

# MASTER THESIS

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## The 'F' word in child welfare. A study of British Columbia fathers

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My rock, my biggest fan and supporter, my husband Barry who was witness to it all from the start. Thank you, sweetheart, for everything—I love you.

For my Mom, the optimist who taught me to believe anything is possible. I did it!

## **Abstract**

Despite emerging research supporting the important role of father's rights, responsibilities, and impact on children's lives, the Canadian child welfare system continues to work primarily with mothers, while ignoring fathers' participation in planning for the safe care of their children. This research explores the experiences of Canadian fathers within the child welfare system and why those patterns of experiences occurred.

The aims of this research were:

- to give an overview and understand the existing literature concerning fathers whose children have come in contact with the child welfare system
- to examine fathers' experiences within the child welfare system
- to apply feminist theory and a strength-based model to the research
- to make recommendations based on the research

Using a qualitative methodology of research, primary data was gathered using interviews to explore father's experiences within the child welfare system. The tool used within this methodology was a semi-structured interview, conducted with fathers who have been involved with the child welfare system. Secondary data, used to strengthen the study, was gathered through a literature review.

Overall, findings from this research may shed light on why fathers continue to be on the edge of the Canadian child welfare system and could provide a springboard for future research contributing to change.

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

Research recognizes fathers as an important influence on their child's life. However, research has demonstrated that fathers remain scarcely involved when their children come to the attention of the Canadian child welfare system (Walmsley, Strega, Brown, Dominelli, & Callahan, 2009). Their contribution seems to be so limited that fathers are identified by some leading researchers as "ghosts" (Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, 2009, p. 25). Fathers are also rarely included in the limited national and international research conducted on their engagement with child welfare systems (O'Donnell, Johnson, D'Aunno, & Thornton, 2005). When fathers are included in studies, the narratives reveal more about what did not work when they met the child welfare system, as opposed to what did. Input from fathers on their participation and recommendations for how to include fathers is rarely found in research (Featherstone & Peckover, 2007). To increase understanding of why fathers are not included, this microlevel empirical study explored experiences fathers had according to their own narratives. This study is specific to participation of fathers in planning when their children come to the attention of the Canadian child welfare system.

### **1.1 Background**

In Canada, parents are responsible for the health and safety of their children. Usually, they are required to provide a basic standard of care for their children, including shelter, food, supervision, clothing, education, protection, and day-to-day necessities. However, when there is suspected child abuse or neglect by a parent, intervention by the child welfare system is mandated (Kozlowski, Milne, & Sinha, 2014). Intervention is guided by legislation in each of the ten provinces and three territories in Canada. The scope of this study was within the province of British Columbia (B.C.), Canada. B.C. is authorized to deliver child welfare under the 1996 *Child and Family and Community Service Act* (Government of British Columbia, 2017). Intervention by the B.C. child welfare system applies to children ages 0-19 (Government of British Columbia, 2017). The Act describes a child in need of protection when the child has been, or is likely to be:

- physically harmed by the child's parent;
- sexually abused or exploited by the child's parent;

- physically harmed, sexually abused or sexually exploited by another person and the child's parent is unwilling or unable to protect the child;
- physically harmed because of neglect by the child's parent;
- the child is emotionally harmed by the parent's conduct;
- the child is deprived of necessary health care; or her development is likely to be seriously impaired by a treatable condition and the parent refuses to provide or consent to treatment;
- the child is abandoned, the child's parent is dead, or the child's parent is unable/unwilling to care for the child, and adequate provision has not been made for the child's care;
- the child is or has been absent from home in circumstances that endanger the child's safety or well-being;
- or the child is in the care of a director or another person by agreement and the child's parent is unwilling or unable to resume care when the agreement is no longer in force.

(Government of British Columbia, 2017)

Protection of children and support to families is delivered by provincial/territorial government run agencies (Kozlowski et al., 2014). Services provided to children and families include a range of support from preventive to reactive services. Support includes assessing needs, investigations of abuse and neglect, mitigating risk to ensure the child's safety, creating plans with the family, and referring families to community supports. Children sometimes are removed from their parents' care and require out-of-home placement, however this is a last resort of intervention. Under such extreme circumstances, children are placed with extended family or in foster care until they can either safely return home or have permanency planning such as adoption. Kozlowski et al. (2014) recognize most Canadian children will not come in contact with the child welfare system. This is because most children are not abused or neglected by their parents, or have at least one parent willing and capable of protecting them. In addition, although there is a legal and/or ethical duty to report suspected child abuse and neglect in Canada, the system only responds to reported cases. According to the Canadian Association of Social Workers (2005), a child welfare mandate is to:

Work with the community to identify children who are in need of protection and to decide how best to help and protect those children. A fundamental belief is that government interference in family life should be as minimal as possible, except when parental care is below the community standard and places a child at risk of harm. The major guiding principle is always to act in the best interests of the child. (para. 2)

My interest in the topic of father inclusion was cumulative over many years working within the child welfare system and surfaced early on in my career. One of my first poignant experiences occurred during a home visit with a family. I had attended the home to speak with the parents regarding a concern for their child, offer support, and create a plan with them to keep the child safe. While working with the mother on a plan, the father came home, looking to excuse himself from the conversation. He accepted my invitation to be part of the meeting however quickly became irritated, blaming his wife for the child welfare involvement. He said he had been in jail when the concern for the child arose and could not see how his absence had contributed to the crisis. In the moment, I felt unable to safely navigate the meeting without an increased risk of retribution toward the mother so I changed the focus of the meeting until there was an opportunity to excuse the father from the visit. The plan was finalized alone with the mother.

This experience was the first of numerous times fathers were excluded from my social work practice. It however remained a personal and professional struggle to ignore the rights and responsibilities of fathers in planning for their children, while focusing on mothers to be accountable for the child's safety. It was not until much later in my career when I began to realize the full extent to which the child welfare system appeared to have a gender bias. The following quote by feminist Gloria Steinem (*The Essence of Quotations*, 2017) may have been forward thinking:

*It's clear that most American children suffer too much mother and too little father.*

## **1.2 Research Questions**

The purpose of this research is to provide a review of the literature and examine fathers' experiences with the Canadian child welfare system. According to Featherstone and Peckover (2007), there is a lack of fathers included in research on this topic. Particularly when there is

evidence of domestic violence studies include only social workers, mothers, and children. I created the following two research questions with the intention of gathering direct input from fathers to gain a better understanding of their unique experiences:

1. What are fathers' experiences with participation in planning when their children come to the attention of the child welfare system?
2. Why did these patterns come to be this way?

The results from my study are intended to contribute to the small body of knowledge around this topic, and, importantly, include fathers in the research.

### ***1.3 Theoretical Positioning***

My study used an interpretive framework in order to understand personal experiences. There is an acknowledgement within this study that the fathers' experiences are based on their own lenses of reality. This framework was used to provide insight into why the fathers may have experienced the child welfare system in the way they did. My research applied both feminist theory and a strength-based model to the data.

Theory is defined as “ideas which arrange sets of concepts to define and explain some phenomenon” (Silverman, 2010, p. 439). The importance of research having a theoretical positioning is to apply the concepts of the theory within the analysis in order to obtain a deeper, more comprehensive understanding of the data. A model is “an overall framework for how we look at reality. It tells what reality is like and the basic elements it contains and what is the nature and status of knowledge” (Silverman, 2010, p. 436).

My research on fathers' experiences within the child welfare system has been primarily examined using a feminist theory. This theory was chosen given the potential for a gender based topic (Strega, Brown, Callahan, Dominelli, & Walmsley, 2009). Of particular importance is raising awareness through research on any system which appears to have a gender focus. A strength-based model was also selected for this study. It was chosen to emphasize a strength-based approach to data collection and analysis. Healy (2005) argues the importance of inclusiveness when assessing the needs of individuals using this model. Inclusiveness is a necessary step for change to occur. My study includes fathers so as to gain an understanding of their experiences in the hope of providing insight into the Canadian child welfare system. I would

argue this particular model aligns best with my social work practise and is a natural application to the research.

#### **1.4 Limitations**

A limitation of my research is the small geographical area used to conduct my study. It was restricted to a 60-kilometer distance on Vancouver Island, B.C., Canada. The total population within this area is approximately 100,000 people. The small geographical scope, as well as the limit of six fathers interviewed, does present restrictive generalizability of the research. Generalizability is described by Berg and Lune (2012) as “scientific value to gain from investigating some single category of individual, group, or event simply to gain an understanding of that individual, group or event” (p. 341).

In addition, cultural considerations were outside the scope and diversity found within my qualitative study. Research noted by Ball (2009) revealed Canadian First Nations children and families in particular are overrepresented in the child welfare system. A study inclusive to that population would have added a cultural lens to this topic area.

This study was also limited by the amount of time allotted to complete the research. Although beyond the limits of this research, a secondary goal is a possible contribution to any gender inequality issues which may surface within the research.

#### **1.5 Terminology**

Terminology within my study requires definitions for clarity and scope of the research.

*Father* is defined as a biological, custodial, or those having a parent-child relationship with the child. Only fathers whose children have met the child welfare system will be included in this research.

*Canadian child welfare system* is a mandatory legislated service delegated to investigate allegations of abuse and neglect of children ages 0-19. Preventative and reactive support to the family is a large portion of intervention when families come to the attention of the system.

*Planning* is participation in providing input, creating, implementing, and/or actively participating in a plan surrounding the safe care of children.

*Case plan* is a document outlining concerns of child abuse or neglect, strengths of the family, and what is required of parents to secure the safety of their children in their care. If the child is not in their care, the case plan consists of goals the parents must meet in order for the child to be returned to their custody/care.

*Custody* is defined as the legal right and responsibility to a child.

*Care*, in addition to custody, is defined as the day-to-day parenting of the child.

### **1.6 Structural Overview**

Sectioned into six chapters, this thesis begins with Chapter 1, revealing the background for why the topic was chosen and why it is an important topic to study. Research questions are presented, along with limitations and terminology. Theoretical positioning and a structural overview of the study is introduced providing a framework for the thesis. Chapter 2 provides historical and cultural context of the Canadian child welfare system including the role fathers play within the system. An international literature review on father involvement in child welfare provides a foundation while disseminating three common themes within the literature: lack of father involvement, mother blaming system, and research without father input. Lastly, this chapter outlines the thesis contribution.

Chapter 3 applies feminist theory and a strength-based model as a lens to explore the research. Methodology used within the thesis are explained in Chapter 4 including the research method, sampling, and the use of a semi-structured interview. It addresses reliability and validity of the study, steps of analysis for the research, and ethical considerations with informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher.

Chapter 5 provides the findings gathered through the interview process with several direct quotes from the fathers interviewed for this study. A thorough analysis of the findings are included in Chapter 6. In conclusion, Chapter 6 looks at the significance as well as the limitations of the study, any implications for future policy and practice, and the role this research may play as a springboard for further research on this topic.

