliff had seen no compassion for the children and only a desire to 'warehouse' them. It was proposed by Allan that there be better screening upon hiring of social workers to find the ones that did care. Jerry had a number of comments about CFS workers. "It's down to a point where it doesn't matter what anybody says or

proves, or what anybody has done, they just don't care. Oh, this is what we've got in our rule book, everyone just has to follow the rule." Jerry had come across a few workers that did care, "that will ... say I'm sorry, I'm very sorry that actually brings a tear because they have to take the child away, will be the actual one that will actually try to get that child back to the family." And Jerry did note that it was not an easy job, it might be dangerous, and it must be difficult apprehending children all the time. But he said that "... you took that responsibility when you took that job." Brian believed that there were systemic decisions being made to hire people who would not challenge the system. He believed the system needed people who would question processes and policies, but that those making different hiring decisions. "... I imagine they don't say it out loud but they could say this isn't going to work because they are going to challenge our system probably at every opportunity."

1. Overreaction

There were two cases of child and family services, in concert with police, reacted in ways that were excessive, especially with Dennis. Dan, who had taken his children hunting and fishing, had police arrive at his home on a Sunday evening after the children were sleeping. Police demanded to speak to the children, Dan asked them to please have a seat and he would get them. But police "came tromping in with their boots and went in the bedroom and woke up the kids and interrogated them or questioned them." Waking sleeping children and with police being the ones waking them up is likely to have been traumatic for children seven years and under. Dennis was the man who described the "SWAT team" showing up at his door after an illegitimate complaint. He said usually CFS would always call first or put a card in the mailbox saying they would be visiting. On one occasion, without warning, Dennis looked out the window to see "SWAT vehicles and cars parked. There were machine guns, sniper rifles, they had guns pointed at my house, off the back of my fence. ... They came to the door just in big bullet-proof vests and they said they were social workers but they didn't look like social workers, they looked like a tactical team..." Dennis believed the children's mother had complained and said something about guns in the house. There were guns in the house, Dennis was a hunter.

2. Underreaction

These Indigenous fathers saw very different reactions when it was they who called in complaints against the child's mother. Aaron described very undesirable conditions his daughter was living in that included drug use and he made a complaint. He said the "... social workers are still OK with that type of shit, they see her family ... and they don't have a problem with that." Jerry's son was living in similar conditions with his mother; Jerry phoned CFS to complain "... 20 different calls into the 24 hour hotlines about my son. And still, nothing is done.... I've got no patience with them." Fred's experience was that after his complaint, it took CFS months to arrive to investigate on the reserve where his children lived in. He perceived an inefficiency on reserves. Fathers also perceived inadequate monitoring of children in foster care. A number of participants referred to children dying while in care, which had been in the local news shortly prior to the interviews.¹⁴¹ Fred commented that "If they were out to protect the children, why would they be losing kids that are in their care to death?" Fathers were afraid for children in care,

¹⁴¹ Edmonton Journal (2014)

“(b)ecause the abuse is still happening, kids are still dying in care. Just like they did in the residential schools. So to me it’s just part of the same system.” (Derek)

3. Lateral violence

Many of the fathers had the mothers of their children and other friends and family making complaints to CFS about them that were not true. In a number of cases, mothers would convince children to tell others about abusive or unsafe practices committed by the father, which were fabricated. This is referred to here as lateral violence, a recognized phenomenon that occurs among oppressed people who, when they see others like them being successful, then oppress that person. The oppressed oppress each other because that is what they know. Fathers perceived that because they were men, with the mother-centric biases of CFS, that these complaints were always taken very seriously and not enough was done to investigate the complainer even if it happened repeatedly. Fathers understood the importance of investigating complaints in order to ensure the child was safe, but that they suffered with the ways the investigations were done.

