

*Edited by Jessica Ball and Kerry Daly*

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**Father Involvement in Canada**  
Diversity, Renewal, and  
Transformation



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Impetus for this book grew out of an eight-year research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and its Community-University Research Alliances program. This complex, nationally networked investigation was deftly managed by Linda Hawkins, director of the Institute for Community Engaged Scholarship at the University of Guelph. Her critical commentaries and enthusiasm fuelled our efforts to bring together authors who could convey the complexity and heterogeneity of fathers' roles in caring for children. Funding for the networking process that led to this volume was also provided by the Public Health Agency of Canada. The agency's interest in father involvement was stimulated and informed by the tireless work of Fernand Lozier, who dedicated much of his career to animating the father involvement movement in Canada. He was a pioneer in calling for more focused research and public advocacy to illuminate, stimulate, and recognize the varied roles that fathers play in the lives of their children, young and old.



# Foreword

By Joseph H. Pleck

From the perspective of someone who began working on fathering research in the 1970s, the way that the landscape of fatherhood, both scholarly and cultural, has changed over the last four decades is remarkable. When I started out, “fatherhood research” meant the investigation of the consequences of father absence. Through the early 1970s, it seemed that in psychological theory, fathers were towering figures in child development – but towering only by their absence. That changed, of course, and new research subsequently emerged that focused instead on what fathers do when they are present. It is now over 35 years since the onset of this contemporary study of fatherhood, an onset marked by the publication in 1974 of the first edition of Michael Lamb’s *Role of the Father in Child Development*. And over 25 years have passed since the explicit formulation of the foundational construct of “father involvement” (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985; Pleck, Lamb, & Levine, 1985). From one perspective, the study of fatherhood and father involvement in the modern sense has been going on for a long time, but from another vantage point, it is historically quite recent.

Today, the father involvement concept is taken for granted and is deeply embedded in current thinking. At the same time, it is contested. Like most constructs in the social sciences, the concept has come in for its share of criticism. Doesn’t the construct of father involvement imply a “maternal template”? A deficit perspective on fathers? A feminist-oriented assumption that there should be gender equity in parenting? Doesn’t it ignore fathers’ thoughts and feelings, and fail to recognize, and even devalue, fathers’ economic support for their children? Isn’t the concept based on the experience of only white middle-class fathers, thereby defining fathering in a way that makes fathers belonging to minorities and lower socio-economic classes appear deficient? And isn’t the notion that father involvement is increasing only “media hype”? The lively debates ensuing from these important challenges have pressed scholars to refine their thinking and their research methods. Even more important, they have led researchers and practitioners



to broaden the scope of what they include in “fathering” and who they study as “fathers” (Pleck, 2010b).

Besides the evolution of academic research and theory, another crucial part of the changing landscape of fatherhood over recent decades is the shift in public perceptions about fathers and in fathers’ views of themselves. I can offer some data from a Pew Research Center (2007) national survey in the United States. About three fifths of adult men and women surveyed said that they think it is harder to be a father now than it was 20 or 30 years ago. And how well does the US public think today’s fathers are doing in the face of this increased “paternal challenge”? Of women surveyed, 56% said today’s dads are doing as good a job or a better job raising their kids compared with fathers a generation ago. Intriguingly, married working mothers’ assessments of fathers’ performance were especially positive: 72% of those working at least part-time and raising young children said dads today are doing as good a job or better.

But here’s the rub: among US men, there appears to be a crisis of paternal self-confidence. Only 41% of men in the Pew survey thought contemporary fathers are doing better or even as well as fathers in the past. The majority of men (55%) said today’s dads are actually doing a worse job. The need for books like *Father Involvement in Canada: Diversity, Renewal, and Transformation* lies precisely in the intersection of today’s increased paternal challenges and the rising crisis in paternal self-confidence.

In their introductory and concluding essays, Jessica Ball and Kerry Daly clearly articulate the multiple themes underlying the book, so I will not try to recapitulate them. Perhaps especially important are the themes of diversity in fathering and the embeddedness of fathering in masculinity and gender. *Father Involvement in Canada* is fundamentally grounded in the recognition of diversity and the valorization of inclusiveness. As applied to fatherhood, the principles of diversity and inclusiveness are far-reaching, addressing multiple domains: fathers’ backgrounds and life histories, the social and institutional contexts in which they father, and the ways in which they enact fathering. These multiple backgrounds, contexts, and modes of fathering may vary profoundly. As the ethic of diversity and inclusiveness seems to be under attack in so many cultures today (especially my own, that of the United States), this book’s steadfast affirmation of these values is especially important.

A particularly notable way in which *Father Involvement in Canada* reflects and fosters new thinking in fatherhood research and practice is the attention its chapters give to the multiple ways in which fathering is intertwined with masculinity and gender. Although to say that fathering is gendered may seem a commonplace, the book brings new insight into gender’s crucial role and explores a central dialectic. On the one hand, institutions, social

services, and policies too often reflect the stereotypical assumption that as parents, fathers are “second class.” The long-standing cultural equations of “woman = mother” and “mother = parent” leave little place for men in the lives of their children. On the other hand, the belief that fathers are essential, making a unique contribution to children’s development, is increasingly prevalent. (An Internet search on “fathers” and “essential” jointly yielded 5.4 million web pages in May 2009; the same search in September 2010 produced 17.9 million web pages.) What is believed to make fathers’ contributions so essential is that it is uniquely male.

Rigorous evidence that good fathering makes an independent, causal contribution to child development has indeed begun to accumulate. This evidence derives from investigations addressing the methodological weaknesses plaguing so much past research, weaknesses such as failure to control for confounding variables – in particular, mothering (since good fathering and good mothering are correlated), same-informant bias in assessments of fathering and child outcomes, and the need to take into account children’s reciprocal influence on fathering (Pleck, 2010b). This research confirmation of independent paternal effects provides a rationale for fathering practice. At the same time, however, evidence is lacking that fathers’ contributions occur *specifically because* their parenting is uniquely masculine (Pleck, 2010a). This latter conclusion is challenging since for so many fathers, and for so many practitioners serving them, the idea of an essential, unique paternal contribution is inspirational and motivating. In a cultural context in which fathers’ roles are less socially valued than those of mothers, this belief may seem to be the only one available that fathers can use to construct a narrative explaining why they want to and should be involved, and that justifies to fatherhood practitioners why they work so hard to help.