## **Chapter 2: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

This literature review chapter will examine research already conducted on the topic of father involvement within the child welfare system. A literature review is:

The selection of available documents (both published and unpublished) on the topic which contains information, ideas, data and evidence written from a particular standpoint to fulfill certain aims or express certain views on the nature of the topic and how it is to be investigated and the effective evaluation of these documents in relation to the research being proposed. (Hart, 1998, p. 13)

Noted by Silverman (2010), the literature review was used within this study to rationalize the approach to the thesis, justify the choice of methodology, and supplement my research findings. Research was extracted from various websites through Nord University database systems, including but not limited to: Sage, ProQuest, Google Scholar, JSTOR, as well as the Government of British Columbia, Canada website. The review includes journal articles, essays, national studies, as well as papers written by leading researchers on the topic.

This chapter begins with the history of child welfare in Canada, foundationally essential to understanding the origins and intentions of the current system. Following this, the research is summarized and analyzed through identification of the three most common themes: lack of father involvement within child welfare, blaming of mothers, and absence of fathers in research surrounding child welfare.

### ***2.1 History of Child Welfare in Canada***

Children historically have been important members of a family for a variety of reasons. Prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with children sometimes viewed as property of their fathers, one of those reasons was for the purpose of sale or trade (Albert & Herbert, 2006). Industrialization in Canada contributed to child neglect after 1880 (Albert & Herbert, 2006). This was a period of time when the mass production of goods was fueling a new economy. Many families could no longer survive economically on their farms and were required to move to the city to work. Mass urbanization resulted in poor and insufficient housing and an increase in poverty. In addition, an influx of children sent from England to Canada increased the amount of neglected and orphaned

children (Swift, 1995). In response, religious and philanthropic groups began to provide basic care and safety to children in need.

*The Prevention of Cruelty to and Better Protection of Children Act* of 1893 formalized the Canadian child welfare system, and shortly after the first service agency opened in Ontario, Canada (Albert & Herbert, 2006; Swift, 1995). Since the inception of the child welfare system, neglect of children has been primarily attributed to mothers. This was entrenched in the system with the institution of Mothers' Pension in the early 1900s to combat low income. Only mothers were eligible and on the condition they agreed to be monitored by a social worker. The social worker focused on the character of the mother and her ability to parent (Swift, 1995).

The 1930s continued to solidify a gender division. Social workers with legislative authority began to investigate child abuse and neglect. Their job was to collect and maintain information regarding the physical appearance of children and the home (Swift, 1995). At that time mothers were primary caretakers of the children and responsible for the home. Expert assessments on parenting began to emerge to substantiate child abuse, resulting in supervision of families by the government. Swift (1995) argued that research and professional literature such as attachment theory on parent/child attachment focused on the mother further grounded the responsibility of children to mothers. The history of child welfare illuminates the start of a culture holding mothers accountable for children and may be the foundation for a mother blaming culture within the Canadian child welfare system.

Currently, child welfare is delivered within a welfare state in Canada. Kennett (2001) defines this as a legal state where the government encourages social wellbeing by providing support to the people. The ideology of a welfare state is a reflection of the social values and economic status within the country (Kennett, 2001). There are three models of a welfare state: social democratic, conservative, and liberal models (Epsing-Anderson, 1990). A social democratic model values collective responsibility from and for its citizens. The state plays a large role in supporting the people, there is a universal right to social funding and the social wellbeing of citizens is evident in policies (Epsing-Anderson, 1990). A conservative model values individual responsibility with a small role for the state and promotion of privatization of institutions. Although there is an acknowledgement for a minimal welfare safety net, advancement of the economy is the result of competitive and unregulated capitalism (Epsing-Anderson, 1990). Canada would be considered a liberal model. Kennett (2001) describes a liberal

model as valuing freedom of expression. Within this model social aid is provided to the poorest citizens, policies and funding for welfare occur after other country expenses are paid, and success and failure are the responsibility of individual citizens. Child welfare mandated within this model is significant as it relates to who holds responsibility for children. According to Swift (1995), research on child welfare identifies its root causes in poverty, poor housing, domestic violence, and social isolation. Canada does not address child welfare as a social responsibility, but rather as an individual (parent) responsibility.

## ***2.2 Review of the Literature***

The main sources for the literature review consist of journal articles, academic books, and website information. Although the majority of the research originated within Canada, supplementary studies from the other parts of Northern America, as well as international references, have been included. Three common interrelated themes emerged from the review: lack of father involvement, mother blaming, and research without father input.

### ***2.2.1 Lack of Father Involvement***

According to O'Donnell et al. (2005), research indicates a lack of fathers across the full spectrum of child welfare services. Reasons for this phenomenon are complex. One potential contribution is the lack of education on fathers delivered to new social workers within the academic system. Walmsley et al.'s (2009) study concluded that although fathers are mentioned briefly in all social work literature, no dialogue on fathering was found within child welfare coursework. Walmsley et al. argued that despite references to parenting within social work literature, there was rarely a distinction between mothers and fathers. When fathers were noted, reference was primarily made to a father as a financial provider or a playmate to the child, and employment was often cited as a reason for a father's absence (Walmsley et al., 2009). Incarceration and hospitalization introduced within the curriculum were often attributed to fathers, despite evidence that when fathers are absent for those reasons some remain connected to their children (Walmsley et al., 2009). Mothers, however, were cited based on their involvement with childcare and household chores suggesting the division of labor within two income households remains gender specific (Walmsley et al., 2009).

The significance of this study is the lack of attention to fathers, as an underrepresented gender within the child welfare system. Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003) argued that men and fathering need to have a place in child welfare curriculum, as well as education on how to engage fathers regardless of their circumstances.

Building on the lack of fathering in the academic realm, the literature review also noted the lack of fathers defined within child welfare legislation. Walmsley et al. (2009) determined that although children have fathers (residential and non-residential, biological fathers, step fathers, adoptive fathers, mother's partners, and male family members), the focus of child welfare legislation continues to ignore them within legislation. Legislation guiding child welfare in B.C., Canada defines a parent under the 1996 *Child, Family and Community Service Act* as:

- (a) a person to whom guardianship or custody of a child has been granted by a court of competent jurisdiction or by an agreement; and
- (b) a person with whom a child resides or who stands in place of the child's parent or guardian, but does not include a caregiver, prospective adoptive parent or director.

(Government, British Columbia, 2017)

The Act outlines the requirement for the child welfare system to work with the parent of the child, based on this legal definition. In 2008, Canadian investigations of substantiated child abuse and neglect consisted of 91% female caregivers compared to 9% male caregivers (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). The table cited by the Public Health Agency of Canada (2010) may reflect the legal definition of parent, to be primarily female:

**TABLE 5-4:** Age and Sex of Primary Caregiver in Substantiated Child Maltreatment Investigations in Canada in 2008<sup>▲</sup>

| Age of primary caregiver                  | Sex of primary caregiver | Number of investigations | Rate per 1,000 children | %           |
|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|
| < 16 years                                | Female                   | —                        | —                       | 0%          |
|   | Male                     | —                        | —                       | 0%          |
| 16-18 years                               | Female                   | 934                      | 0.16                    | 1%          |
|   | Male                     | —                        | —                       | 0%          |
| 19-21 years                               | Female                   | 3,003                    | 0.50                    | 4%          |
|   | Male                     | —                        | —                       | 0%          |
| 22-30 years                               | Female                   | 23,448                   | 3.89                    | 28%         |
|   | Male                     | 1,305                    | 0.22                    | 2%          |
| 31-40 years                               | Female                   | 34,595                   | 5.74                    | 41%         |
|   | Male                     | 3,316                    | 0.55                    | 4%          |
| 41-50 years                               | Female                   | 12,214                   | 2.03                    | 14%         |
|   | Male                     | 2,481                    | 0.41                    | 3%          |
| 51-60 years                               | Female                   | 1,855                    | 0.31                    | 2%          |
|   | Male                     | 493                      | 0.08                    | 1%          |
| > 60 years                                | Female                   | 514                      | 0.09                    | 1%          |
|   | Male                     | 123                      | 0.02                    | 0%          |
| <b>Total</b>                              | <b>Female</b>            | <b>76,597</b>            | <b>12.72</b>            | <b>91%</b>  |
|   | <b>Male</b>              | <b>7,760</b>             | <b>1.29</b>             | <b>9%</b>   |
| <b>Total substantiated investigations</b> |                          | <b>84,357</b>            | <b>14.01</b>            | <b>100%</b> |

Canadian Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect – 2008

<sup>▲</sup> Based on a sample of 6,060 substantiated child maltreatment investigations with information about primary caregiver's age and sex.

Percentages are column percentages.

— Estimates of less than 100 investigations are not shown, but are included in the total.

A study by Brown et al. (2009) revealed that legislation mandates social workers to focus on the primary parent's ability to be protective of the child even in the case of domestic violence, although frequently the violence is against the mother. In addition to the possibility of legislation contributing to the lack of fathers involved in child welfare, research surrounding the practice of child welfare also held interesting results. Findings from a Canadian longitudinal study on a random sample of child protection files, covering an 8-year period ending in 2005, looking for evidence of work with fathers produced alarming results (Strega et al., 2009). More than 80% of the fathers were considered irrelevant argued Strega et al. (2009), and there was no contact between the child welfare worker and the father, who was labelled as a risk to the child more than half of the time. The absence of fathers within the child welfare system has becomes so prevalent that Canadian researchers Strega et al. (2009) coined the term *ghost fathers*.

In his study, Bellamy (2009) found that fathers were labelled into one of three categories: “absent, unimportant or dangerous” (p. 1); all three used as a justification for fathers’ absences

within the system. Absent was used to describe fathers who were non-participatory or inconsistent in the child's life. Unimportant was used when the father's contribution to the child's life was insignificant or in comparison to the mother's role, less important. Dangerous was used when the father's contribution only involved an increased risk of safety to the child. Dangerous, a common label when domestic violence was found, often resulted in the mother not receiving support, but rather a warning. Similar research by Featherstone and Peckover (2007) found that when domestic violence was evident, little to no support was offered to deal with the man's behavior. The research also concluded that children who are witness to domestic abuse of their mother by their father and as a consequence have no communication/contact/relationship with their father, tend to either idealize or deprecate their fathers, an outcome affecting their development as well as future relationships (Featherstone and Peckover, 2007). Coady, Hoy, and Cameron (2013) argued that the challenge in engaging fathers and protecting their rights and responsibilities to children requires fathers to be included, listened to, and engaged. Coady et al. suggested to combat an anti-male culture within the child welfare system means working with fathers even when their behavior is completely unacceptable, as is the case with domestic violence.

This literature review was unable find statistics on fathers who identify as having Aboriginal ancestry. With an overrepresentation of Aboriginal children in the child welfare system, any research conducted specifically on Aboriginal fathers is layered with colonization (Ball, 2009). Although Ball (2009) successfully conducted research with Aboriginal fathers in B.C. on their parenting role, there was no research found specific to father involvement within the child welfare system.