The reason the SWAT team appeared at Dennis’s home was due to such a complaint. He did not know there was a warrant for his arrest issued. Scott’s former partner “... had been telling social workers a whole bunch of bad stuff that she made up off the top of her head.... “she was telling social workers that I went after a mob of people with guns. It was like ridiculously insane stories.” Scott thought that “(s)he was scared they were gonna take him (their son) and give him to me. Or they were gonna take him and not let her have him. Because that was her experience before.” In the case of Jerry, his children “... would go outside and they would tell all my neighbours ... my Dad manufactures drugs, Dad’s always partying... and within three months I had child welfare walk up into my place 15 times....” His daughter had also accused him of sexual abuse. “And they all found that to be negativity. And then they did more background into it and they found that was all coming from her Mom. Her Mom was brainwashing her and saying OK ... this is ... what you’re gonna tell them.” When Dan’s ex-wife called police alleging abuse and neglect when he took his children hunting and fishing, he explained the situation to CFS and they understood. “And at the height of this conflict, the Mom would park on the street in front of the house... for a few hours, ... and the police showed up....”

4. Fathers work hard for their children

The Indigenous fathers interviewed for this project all described how diligent and persistent they had to be to overcome the barriers presented by child and family services. Several of them described it as “jumping through hoops”, or going through extensive and unnecessary steps for long periods of time. Dennis stated that “... like I know you can go to social services and stuff but you still have to go through hoops and intake session and all that. And it takes time, sometimes when you don’t have time.” Scott agreed, saying “The way the system is designed ... that you have to jump through so any hoops to get your rights.” Sam and his wife had been trying for five years to get their children back. They had weekly visits but often visits would be cancelled for various reasons. Randy said “It’s not, no it’s not, it’s not fair at all.” He had been working had going to counselling and going to sweat lodge ceremonies to heal so he could get his grandchildren out of foster care. “(B)ecause it’s too early (said with sarcasm) and they call

it a game, too early in the game.” He found that as soon as progress was made, his worker would go on leave and everything would stop. “And then meanwhile my grandson is ...” saying “... when am I getting out of here you know?”

Dan and Paul had never had their children apprehended, because they understood the system better, could speak the ‘mainstream’ language, and therefore be more successful communicating with white professionals. Dan thought “(b)ut I don’t know if other people might come against that to be able to explain. Fortunately I was able to explain.” Paul considered himself very resourceful but still resented the time and energy it took him to make sure CFS was never involved in his life with his son. He said “... you have to be just as smart and ... make sure you cover all angles, and the requests that you’re asking for, for your child to be safe.”

Some CFS practices caused damage to the father and little was done to ameliorate that harm after it was all over and the father was proven innocent. Dan was concerned that the unfounded complaint would remain on his CWIS (Child Welfare Intervention Record Check) record and that would affect his life as a professional who worked with children. Fortunately for him, CFS had just changed their processes so that after innocence was proven, the records were removed.

C. Systemic problems

1. Incompatible systems

There was a sentiment expressed that child and family services as a system was completely incompatible with Indigenous ways and values. Brian described it as “a wall, there is a wall that somehow has to be broken down.” Derek perceived that the purpose of any government system had not changed from the formal assimilation goals of the past. “And it’s, you know, a government system that was set up to take away the Aboriginal kids and put them in non-Aboriginal homes to teach them how to be, you know, non-Aboriginal. So the system from the get-go is set up to be against us. They’re not there to help, they’re there to steal our kids. You know residential school didn’t kill the Indian in the child so now foster care is trying to.... So as far as I am concerned it’s the same thing just, you know, a different name.”

Brian and Dan spoke of the incompatibility through totally different uses of power and hierarchy between western and Indigenous societies and systems. Brian saw child and family services as a few people with a lot of power making decisions, and many other people making decisions behind closed doors. He saw “... layers of secrecy and stuff like where people are not taking responsibility for their decision.... I just don’t think people should have that much power.” Brian did see good quality people in high positions, but thought that “... when somebody gets into those positions and then they go through a lot of stress.... there’s burnout going on, they are always fighting.... it’s the system itself that burns them out.”

Brian saw the need for “... a kind of paradigm of thinking change where it’s not about some Aboriginal awareness classes here and there, that may or may not be compulsory. It’s about a prolonged approach of working with the community so that these lines don’t exist anymore.”

There were also some general comments about the system: “Because obviously you guys’ system is not working” (Fred). Jerry thought that the system is stupid.