Whatever the research findings, it is unlikely that the words “essential” and “unique” will disappear in public discourse about fathers. Fathers and fatherhood practitioners need not get stuck on these words, however. Nearly all who say that fathers are “essential” do not mean this in a literal sense, for that would mean that it is impossible for any child raised without a father, or without a good father, to develop successfully. Most of those using the rhetoric of paternal essentiality know of too many disconfirming examples; what they mean by “essential” is something more like “really important.” And there is indeed a sense in which, for many children, their father’s contribution is unique. Children benefit by having more than one adult who raises and is deeply committed to them. For most children, their father is unique in being the only adult besides their mother who is potentially available and potentially motivated to be a parent to them in this way. (And for some children, their father has a unique availability to be the child’s *only* parent.) Whether or not fathering has a unique effect on children in general,

for a particular child, her or his individual father is highly likely to be “one of a kind” in his availability and motivation to be a co-parent or sole parent.

Fathers need support to fulfill the unique potential they have to parent their children. *Father Involvement in Canada* – encompassing the diversity in fathers’ backgrounds, in their current contexts, and in how they father – points the way to how scholars can better understand the varying ways in which fathers realize this potential, and how practitioners can better help them to do so.

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**Part 1**  
Trends and Perspectives:  
An Overview of Father Involvement



# 1

## Father Involvement in Canada: A Transformative Approach

*Jessica Ball and Kerry Daly*

There is an extraordinary range of possibilities for being a father in Canada today: biological paternity in the context of heterosexual marriage, adoption of a child with one's same-sex partner, sperm donation, step-parenting, lone parenting, co-parenting with an ex-partner, and myriad other ways. A father's contribution to his child may be primarily financial. He may have little or no contact with some or all of his children, whether by choice or by circumstance. Or he may be directly involved in every aspect of his child's care.

This multitude of options parallels significant and concurrent challenges to dominant cultural constructions of masculinity in Canada. Increasingly, embodiments of masculinity are visibly diverse. Popular media tend to catastrophize this multiplicity. Census findings that show a rising prevalence of lone-parent households tend to be seen as indicative of a crisis in family life. The decline of lasting heterosexual marriage and the rise in unfamiliar patterns of father involvement are often read as signs that traditional masculinity and the patriarchal heritage are under attack. Theories of fatherhood are proving to be less useful than they were when they had to account for findings of research that focused mainly on quantitative measurements of father involvement in European-heritage, nuclear families. Practitioners in health and social services find themselves on uncertain ground as their understandings, skills, and program models seem inadequate to reach out to fathers in ways that fathers respond to and find helpful.

If Canadian society is to keep step with and support men on their various paths to becoming fathers and in their diverse family constellations and father-child relationships, research is sorely needed that can inform guiding concepts, professional education curricula, policy decisions, and community program development. This book is a compilation of discussions about twenty-first century research by Canadian scholars who are part of an emerging movement to understand and support father involvement in its many forms. Canadian investigators and practitioners who are advancing understandings and outreach regarding fathers cut across many disciplines,

including child and youth care, family studies, psychology, sociology, social work, public policy, and law. Thus, a number of theoretical lenses are being used to examine fathers' involvement, and a number of professions and service sectors are exploring how practices need to be revised or refined to support fathers' involvement.

Against a background of, until recently, a paucity of research and theory on Canadian fathers' involvement, this book provides a status update on the nascent and growing movement in Canada to understand and support fathers' involvement with their children; it offers a multi-layered reading of the personal and social systems that are shaping father involvement within and across diverse populations in Canadian society. Each of the contributing authors approaches fathers' experiences from a slightly different angle. By bringing these approaches together, the book creates a map of the interlocking individual, familial, institutional, socio-cultural, political, and material systems in which fathers are embedded. In this way, it provides a baseline for tracking the experiences of populations of fathers that vary by ethnicity, age, marital status, and context. It explores fathers' relative vulnerability as a result of poverty, access to paternity leave, and the degree of support they receive from the health sector, child welfare, other institutions, and communities. These critical dimensions of the ecological embeddedness of father involvement tend to be disregarded in normative, universalistic concepts of fatherhood. The book's contributors also identify some of the gaps that remain in our understandings, policies, and practice competencies, and offer directions for future research and policy work to reduce barriers and improve community-based supports for fathers.

As research on father involvement in Canada has grown over the past decades from a scattering of disparate studies to a developing body of knowledge, several unifying themes can be discerned. These include ecological embeddedness; diversity and social inclusion; visibility, outreach, and engagement; and reconceptualization of masculinity in the context of involved fatherhood. The emerging salience of these four themes, combined with increasingly vocal calls for more nuanced public understanding and more concerted program efforts to recognize and encourage positive father involvement, provided the impetus for this book. Following an overview of changing patterns of father involvement in Canada, this chapter takes up these key themes, which are also developed by the authors that follow.

### **The Shifting Terrain of Fatherhood in Canada**

In 2006, Statistics Canada (2006a) counted 8.1 million fathers in Canada. Among these, just under half (3.8 million) were biological, adoptive, or step-parent fathers living with children under 18 years of age.<sup>1</sup> Married-couple families accounted for 68% of all families in Canada (down from 80% two decades ago). The proportion of families headed by common-law

couples (15.5%) and lone-parent families (15.9%) increased from the 2001 census (Statistics Canada, 2001, 2006a). According to Statistics Canada (2006a), of the 1.4 million lone-parent families with at least one child under age 16 at home, 20% involved single fathers. Based on these data, between 2001 and 2006, the growth of lone-male-headed families (14.6%) was more than twice the rate of growth (6.3%) of lone-female-headed families.

Time and money are basic resources for family life. Large inequalities of wealth and income between the richest and poorest 20% of Canadian families are enduring and prominent features of the Canadian social landscape. Particularly vulnerable are Aboriginal families, newcomers, and families that rely on a single earner. In addition, the experience of a mild to severe disability is a common one for Canadians, who have a disability rate of 14.3%, including 3.7% of children under 15 years old (Statistics Canada, 2007). Disability can contribute to vulnerability and to poverty due to costs incurred in meeting exceptional needs. All these conditions call for supports and services for affected children, fathers, and mothers, which are in short supply, especially in rural areas and in the North.

The past 30 years have seen profound shifts in how families try to provide economic security for family members. Changes in family functioning and dynamics have occurred in the gender division of paid and unpaid labour, the division of household labour and distribution of care responsibilities, and decisions about who will work what hours or take parental leave upon the birth or adoption of a child. There has been a steady rise in labour market participation of women, along with a growing number of two-parent families with dual earners. In 1976, less than half (46%) of all women aged 15 and over were in the paid labour force, compared to 63% in 2009 (Statistics Canada, 2009). Compared to what is often referred to as the “traditional” family model of male breadwinner/female homemaker (Pleck, 1979), the gap between the labour force participation of men and women has narrowed from 40 percentage points in 1976 to 9 percentage points in 2009. In 2006, 73% of all women with children under 16 years old living at home were employed on a full- or part-time basis, up from 39% in 1976. While pay equity remains an elusive goal for Canadian women, 28% of women earned more than their male spouse in 2007, up from 12% in 1976 (Statistics Canada, 2009). Taken together, fathers put in an average of two more hours of paid work per week compared to mothers. However, an increasing number of fathers also work part-time, and 10% of stay-at-home parents are fathers (Statistics Canada, 2006a). The reported number of same-sex couples has surged over the past decade, growing at five times the pace of heterosexual couples between 2001 and 2006; the 2006 census counted 45,345 same-sex couples (Statistics Canada, 2006c). Reflecting the legalization of same-sex marriages in Canada in July 2005, 16.5% of these were married couples. A majority of these couples were male. A small but significant number of



same-sex married and common-law couples (9%) had children under 25 living with them; a minority of these couples were men. These and other important shifts in the composition and contexts of families are described in more detail by Ravanera and Hoffman later in this volume.