In the Canadian child welfare system, research by Coady et al. (2013) indicates fathers are rarely mentioned in child welfare documentation. They are instead often passed over, possibly representing a microcosm of the broader society which still views mothers as the primary caregivers responsible for children (Coady et al., 2013). According to Brown et al. (2009), in the Canadian system documentation is stored in files under the mother's name, possibly contributing to a culture of practice focused on mothers. Research by Brown et al. also found that the child welfare system was underresourced, likely contributing to prioritizing its work with mothers as primary caregivers over engagement with fathers. The study also found documented parenting assessments are overwhelmingly conducted on mothers (Brown et al., 2009). Research by Strega

et al. (2009) showed that fathers deemed neglectful of children based on the legal definition (abandoned, or safety and care not provided) were not documented in comparison to primary caregivers—consisting mainly of mothers—who in comparison were documented as neglectful of their children’s needs. This suggests discourse within the child welfare system may be perpetuating a gendered system. According to Strega et al., (2009), documentation in child welfare files revealed recordings suggestive of discourse attributing rights to fathers (his property, his children) and responsibilities to mothers (childcare).

Skramstad and Skivenes (2017), in their research on the child welfare system, explored father involvement within risk assessments and planning. This was a comparative study between England and Norway using qualitative methodology. The study included interviewing child welfare workers. Skramstad and Skivenes noted that although limited research is conducted on fathers, their findings were consistent with an increase in the promotion of father involvement within general societal discourse. However, their study also revealed this increase in attention to fathers is inconsistent with father involvement within the legislation and practice of child welfare. The findings indicated there was little difference between the two countries, although Norway “scored third on the world gender gap index” (Skramstad & Skivenes, 2017, p. 12). This may suggest a child welfare system ingrained with a culture of gender division, resistant to influence from the broader society. The research findings have implications for my study, particularly within the findings and recommendations of my research. Any suggested recommendations may need to come from within the child welfare system to align with the broader society, not the other way around.

Closely linked to the lack of fathers’ involvement is research on potential mother blaming within the Canadian child welfare system.

### ***2.2.2 Mother Blaming***

Research suggests the Canadian child welfare system, rooted in its history and perpetuated by its current system of practice, has a lack of fathers and an overrepresentation of mothers (Walmsley et al., 2009). As a mandatory service delivery entrusted with the protection of children, this suggests a gender specific system and may suggest elements of mother blaming as indicated by Davies, Krane, Collings, and Wexler (2007).

Davies et al. (2007) explored the complex historical notions of mothering. The study found binary thinking of motherhood as ideal or neglectful, without an appreciation for the complexities of ambivalent feelings. The significance of the study is in its findings and recommendations. Davies et al. that theorized if complex feelings of mothers are allowed, acknowledged, and accepted, they can be used to meet the needs of both mother and child. This could possibly replace the current suppression of complex feeling felt by mothers out of fear for delaying, effecting, or damaging the child. Davies et al. suggested if child welfare workers could provide a space to allow honest narratives from mothers they, and in turn the children, would be better supported. To encourage this, Davies et al. asserted that the practice within child welfare would need to shift from child to mother focus. The research may be suggesting the necessity for a broader view of what it means to be a mother and that women are not the only parent delegated and responsible for the welfare of their children. Davies et al. suggested this shift away from binary thinking of motherhood may open a door to realistic and shared responsibility for children and diminish mother blaming within the child welfare system.

Strega et al. (2008) argued parental responsibility for a child in a world where single mothers are often the only parent automatically attributes blame to the mother. Their study concluded this was evident, even when the reason the family came to the attention of the child welfare system was a result of domestic abuse on the mother and/or children by the father (Strega et al., 2008).

In addition to a gender imbalance with service delivery in the system, there has also been studies on imbalances in documentation within the Canadian child welfare system. Documentation includes written recording of conversations, meeting, case plans, assessments, interventions, and court documents. It is information gathered, stored, and maintained within a database and/or a physical file on the family. The review of child welfare files found that, even when the policy and procedure stated ‘parents’, the file still primarily included documentation on mothers (Strega et al., 2008). Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan’s (2003) study also concluded that, despite legislation, policies, and practice citing ‘in the best interest of the child’, documentation evaluated those interests based on the ability of the mother to protect and provide adequate care. A keyword search study conducted by Strega et al. (2008) on the Canadian National Clearinghouse on Child Abuse and Neglect found a 3:1 ratio with the word ‘mother’ versus ‘father’ at a 5:1 ratio; considerably higher than the 3:1 and 2:1 findings in the United States.

Research has also linked mother blaming to the lack of father involvement. Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003) found child welfare files tend to document and accept a mother's account of a father's behavior without gathering information from the father himself. Fagan and Barnett's (2003) study drew a causal link between mother "gatekeepers" (p. 1020) and the involvement of fathers with their children. Although the research explored broad co-parenting influences, it focused specifically on a mother's influence over the father's involvement. The research conducted defined "maternal gatekeeping as attitudes about the importance of the role of fathers' and mothers' satisfaction with father involvement" (Fagan & Barnett, 2003, p. 102). Exploring several variables including the father's financial contribution, "mothers' attitudes about the fathers" (Fagan & Barnett, 2003, p. 1020), parenting competence, and whether the father was a resident or nonresident of the family, the research found a causal link on the role played by maternal gatekeepers in restricting fathers' involvement.

Davies et al.'s (2007) study also explored a broader scope within the child welfare system. The study researched the gender of social workers and management responsible to deliver child welfare. Davies et al. found an overrepresentation of female child welfare workers, indicating child welfare may be too gender specific in its delivery of service. Male social workers found within the system tend to hold management positions, suggesting a potential for a female focused culture (Davies et al., 2007). The significance of this finding is the broad lens of research exploring potential gender imbalance within the broader context of the child welfare system as a whole. This broad scope of research may highlight a broader culture of gender imbalance.

In addition to research on the lack of fathers and possible mother blaming within the Canadian child welfare system, a third theme emerged within my study: research without father input.

### ***2.2.3 Research Without Father Input***

Unfortunately, the limited amount of research conducted on fathers involved with child welfare has rarely included their input into the studies (Featherstone, 2001). Particularly lacking in research are fathers who have committed domestic violence. Featherstone (2001) noted domestic research is mostly done within agencies supporting women or social services; the information is gathered from partners and children witness to domestic violence, in offices with a high percentage of women and which are only open during business working hours. Within the

child welfare system, the primary focus is on protection of the child and assessment of family. Featherstone argues that the system often includes fathers only within a narrow scope of domestic violence, ignoring the other sides to their individual and fathering abilities.

O'Donnell et al.'s (2005) study, consisting of five focus groups to discuss lack of father involvement from the child welfare worker's perspective, produced some interesting results. It included an outcome with division on whether the child welfare system should address father absence and how. The study highlighted not only the absence of fathers within the study but also a culture of hesitation within the system to acknowledge and address any change related to the need to include father participation in planning for their children or to include fathers in research. No fathers were part of the study. Research without father input into a system, within which they are absent and yet effected by, may be perpetuating the system to continue in this way.

## **Conclusion**

This literature review began with the history of the Canadian child welfare system to illustrate the potential impact the foundation may have on the current system. It then proceeded to explore the three prevalent themes found within my research: lack of father involvement, mother blaming, and research without father input. The methodology chosen for my research, including the research questions and the choice to interview fathers surfaced from the literature review.

## **Chapter 3: Theory**

### **Introduction**

This chapter reviews the theoretical lens applied to my research. Data was collected through a literature review as well as interviews with six fathers who had involvement with the Canadian child welfare system. The data was collected and analyzed using a feminist theory as well as a strength-based model. Following are definitions of feminist theory and the strength-based model, including principles and/or main concepts. A review of why these theories were chosen and how they will be applied is also outlined in this chapter.

#### ***3.1 Feminist Theory***

Indicated by Radtke (2017), feminism or to be a feminist is a belief in equal rights for men and women. It includes the importance of having a lens on our political, historical, economic, and cultural world, which represents all genders. Radtke (2017) argues the theory emerged with the first wave of feminism in the 1920s when women advocated for the right to inclusion in the Canadian electoral system. Feminist theory gained formal recognition from the field of sociology in the 1940s (Connell, 2009). At that time there was an acknowledgement of gender roles being socially constructed. In addition, the theory explored the consequences of conformity for women within a patriarchal hierarchy of male-dominated systems, history, economics, and political structures (Connell, 2009).

Feminist theories hold a variety of lenses, according to Dominelli (2002), which began taking shape in the 1960s and 1970s. Banks (as cited in Dominelli, 2002) categorized feminism into: liberal feminism (equal workplace opportunity for the genders), radical feminism (a patriarchal society resulting in systemic violence against women), and Marxist and socialist feminism (economic power through patriarchy and capitalism used by men to control women). Tong (as cited in Dominelli, 2002) added black feminism (analyzing the unique experiences of black women), and post-modern feminism has since been added (discourse or the analysis of language utilized systems, to contextualize gender based power imbalances).

All types of feminism share the same four principles:

- integrating the personal and political dimensions of life (Millet, 1969)
- the diversity encompassed by women (Hooks, 2000)

- seeking more egalitarian forms of social relationships (Collins, 1991)
  - transforming the existing social order (Adamson et al., 1988)
- (Dominelli, 2002, p. 3)

Feminist theory was chosen for this thesis as the literature review highlighted the Canadian child welfare system as gender specific, aimed primarily at mothers and away from fathers (Strega et al., 2009). Using a gender specific theory on a topic involving a system delivering service to a focused gender was a natural fit. To answer research questions on experiences fathers have with the child welfare system, it was important to collect and analyze the data using principles of this theory. Specifically, the theory was used as a lens within the analysis of my data to gain a deeper understanding of the link between lack of fathers and mother blaming in the child welfare system, in the hopes of highlighting any gender inequalities discovered through the research.

Feminist theory was also chosen for this study, as among the many strengths of feminist theory application is particularly important to the field of social work as:

Feminism is indispensable to social workers in its commitment to social change to better the lives of men, women and children. This arises from feminists' concern to understand and eradicate patterns of inequality that impact on some groups more than others and make some sense of the continuities and discontinuities encompassed within the history of any particular group. (Dominelli, 2002, p. 8)

My recommendations for policy and practice changes, as well as future recommendations, as outlined in detail within Chapter 7 are intended with the possibility of increasing inclusion of fathers and decreasing mother blaming within the Canadian child welfare system.

### ***3.2 Strength-Based Model***

Healy (2005) described a strength-based model of practise as a means to accentuate what a person is good at, feels confident doing, and is proud of, to help them access those strengths for reaching goals, facilitating change, and living an optimal life as defined by the individual. According to Healy, this model originated from the mental health field and was acknowledged in the 1980s within the social work field. It foundationally values the respectful belief that people have the ability and the expertise to determine how, when, and in what way to live their optimal

lives. Healy argued the model reflects a belief that people are resilient and have strengths which can be used to initiate and sustain the change they have determined. Building on research of resilience, this model discounts past harmful negative experiences as a predictor for future harmful experiences to the extent to which the opposite may be true (as is sometimes the case with a positive life change due to an event of ill health). Healy described the approach as linked closely to solution-focused therapy and intertwined with empowerment practises while including the following beliefs: “all people have strengths, capacities and resources, demonstrate resilience, have the capacity to determine what is best for them, a perception that people are resilient, have possibilities, and benefit from a genuine mutual partnership with their service provider” (p. 157).