2. Inadequate Support

Participants expressed emphatically the need for support for Aboriginal fathers. They believed that if CFS truly cared about creating healthy families, the way to do this was to work with the fathers and not against them. They wanted to be included in family programs but most of all they needed opportunities to talk to other lone-fathers who are Indigenous. They did not request anything elaborate, just opportunities to get together with other fathers to share experiences, frustrations, and successes. Paul “... searched around for a male group. Just a place where I could go share, you know, just to talk. For example, I am just so frustrated today or this week, you know, and just get feedback from other peers. But there was nothing...”

Requests came through for various other kinds of support, to develop parenting skills or provide small amounts of financial assistance in urgent situations. Derek agreed that “... yeah there are some parents out there that are not good parents. They need some skills, they need some treatment, they need help.” He also noted that as soon as children are apprehended, then money starts to flow for them. He thought it would be much more appropriate to use those funds to help the parents and keep the family together. Dennis was struggling financially.

These fathers had expressed that they did not trust the CFS system, in a way very similar to when they spoke of their past experiences with child welfare (above).

V. Recommendations

A. Change Attitudes

The general agreement was that CFS must understand and respect Aboriginal cultures, in its individual workers and in its policies and practices. And a knowledge that all Indigenous cultures are not the same, nor are urban Indigenous communities similar to First Nations communities. In addition, urban Aboriginals may have grown up in and be highly immersed in practices most common in their home communities. Dan said that some aspects of the system may not even realize that it is organized and practices within mainstream Canadian culture, which is different from most other cultures. Aboriginal worldview, beliefs, communication styles and certainly parenting styles may be quite foreign to most who work in the system and to those who design systems and policies. For Dan, “to me what that means is it’s pretty deep and it’s a very different cultural mindset. Very different belief.” Brian insisted that the knowledge must from Aboriginal people themselves, and on an ongoing basis. He thought “the only way you can get their input is to devise a strategy to have it on an ongoing basis, not an awareness workshop here and there. There has to be a strategy.” He said, “(b)ut if you are gonna work with Aboriginal people, if you’re sincere about it, then you can’t make decisions without us. You know, we have to work together.” “Nothing about us without us.”

The system must not just understand culture, but monitor itself so that racial and gender discrimination are reduced and eventually eliminated. Scott wanted the system to show that "... men are just as important as mothers."

B. Change system and worker behaviour

1. Build prevention mode

There were several who mentioned that there needed to be a prevention of the need for CFS. This may involve preparation for parenting, sex education, helping parents teach these things to their children. Alan was clear that "you gotta get them before they get pregnant." Girls need to be encouraged to develop a focus in life and wait to have children until they are prepared. If young women did get pregnant, Alan believed they needed to be well monitored during that time and to "... getting their act together so they can keep a baby." Brian had a specific suggestion of having Elders work with young mothers. There were also references to preparing young males for responsible sexual activity and fatherhood.

2. Support Fathers

Without exception, the fathers wanted and needed support from child and family services. They wanted assistance with best ways to keep the child in the home and not to have their first experience with CFS be apprehension of their children. Dan wanted to see "(a) more supportive, proactive role rather than the big stick and the punishment." Derek "... would rather see the kids, you know, supported to stay in their homes than removed." There were several different ways suggested to provide support: CFS workers provide the support, help fathers to set up their own support groups, work with the children of lone-parent fathers, and help fathers deal with the aftermath of traumatic events such as being wrongly accused of sexual abuse.

These Aboriginal fathers wanted CFS to help them deal with their own traumatic experiences. Scott would have liked another man to explain to him what it meant to be a "Native" guy in Canada. He wanted to learn that his own father may not have abandoned him or drank too much. "It might have been because the system was putting up barriers that didn't allow him to be around me, right?" For Brian, he knew that many of them had grown up with "... big gaps of love and caring and nurturing that has been missed out along the way and so of course that affects you as an adult. So really in so many ways that is one of the biggest things is to kind of find that child again." Derek had just participated in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, described above) and had concluded that with CFS "... there needs to be some way to continue that healing as individuals and as groups" that resembled the TRC. Then these fathers requested assistance with parenting skills. Dan "... really could have used some help with those ... kids... Building a relationship with people and what can we do to help your kid? Where are the gaps?"

