THROWING DAD UNDER THE BED

by

David Roy

Bachelor of Arts (Applied Science), Simon Fraser University 1989
Bachelor of Social Work University of Victoria 1997

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree of

MASTER OF SOCIAL WORK

in the
School of Social Work

© David Roy, 2010
University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This thesis may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.
THROWING DAD UNDER THE BED

by

David Roy

Bachelor of Arts (Applied Science), Simon Fraser University 1989
Bachelor of Social Work University of Victoria 1997

SUPERVISORY COMMITTEE

Dr. Leslie Brown, School of Social Work, Faculty of Human and Social Development, University of Victoria
Supervisor

Dr. Michael Prince, Lansdowne Professor of Social Policy, Faculty of Human and Social Development, University of Victoria
Outside Member
Abstract

This research examines and analyses the experiences of four fathers as they negotiated British Columbia’s child welfare system in an effort to maintain a relationship with their children and step children. While the particulars of their experiences with social workers and allied professions vary, their experiences with the child welfare system and child protection social workers reveal common themes.

These fathers told stories of being ignored, mistrusted, misled and placed under surveillance by child protection social workers employed by the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

These fathers’ experiences suggest that the British Columbia child welfare agency is ignoring research from Lamb (1997, 2001, 2004), Strega (2005), Brown (2009) and Scourfield (2001, 2002, 2003) that stresses the importance of involving fathers in the lives of their children for reasons of both safety and well-being. This is particularly the case for children engaged in the child welfare system according to O’Hagan (1997), Peled (2000) and Brown (2009).

Social work and institutional practices that fail to include fathers in their children’s lives without justification are not only oppressive with respect to the adults involved but fail to consider the best interests, needs and rights of children.

The thesis concludes that when social workers in child welfare metaphorically “throw fathers under the bed” they are both creating paternal ghosts and failing children by violating their fundamental human rights and undermining beneficial family relationships as stipulated under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee ................................................................. ii
Abstract ......................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents ........................................................................... iv
List of Figures ................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgments ............................................................................. viii
Dedication ......................................................................................... ix

To My Colleagues.............................................................................. x

Chapter One: Introduction ................................................................. 1
  Background ....................................................................................... 1
  Researcher Bias ............................................................................... 1
  My Father: A Personal and Historical Perspective ......................... 2
  I Become a Father ........................................................................... 2
  Personal Interest in the Treatment of Fathers .................................. 3
  Motivation for this Research .......................................................... 3
  Personal and Political ................................................................. 3
  Why Father’s in Child Welfare Need Special Consideration .......... 4
  The Research Questions .............................................................. 5

Chapter Two: Methodology ............................................................... 7
  Storytelling ..................................................................................... 7
  Narrative and Feminist Research ..................................................... 8
  Nuts and Bolts of Narrative Analysis ............................................... 9
  Which Fathers? .............................................................................. 10
  Finding Fathers with Stories to Tell ................................................. 10
  Ethics: I was once them ................................................................ 11
  Conduct of the Interviews ............................................................ 11
    Strengths and Limitations ................................................................. 13

Chapter Three: Literature Review .................................................. 16
  Introduction ...................................................................................... 16
  Role of Fathers .............................................................................. 17
  Themes Identified in the Literature ................................................. 19
  Father Exclusion ............................................................................ 19
    Adverse Impacts ........................................................................ 25
  Excluding Fathers Further Poor Practice .................................. 25
  With Children and Families ......................................................... 25
  Father Exclusion Deprives ............................................................ 25
  Children of a Source of Nurture ..................................................... 25
    Findings from the Literature ......................................................... 36
  Gaps in the Literature ................................................................. 37
  Research Specific to Fathers in Child Welfare ......................... 37
  Fathers, Children and Domestic Violence .................................. 37
  Child Welfare Decisions and Race in Canada ............................ 39
  Children, Parents and Best Interests .............................................. 39
  Children’s Rights ................................................................. 39

Chapter Four: Four Fathers: One Story .................................... 41
List of Figures

Figure 1: Domestic Violence Wheel........................................................................................................28

Figure 2: Children in Care Chart............................................................................................................33
Acknowledgments

This research was conducted by David Roy in Victoria, British Columbia on the territory of the Coast Salish people of Southern Vancouver Island. The thesis was written in both that territory and in Dorking, Surrey, a village at the southern border of London, England. I acknowledge and thank both nations for permitting me to reside on their territory.

I wish to thank the fathers who gave of their time and energy in order to help those of us working in and around child welfare to hear and, hopefully, understand their stories. I acknowledge that the re-telling of often painful events was difficult and I apologize for my part in causing them to re-live that pain. Thank you.
Dedication

To my children: Cuilean, Tristan, Lindsay and Tanya (1969 - 2005).

To my partner Lynne.