As noted by Rapp, Saleebey, and Sullivan (2006), this model of practise includes assessment of strengths (identifying coping strategies, community resources, matching the strength of a person with resources, encouraging capabilities, and instilling the person’s right to choose). When applying strength-based theory to the collection and analysis of data within my thesis, the following 5 principles (Healey, 2005) were considered:

- Maintain optimism by separating the issue or problem from the individual
- Emphasis on the individual’s assets by listening to the stories with a strength-based lens
- Engage in a partnership of collaboration (providing a safe space, promoting a reciprocal relationship, and inspiring creative solutions)
- Empowerment with focus on future aspirations
- Encourage maintaining and creating a social support circle

A strength-based model was chosen as a guide to choose the methodology and interpret data results within the analysis. Interviews were chosen as a tool within the methodology as a suitable means to gather information for my microlevel study. Throughout the interview process the fathers’ strengths were accentuated and any recommendations for improvements, as determined by them, encouraged. My research style was intentional to provide options for when and where the interviews were conducted, and clarity of the research purpose was shared, before, during, and after the interview process with the fathers to inspire a sense of collaboration.

Analysis of the data results separated common issues identified by the fathers from an individual experience to broader collective data. The recommendations found in Chapter 7 were put forward with a spirit for collective change within the Canadian child welfare system.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter examined feminist theory and a strength-based model of practice. It defined both while considering the principles relevant to each and described why they were chosen for this research. The application of feminist theory and a strength-based model leads into the next chapter of methodology used for this study.

## **Chapter 4: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research methodology chosen to conduct this study and why it was selected, including the use of interviews and their strengths and limitations. My study is exploratory in nature in the hopes it will provide some insight into fathers' experiences within the Canadian child welfare system. Sampling and analysis are reviewed in relation to data collection for this study. Ethical issues including informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher, are outlined as considerations in conducting this qualitative research.

#### ***4.1 Research Methods***

Research is systematically performed using methodology defined as “choices we make about appropriate models, cases to study, methods of data gathering, forms of data, analysis, etc. in planning and executing a research study” (Silverman D. , 2010, p. 436). The intended purpose of this research is to explore experiences of fathers whose children have come before the child welfare system. The study provided an opportunity for fathers to describe what their experiences were and why those experiences may have occurred in the way they did. Although using a quantitative method would have produced statistics, numbers, and charts quantifying the fathers' experiences, it was felt to be too restrictive for this research. To answer the research questions, this thesis was conducted using qualitative methodology. Defined by Berg and Lune (2012) this methodology provides a way to research beyond what is happening, to where, when, and why something may be happening. Qualitative methodology is also defined by Mack, Woodsong, MacQueen, Guest, and Namey (2005) as specific research which strives to provide answers to questions using a clear process of data accumulation and analysis. It can ideally be used within and beyond the scope of the research. In addition:

It provides information about the “human” side of an issue- this is, often contradictory behaviours, beliefs, opinions, emotions and relationships of individuals. Qualitative methods are also effective in identifying intangible factors, such as societal norms, socioeconomic status, gender roles, ethnicity and religion, whose role in the research issue may not be readily apparent. (Mack et al., 2005, p. 1)

#### **4.1.1 Interviews**

“The qualitative research interview attempts to understand the world from the subjects’ points of view, to unfold the meaning of their experiences, to uncover their lived world prior to scientific explanations” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 1). Interviews were chosen as a qualitative research method for collecting data, primarily to provide a platform for fathers to have a voice in the research. Chosen over other qualitative techniques, interviews provided an opportunity to gain rapport with the fathers and interview them one-on-one within a face-to-face environment in which each father could tell his personal story. According to Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), the interview method allowed me to be openly curious with the hope of providing something positive for the fathers through the interview process.

Enveloped within a strength-based model of practice as described by Healy (2005), the interviews were conducted from a lens of optimism with the intent to listen and understand the experiences of the fathers. Although it is time consuming and restrictive conducting face-to-face interviews across geographical distances, these limitations were overshadowed by the ability to ask clarifying questions, react to the verbal and non-verbal cues given by the fathers, and the importance of fathers’ telling their stories at a comfortable pace using their own words.

Semi-structured interviews were chosen with a feminist theory lens which “seeks to minimize power differentials between service workers and service users” (Dominelli, 2002, p. 39). Semi-structured interviews were a mindful fit in this regard, by allowing the interview to go where the fathers felt a strong need to share information. This format was chosen for its flexibility. Although most of the questions in the interview guide were asked of each father, the order, manner, language used, and flow of the questions varied according to each unique father’s understanding, willingness to share, and individual narrative within the interview. A limitation of a semi-structured interview according to Mack et al. (2005) is the ability to provide meaningful parallels between the father’s answers and comparison with other research. The use of semi-structured interviews likely accentuated the natural inclination for the fathers to present themselves in a favorable light to me, although each of the interviews was felt to be authentic.

Conducted individually with each participant, interviews ranged from 30-45 minutes each and were recorded with the participant’s informed consent in public and semi-public settings, except for one participant who preferred to be interviewed at his residence. All interviews were transcribed by the researcher.

#### **4.1.2 Sampling**

Using convenience sampling, described by Berg and Lune (2012) as participants who are accessible or have been accessed by chance, I was able to recruit fathers directly from personal/professional connections. This was achieved through community word of mouth as well as through a non-profit men's group which championed recruitment for this research with fathers they support.

Initially a challenge to find fathers willing to participate, I began the search by sending out a participatory letter (see Appendix A) to professional government and non-government agencies within the geographical parameters of this study. Included were legislated agencies tasked with providing child protection services and non-government men's groups providing service to fathers from the general population. Non-government support included drop-in crisis intervention, advocacy, mandatory and voluntary support through group and individual counseling, as well as education through structured workshops for fathers and communities. Participation letters were distributed first through email, with follow up phone calls to eight agencies.

Interviewing social workers through mandatory child protective services was presented as an option by legislated agencies, however, I felt strongly the need to include fathers directly in this research—a gap evident in the literature review (Featherstone, 2001; O'Donnell et al., 2005). As a parallel recruiting process, I also shared research information with several professional and personal contacts. These discussions led to two separate fathers' interest in participating in the research. Participation letters and informed consent forms (see Appendix B) were forwarded to them directly.

At the same juncture, a local men's support group responded to my inquiry. I had a face-to-face meeting with one of the counselors who, as a strong advocate for fathers, was convinced of the importance of this research and began to randomly reach out to fathers for expressed interest. The remaining four of the total six fathers were obtained using the same convenience sampling technique.

#### **4.1.3 Reliability and Validity**

A limitation in interviewing only six fathers in a small geographical area is a possible decrease in reliability of the findings. Reliability is defined as “the consistency and trustworthiness of research findings; it is often treated in relation to the issue of whether the findings are reproducible at other times and by other researchers” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 245). In order to increase reliability, I considered proper methodology and ensured participants met the criteria for the research. The interview guide (see Appendix C) was also created, rehearsed, and amended as required, contributing to the clarity and common understanding of questions for the fathers throughout the interview.

Primary research through interviews and secondary research through the literature review provided a basis of validity described “in the social sciences [as] pertain[ing] to whether a method investigates what it purports to investigate” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 246). In order to increase validity, the analysis used as much of the primary source data as possible in order to capture the essence of the fathers’ stories, combined with a full spectrum of secondary research through the literature review to strengthen the data. Concepts and themes were extracted from the data as opposed to words to broaden the data, reducing the likelihood of different meanings intended by the participants.

#### **4.1.4 Analysis**

Qualitative research uses an inductive strategy. Its purpose is to examine the whole, in a natural setting to get the ideas and feelings of those being interviewed or observed. As a consequence, data analysis in qualitative research is also inductive and iterative.

(Lichtman, 2013, p. 242)

An interpretive approach was chosen to analyze the data collected. This approach is a procedure described as “providing a means for discovering the practical understandings of meanings and actions” (Berg & Lune, 2012, p. 351). This approach allowed the text to be organized in a way to draw out themes of action with meaning. As interviews were the primary source of data, the researcher did not have concentrated participatory interaction with the participants nor was the data collected for the purpose to recruit fathers for action, therefore this approach was chosen to best reflect the analysis.

Use of a conventional context analysis set out by Berg and Lune (2012) and Lichtman (2013), the following six step process was utilized:

Step 1: Information was collected, then transcribed. I systematically was able to work through this process commencing with the collection of six audio-recorded interviews with fathers. All interviews were personally transcribed, a time-consuming task, although chosen to protect confidentiality and keep myself close to the data.

Step 2: I read through each printed transcribed interview, identifying codes such as history with child welfare, initial feelings interacting with the system, connecting with community supports, and involvement in planning. As well as noting any particularly interesting insights the fathers had to their circumstances for use as direct quotes in the research.

Step 3: Highlighted codes were then moved into a separate document, where I condensed the codes into major categories such as information, relationships, and system responses.

Step 4: Major categories were utilized for sorting the material, identifying similar phrases, patterns, and common themes, and included important incongruences or differences. Extracting commonalities between the six interviews allowed me to sort using subcategories for detailed analysis. Examples of subcategories emerged including lack of access to information, feelings of powerlessness, and different system responses based on the gender of the parent. Well defined categories and subcategories were important in this stage as to not miss important messages, as well as to detect some significant differences evident in the material.

Step 5: I re-examined the categories to determine the clearest, most concise, and objective data analysis. Meaning to the patterns became evident in the data during this stage.

Step 6: Patterns were linked to previous research from which I could draw generalizations in the data. Incorporating what was discovered during the literature review and including the theoretical lens applied to this study, I began to draw conclusions on the data collected and ultimately answer my research questions.

## **4.2 Ethical Considerations**

Approval to proceed by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data Ethics Committee was granted, however due to the sensitivity of the subject, there were still many ethical issues to contemplate when interviewing fathers. Consideration of the following ethical issues, which serve as a guideline for social science researchers using interviews as a method, was thoroughly done.

### **4.2.1 Informed Consent**

Described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), informed consent must outline for the participants the purpose of the research, the overall design, and any intended or unintended consequences of participating. I explained privately to each of the six participants the purpose of the research as an opportunity to gain an understanding of their personal experiences with the child welfare system. As well I explained the importance of their involvement in the research surrounding a system which affects them and their children directly. There was a review of their anonymity within the research and assurance their information would remain confidential and then be disposed upon thesis completion. All fathers were given the option to withdraw their participation at any stage within the research process. I provided an opportunity to ask any questions they had prior, during, and after the interview. An informed consent form was signed by each participant (see Appendix B).

### **4.2.2 Confidentiality**

Confidentiality of information includes obtaining, storing, and holding collected data in confidence. As outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), keeping information confidential requires the protection and non-disclosure of identifying information of the participants and/or others identifiable through data collected within the interview. Maintaining a balance between protection of confidential data with using data specific to the participants' experiences to contribute to the research was difficult to manage. All participants were given a pseudonym within the thesis and, when possible, partial disclosure of information was used to secure non-identifying data. Within the analysis, the use of themes, categories, and concepts as opposed to specific details mitigated some of the ethical risks and protected confidentiality.