The majority of participants indicated that it was crucial to assist fathers in getting together in support groups to share experiences and advice or get referrals for these, talk about how to get and stay healthy in their role as fathers, and to occasionally integrate these groups with cultural activities. They were clear that they wanted to organize these groups on their own, but just needed a bit of an incentive to

get going. Paul felt strongly that the sessions be solutions-based and not “bitch sessions”. Scott agreed that it would not be helpful to cut down women. He said that “nice guys finish last, but at least they finish.” Dennis insisted that the talking not be solely about problems that would “open up old wounds” but that after talking, one did feel better than keeping everything inside.

Aboriginal fathers wanted to talk to each other. Derek felt that “... there needs to be a place where they can get together and talk and network and you know and just share ... how they did it ... and help the younger ones that are doing it” Jerry “... honestly would sit down, like I know there is a lot of fathers out there that have gone through just as much as I have, if not worse. And to actually to have someone else to sit down with and talk to.” The fathers wanted to make suggestions to each other on best ways to parent (Paul), and help each other with furthering their education, or getting employment. Dennis would like “... to just go and ask how would I go as to get education? Where would I go, what resources?” Some suggested involving Elders. Scott would like “... to have access to healthy role models for the men.”

Several participants suggested that the groups not use solely verbal communication, but when possible integrate traditional Aboriginal male activities to build holistic traditional values. Scott had experience with a group of men that met regularly with an Elder to “... talk about how, what it means to be an Aboriginal father and how there’s got to be a balance between the traditional values....” Another reason for integrating activities was that some males may not be comfortable always talking. Randy’s experience was that “...they’re scared to say anything to anyone because they won’t be believed ... because they got them beat into them that they are liars.” Randy thought that “... us guys we don’t really come out and address things, say we want help either, we kind of hide it a little more I think.”

For children, there was one suggestion to provide healthy role models to those without active fathers, and one said it would be great to have father activities with the children. Dennis suggested “... camping or have cultural group camps I just think something where you could bring your kids and activities out of the home. Not always home.”

3. Paradigm shift

Aboriginal fathers were clear that the child and family services system was not working for them. Some suggested that a major philosophical shift was necessary and others did not have any hope that this could happen. Derek was skeptical about the possibility of change with a system that was “... abusing our kids, killing our kids.” Cliff thought, “It’s hard to say, it’s a big, right now it just seems like it’s too big of an issue that any one thing can solve. Many viewed CFS as part of a large system of government that had historically worked to eliminate them as peoples with a unique identity, who had holistic, healthy systems before the arrival of any European colonizers. The two ways of living were completely different from the other, with mainstream Canada at the top of a hierarchy, and Aboriginal Canada at the bottom.

The western paradigm used a hierarchical system was not consistent with their world view. For Dan, “(i)t’s tough I think and people have a hard time understanding that hierarchy in child welfare. So if there is I think understanding is where it starts, some kind of understanding about those differences.” Brian commented that “... once people kind of relinquish that (power) and start to work together on

something, that is really what it boils down to. So you need a kind of paradigm of thinking change It's about a prolonged approach of working with community so that the lines don't exist anymore." He thought that the system could change but that it would take a long time. He used the example of there being more Aboriginal teachers as evidence of an incremental system change that gave him hope.

4. Ensure CFS workers are qualified

Because these Indigenous fathers had dealt with workers who were mostly uncaring, had no understanding of them, and some who were rude, cruel, and discriminatory to them; they wanted to see a systemic change toward having well trained, patient, compassionate workers who wanted or were able to help them. They wanted hiring practices that would find these 'good' social workers and that the system would provide resources, like good training, so that their knowledge and skills working with Aboriginal fathers would continue to improve. Fred thought "they need to pull out social workers that stop caring." There were suggestions of hiring more Aboriginals, more men (and fathers), and others who would work with them with understanding and respect. Brian stated, "(a)nd that means somebody it doesn't matter what colour they are, with the heart and ability and the hard-working attitude to be able to implement that (work for change) against the powers that be, to go for it – but it's like leaders or innovative, creative people to say we've got a problem, it's getting worse. Let's keep working at it and you know there has gotta be success at some point."