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to be a better parent and partner.
Preamble

To My Colleagues

Reading the stories of the fathers who participated in this research should be difficult for those of us engaged in child welfare social work. They told these stories because they were asked to recount their experiences. In each case it was painful. These men did not tell their stories to get back at their social workers. Discrediting and ignoring these accounts or denying that we practice in this fashion does not address practices that social workers should know are fundamentally oppressive. Each father appears to have told their story with a degree of insight and balance. They have generously shared so that practitioners can learn and improve practice. This is important to all in child welfare because failing to work with fathers is also failing to meet the needs of mothers, extended family and, most importantly, children.

This document is not intended to be a criticism with respect to any particular feminist advocacy or position regarding domestic/spousal/woman violence. I do not deny that men are violent to women. This work in no way seeks to undermine feminist analyses with respect to male to female violence but wishes to understand the nature of social work practices with respect to fathers and advocates on behalf of children and their rights.
Chapter One: Introduction

Background

My practice experience in child welfare suggested that prejudice exists with respect to the fathers of children involved with the child welfare system. This manifests partly in the reluctance of child protection workers to engage fathers at a practice level. When they do engage, it is as “extended family” at best and there is little if any recognition of the importance of father-child relationships or the capacities of fathers as carers. Practice with fathers usually occurs solely in the context of absent or non-protective mothers.

At the same time, there is a shortage of research with fathers in child welfare, a shortage identified by a range of researchers in several jurisdictions. The shortage of research makes it difficult for practitioners, policy makers, advocates and others to understand the nature of these practices and address these through policy and practice initiatives.

This research seeks to make a modest contribution to the research by documenting the experiences of some fathers who encountered prejudice in the child welfare system. Through this undertaking I hope to shed some light on this issue, validate these father’s experiences and make a small contribution towards improving child welfare practice.

Researcher Bias

Sherman made the terrible discovery that men make about their fathers sooner or later... that the man before him was not an aging father but a boy, a boy much like himself, a boy who grew up and had a child of his own and, as best he could, out of a sense of duty and, perhaps love, adopted a role called Being a Father so that his child would have something mythical and infinitely important: a Protector, who would keep a lid on all the chaotic and catastrophic possibilities of life. (Wolfe, 1987, p. 449-450)

I am both a son and a father. My experiences of both seem relevant to this research and I will briefly outline my own experience from both sides of the reproductive fence.
Erma Bombeck wrote a piece in which she described the prevalent view of fathers and fathering when she was a child. Bombeck, who was born in 1927, was a popular humourist and chronicler of the mid-century American, implicitly white and middle-class suburban sensibility. In this setting and at that time a father was, “…like the light in a refrigerator. Every house had one, but nobody knew what either of them did once the door was shut.” When they played house Bombeck and her peers knew the mother doll had a lot of work to do but these children never knew, “…what to do with the daddy doll, so I had him say, "I’m going off to work now," and threw him under the bed” (Bombeck, 1996, p. 23-24).

As a boy, growing up in Eastern Canada during the 1950’s and 60’s, my view of my middle class, white suburban father was not too different. Dad was the guy who left for work before you had breakfast and whose arrival home determined dinnertime. He might play a bit with the kids on the weekend but it was more likely he’d be playing his clarinet or saxophone, in his workshop, painting the house or, even doing office work at home. My father was not distant or aloof but fulfilled a role that seemed natural to the child I was at the time.

I Become a Father

I fathered a child in 1969 at the age of 18 while effectively living on the street. While I lived with and cared for my daughter during her first year, I subsequently abandoned her when the relationship between her mother and I ended. I did not see her again until she was 18 when she sought me out. I was not her father in any real sense. This honour goes to her mother’s husband. My eldest daughter was a very accomplished young woman who, sadly, died of breast cancer in 2005.

I have had 3 additional children with two partners. I engaged in a lengthy custody battle for my second daughter, who was born in 1983. I pursued this course because of my love and sense of responsibility towards her and as a result of the grief, loss and guilt I experienced following my abandonment of my first born. While I was not entirely successful in the courts, I was able to maintain a fathering relationship with her over a great geographic distance and we remain close. I have lived with and co-parented my younger son and daughter for their entire lives.
Personal Interest in the Treatment of Fathers

In the autumn of 1984 I stood in a British Columbia Supreme Court seeking custody of my then 11 month old daughter. The elderly patriarch sitting as a Supreme Court Justice in Chambers stated that he was not impressed with a man applying for custody of a young child, particularly a girl. I recall well the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach upon hearing these words. The whole effort appeared hopeless and it seemed to me that I was doomed to lose contact with my second child.