#### ***4.2.3 Consequences***

Defined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), consequences include an acknowledgement, appreciation for, and an appropriate response to any intended or unintended positive or negative consequences to the participant for sharing information within an interview. Relying on my experiences and skills as a social worker, I expected and was prepared for the possible emotional responses of the participants sharing personal information through the interview. Techniques such as discussing confidentiality, giving the option to stop the interview, and offering to link the participant to appropriate community resources were utilized pre-interview. I was also able to take some time to build rapport with each of the fathers. Validating feelings during the interview, staying focused on the questions as to not slip into a therapeutic relationship, and providing any debrief required after the interview worked well with the fathers. A quick check-in thanking the participants for their participation was an important contributor to helping the fathers feel comfortable with shared data and proud of their contribution to important research.

#### ***4.2.4 Role of the Researcher***

I was brought up in a middle class, small town in northern Canada. A Caucasian woman educated at a post-secondary level, I have been a social worker within various capacities including the child welfare system. There were many advantages and disadvantages to having this lens as I took on the role of a researcher. “The role of the researcher as a person, of the researcher’s integrity, is critical to the quality of the scientific knowledge and the soundness of ethical decisions in qualitative inquiry” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 74). My personal and professional background both helped and hindered the research.

An advantage of my experiences was my understanding of how the child welfare system operates including the legislation, policy, and practise which guides it and the role for social workers within the system. In addition, I understand the importance of knowing how to engage families and the expectations that families are to be supported, along with familiarity of the language associated with the child welfare system.

A disadvantage of my experiences to my role as a researcher is having preconceived ideas, opinions, and thoughts surrounding the child welfare system, its strengths and weaknesses, as well as possessing a lens of values and culture which form my personal and professional conduct.

Educated and practising as a social worker commits me to abide by the social work code of ethics including integrity, honesty, and to do no harm. I endeavoured to ask questions from a place of curiosity, asking them with an open mind, respectful lens, and empathic tone to fully understand the fathers' experiences. Knowing this research is a sensitive topic, I fully appreciated fathers willing to tell their story for the sake of the study, in some cases sharing hurtful, challenging, and triumphant life stories.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter provided an outline of the research methodology chosen for this study. It explained why the methodology was selected, including the use of interviews. Sampling and analysis were reviewed in relation to data collection for this study. A discussion on ethical issues was also explored to include informed consent, confidentiality, consequences, and the role of the researcher while conducting this qualitative research.

## **Chapter 5: Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter describes my primary research findings. These findings were gathered through qualitative interviews intended to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 1. The current chapter begins with brief profiles of the fathers who participated in the study. It then proceeds to summarize the types of participation fathers experienced in planning for their child(ren) while involved with the child welfare system. Themes of common experiences presented within categories and subcategories found in the data are then outlined, including: communication issues, relationship issues, and systemic issues. To accurately put forth these categories, direct quotes from the research were utilized to ensure the fathers' voices were heard.

#### ***5.1 Participants***

This study included six participants ranging in age between 30–55 years of age, each having between 1–6 children ranging in age from infants to adolescents. None of the fathers interviewed were from an ethnic minority group. These children came to the attention of the child welfare system for various reasons, from the father accessing support to allegations of various forms of child abuse and neglect. The duration and frequency of interaction with the child welfare system was different for each father, some with short-term involvement and some with long-term involvement. For this research, each father was assigned a pseudonym taken from a randomly generated list of men's names available through Google. Interviews were 30–45 minutes in duration and occurred in public to semi-public places, except for one father who was interviewed at his home, accommodated at his request.

Four of the six participants' initial contact with the child welfare system was due to a concern expressed by the community regarding the safety of their child. Safety concerns included neglect of the child (lack of supervision, attention to health care needs, unable or unwilling to protect the child from abuse) and/or physical, emotional, sexual abuse, and/or or witness to family violence. One of the participants reached out to the child welfare system looking to access support parenting their child. One of the participants was contacted by the system requesting their assistance in ensuring the safety of their child.

### **5.1.2 Father Profiles**

Abraham is between 35–40 years of age and a father of three children. He has been involved with the child welfare system on and off for at least 10 years as a father. In addition, Abraham was involved with the system as a child. He is currently in a common-law relationship, and at least two of the children reside with him and the children’s mother. He has no custodial responsibilities for the third child.

Jordan is between 50–55 years of age and a father of two children. The child welfare system has been involved with his children for at least 5 years. He is currently single and shares joint custody of the children with their mother.

Louis is between 40–45 years of age, a father of one child. The child welfare system was involved with his child for at least three months. Louis is currently in a common-law relationship and has joint custody of his child.

Archie is between 35–40 years of age and a father of six children. He has been involved on and off with the child welfare system for at least 10 years as a father. Archie was involved with the system as a child. He is currently in a common-law relationship and has sole, joint, and non-custodial responsibilities for his children.

Mario is between 40–45 years of age and a father of two children. He has had child welfare involvement on and off with the system for at least 1 year. Currently he holds joint custody of the children and is single.

Bobby is between 30–35 years of age and a father of one child. He has had child welfare involvement for at least 1 year. He is living in a common-law relationship and shares joint custody of his child with their mother.

The purpose of this study is to answer the following research questions:

- What are fathers’ experiences with participation in planning when their children come to the attention of the child welfare system?
- Why did these patterns come to be this way?

## **5.2 Participation in Planning**

For this study, participation in planning is defined as actively engaging and/or contributing to a plan surrounding the safe care of children. When the fathers were asked in what way they participated in planning for the safe care of their children, responses were on a continuum from little to sporadic participation. None of the participants felt they were actively involved in the planning for the safe care of their children. In addition, three of the six fathers do not remember seeing, having input, or signing a documented plan.

Through their narratives, it became apparent all the fathers had a role and responsibility to ensure their child(ren) was safe. They participated in that goal to the best of their ability and to the extent the child welfare system allowed them. Some types of participation in planning included conversations with the social worker, attending meetings, visiting their child or ensuring their child's safety, and fulfilling goals as set out by the social worker. Half of the fathers signed either a case plan or a legal document regarding their child. All stated they needed to work hard to be included in the planning for their child.

The interviews revealed fathers had been involved with planning for their children in various ways. As shown below, Abraham was not involved but rather dismissed when he tried to include himself in planning for his children.

*“The lady came and did the last review and checked all the information but I find it a little odd, they are supposed to talk to the parents, they came in and totally just shoved me aside like I wasn’t there, and asked the mother all the questions. But me being a nosy person who wasn’t going to do that, I just stood there because that’s what I do, I even told her that I’m really nosy and I’m going to listen and you can’t push me aside because these are my children.”* (Abraham)

Jordan had a different experience. He instead accessed community supports, and finally the court system granted him the legal right to make decisions for his child. As cited below, having the legal right to make decisions for his children required MCFD (Ministry of Child and Family Development) to include him in planning.

*“Eventually, I fought MCFD, I went over their heads and did things. I just went and dealt with it, I contacted the child development center, I contacted the children’s hospital. Now the court order states that I am responsible for all medical, all educational, all dental, all those types of decisions. That’s me, so they have to deal with me.”* (Jordan)

Louis' experience too was unique as he was involved in planning for his child, however in the absence of a documented plan.

*"There was supposed to be a plan, but there was no plan. There should be a written plan signed off by us."* (Louis)

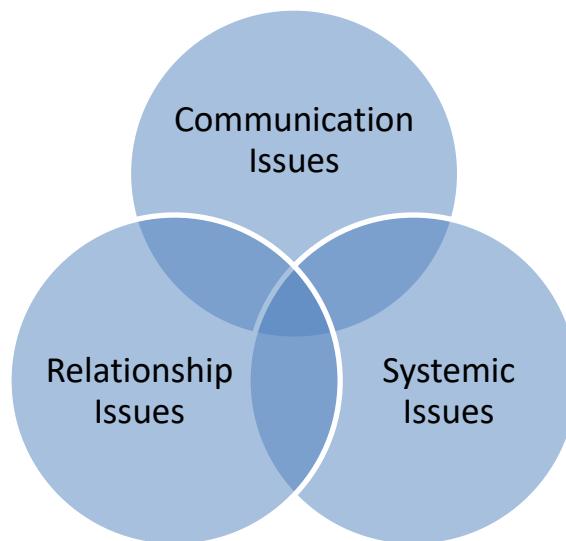
Archie was also involved in planning for his children, although primarily when it involved his children living under his care.

*"They didn't anticipate that, so next thing you know things changed and we're making plans for the kids to come back home."* (Archie)

Bobby's experience with planning included verbal and signed documented agreements, as explained by him below.

*"That's when we had to sign a voluntary agreement. They give you a choice, you can either sign a voluntary release for your child or you can go to court, either way you're going to lose your kid, its kind of a no-win situation. Yes, plans. I had meetings with mom and the social worker and also on my own."* (Bobby)

Through the fathers' narratives, this study wanted to more importantly capture how participation occurred based on their experiences, providing insight into why those patterns came to be that way. Three main themes emerged from the fathers' participation in planning: communication issues, relationship issues, and systemic issues. Represented in Figure 1, these issues are intentionally interlocked to show an overlap in the three themes.



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Figure 1. Communication/Relationship/Systemic issues.

### **5.3 Communication Issues**

One consistent and threaded theme throughout the fathers' interviews was their frustration with the lack of communication with their social worker(s). Specifically, lack of consistent, timely, and clear communication resulting in insufficient or unclear shared information. In addition, two of the fathers with custodial rights were particularly frustrated with the lack of access to documented information available to them about their children while involved with the system.

#### **5.3.1 Communication**

Communication includes phone conversations, documentation, and clear expectations of the fathers when interacting with the system. It can be interactive or one sided through face-to-face contact, in letters, through text messages, or emails.

As Jordan describes, he experienced poor communication and when he did get to speak with a social worker, they rejected his request to be included.

*"She wouldn't return my phone calls. One day she basically said, 'I don't even have to discuss anything with you, you have no legal rights to your children at all.' Meanwhile I've got a court order saying I do." (Jordan)*

As stated below, Louis never received answers to inquiries for information.

*"I called him back to follow up 4 months after the fact and said 'hey remember me, we talked about this and this and this', and there was absolutely no follow up again." (Louis)*

No communication left Mario uninformed on what was happening until he was served papers to appear in court.

*"And so, I'm left going 'I don't know'. Then there was no contact between us for a month until I got served." (Mario)*

As articulated below, Bobby begins to explain the frustration with no communication around important subjects like visits with his child.

*"When a parent is asking about visitation and stuff like that, it's not good to get back to them three or four days later. I always have to leave a message, I never get the person on the phone." (Bobby)*

Responses from the fathers regarding communication suggest, despite their attempts to communicate with the social worker, that they were unsuccessful. The fathers expressed concern,

frustration, and confusion over the reasons why the communication was so poor, particularly given the important topic of their children.

### **5.3.2 Information Shared**

Information shared includes information related to the child or the father who holds custodial rights and responsibilities. Information shared includes events or processes, questions, the status of their children's safety, scheduled visits with their children, and information regarding expectations of the father.