As patterns of family relationships involving children become more diversified in the early twenty-first century, stable nuclear families headed by one father and one mother are becoming ever more rare, both as a goal for adults and as a reality for children and families. More fathers are involved as their children's lone caregiver – either full-time as lone parents or part-time when they care for their children in joint-custody arrangements. Increasing numbers of fathers are involved in more than one family. Along with these changes and shifting gender expectations regarding parenting in general, there is dawning awareness that sustained, positive involvement of fathers with their children must be encouraged and supported by media, public policies, child care programs, schools, social programs, child health services, and workplaces. Popular culture in Canada tends to see diverse groups of men as enjoying certain patriarchal dividends. For example, although women are increasingly taking up traditionally male roles as co-providers for their children, caring for children continues to be publicly depicted, and frequently experienced, as more of a choice for fathers and a necessity for mothers. Images of fathers eager to shed their parenting responsibilities in favour of work, sports, or personal gratification persist in popular media, and while women are frequently depicted as calling for more father involvement in direct child care activities, some studies point to some ambivalence on the parts of mothers about how much and in what aspects of child care they want fathers to share (Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2009; Gaunt, 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan, Brown, Cannon, Mangelsdorf, & Szewczyk Sokolowski, 2008). Policies are needed to promote gender equity in opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, and commitment to care for children and to be fully engaged as parents.

Popular media in Canada is replete with negative representations of fathers as less competent than mothers when it comes to caring for children; fathers are also portrayed as more likely to be violent in the domestic sphere. The fact that some men are violent in family contexts also tends to be culturally depicted as an expression of patriarchal dividends accruing to fathers in a male-dominated, traditional society. While domestic violence is found in a small minority of (but still too many) Canadian families, in 2004 an estimated 7% of women (653,000 women) and 6% of men (546,000) over 14 years old reported some form of spousal violence in the context of a current or previous marital or common-law relationship in the previous five years (Statistics Canada, 2005). Other studies have similarly suggested a relative equivalence between Canadian men and women in their propensity

to perpetrate violence in family contexts (Dutton & Nicholls, 2005; Grandin, Lupri, & Brinkerhoff, 1998).<sup>2</sup> In the face of such portrayals, an apparent groundswell of fathers is critically resisting both dominant discourses of normative gendered parenting (Doucet, 2009) and popular images of the “deadbeat dad” and family buffoon. A stroll through grocery stores, city parks, and community recreation centres would certainly suggest that droves of Canadian fathers reject essentialized masculine parenting roles and are involved in personal care routines, coaching, guiding, teaching, driving, and generally sharing time with their youngsters, with and without adult partners. The influx of new Canadians is also shaping the social landscape, contributing a complex and varied array of ideals about family life and a father’s responsibilities, roles, needs, and goals. The persistence of negative expectations and images in popular media appears to be based, in part, on mother-centric and dominant cultural ideas of what counts as a loving, meaningful contribution to caring for and supporting the health and development of children and youth.

Among scholars, the forms and meanings of father involvement – as well as how we measure, interpret, and conceptualize father involvement – are being questioned (Day & Lamb, 2004; Palkovitz, 1997; Parke, 2004). Some investigators are beginning to deal with the practical difficulty but conceptual necessity of capturing the multi-dimensionality of father involvement measurement tools (Schoppe-Sullivan, McBride, & Ho, 2004). Investigators are also recognizing that not all fathers experience the birth or adoption of their child as a seminal moment when they don the mantle of fatherhood; rather, some fathers grow into the role gradually, and the nature, extent, meaning, and impacts of different forms of father-child interaction vary as their children change over time (Amato, 1998).

Advocates of increased father involvement in child care (e.g., Kershaw, Pulkingham, & Fuller, 2008) must grapple not only with an ideological commitment to equality of opportunities, if not expectations, for men and women to play significant roles in direct caregiving but also with evidence that mothers can act as gatekeepers who monitor and regulate the form, timing, and frequency of fathers’ involvement (Allen & Hawkins, 1999). As Doucet and Hawkins discuss in this volume, mothers’ oversight of child care is a product of a social reality in which mothers have been expected to do the majority of child care – a pattern that is almost universal, remains the norm in many cultures, and is difficult to change. Canadian family policy scholars Kershaw et al. (2008) draw on Fraser’s (1994) interpretation of this kind of care specialization falling to women as one of several indicators of an androcentric model of citizenship. Fraser offers a universal caregiver model of citizenship that recognizes increased labour force participation by women and calls for social policies to induce greater numbers of men to undertake more care of children and other dependents, and generally

to embrace an ethic of care that would reduce domestic violence as well. In Canada, fathers and community program practitioners are increasingly recognizing both the mother-centric bias of many health, education, and social programs, and the prescriptive messages fathers receive about what their involvement with their children should look like (Hodgins, 2007). At the same time, the question of what actions ought to follow this recognition, particularly at the policy level, remains open-ended. As Kershaw et al. (2008) note, social policy in Canada is so focused on labour-market involvement that it seems far from conceiving or contributing to men's roles in caregiving within the context of family life.

### **Ecological Embeddedness: Contextualizing Father Involvement**

The Canadian social-research agenda acknowledges and takes as a primary value the need to understand father involvement as diverse, embedded in multi-faceted social contexts, and multiply determined. Father involvement investigators in Canada, as elsewhere, stress the need to characterize, conceptualize, and respond to the diversity of fathers' behaviours and experiences since these are embedded within numerous kinds of couple relationships; family structures; cultural and religious communities; socio-economic circumstances; residential institutions, including hospitals, long-term care facilities, and prisons; and legislative frameworks, such as those governing paternity leave and custody decision making. Fathers' socio-political and personal histories are also diverse. They may include, for example, varied experiences of fatherhood within their families of origin, experiences in an "Indian" residential school, or, for political asylum seekers, armed conflict in their country of origin. Rather than search for a universal fatherhood experience or the "typical" Canadian father, scholars and practitioners are oriented toward understanding the diversity of fathers' experiences based on their ethnicity; their socio-economic status; their locale, whether rural, remote, or urban; the health and development of their children, whether typical or atypical; and other key sources of variability. While fathers may share many similar experiences in the process of becoming fathers, specific challenges, goals, and expectations are associated with their culture, religion, employment status, immigration history, sexual orientation, or relationship with their child's mother – to name just a few sources of variation.