This justice’s words and attitude left me appalled by the lack of concern for my daughter, the failure to consider the importance of her relationship to one of her parents and the apparent assumption on this official’s part that I did not have the capacity to care for her because of my gender. This Supreme Court Justice’s admonition and the subsequent prejudice encountered led me to pursue an interest in the laws impacting children and families, the sociology of these laws and, eventually, led me to employment as a child welfare social worker.

This experience was of great significance for me and experiences during this period continue to shape my life and my relationships with my children and my partner. It also helped to develop my interest in further research into this topic.

Motivation for this Research

Personal and Political

My interest in this topic began with my own experiences as a father in the family court system. This led eventually to my employment in the child welfare system and over 11 years practice as a child welfare social worker in Vancouver and Victoria, BC and in and around London, England.

The present research effort was motivated by my experience as a social worker within the child protection system in British Columbia and as a father with a social justice agenda. My experience in the child protection system up to that point suggested that fathers and stepfathers were overlooked, and ignored by my profession. This created an intolerable tension between my political and personal values and
professional actions. It also led to me to seek further understanding with respect to social work practice with the fathers of children involved with the child welfare system.

**Why Father's in Child Welfare Need Special Consideration**

Helping men be better fathers could prove to be a powerful weapon in the government’s campaign against youth crime, social exclusion and even suicide. (Inman, 1999a)

There are a numerous reasons why fathers in child welfare are in need of special consideration and further research. These reasons include a large body of research from Lamb (1997, 2004) LaRosa (2000) suggesting that contemporary fathers are more engaged with their children and that father involvement is beneficial to children and their development. Others such as LaRosa (2000), O'Donnell (1999), and Marshall, English and Stewart (2001) state that father involvement can be positive for children engaged by child welfare systems. A number of researchers have also noted that there is a well researched lack of research with respect to fathers in child welfare.

In *Fathers, The Missing Parents in Research on Family Violence*, the authors write that the, “…lack of information about fathers and father figures has hampered our efforts to understand the etiology of abuse by parents and its impact on children’s development” (Sternberg, 2004.) Brid Featherstone describes material relating to fathers and their changing roles as an, ideological war zone” (Featherstone, 2001, p. 179). Featherstone concludes a review of some key research by suggesting that there is an “…urgent need to explore the issues which face fathers today.” She further suggests that there are, “ …a range of issues in relation to father and father figures which are clearly deserving of further attention to those involved with child welfare and child protection concern” (p. 185). An article in the journal *Affilia* noted that researchers such as DePanfilis and Zuravin (1999) for example, often intentionally exclude fathers from studies of child maltreatment (Risley-Curtiss, 2003). This might be partly due to their fear of entering the aforementioned war zone and attendant difficulties facing child welfare researchers interested in fathers.

While the current state of research with respect to fathers and child welfare is examined in the literature review later in this document, it is worth noting here that despite a well documented call for more research there remain few initiatives that study fathers and their roles in child welfare scenarios.
The Research Questions

The essential questions in this research are:

1. What are the experiences of fathers engaged in the child welfare system?
2. What do these experiences indicate for the children, men and women involved in child welfare systems?

I will explore these questions by reviewing the relevant literature, collecting and analysing the stories of fathers involved in the child welfare system. The structure behind these experiences will be considered as I examine prejudicial aspects of the child welfare system including the legislation, bureaucracy, policy and social work culture.

Chapter 2 describes the methodology and the narrative framework used in this research. Storytelling and narrative allowed these fathers to give firsthand accounts of their experiences with child welfare social workers and other officials. The approach also provided the researcher with a rich source of detail which was used to inform the research questions.

Chapter 3 contains the literature review which outlines the themes noted in the literature. These include themes of father exclusion and the failure of child welfare practice to consider the rights of children, mothers and fathers. Race and other factors impacting child welfare practice with fathers are also noted.

Chapter 4 introduces the four fathers interviewed. Edward, Brian, Andrew and Greg tell their stories of involvement with child welfare social workers, the police and the courts. These are accounts of encounters with exclusion, racism, sexism, avoidance and mistrust.

Chapter 5 analyzes these fathers’ encounters with prejudice with reference to the care and nurture they provided to their children prior to the involvement of child welfare. The chapter concludes that there is little evidence that child welfare agencies and other state institutions engage in practices that are not at all concerned with preserving father child relationships.
Chapter 6 reviews the goals and findings and concludes that child welfare institutions and others engage in oppressive practices with fathers, mothers and children and that these practices violate the rights of all parties. Most especially child welfare social work practices that exclude fathers are prejudicial and dangerous and at the same time are violations of the rights of children.
Chapter Two: Methodology

Narrative Research

This study employs a form of narrative research outlined by researcher Heather Fraser (Fraser, 2004) following upon the work of Catherine Riesman (Riessman, 1993, 2008). This analytic framework is an effective method for collecting evidence from an individual narrative and bringing private troubles forward into a public discussion.