Abraham explains how he had to work very hard to get information and be involved with planning.

*"Yes, they were always in touch with me but lack of information. I always had to push for information, I had to push to find ways to get visits." (Abraham)*

The lack of information shared by Bobby below, left him with more questions than answers.

*"They still won't tell me why they took my daughter from me to begin with." (Bobby)*

As Louis shares below, the lack of information shared about important decisions left him uneasy.

*"That was a pretty difficult process to go through. After that it was very little contact and then suddenly, it was just the green light for her to go back to her mom's. I never got any information, never got any reassurance from the social workers at all." (Louis)*

Consistent responses from the fathers on the topic of shared information suggest the fathers were not provided information on content or process surrounding what was happening nor expectations of them by the system. Providing an opportunity for the fathers to have their questions clearly answered by the social worker may have increased their level of engagement with the system.

### **5.3.3 "Trust Us"**

Two of the fathers shared a consistent message from their social workers to "trust them", a response they felt was said to replace providing them with information. The fathers were aware of the restrictions on social workers to secure the privacy of third party information. As shared by both Louis and Bobby in the statements below, both felt this was an inappropriate answer to requests for information.

*“We’re not going to tell you anything, but just trust that everything is okay for your child. I don’t trust people in that way with my child’s safety.”* (Louis)

*“All I got was ‘trust me’, just ‘trust me’. Trust you? You took my kid away from me without telling me, I’m not trusting you. They kind of set it up that you’re going in there with resentment.”* (Bobby)

It appears the fathers felt this response from the social worker was inappropriate given trust is developed as a result of a secure relationship. Neither of the father’s felt they had a relationship with the social worker, particularly not one to justify a level of trust.

#### **5.3.4 Access to Information**

Lack of access to information included the inability to access documentation outlining involvement with their child. These issues were presented by the fathers with an acknowledgement of the system’s strict confidentiality laws surrounding third party information.

Abraham’s comment below was an indication of his knowledge surrounding MCFD documentation and a suggestion for how to provide fathers with access to information.

*“The system now has it where fathers get their own file at the MCFD office but guess what? Trying to do that is like pulling teeth. They’ll dance around it, they refused to give me my own file when I wanted my own file because I wanted to be a parent.”* (Abraham)

Louis speaks below of frustration with the lack of documented information shared with him.

*“I asked for him to get me some sort of response about why that happened and how you could possibly remove a child and have no paperwork to support it. Nothing had ever been explained to me so I have no information about what they’ve ever written down, what anybody else said, nothing.”* (Louis)

These responses suggest both fathers expected social workers would be recording and storing information regarding their involvement with the system. They also expected to have access to the documentation regarding themselves and/or their children. When this did not occur, it understandably left them with a sense of disempowerment.

#### **5.4 Relationship Issues**

Although some of the fathers commented generally about their experiences with the system, a theme that emerged when the fathers were probed for examples were experiences the fathers had with specific social workers. Abraham, Jordan, Louis, and Bobby were consistent in this way, using language such as feeling threatened and bullied and that the workers were mean and judgmental.

*“I’ve had terrible experience with them. When I became a father, I always had them categorized as one big group of people. ‘Them’ as I would say. It didn’t matter their personality or anything about them what so ever, it didn’t make a difference, labelled social worker I put them all in one category. It didn’t matter, they were not nice people, so yeah. It was never good, it was always scary, they always looked like the bully.”*

(Abraham)

*“They’re brutal. My very first meeting was with a woman. She took me into this back room and had me sit at one end. There was a whole bunch of tables all in a line like a big conference room, she had me sit at one end and she sat way at the other end and sat there and started yelling accusations at me, telling me I did this and I did that.”* (Jordan)

*“It’s almost like they feel they’re above you and they can make these arbitrary decisions about people’s families.”* (Louis)

*“I felt threatened by social services, by that worker, by that one worker. So, she brought my daughter back and she said if you take your child out of BC, I will hunt you down.”*  
(Mario)

*“They are kind of mean. They are jerks, they kind of look at you like you’re a piece of shit, you’re a dead-beat parent and I have your child so now you’re going to do what I say. That’s not the case, I’m not a deadbeat dad.”* (Bobby)

Inconsistent with this pattern of experiences was Archie’s response, who shared examples of successful relationships and what he thought may have contributed to the success.

*“It is seasoned workers that can define the situation instead of protocol. I’ve had a few good workers that I can remember who actually went to bat for me, that listened, look from the beginning at how I had changed my life and did it for my kids, you know?”*  
(Archie)

To summarize, most of the fathers reported feeling disrespected in their relationships with social workers, citing examples of dismissal and bullying. Archie, a father of six and with at least 10 years' experience with the system, could articulate a broader understanding of his relationship with social workers. His reflection may mean an experienced worker who acknowledges strengths as a motivator for change may have a better relationship with the father.

#### **5.4.1 Feeling Tricked**

Specifically, in addition to feeling a sense of disempowerment, Abraham and Mario both identified a sense of feeling tricked. As shared below, they felt tricked into making decisions by either not having all the information required, deliberately being lied to, or being manipulated.

*“Back then was I really shy. They were sneaky about it, they just slide in some paperwork and said, ‘you should sign this’ and for someone that was messed up as much as I was and not able to comprehend things because not enough time to read it and stuff like that. I didn’t read it so I don’t know if I had any parental rights or visit rights or anything like that with my kid at all because I didn’t know what was on it, had no clue, I still don’t know what I even signed.”* (Abraham)

*“I took the polygraph and I passed it. So, I called the social worker and she said it’s okay you got the kids back, you passed, no problem. I said when is the mother going to take her polygraph. She said ‘oh the mother is not going to take it’. Didn’t you just say she was going to. ‘Yes, but there’s no point. You passed it.’ I wouldn’t have agreed to it if she wasn’t going to take it.”* (Mario)

These reported experiences left the fathers feeling deceived by the social workers. They also perceived the system as untruthful.

#### **5.5 Systemic Issues**

Most of the fathers interviewed had a clear understanding of the purpose for the child welfare system and its legal and moral obligation to protect children. One father went so far as to be thankful Canada has a system in place to protect children. Although the fathers understood the need for a reactive system to protect children, our most vulnerable citizens, they struggled with significant decisions being made about children with what appeared to be little or incomplete information.

### **5.5.1 Reactive System**

As reflected below, Abraham, Louis, and Mario all felt important decisions were made about their children without a thorough examination and assessment of all the relevant information about the family.

*“They never seeked out the truth, they always looked at what the outcome was of the situation, never finding out the root cause of the whole thing, before they made their decisions, they just reacted”. (Abraham)*

*“Now I get when a child is possibly in danger you need to make a quick decision and grateful from that stand point that a decision was made quickly. As far as the way the child welfare system went, it was a lot of knee jerk decisions being made.” (Louis)*

*“They never contacted me, they never tried getting any information from me, and they don’t have to get it from me, they can get it from my parents, my brother, my sister, my co-workers, they didn’t ask anyone, they didn’t speak to my sister, nobody. So they should have gotten information to make the best decision.” (Mario)*

The fathers were left with a sense of surprise and anger when talking about these experiences. They justifiably struggled with quick yet significant decisions being made about their children. In some cases, the children were removed from their primary parent’s care. The fathers struggled even more with how those decisions did, and continue to, affect their children and families.

### **5.5.2 “Guilty Until Proven Innocent”**

Layered within a reactive system was the concept of “guilty until proven innocent”. Although the fathers could understand why the safety of their children needed to be secured in the moment while an investigation pursued, they struggled with a system starting from a position where allegations were fact until proven otherwise. Abraham, Jordan, and Louis all used this concept to describe some of their experiences with the child welfare system.

*“They’ve been bothering me ever since. It’s the way it goes, no benefit of the doubt, no finding out the root causes of anything, it’s just look at what had happened and the outcome of what happened and they focus on that, that’s all they focus on.” (Abraham)*

*“The problem with our system is a man is guilty until he proves himself innocent. As far as she was concerned I was guilty, simple as that. They could be fair, instead of making me prove myself innocent, not just automatically guilty.” (Jordan)*

*“The whole innocent until proven guilty does not happen in that situation and you’re being looked at through a certain lens right off the bat, which is a negative lens immediately.”* (Louis)

The fathers all appreciated the need for a system to address concerns of abuse and neglect of children. The fathers also felt strongly that the Canadian child welfare system is a system which starts from a place of guilty until innocence is proven. This means the fathers may be comparing the child welfare system to that of the justice system. There may be a danger in applying the same language and concepts to both systems as it suggests the fathers may be perceiving the two structures as having similarities. In Canada, the two systems are completely different. The justice system is intended to punish those who have broken the law and to protect society. The child welfare system is intended to protect children and support families.

### **5.5.3 Inconsistent Responses to Concerns from Mothers vs. Fathers**

In contrast to the fathers’ experiences of “guilty before innocent”, concerns expressed by the fathers about the care of their children while in their mother’s care were dismissed. Jordan, through the example told below felt his concerns were ignored.

*“Oh yeah, every single time she phones MCFD or the police they show up at my door. Any time I make a complaint, they do nothing. I had my youngest one taken right from school right in front of me and her sister, the older one, by my ex’s oldest daughter and her boyfriend comparing the end, just took her. Basically, told me I’m an a-hole kind of thing and just took her. The oldest one and I went to the RCMP and MCFD, they wouldn’t do anything, nothing, no. I went to court again to get another police enforcement order.”* (Jordan)

Within the examples below Mario also felt his concerns with the care of his child were underestimated. In addition, child visitation rights appeared to be different for father and mothers despite joint legal custody of the children.

*“The Ministry phones me and said you should give the child to the mother and I said no I want there to be guidelines in place to make sure my child doesn’t get hurt. If there is someone there, no problem, they said the child will be fine, the child is in our care, we do not believe the child is at risk, let the mother spend a night or two with her daughter. I said okay, can I spend a night or two with my baby they said no she’s breastfeeding and*

*the mother says no. I said, so the mother says no I cannot see that child, but you are saying I must let the mother see that child, there's been violence here, what do I do.”*  
(Mario)

*“If the original social worker, or if there was a policy in place to make sure both sides of the story are looked at, the evidence is weighed and it's not just one person's word, okay let's just react. It's what that person said, what that person said and balance it, what's the probability, instead of just bang that person said that, let's take the kids.”* (Mario)

Bobby, who additionally felt there was a double standard when it comes to concerns expressed to MCFD about fathers and mothers, offered a more equitable solution of anonymity in the example below.

*“It would almost be better if they ignore who's the mother or who's the father and make decisions based on what's on paper. They think right away, if they find out its the dad I guess for the most part maybe they think it's a deadbeat dad, in the system and now they've got some that aren't and they don't know how to deal with it. I wish they would take what the dads say a bit more seriously, my concerns were kind of thrown aside.”*

(Bobby)

These experiences suggest the fathers felt a sense of dismissal when they raised concerns for their children under the care of their mothers. It appeared to fuel a sense of unfairness and caused them to question whether the system was really concerned with the best interest of their children.