### **Familial and Social Systems**

The need to develop context-sensitive understandings has been salient throughout the short history of Canadian fatherhood studies. For example, an early study of Canadian families found that the largest contributor to the quality of fathers' and mothers' nurturance of their children was whether the partners, individually or together, had sustained employment to generate

a stable family income (Maxwell, 1997). Another early study identified the bidirectionality of fathers' embeddedness within the family system, suggesting that when fathers are struggling, particularly when their relationship with their partner is unhappy, the well-being of the entire family is affected (Watson, Watson, Wetzell, Bader, & Talbot, 1995). This Canadian study and another by Bouchard and Lee (2000) found that the most frequent causes of marital conflict were low levels of fathers' participation in household chores, jealousy over mothers' preoccupation with a new baby, and difficulty adjusting to profound changes in the marital relationship. Bouchard and Lee found that the couple relationship was key to the father-child relationship: the more a man felt supported by his partner in his role as a father, the more he enjoyed fathering and the more involved he became.

Other Canadian investigators, such as Devault and her colleagues in French Canada (e.g., Devault et al., 2008), also conceive of father involvement as a multi-relational construct embedded within the broader family system. Lamb (1997, 2004), whose scholarship on fatherhood in the American context has been formative for the field, emphasizes a need to recognize the interdependent nature of fathering relationships within other relational contexts and particular cultures, religions, and economic circumstances, as well as within the context of a gender-segregated labour market and certain public policies affecting families (Lamb, 1997; Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000; Palkovitz, 2002). In Canada, an emphasis on a contextualizing approach is underpinned by Canadian social scholars' signature belief in a population health model that emphasizes multiple determinants of health and well-being, many of which are social in nature and based within the family and community. This model assumes that citizen engagement is a major contributor to promoting health and well-being (Kishchuk, 2001) and that fathers, mothers, and other family members are producers of support, growth, and learning for themselves and their children (Doherty, 2000).

Consistent with a population health model, some father involvement scholars in Canada draw on Bronfenbrenner's (1986) ecological model. This model conceptualizes the multiple systems that shape and are shaped by an individual's experiences. Thus, investigators have sought to characterize fathers' goals, strengths, challenges, and needs (what Bronfenbrenner referred to as the *ontosystem*) in relation to the co-parenting and parent-child dynamics in which fathers are engaged (*microsystem*), community-level structures (*mesosystem*), institutions, policies, and legislation (*exosystem*), and cultural values and societal prescriptions (*macrosystem*). Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's (1979) earlier notion of the *chronosystem*, some investigators are also interested in understanding how and why expectations, forms, and levels of father involvement have changed over time in Canada. The chronology concept weaves together many of the themes addressed in this book, such as fathers' roles in families before and after immigration to

Canada, the impacts of residential schools on Indigenous men's journeys to learn fatherhood, shifts in family law that have brought about more opportunities for fathers to remain in (or take up) caregiving roles with their children following separation and divorce, and the impacts of traditional and post-structural feminism on men's thinking about masculinity. The related concept of generativity, discussed in the chapter by Pratt, Lawford, and Allen in this volume, concerns the ways that experiences, stories, and recollections of fatherhood are communicated, adapted, resisted, and transformed across generations.

### **The More Things Change ...**

To date, the chronology concept has been undertheorized and not well integrated into understandings of men, masculinity, and fatherhood. Yet theories, programs, and policies would be greatly informed by a more comprehensive socio-historical and intersectional analysis of how institutional policies and structures have constructed discourses of gender roles, men, masculinity, fatherhood, and families over time. For example, every generation conceives of itself as living in a time of rapid social change, and fatherhood researchers are not immune from thinking that the social constructs of masculinity and fatherhood are currently undergoing dramatic shifts. Yet family life has changed dramatically in every era, though the nature and degree of these shifts have varied within different segments of Canadian society. Imagine, for example, the absolute shift for Indigenous families when suddenly the government called for the removal of all school-aged children to government-run institutions and the equally profound and challenging shift as the right to raise one's children was restored to Indigenous families. Often, children and youth returned to communities no longer well equipped to care for them, and many First Nations are struggling today with the impacts of this history.

Other aspects of Canadian society have changed less than we might imagine. For example, evidence of significant shifts in fathers' direct involvement in child care is equivocal. While fathers have become more involved with their children over the past two decades, on average they still spend far less time in direct care of their children compared to mothers. Within dual-earner, heterosexual couples, for example, the convergence of paid work hours between men and women raises important questions about the division of labour within families. Women in these couples are still much more likely than men to modify their patterns of work to accommodate family responsibilities (Karambayya & Reilly, 1992; Stone, 1994). Women's workforce participation is often disrupted after the birth or adoption of a child. More than four in 10 women aged 25 to 44 who are working part-time (43%) do so because of the need to care for their children or for other family reasons; in comparison, fewer than one in 10 men (7%) work

part-time to accommodate family demands (Statistics Canada, 2008). Whereas women still spend more time in unpaid household labour and caring for children, men have gradually increased their involvement in child care and, to a lesser degree, in housework. In 2006, Statistics Canada (2006b) showed that while the average time fathers spent on housework and child care had increased from 1986, fathers were still spending only about two thirds as much time as mothers in direct care for their children. Among fathers of children under five years old, the increase was slightly more, from 1.0 hour per day in 1986 to 1.6 hours per day in 2005. For mothers of children under five, it was 2.6 hours per day in 1986 and 3.4 hours per day in 2005 (Marshall, 2006).

One of the primary implications of the shift to more mother participation in the labour force and more father participation in child care is that decision making about parental responsibilities is becoming more complex, with increased role ambiguity, increased emphasis on negotiation of roles, and fluidity in the ways in which parents respond to the demands of everyday life. For example, Marshall (2009) reported that work-family balance is an important concern for dual-earner families in Canada, with 24% of men and 38% of women in families with two full-time jobs and preschool children reporting severe time stress. Another pattern that has endured is that fathers continue to spend more time each day engaged in paid work and commuting, while mothers spend, on average, less time in the paid workforce (Marshall, 2006). This pattern is sometimes seen as an aspect of the patriarchal dividends accruing to men, who are economically privileged in the labour market with better wages and opportunities for promotion than women. At the same time, this pattern means that some women have more time available to spend with their children. This gender gap, combined with the rapid increase in the number of lone-mother-headed households and accumulating evidence that a lack of positive father involvement can have negative consequences for children (see Allen, Daly, & Ball in this volume, and Flouri & Buchanan, 2003), forms the rationale for constructing father involvement as a public issue.