5. Good procedures

Participants wanted to see social worker practices that were fundamentally helpful to them, "to be able to work with people that are ready to work with you, then we can at least start to see the light" (Brian).

Fathers needed practices that would be less mother-biased, "to give voice to the Dad, not just to the mother. Understand where Dad's coming from. See what Dad's doing. I want to be able to have just as much voice as the mother." It was important to Aboriginal fathers for CFS workers to be able to recognize lateral violence, and not automatically assume the father was guilty when complaints were made against them. They did not want to see good fathers have to suffer "(a)ll because the woman sat there and cried and made up some story and reversed everything around that happened. That needs to change." They also wanted equitable support for fathers, and one clear example was the need for a men's shelter where they could bring their children if they were suffering abuse from their partners. They felt the extreme unfairness of women having access to financial support and shelters if they were abused, but "if a man's thrown out on the street with kids, who's out there to help them?" (Jerry)

Beyond practices that worked well for fathers, participants wanted to see practices that were respectful of Aboriginal cultures. First, when a problem with parenting occurs, resources should be focused on helping parents to deal with their issues so that the child could stay in the home. "Leave our kids at home," Derek said. When working with Aboriginal families, they wanted CFS to use Aboriginal practices like talking circles and recommending Aboriginal-specific programs for parents when they needed them. The talking circle had worked very well for Dan when he was falsely accused of sexually assaulting his step-daughter. They wanted social workers to be familiar with their history and the root causes of many of their problems through being "... separated from that duty (parenting) for over 100 years of training

in how not to be emotionally available.” (Brian) Workers need to be able to recognize that the western way of raising children was not any better than the traditional Aboriginal ways.

If it did become necessary to remove children from the home of their parents, participants recommended kinship care and Aboriginal foster homes as much preferable to non-Aboriginal homes. Scott’s child had ended up with his child’s grandmother having a permanent guardianship order. This was ideal because both the mother and the father could visit the child and still be involved in his life.

Fathers wanted to see more work put into keeping children from the same family together if apprehension was the only solution. And in general, much more careful selection and monitoring of foster homes to ensure that children were safe and well cared for.

It was important to these fathers that CFS also recognize that Aboriginal people are discriminated against in all other systems also. Policing and education were mentioned. Housing and employment are other areas where racism limits opportunities. All aspects of Canadian society presented barriers for them and without the political will, they believed this would not change for them.

Dan’s comments present a good summary of the fundamental conflict between Indigenous and mainstream-Canadian society. Someone had asked him why “... you guys are always breaking the law. You’re always in trouble and breaking the law. And I said fair enough. And I said but the problem we have ... is who are you to come here and make laws. Where do you get that authority? ... I don’t buy in, I don’t believe in that. I don’t believe in that whole structure so I think automatically, right from the first step, there’s an issue there, there’s a conflict there. And it’s been going on for a long time.”

CONCLUSION

The findings of this research are highly consistent with those identified in the literature.

This project encouraged the 14 participating Aboriginal fathers and father-figures to share their **early history** with child welfare systems. Most participants had been apprehended from their families and placed in foster care. Some had been to residential school and for many of them, their parents had this experience. Most experienced severe neglect and abuse and one participant's life had been in danger in care. There was a trend of these men running away in their early teens, moving to cities where they lived in poverty, often on the streets. There was a great deal of alcohol and drug abuse in their past and some had been involved in criminal activity. They experienced discrimination and lateral violence.

Most of these fathers had not developed identities as Aboriginal men in their early years and some were not even aware of their heritage until later in their lives. If they were aware, most were not connected in any substantive way with people from their culture. This resulted in confusion about their identity and feelings of not fitting in to either Aboriginal or mainstream society. Few had positive Aboriginal role models.

There was a universal lack of trust of child welfare/ child and family service workers and of the system. Siblings, when fostered together, were eventually separated. These Aboriginal men felt inadequately monitored when in foster care and that workers should have noticed signs of poor care. Some developed a sincere hatred toward the system.