#### **5.5.4 Overworked System**

When the fathers were asked what may have contributed to the systemic challenges, an acknowledgement and appreciation for an overworked system was stated as a likely reason. Jordan, Archie, and Bobby empathically all identified this causal factor in the quotes below.

*“I think they are totally overworked, they give them way too many cases so they can't possibly cover everything properly, so they cover their own backs, you know without really doing a proper investigation until they finally get time to do it, which stretches that time out for the kids.”* (Jordan)

*“I do understand there can be a lack of paperwork and they change workers often. So there are things that they do there that I found that when a new worker comes in, a few*

*times the kids were taken or all of a sudden swooped away, when, if it was the old worker it would have got worked out better, you know what I mean, if they would have known the story more in maybe notes or whatever else, so that was really tough sometimes but of course it would all come through and then work out.”* (Archie)

*“Maybe they are overworked, they’ve got too much on their plate so they can’t give you the attention.”* (Bobby)

Responses from the fathers were articulate and reflective when speaking to the lack of resources within the system. Specifically, the fathers understood social workers are often overworked, the demand on their time and energy is unreasonable, and there is a high turnover of staff. Their answers imply an understanding of the struggles within child welfare which may be contributing to challenges in the system.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter began with presenting profiles of the fathers interviewed for this study. It then proceeded to summarize the findings of types of participation in planning the fathers experienced within the child welfare system. Next, the chapter explained three common themes of interaction: communication issues, relationship issues, and systemic issues. Lastly, direct quotes from the participants were used to ensure their voices were clearly heard throughout the findings and provided some context to the narratives.

## **Chapter 6: Analysis**

### **Introduction**

This chapter presents analysis of my research findings for this study. Linked to previous research and theories, the analysis enables me to draw some generalizations from the findings. Information within this chapter is organized according to the findings outlined in Chapter 5. It begins with the types of participation in planning experienced by the fathers, proceeding then to an analysis of the three identified themes found within the primary research: communication issues, relationship issues, and systemic issues.

#### ***6.1 Participation in Planning***

The fathers interviewed for this study revealed personal stories of frustration, confusion, and thoughtful reflection when describing interactions with the child welfare system. Provided the system is a mandatory organization, legislated to ensure the safety of children and to support parents, it would be reasonable to expect fathers of those children to be involved with planning.

When children come to the attention of the child welfare system, there are identified concerns with the child's health and/or safety in the care of their parent(s). To mitigate those concerns, the parent(s) are required to address those concerns through a plan. Planning can be a verbal agreement, a written case plan outlining goals, and/or a legal document outlining expectations for the parents. Best practice ensures parent(s) are active participants in planning. For this study, planning includes providing input, creating, implementing, and/or actively participating in a plan to ensure the safe care of their children.

My research found three common themes of communication, relationship, and systemic issues experienced by the fathers when they interacted with the child welfare system. Despite the challenges and successes experienced in these areas, this study found that all six fathers interviewed were, to some degree, involved in planning for their children. Through their narratives, all the fathers identified their involvement in planning as conversations with caseworkers, attendance at meetings, signing of case plans, and/or involvement with the direct care of their children. I was surprised by the evidence found within this study, as it is inconsistent with secondary research, identifying a lack of fathers involved with the system.

There may be many possible explanations for this inconsistency. Informed by O'Donnell et al.'s (2005) study, one possible explanation could be that the six fathers interviewed inclusively represent the small percentage of identified fathers on the average caseload. A second conceivable explanation could be that the fathers did not accept any of the three categories of absent, unimportant, or dangerous (Bellamy, 2009) attributed to them by the child welfare system. The Bellamy (2009) study concluded the child welfare system documents fathers into one of the three categories, as a justification for their lack of involvement. The fathers interviewed for my study revealed experiences which might have resulted in this categorization, however it did not happen. Strega et al.'s (2009) study found that if fathers took an interest and the caseworker felt optimistic regarding the involvement of the father, fathers were more likely to be involved with the system. All the fathers within my study had examples of determination and tenacity. Below, Abraham describes his motivation to continue participating in the planning for his children.

*"Yeah you can't give up, if you care about them, you have to keep going, if you give up that just shows your kids it's okay to give up. You pick yourself up and keep going".*

(Abraham)

A third possible explanation could be the fathers' knowledge and/or access to community resources, which acted as both a support and advocate on their behalf within the child welfare system. Abraham articulates his appreciation for a local advocate support service, in the statement below.

*"They helped me get into meetings, get me into the process of being a part of the whole thing. Without them I wouldn't have got into any meetings, I wouldn't have gone to talk to a social worker, I wouldn't have been involved with my kids I wouldn't have gotten any visits. "* (Abraham)

At the same time, Jordan also had success with a community resource navigating the child welfare system with him.

*"Instead of dealing directly with MCFD, what I do is I go through the Child Development Center (CDC) because they will talk with the social worker. It is about planning, things like that for my daughter's future, but we end up doing it from CDC, and she basically tells MCFD where we're at, what my daughter needs. "* (Jordan)

These statements made by the fathers suggest having an advocate from another community agency may be necessary to work successfully with the child welfare system. This may be an indication of an overly complex system too difficult for fathers to navigate. It could also be an indication that a neutral agency is necessary to mediate between fathers and the system.

Fathers interviewed in my study revealed three common themes contributing to their experiences with the child welfare system: communication issues, relationship issues, and systemic issues.

## ***6.2 Communication Issues***

Threaded through the fathers' statements was a clear indication of the lack of consistent and clear communication between the assigned social worker(s) and the father. The fathers provided examples of phone calls not being returned, no communication with the system for months, and delays in planning for father/child visits.

Based on previous research by Brown et al. (2009), one possible explanation for the poor communication is the caseworker's response to discourse. They may have misinterpreted policy which speaks to engaging the parent, to mean engaging the mother. At the same time there is a high likelihood that within a crisis driven system the case workers are constantly required to prioritize their time (Boer & Coady, 2007). When fathers are involved in planning, particularly when the parents are separated, it requires two phone calls, two invitations, and more complex scheduling to ensure meetings occur. Additionally, Fagan and Barnett (2003) found caseworker preference to work with mothers. If there is a misinterpretation of policy, a requirement to prioritize time, and a preference to work with mothers, it is reasonable caseworkers feel they are fulfilling their mandated obligation to protect children and support parents by working primarily with mothers. However, as noted by Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan (2003), the consequences from a feminist lens are lack of communication with fathers, father's rights and responsibilities to their children being ignored, and the perpetuation of a gender specific system.

Child welfare information is guarded by strict confidentiality rules and regulations. A possible explanation for caseworkers encouraging the fathers to "trust them" may have been an attempt to provide the fathers information without breaching confidentiality.

Another possible explanation for poor communication could be the connection between the level of communication and the level of support received by fathers from the system. The more support fathers receive, the better communication between caseworkers and fathers. This is supported by de Boer and Coady's (2007) research which found clear communication and support facilitated a helping relationship between caseworkers and fathers. Consistent with the research, Louis shares his experience below.

*"More communication. I think we deserve to have some communication. All of a sudden, I'm working fulltime and now I'm a fulltime dad at the same time and I don't know what the hell I'm supposed to do, I didn't have any instructions, nothing, I wasn't given any support. There was no plan, there was no offer, there was no system, there was just 'here, you're going to have your child fulltime until we figure it out.'"* (Louis)

This experience is an example of the frustration and disempowerment felt by Louis from his interaction with the system. At the same time, he insightfully spoke of two possible solutions: more communication and parenting support.

Archie articulated a similar experience through his interview, however he reached a point in his relationship with the system where support improved, as did communication.

*"When the Ministry came along side of me and actually recognized me then I think that encouraged me to ask more questions like what else can I do."* (Archie)

Archie demonstrated reflective thought in this statement. He recognized his motivation to engage the system occurred when the social worker saw him as a person and parent with capabilities.

Communication issues identified by the fathers also includes the lack of written information shared with them. When children come to the attention of the Canadian child welfare system, documentation of all interactions is created, stored, and maintained within a file. A possible explanation for fathers' inability to receive a copy of the documentation is likely related to the maternal filing system. Files are kept under the mother's name within most Canadian child welfare agencies (Brown et al., 2009). Documentation regarding the child is kept within this file and would be intertwined with their mother's information. In addition, fathers are frequently not mentioned in child welfare case notes (Coady et al., 2013). This results in files with interwoven documentation about the child and their mother. When fathers request information on the child, third party information regarding the mother is omitted from the file. This leaves either no information, incomplete information, and/or unhelpful information to be shared with the father.

From a feminist lens, the maternal filing system is an example of casework practise focused away from fathers and toward mothers.

### **6.3 Relationship Issues**

In this section, I am going to discuss two types of relationships. The first is described by Archie and is a strength-based reflection of what constitutes a helpful relationship between fathers and the child welfare system. The second is articulated by Bobby. The relationship described by him indicates a strained relationship between fathers and the child welfare system (O'Donnell et al., 2005).

Research has found that when the relationship is mutually respectful, professional, and empathic, families are clearer about the reasons the system is involved with their family and are more likely to view it as a helping relationship and explore positive change (de Boer & Coady, 2007). This is consistent with Archie who talked of a defining moment for him:

*"That was a big shift. A judge trusting me and telling me I'm taking a chance on you. You be a father and that changed my life."* (Archie)

A possible explanation may be that when the child welfare system acknowledges a father's strengths and capabilities, this may allow relationships to develop and motivate the parent toward positive change. Applying a strength-based model, a contributing factor to a successful relationship is also the father's own personal ability and willingness to reflect and make changes. Archie revealed below in his statement that he likely would have not agreed to an interview in the past.

*"If you would have asked me this 10 years ago, I would have had a bit of a different opinion. I would not have even talked to you. The child system, I always thought was out to get me or attack me or not support me. Growing up and over the years I realize that it was the way they are structured."* (Archie)

Archie showed insight in this statement, understanding his role within the relationship, as well as his ability to look at it differently with age, maturity, and life experience. He appreciated the relationship was more reflective of how the system is structured as opposed to a personal reflection on a particular social worker. This reflection likely points my research toward recommendations specific to the structure of the system.

Logically, it would be difficult to engage in a relationship if you are feeling attacked, as was evident in many of the fathers' experiences. Bobby articulated the second type of relationship well in the following statement:

*"They think right away, if they find out its the dad I guess for the most part maybe they think it's a deadbeat dad, and now they've got some that aren't, and they don't know how to deal with it." (Bobby)*

A possible explanation of poor relationships between fathers and the system might be the lack of education and training accessible to caseworkers on the role fathers play in parenting their children. According to Walmsley et al.'s (2009) study, there is little education within the curriculum of the Bachelor of Social Work degree addressing the role fathers play in the parenting of their children. I would argue this lack of education has an impact on the exposure, comfort, and skills of caseworkers engaging fathers. If social work students do not read specific references to fathers in their education, this lack of education may be a contributing factor to a culture supporting a lack of fathers.