### **Diversity and Social Inclusion: A Canadian Approach to Father Involvement**

Canada is both the original home of over 600 distinct First Nations, Métis, and Inuit populations and a nation of immigrants, with over 200 ethnic origins represented in the 2006 census. Indigenous peoples constitute nearly 4% of Canada's population. The 2006 census showed that 19.5% of individuals living in Canada today were born in another country, and that approximately 1.1 million immigrants came to Canada between 2001 and 2006 (Statistics Canada, 2006a). (The top three countries of origin were China, India, and the Philippines.) Such a culturally diverse population results in

a wealth of approaches to fatherhood; no single image, role model, or standard characterizes “the Canadian father.” Additionally, Canadians are spread across the largest national land mass in the world, and fathers span the country, living in areas that range from remote villages, where helping children to learn skills for living on the land or sea is often an important role for fathers, to cosmopolitan centres, where facilitating and regulating children’s engagement with the risks and opportunities of urban life are some of the tasks of fatherhood.

To date, little research has explored the heterogeneity of fathers and the related diversity of forms of father involvement. Theory and research have primarily focused on the experience of middle-class men of European heritage living in urban families (Roopnarine, 2004; Tamis-LeMonda & Cabrera, 2002). Heterosexuality and Euro-Western normative ideals of fatherhood have been assumed, with little critique (Hearn, 2002). A goal of Canadian research on father involvement is to go beyond the dominant portrayals of fathers in “intact” heterosexual nuclear families and expand the focus of research to groups of fathers who remain outside the normative gaze and are often excluded from theoretical conceptualizations, policies, community outreach, and programs. These groups of fathers include Indigenous men, gay men, social fathers, immigrants and refugees, adolescents, and fathers of children with disabilities. Furthermore, little research to date recognizes the dynamic chronological dimension of fathering, whereby fathers today live in different contexts from their forebears, do not embody the same cultural predilections, and cannot automatically apply the lessons they may have learned about fatherhood from their own fathers (Daly, 1993).

While diversity has emerged as a primary focus of father involvement research in Canada, social inclusion is equally important. The concept of social inclusion became a priority for investigators and social policy and program developers in the mid-1990s as a way of encapsulating Canadian values such as multiculturalism, protection of minority rights, equity, bilingualism, and religious freedom (Richmond & Saloojee, 2005). Advocates and scholars are currently struggling to articulate theory, policy tools, and program models that encompass all fathers, especially those who have been disadvantaged historically, culturally, legally, and/or economically, and those in sexual minority groups. Crucial here is a critical assessment of community supports for fathers, with a view to ensuring that the needs of all fathers in Canada who are motivated to be positively involved with their children are addressed in policy, legislation, and health and social service programs.

### **Involving Fathers in Research and Policy Discussions**

Today, most Canadian investigators, policy analysts, and practitioners are starting with the premise that Canada’s diverse population calls for approaches that are clearly situated in culturally defined subpopulations of

fathers. Most scholars of father involvement aim to avoid reproducing or prescribing hegemonic white, middle-class, heterosexual images of ideal fatherhood and are instead emphasizing the diversity of manifestations of fathers' involvement with their children. Reflecting this orientation, many father involvement scholars in Canada are choosing qualitative research methods wherein theoretical hypotheses and concepts are being derived inductively through, for example, grounded theory development, hermeneutics, and phenomenology. The common objective is to construct conceptual understandings and guidelines for policy and practice that resonate with diverse populations of fathers, mothers, children, and practitioners in the widely varying circumstances in which Canadian families live.

During this exploratory phase, Canadian researchers are tending to choose methodologies that involve fathers and families themselves through community-engaged research. Given the grassroots origins of the growing father involvement movement in Canada (Kishchuk, 2001), and in the absence of a robust and differentiated knowledge base about diverse conditions and experiences of father involvement, participatory action research has been found to be particularly well suited because of its theoretical flexibility and commitment to community building (Doherty, 2000). Underlying this approach is the conviction that fathers are producers of learning for and about themselves and of support, growth, and social changes within their families and communities. As a relational praxis of knowledge co-generation and a springboard for social action, participatory action research is a promising approach to engaging fathers in processes of personal and social transformation (Definney & Ball, in press).

Research questions are concerned with how to use policy tools and legislation to reduce barriers to positive father involvement and how to strengthen the capacity of community-based programs to reach out effectively to support men in becoming positively involved as fathers and in sustaining connections with their children over time and across changing circumstances. For example, in this volume, Strega and her colleagues present research findings pointing to the need to increase child welfare workers' awareness of fathers' rights to be included in child welfare decision making and to increase their readiness to assess fathers' potential to be resources for children who are subjects of child protection investigations. Also in this volume, McKay, Marshall, and Doucet examine the impacts of Canada's move to a father focus in parental leave policy on patterns of fathers' leave-taking and the duration of fathers' leave. And Beaton, Nicholas, McNeill, and Wenger discuss the potential of a family-centred model (McDaniel, Hepworth, & Doherty, 1992) and the Citizen Health Care Model (Mendenhall & Doherty, 2006) to support fathers of children with chronic health conditions, underscoring the need for policy reforms that can enable fathers to sustain involvement in caring for their ill children.



### **Understanding Similarities and Differences across Populations of Fathers**

In 2003, a team of Canadian investigators and community partners joined together for the first nationally networked study of father involvement in Canada, with an explicit focus on diversity and social inclusion. Led by Daly and described by Daly, Ashbourne, and Brown (2009), the study investigated seven populations of fathers who had previously been under-represented in theory, research, policy decisions, and father involvement promotion materials and programs: immigrant and refugee fathers; new fathers; young fathers; separated and divorced fathers; fathers of children with special needs; gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual fathers; and Indigenous fathers. The findings indicate that fathers share some similar experiences when their child is at a particular stage in his or her development (e.g., infancy, school-aged, adolescence, and grown children) and when their relationship to their child's mother is in a similar state or stage (e.g., the transition to fatherhood, co-parenting in a co-residential union, co-parenting following union dissolution, lone parenting). These findings are discussed by co-investigators in this inaugural Canadian study (Ball, 2009; Daly et al., 2009; Devault, Dubeau, & Forget, 2009; Este & Tachble, 2009). However, the findings also underscore a need to conceptualize and respond programmatically to the unique needs, strengths, goals, and circumstances of fathers in specific subpopulations. Acknowledging the diversity of fathers is a first step toward a socially inclusive vision for father involvement initiatives that include the insights and perspectives of individuals, organizations, and communities outside of the cultural and structural mainstream (Long, 2007).