Recent experiences of participating Indigenous fathers and father-figures indicated all were doing whatever they could to heal from earlier trauma, in order to be good fathers. There was a common sense of resiliency despite tremendously difficult experiences. Fathers spoke of quitting their addictions, going back to school, working, and participating in cultural activities was important for all of them. They believed in their own capacities to parent well and shared many narratives to illustrate positive relationships.

Many had experienced apprehension of their children for varying lengths of time and at various points in their parenthood. All but one father were no longer living with the mother of their children. Many described unhealthy and even dangerous situations their children were living with if the mothers had custody. Several participants shared the abuse they had experienced from former partners and spouses and the lack of a shelter for fathers with children was felt acutely. Nearly all Indigenous fathers in the study had custody of their children, again at varying times and for varying lengths of times.

There were a few **positive experiences** shared by the fathers. Some had the opportunity to be acquainted with their culture and this was always a positive factor. A few child welfare practices were experienced that were helpful to them. One had lived with a good foster family in his youth. A few had worked with male/ Aboriginal male workers and had good experiences with them. One man finally achieved good results when he challenged two levels of supervisors.

Barriers for Indigenous fathers arose through interaction with CFS worker attitudes and behaviours and some barriers were systemic. A number of participants described treatment by CFS workers as discriminatory, with stereotypes of being Aboriginal and being fathers used to judge them prior to getting to know them as individuals. Many described a mother-centric bias in CFS. Often workers would only communicate with the mother and fathers had to work very hard to be heard. They felt their rights as parents were not recognized.

A nearly unanimous feeling that CFS workers did not care about them or their children was expressed, with many stating the workers seemed to not enjoy their work or only be there for the money. Hiring practices were questioned.

Behaviours of workers in the system at times over-reacted to situations and at other times did not react appropriately or promptly. In two cases where mothers had made false complaints about fathers with custody, police had arrived at their homes, in one case with guns pointing at the doors. Under-reaction was perceived when fathers made complaints about mothers. Assumptions were that mothers must care and Aboriginal fathers must be incapable or unable to properly parent their children. There was a great deal of lateral violence experienced by these fathers, from the mothers of their children and other family members or friends. This is a case of oppressed people oppressing each other, a recognized phenomenon in critical race theory but not generally recognized by the public. Only one participant had no involvement with CFS and he felt this was because he had a good understanding of the system and the barriers and put all of his energy into avoiding any kind of interaction, to the point where he would not hire a sitter for his son at all.

Some barriers were seen by participants as **systemic**. The western system with its use of hierarchy and power in the hands of a few was foreign to these fathers. Aboriginal fathers found that they did not receive support from the system, only suspicion and negative action. CFS did not offer them ways to improve their parenting skills or deal with past trauma.

A number of **recommendations** were put forward by participating fathers. Firstly, a change of attitude among CFS workers was necessary. Aboriginal fathers wanted their culture to be understood and respected. They wanted the system to work with them, not against them. Discriminatory attitudes toward them needed to be reduced and eventually eliminated. Workers needed to realize that their system and many of them as individuals operated within a western, mainstream culture which most often did not mirror Aboriginal values and ways of living.

There were several mentions of the importance of working toward prevention of early pregnancy in the Aboriginal population and when pregnancy did occur, fathers felt that resources needed to be mobilized early to promote healthy children and parenting.

A desire for good procedures within child and family services was widely expressed. Kinship care arrangements were favoured and generally the fathers wanted the system to work hard to keep children in their homes or at least in their communities. Parents should not be cut off from their children, but supported so that they can live with them again.

Indigenous fathers' voices passionately expressed the need for support. Most participants indicated that what they needed was to get together with other Aboriginal fathers in groups – both talking and integrating traditional father role activities. They supported the integration of traditional practices such as talking circles and linking with healthy male Aboriginal role models for children.

There was a cluster of participants who described the need for a paradigm shift within child and family services so that it would be more supportive and open to them as men and as Aboriginal people. Another cluster expressed that the system could not change, but that it was fundamentally flawed and needed to be removed and replaced.

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