#### ***6.4 Systemic Issues***

All the fathers had experiences, frustrations, and unanswered questions surrounding decisions made about their children by the system in the absence of fulsome information. They felt there were information gaps surrounding who they are as fathers, their role in their child's lives, and/or how they need to be supported as parents. Most of the fathers were never asked for this information nor had opportunities to provide it to their caseworker(s). They found decisions were made about their children in the absence of this information, decisions which have significant impacts on their child and their family, as articulated by Louis:

*"Where's the help for the people who are victims. In this situation, our entire family was a victim and there was no help, no support." (Louis)*

One explanation for the gap in information provided when decisions are made could be that it stems from a broad systemic issue within the Canadian child welfare system. It could be a system operating within a framework which excludes fathers. Research by Featherstone (2001) identified a lack of communication and relationships with fathers, a crisis driven mandatory system, and no father input into research which guides policy, as contributing to such a framework.

The lack of fathers within the Canadian child welfare system has resulted instead, in a primary focus on mothers (Davies & Krane, 1997). With the absence of fathers' participation, accountability, and research within the child welfare field, an involuntary system holds mothers primarily responsibility for the care of their children. This imbalance of parental responsibility may be creating a culture of mother blaming. Mother blaming is evident even when there is evidence of domestic violence, as the mother is expected to be a "protective parent" (Brown et al., 2009, p. 27). From a feminist perspective, this statement within a context of domestic violence would be considered mother blaming, victim blaming, and discriminatory toward mothers.

As noted by Davies and Krane (1997), a suggested start to discounting mother blaming would be acknowledging that mothering is socially constructed. The concept of mothering has been formed and intertwined within the history of child welfare according to Swift (1995) and requires unpacking to fully explore the implications of a mother focused system. An increase in father participation would possibly impact the decrease of mother blaming within the system (Davies et al., 2007).

A surprise within my study was that five out of six fathers spontaneously and clearly stated their support for their child(ren)'s relationship with their mothers. Even when there was animosity between the parents and a level of concern with unmet needs of their children when cared for by their mothers, the fathers supported this parent/child relationship. Sensibly, although there appears to be a tendency to mother blame within the child welfare system, my research found fathers are not contributing to this culture.

## Conclusion

This analysis chapter explored my research findings, linking previous research and theories to investigate and explain why fathers may not be included in planning when their children come to the attention of the Canadian child welfare system. This chapter first outlined experiences fathers had with participation in planning. Next, the chapter proceeded to analyze the three identified themes found within my research—communication issues, relationship issues, and systemic issues—drawing conclusions on fathers' experiences with participation in planning and why those patterns may have come to be that way.

## **Chapter 7: Conclusion**

### **Introduction**

This chapter will consider the significance of my research findings on the lack of fathers in the Canadian child welfare system. The purpose of this research was to increase understanding of fathers' experiences with participation in planning when their children come to the attention of the child welfare system and why these patterns came to be this way.

Recommended proposals for change to policy and practice within the Canadian child welfare system are then put forward, as well as recommendations for future research. A personal reflection completes the chapter.

#### ***7.1 Significance of the Study***

According to the O'Donnell et al. (2005) study, fathers are absent in research surrounding the Canadian child welfare system. As a mandatory system, it often interjects in a family when a crisis has occurred. The system works with trauma experienced by children and parents alike and uncovers struggles within families. The system imposes on parents an expectation for change to ensure the safety of the children, while supporting parents with life adjustments. Fathers are members of those families, related by blood, marriage, or other. Legislation, policy, and practice guiding this involuntary system are formed and amended by research. A significance of this study is the involvement of fathers in this qualitative research. Including fathers in data ensures their perspectives are heard within research, as a significant contributing factor to improving service delivery within the system.

My research highlighted many consistencies with previous studies conducted on this topic. The findings on involvement in planning, however, were inconsistent. This could suggest the fathers interviewed for my study were inclusive of the small percentage of fathers participating in the system, as O'Donnell et al.'s (2005) study suggested. This study was also able to accentuate successes as told by the fathers through their stories. The significance of noting successes, including the father's ability to self-advocate and/or access community supports, is the inclusion of those successes within recommendations for future policy and practice change.

Suggested by Strega et al.'s (2008) study, mother blaming is evident within the child welfare system. An unexpected result from my data was found in the narratives when five out of six fathers spontaneously articulated support for the mother/child relationship, even within

disrupted and/or disengaged parental relationships. A possible suggestion to this finding is that fathers are not contributing to the mother blaming culture within this gender specific system.

## ***7.2 Policy and Practice Changes***

Based on the theoretical positioning of feminist theory and a strength-based model, it is important to advocate for social change within a system focused on mothers. Based on Risley-Curtiss and Heffernan's (2003) study, the child welfare system has gender biases. Mothers are required by the system to be the primarily responsible parent when their child comes to the attention of the system. My study shows fathers need to be included and have the potential to be resources to the Canadian child welfare system. Substantiated by my data and the secondary research conducted, the following changes are proposed:

- A filing system in the child's name to allow custodial parents access to information through legal and procedural avenues. Involvement with fathers needs to be documented on child welfare files.
- Education and training through the Bachelor of Social Work curriculum specific to fathering and working with fathers.
- Hiring of more male front line social workers to increase the ratio of males to females within the child welfare system.
- Policies to include participation of fathers and mothers as opposed to 'parents', requiring accountability to engage and inclusion of fathers in planning.
- Systemic changes to minimize high workloads to allow social workers time to include fathers in planning for their children.
- Increased communication and relationship building with fathers.
- Increased resources for fathers.
- The creation of a family advocate to aid parents in navigating the child welfare system. This role would be like a lawyer helping individuals navigate the legal system or a doctor helping patients with the medical system.

### **7.3 Future Research**

The following are proposals for future data collection surrounding fathers within the Canadian child welfare system:

- Longitudinal studies on the inclusion of fathers within the child welfare system.
- Exploration on the impact of discourse on the inclusion of fathers to include legislation, policy, and practise.
- In-depth studies on the role gender plays within the child welfare system and the implications for children and families.
- Exploration of how culture contributes to fathers' experiences within the system.
- As there are no legislative or policy restrictions on engaging fathers, further research on the education of social workers through Bachelor of Social Work programs.

### **7.4 Personal Reflection**

After many years of working within the child welfare system, I needed to step away professionally when I could no longer contribute to a system which appeared to have a clear gender bias. My frustrations were systemic, with demanding and stressful workloads not allowing enough time, energy, and reflection required to engage fathers. There were no resources for fathers nor fathering programs, yet expectations within a mandate to support parents. I experienced a child welfare culture, threaded with policy and practise absent of fathers and focused on mothers. These frustrations were amplified with a feminist lens of practise. Requiring mothers to be protective of their children, specifically when domestic violence was present, felt to be a systemic re-victimization of women, while ignoring fathers' rights and responsibilities for the safe care of their children.

My study confirmed some suspicions of gender bias. It also confirmed the importance of fathers in children's lives, despite, or perhaps most importantly, when a crisis occurs. It is stated that fathers are sometimes the reason families come to the attention of the child welfare system, as is often the case in domestic violence. If fathers are part of the problem, they are required to be part of the solution. I stand back in admiration of the six fathers who chose to share their stories to be included in this research. Research including fathers is an important part of a full, necessary assessment to improve a system responsible for the protection of our most vulnerable citizens—children.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter reviewed the significance of the study, its limitations, and recommendations for proposed changes in legislation, policy, practice, and education. The chapter also recommended future research and ended with a personal reflection.

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## Appendix A

### Request for Participation in Research Project “The F word in Canadian child welfare: Fathers” A Study of British Columbia Fathers

As a graduate student in the Masters of Social Science international program with Nord University in Norway, I am researching fathers whose children have come in contact with the child welfare system. I'm interested in providing an opportunity for fathers to have a voice in research by sharing their experiences, specifically their role in planning for the safe care of their children.

Your program has been chosen as a community service who supports fathers. I am hoping to have an opportunity to invite those interested fathers to be part of this research.

The purpose of this research is:

- to include fathers (an international literature review revealed a consistent theme: lack of fathers involved in research on this topic)
- contribute toward an understanding of the experiences fathers have when their children come in contact with the child welfare system

Participating in the research involves a 1-1 audiotaped interview which is voluntary, anonymity of the participants secured in the publication, and confidentiality of shared information, protected.

Overall findings from this research may shed light on the level and type of involvement fathers have with the child welfare system and provide a springboard for future research. The project end date is December 2017.

If you would like verification of my student status, please feel free to contact my thesis supervisor, Trude Gjernes at [trude.k.gjernes@nord.no](mailto:trude.k.gjernes@nord.no)

With appreciation for your time,

Denise Sands  
250-937-1163  
[dasands@shaw.ca](mailto:dasands@shaw.ca)

## Appendix B

### Informed Consent

Thank you for participating in a research study on fathers' experiences within the child welfare system. Despite emerging research supporting the important role of fathers' rights, responsibilities, and impact on children's lives, the child welfare system continues to work primarily with mothers in planning for the safe care of their children. The purpose of this research is to include fathers in research and contribute toward an understanding of the experiences fathers have when their children come in contact with the child welfare system.

Research on this topic is being conducted by Nord University in Norway, the Department of Social Science with the primary researcher Denise Sands. Questions about this research can be directed to Denise Sands at 250-937-1163 or [dasands@shaw.ca](mailto:dasands@shaw.ca).

You have been selected for this research based on your status as a parent, that your child(ren) have come in contact with the child welfare system, and you live within a defined geographical area of Courtney/Parksville/Nanaimo/Ladysmith/Duncan, British Columbia.

The research is an informal interview with myself and can take at a minimum 30 minutes or as long as needed to tell your important story. Your identification and your responses to these questions will be kept confidential. No one outside of the research team will have access to your information.

Completely voluntary, you are not required to give any information you are not comfortable with revealing, and at any point if you wish to stop the interview, the interview will be terminated. You may withdraw from the project at any point as long as it is in progress, without reason. Upon completion of the project, your information will be erased.

Should you have any emerging feelings/thoughts which you wish to discuss further with a local professional as a result of this interview, a recommendation for local support services will be offered.

This project has been reported to the Data Protection Official for Research at NSD - Norwegian Centre for Research Data.

Your signature below states you have read and understood what is being required from you and you are giving your consent to participate.

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Participant's Name

---

Participant's Signature

---

Date

---

Interviewer's Name

---

Interviewer's Signature

---

Date

## Appendix C

### Interview Guide

At the time you were involved with the child welfare system, please share:

- your age, age of your child(ren)
- marital status
- legal custody of your child(ren) and
- whether you lived with your children

#### Audio Recorded

1. How did you become aware your child(ren) had come in contact with the child welfare system?
2. What is your understanding of the reasons why your child(ren) came in contact with the child welfare system?
3. Had you experienced the child welfare system in the past?
4. Please describe your experiences with child welfare (social worker(s)/system)
  - a. what did you experience (examples)
  - b. how did you feel
5. Were you invited to plan for your child(ren), did you participate, in what way, what worked?
6. How could your experiences have been easier/better?

This research hopes to answer the following questions:

- What are fathers' experiences with participation in planning when their children come to the attention of the child welfare system?
  - Why did these patterns come to be this way?
7. Given these two research questions, is there anything more you want to share that you haven't already?