### **Visibility, Outreach, and Engagement: Father-Supportive Policies and Practices**

While the characteristics of fathers and families in Canada are changing, the terrain of father involvement research and program outreach is also shifting to make fathers' experiences, needs, and goals more salient. Growing momentum among investigators, the legal community, and social service practitioners aims to reduce fathers' relative invisibility in family theory, family law, parent support initiatives, and programs for children, youth, and families. Efforts are being made to strengthen fathers' engagement, sense of empowerment, and resources so as to support them in making themselves and their contributions to caring for children more visible. The agenda includes an examination of men's reluctance to seek help and support. Some programs have emphasized the development of father-friendly resources. However, investigators and program developers have made little progress in understanding or breaking through men's apparent resistance to seeking

help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Fagan & Palm, 2004; Statistics Canada, 2001) and their apparent tendency toward individualism compared to women's more collectivist or communal tendencies (Kaufman, 1993).

Pointing to shifting gender practices in parenting culture in Canada, Daly et al. (2009) emphasize the need to base programs of support for fathers on a recognition that the kinds of information and support men need and the kinds of programs to which they will respond are not likely to be the same as those for mothers. These investigators note that most fathering programs in Canada that are modelled after mothering programs usually have not been well attended. Furthermore, while many researchers focus on how fathers' involvement affects children, the investigators suggest that a more productive approach to understanding and reaching out to fathers might be turning the tables to look at how involvement with their children affects fathers. Based on a secondary analysis of data obtained from diverse populations of fathers in a national study, Daly et al. found that fathers of young children often talk about the importance of children for their own sense of growing maturity, responsibility, and engagement, and for learning about their emotions and how to deal with them in the contexts of their parenting activities. Fathers were also found to express regrets about a lack of time for their leisure and exercise. The findings of this study suggest that programs for fathers might be framed as ways for men to learn about their emotions and responses to parenting and to share their experiences with other fathers. Drawing on their own and others' research pointing to the positive effects of father involvement on fathers' mental health and self-concept, Daly et al. recommend that advocacy for Canadian government investment in fathering programs could effectively emphasize the salutary effects of positive father involvement on *fathers'* health, as much as on outcomes for children.

Developing policy and program supports for father involvement policy is the one means by which Canadian social values, norms, assumptions, laws, and institutional practices are propagated. Fathers are often overlooked as a specific population in demographic analysis, policy decision making, and child and family service programs. Fathers are nevertheless affected – directly or indirectly – by policies that govern, for example, their opportunities to engage with their newborn child, their access to information about their child, and the conditions of their engagement if their child is taken into protective custody or if their relationship with their child's mother dissolves. Exploratory studies, descriptive surveys, and policy analyses are beginning to examine how key contextual factors – such as family law, discussed by Whitehead and Bala in this volume, and provisions for parental leave, discussed by McKay, Marshall, and Doucet in this volume – affect fathers' involvement with their children from before birth and over time.

In 2006, a group of investigators undertook an inventory of policies in Canada that may shape fathers' rights, responsibilities, and opportunities for involvement with their children (Lero, Ashbourne, & Whitehead, 2006). The objectives were to explore how diverse populations of fathers in various social circumstances are affected by these policies and to stimulate public debate and scholarly analysis of how policies and practices might improve supports for Canadian fathers' involvement with their children. Recognizing the diversity of fathers in Canada with respect to economic, social, and familial circumstances, the policy analysts also examined how policies differentially affect particular subgroups of fathers. These authors concluded that fathers are all but invisible in government policies and programs in Canada, which tend to be oriented toward the well-being of mothers and children. The researchers found that policies and programs that do include fathers frequently make normative assumptions about the validity of cultural stereotypes of parenting, family life, sexuality, and children's needs that can hinder certain groups or populations of fathers from receiving the support they need to be positively involved in the lives of children (Lero et al., 2006).

Striking a similar chord, a survey of programs in Canada found that diverse populations of fathers remain in the outfield in terms of the reach of parent support and education programs (Devault, Gaudet, Bolté, & St-Denis, 2005). A study of parent education program curricula in British Columbia also found almost no specific mention of fathers or attribution of fathers' specific contributions to child care (Hodgins, 2007). When fathers are identified as co-caregivers with mothers, Hodgins found, they are often cast as helpers rather than primary caregivers.

### **Getting Beyond Mother-Centred Approaches to Fathers**

The mother-centred lens through which families have been viewed throughout Euro-Western history has provided only a peripheral view of fathers (Broughton & Rogers, 2007; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Pleck, 2004). Until recently, scant research has shed little light on how men in Canada approach fatherhood, on their experiences of becoming fathers, or on how they and their children are affected by the father-child relationship.

Critical resistance to mother-centrism in discourses, policies, and practices of parenting and father involvement dominates the work under way in Canada on fatherhood. The exclusive focus on maternal experience in the prenatal, antenatal, and postnatal periods, and on maternal contributions to infant and child development through mother-child health programs continually communicates to men that their role as father is negligible. The assumption that men need to learn the attitudes, skills, and forms of responsiveness thought to typify "the good mother" frames men's readiness for parenting – and their masculinity itself – as deficient with respect to fathers'

positive contributions to their children's well-being. Among investigators in Canada who have taken up this issue, Bouchard and Lee (2000) and Doucet (2006) have addressed maternal influence on the father role (sometimes construed as maternal gatekeeping) and elucidated the tensions for fathers' involvement created by the interplay between hegemonic and subordinate masculinities. Expanding this critique to a deconstruction and unlearning of "the good mother" script may also be an important step toward getting beyond the constraining binary of mothering and fathering, and realizing new possibilities for positive parental involvement with children.

### **Reconceptualizing Masculinity: Gendered Constructions of Caring for Children**

Expressions, meanings, and expectations associated with father involvement in Canada have shifted significantly away from sharply differentiated gender roles in which fathers are cast as breadwinners, protectors, and disciplinarians, and toward a less gender-specific set of expectations and encouragement of more direct involvement of fathers in practical caregiving and emotionally nurturing activities. Demographic trends – particularly rising rates of divorce and lone parenting and increased participation of mothers in the workforce – are transforming fathers' and mothers' understandings of fatherhood and placing new demands on fathers to become more involved in hands-on care of their children.

Within Canada's changing social contexts, many men are struggling to become involved fathers. Lacking identifiable and meaningful father role models (Daly, 1993), they must look for guidance to an array of sources, including past experiences of being fathered, family role models (including mothers and other women), media images, visions of family life co-created with their partners, and their own dreams, hesitations, and ability to respond to what their children bring into the father-child relationship. Doucet (2006) argues that a changing social discourse of involved fatherhood in Canada has not been mirrored by shifts in policy, and gender-differentiated roles therefore tend to be sustained even when parents aim for greater gender equity and non-traditional parenting styles.

### **Included in What?**

An emphasis on social inclusion in Canadian father involvement research aims to reveal disparities between public and private experiences of fathering. However, when envisioning the broad ideal of social inclusion, we need to ask: "Included in what?" When relating this crucial question to father involvement, the concern is whether emerging concepts and programmatic approaches to encouraging father involvement reproduce prescriptive and

outmoded images of fathers based on normative Euro-Western, heterosexual, gendered discourses of masculinity and parenting. Referring to US policy contexts, Coltrane (2007) warns that initiatives promoting father involvement may promulgate a particular narrow model of the family. A substantial amount of mass media in the US focuses attention on fatherhood and delivers a relatively homogeneous cultural message about what fatherhood means and how it is enacted, despite increasing evidence of the diversity of American fathers. Lupton and Barclay (1997) caution that most parenting interventions draw from a body of research that “provides a highly normative perspective on fatherhood by advocating appropriate behaviours in men and identifying those who fail to fit the ideal of the involved father” (51). Images of the good father who looks the part of a representative of the dominant culture, who is a steady wage earner, and who cheerfully takes his cues from his child’s mother as to when, where, and how to be involved with his child prevail.

The experience of a First Nation man who participated in Ball’s study of Aboriginal fathers described in Chapter 6 underscores this point. He said: “I hide my tattoos and take my biker clothes down a notch when I’m picking my son up from daycare and know I’ll be seen on the street with him, or else people look at me as if they suspect I kidnapped someone else’s kid.” This self-disclosure, variously echoed in several chapters in this volume, conveys how much fatherhood – or at least “ordinary” heterosexual, dominant-culture fatherhood – is experienced by some men as a heavily prescribed performance. While Canadian society is opening to the fact that no universally valid way of “doing fatherhood” exists, this expansion of possibilities for how to father brings with it ambivalence and nostalgia for a seemingly simpler time when the concept of fatherhood admitted a narrower range of possibilities. Recognition of diversity and the right to social inclusion by a wide variety of fathers offers new opportunities for Canadian children and families, but it also raises new questions, controversies, and dilemmas such as those discussed by Doucet and Hawkins in this volume. For example, how does father involvement in care activities expand our traditional thinking about feminized care activities? What practices of care do fathers participate in? To what extent are fathers engaged in critically resisting normative gendered discourses of parenthood and hegemonic masculinity?

### **Gender Binaries and the (De)construction of the Essential Father**

A question of acute importance to the father involvement field is raised by Hodgins (2011). In response to an assertion by Hearn (2002), she observes that “the importance of fathers’ involvement is often couched in terms of fathers’ essential and uniquely male role in parenting” (109). Citing several policy examples that rely on the construction of fathers as essential, Hodgins asks: “What form of masculinity is envisioned in this essential, uniquely

male parent? Are fathers who are gay, bisexual or transgendered, or those who do not like sports or rough and tumble play, part of this vision?" (109)

As Hodgins notes, deconstructing the essential father is not necessarily welcomed by the father involvement field. Nevertheless, while fathers unquestionably can be important contributors to child development, a dearth of evidence exists that they are essential to children's optimal growth and development (Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Arguably, mothers are not "essential" either; rather, it is the presence of caring adults in a child's life and the attributes of the primary caregiver(s), rather than their gender, that are critical to child outcomes. The instability of the constructed "ordinary father" and the realization that children can thrive in a variety of family constellations have the potential to disrupt many social policies and institutions in Canada.

Drawing on recommendations made by Richmond and Saloojee (2005) to develop a made-in-Canada approach to social inclusion that is policy relevant, Long (2007) suggests that a fundamentally new way to think about men in Canadian society is needed. This new way begins with listening to fathers' stories in research that reaches across cultures and involves "insiders" as well as "outsiders" of population groups in sharing a basic respect for the integrity, autonomy, and uniqueness of fathers and diverse communities. Research by Doucet (2006) involving 118 Canadian fathers in primary caregiving roles with their children illustrates this approach. According to Doucet, these fathers' accounts "are filled with visible and inchoate contradictions, which tell how fathers are both determined to distance themselves from the feminine but are also, in practice, radically revisioning masculine care and ultimately our understanding of masculinities" (237). These reconceptualizations of masculinity draw attention to a need for critical masculinity studies, for as Hodgins (2011) points out, "while multiple forms of masculinity exist, they are not all equal in their persuasion or dominance" (110). For example, despite Canadians' awareness of and relative sensitivity to diverse embodiments of masculinity and fatherhood, policy and program initiatives in Canada still tend to ignore or discount the diverse needs and circumstances of disadvantaged fathers, especially Indigenous, immigrant and refugee, and gay, bisexual, and trans-masculine fathers.

### **Challenging Heteronormative Thinking**

Some gay fathers and fathers who sometimes refer to themselves as "queer" vividly illustrate both the expanding possibilities for enacting masculinity in Canada and the power differentials that exist among varying forms of masculinity. The twenty-first century has brought unprecedented legal and social recognition to men living in same-sex family structures as common-law or married partners. In addition to the right to be legally married, most

provinces have opened doors for men to adopt children. In Toronto, parent education courses called “Daddies and Papas 2B” and “Trans Fathers 2B” are consistently oversubscribed (Veldhoven & Vernon, 2009; Ware, 2009). At the same time, Prince Edward Island continues to limit adoption to heterosexual parents. In some school districts, such as Surrey, British Columbia, educators must fight for the right to have non-traditional family structures represented in school libraries (Smith, 2004). And Epstein (2009) and the other authors of *Who’s Your Daddy* – a landmark collection of writings by Canadian gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered, and queer (GLBTQ) parents and their grown children – describe how GLBTQ parents and their children feel and respond to social and, in some cases, legal pressure to present a sanitized and essentially heteronormative portrait of their family life.

What insights can be gleaned from the experiences of queer fathers with respect to the ways in which they approach masculinity in the context of raising children? What can we learn from their children’s experiences and developmental outcomes? While little research has focused on these questions, Stacey and Biblarz (2001; Biblarz & Stacey, 2010) report research findings suggesting that compared to children of heterosexual parents, children of lesbian and gay parents show higher self-esteem, better mental health, better communication with parents, more empathy toward social diversity, and less traditional gender stereotyping. Their research is provocative and can stimulate exploration of new frontiers in research, theory, policy, and family law. Similarly, *Who’s Your Daddy?* provokes scholars and practitioners to push beyond the binaries and boundaries of heteronormative thinking about parenting. There is a need to focus research on gay and transgendered fathers and their children, given that most research about non-heterosexual parents has focused on lesbian mothers. Such research would enable an examination of the intersection and influence of gender identity and sexual identity on parenting and on children’s own constructions of gender roles with respect to caring for children.

### **Father-Supporting Initiatives**

Despite the growing momentum in father involvement research and advocacy, and some evidence of increasing father involvement, fathers remain a vastly untapped resource for promoting children’s optimal health and development. Fathers continue to be portrayed in Canadian media in ways that ignore or denigrate them or that relegate them to the role of provider. Community services such as child health and early development programs tend to overlook them, focusing only on mothers. Fathers have little support for gaining the skills they need to be positively and effectively involved as their children grow and develop. Relatively little dedicated funding and few formal policies specifically address outreach and support for father involvement. In Canada, no controlled research studies have been conducted to

assess the impacts of community-level or individually focused interventions designed to promote positive father involvement. As Pruett, Cowan, Cowan, and Pruett (2009) comment with reference to US research, in contrast with the research literature on father involvement, little investment has been made in outcome research on father involvement programs. Father-focused practice in community programs is just beginning to gain momentum; some provincial governments have allocated small amounts of funding for training and employment of father outreach and support workers in community-based family resource centres, child development centres, and community health promotion programs. Canadian practitioners working on family services and early childhood programs are currently seeking leadership and direction in discerning effective practices and informing policy supports.

Obstacles to providing socially inclusive services for fathers in Canada have included a lack of referral systems and information networks. Over ten years ago, Taylor, Brown, and Beaugard (1999) observed that fathers, practitioners, volunteers, and investigators craved opportunities to share information and actively support father involvement. However, they noted that “across Canada, people who do innovative work with fathers remain isolated from one another” (134). To counter that isolation, several key coalitions have formed in the past decade to raise fathers’ visibility, share and mobilize knowledge, and lobby governments to create new policies, reform existing ones, and invest in father involvement initiatives. Key organizations and initiatives are described below.

### **ProsPère**

A pioneering organization in Canada that combined research, advocacy, clearing house, and training for staff in community-based programs was ProsPère. This Québec-based network operated from 1993 to 2010 as a coalition of researchers focused on father involvement as a protection against child victimization. Their early research led to other studies, all conducted in partnerships with communities; to the development of a new tool to assess salient dimensions of father-child relationships; and to a series of training workshops for staff of community-based agencies that were well positioned to reach out to fathers.

### **Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA)**

Much of the recent research on father involvement in Canada has been produced by investigators across the country working in a variety of disciplines and networked through the coalition Father Involvement Research Alliance (FIRA; [www.fira.ca](http://www.fira.ca)). Created in 2004, FIRA brings together an array of scholars, community-based practitioners, policy-makers, funders, and fathers who contribute unique and sometimes divergent perspectives, resources, practice experience, and research activity in support of FIRA’s goals:



(a) to create a vital, sustainable network of people interested in enhancing father involvement; (b) to increase Canadian research and knowledge on father involvement; (c) to inform public decision making, community development, and policy development; and (d) to develop tools, resources, and training to be used in practice. The FIRA website functions as the main clearing house in Canada for resources and research reports on father involvement. FIRA has supported community capacity-building projects, the first national conference on father involvement (Hoffman, 2008), and a project to enhance post-secondary training in community engagement focused on fathers. It has been active in bringing forward policy recommendations through provincial and federal round tables, consultations, and expert advisory committees.

### **Dad Central Ontario (Formerly Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network)**

Formed in 1997, the Father Involvement Initiative – Ontario Network (now Dad Central Ontario) ([www.dadcentral.ca](http://www.dadcentral.ca)) was the first provincially based coalition of organizations and individuals that joined together to consolidate and mobilize knowledge about father involvement, with a focus on fathers of young children (0-6 years). The network takes a population health approach, emphasizing broad-based community engagement and diversity. Its goal is to be a catalyst for acknowledging and supporting fathers' involvement in the development of healthy and resilient children. To achieve this goal, FII-ON creates partnerships among various stakeholders, including fathers, mothers, service providers, policy and decision makers, employers and the business sector, labour organizations, professional associations, community-based coalitions, government, academic institutions, and the media. FII-ON recognizes that the individual and collective efforts of network partners are as diverse as the communities in which they are located. To create a sense of common purpose and approach across diverse stakeholders, FII-ON is guided by the following principles: child first, importance of both parents, responsible father involvement, social responsibility, diversity, empowerment, collaboration, and sustainability. Actions undertaken by FII-ON are decentralized and variously funded. They include community development, community capacity building, social marketing, creation of partnerships, knowledge development, and educational activities.

### **Father Involvement Network – British Columbia**

Father Involvement Network – British Columbia (FIN-BC; [www.bccf.ca/node/24](http://www.bccf.ca/node/24)) was formed within the BC Council for Families in 2006. It is the second province-based network of organizations and individuals supporting father involvement. It aims to replicate key functions of FII-ON, though on a smaller scale, reflecting the smaller constituency in British Columbia, a

smaller budget, and a shorter history. There are promising signs that similar networking approaches may emerge in other provinces and territories.

### **Transforming the Landscape of Father Involvement in Canada**

To what extent do current policies and community programs attempt to unsettle dominant European-heritage, heterosexist discourses of fatherhood and masculinity? Do new and competing discourses about fatherhood support fathers and practitioners who wish to critically resist dominant discourses of masculinity and parenting? How do the ways in which Canadian policy analysts and practitioners think about supports for fathers reproduce narrow visions of functional families, healthy parenting, and responsible father involvement? Do fathers' goals and needs even register in practitioner training or in health and social service planning for children and families? The chapters that follow explore some of these questions.

Canadian investigators are working to understand the myriad pathways that fathers in Canada are forging in pursuit of their personal goals for involvement with their children. One promise of the socially inclusive stance taken by Canadian investigators who are joining the movement to conceptualize fathers' experiences and enhance their visibility is the potential for a nuanced, contextualized, post-structural understanding that recognizes the intersectionality of gender and notions of caring for children with realities of ethnicity, immigration status, economic status, sexuality, and other factors. This differentiated and contextualized understanding, springing from research that engages fathers themselves, can help to disrupt some of the dominant theories that tend to portray father involvement as a normative and monolithic experience. At the same time, these new understandings should militate against the hegemonic exposition of "best practices" – as if practices with proven effectiveness with one population of fathers and families could be expected to have similar meanings and impact with other populations in different contexts. Ultimately, these contextualized understandings will contribute to a transformative approach to social inclusion that admits multiple forms of positive father involvement and numerous ways to support diverse fathers in Canada.

#### **Notes**

- 1 Statistics Canada surveys restrict the definition of a family member to those occupying the same dwelling, reflecting a notion of family as people living together over time. This definition fails to capture familial bonds of parents living apart from their children due to work, separation and divorce, incarceration, institutionalization, child welfare, homelessness, and other conditions. Changes in the ways Canada counts family members are recommended by Ravanera and Hoffman in this volume.
- 2 Limitations in the measurement of domestic violence are beyond the scope of the current discussion, but particularly likely sources of underestimation are reluctance to report domestic violence, emotional violence, and violence occurring to partners who are no longer co-resident.

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