Narrative research is also particularly well suited to the goals of this research: hearing, recording and analysing the stories of fathers engaged by the child welfare system. A particular strength of this approach is the provision of, “...greater control to research participants—interviewer and interviewee alike—to jointly construct narratives using available cultural forms” (Riessman cited in Lewis Beck, M; Bryman, A; Futing Lao, Tim. p710). The process of engaging these fathers as storytellers of their own experience is a way for researchers to, “...forge dialogic relationships and greater communicative equality in social research” (p710.) It also serves the additional purpose of levelling the power relations especially because as a former child protection social worker I was a member of a group of professionals who had once held considerable power over them and their children.

Storytelling

We all listen to and tell stories everyday. Parents read to their children. Radio announcers tell stories to their audiences as we get ready for our work and school days. Our iPods are full of spoken word materials: podcasts, e-books which we listen to on the tube, bus and in the car. When we get home we tell the story of our work or school day, our run in the park or the “weird guy” on the bus. Telling and listening to stories is a fundamental human activity. It is also a source of information and data relevant to understanding individual, community and cultural practices and understandings.

Storytelling is such an important activity because narratives help people to organize their experiences into meaningful episodes that call upon cultural modes of reasoning and representation.
(Cited in Fraser, 2004, p. 180)
Caroline Riessman describes stories as a subtype of narratives. She defines narratives broadly as events that are, “...selected, organized, connected and evaluated as meaningful for a particular audience” (Riessman, 2002, p. 1).

As a professional social worker in child welfare, I have learned to hear the entirety of a family or individual’s story. While it is not possible to set the agency remit completely aside while listening, it is possible to expand our capacity to hear the story beyond the narrow reasons that brought us to the family’s home. This open ended listening enhances our ability to get the full picture and improves our effective capacity to ensure safety and well being.

The current paper seeks to extract quality information from the participants in order to shed light upon the research questions. I determined that a narrative analytic framework was consistent with both my professional experience and social work values and would most accurately help gain a better understanding of these stories.

**Narrative and Feminist Research**

“Personal storytelling is now seen as a valid means of knowledge production...” writes Heather Fraser who also notes that social workers have been slow to accept the validity of narrative in academic research (Fraser, 2004, p. 180). Devault writes that “…feminists and others in the social sciences have cleared a space for less dominating and more relational modes of interviewing, which reflect (and respect) participants ways of organizing meaning in their lives (Devault 1999 cited in Riessman, 2002, p. 332). Riessman expands and further suggests that feminists, “…have made efforts to give up power, and follow participants down their associative trails. The current wellspring of interest in personal narrative reflects these trends.” (p. 332).

Using this approach respects the story being told and the participant doing the telling. Narrative analysis helps interviewees, social justice minded researchers and advocates to convert the former’s personal trouble into a public and political discourse. Oppression by social institutions is brought to the foreground making personal liberation and liberatory praxis possible. Scrutiny of institutional oppression is consistent with the objectives of this research project, social work values and social work ethics.
Heather Fraser has articulated further the value of narrative research as a method for understanding and analyzing personal stories. Drawing and expanding upon the earlier work of Catherine Riessman she posits that narrative research is particularly valuable for social work given the capacity for narrative to assist in making sense of language and helping elucidate multiple truths. Citing Jackson (1998) Fraser also suggest that narrative provides, “...ways to understand the interactions that occur among individuals, groups and societies” (as cited in Fraser, 2004, p. 181).

The method also has, “…the capacity to recognize people’s strengths and engage people in active, meaning-making dialogues” (Fraser, 2004, p. 181). Most importantly for social workers, narrative analysis may help to equalize power within relationships. Fraser cites, among others, Leonard and Milner who argue that the method has compatibility with social work values, “…especially those pertaining to social justice and self-determination” (p. 181). Very critical for the purposes of this study of fathers is the suggestion that the method may help researchers, “move beyond a strict problem focus to more generally explore social phenomena” (p. 181).

Nuts and Bolts of Narrative Analysis

Fraser (2004) suggests a “rough guide” for those undertaking line by line analysis of personal stories and outlines several phases for such a project. During phase one both researcher and subject hear their respective stories and experience each other’s emotions. During phase two the researcher is transcribing the material. The researcher engages with the individual transcripts in order to interpret each while phase four scans across different domains of experience to ensure that research is not fixated on, “…one dimension of life...” (Fraser, 2004, p. 191). Phase five seeks to link the personal with the political while phase six looks for both common and uncommon experience amongst the participants. Phase seven writes academic narrative about these narratives. Within each phase, Heather Fraser suggests that researchers ask a series of exhaustive questions in their examination of the story.

I planned to analyze research participant’s stories using Fraser’s guidelines. While these were all considered and are all important, they are too numerous to outline in their entirety here. I believe the following, extracted from different phases, to be among the most significant with respect to my analysis of these stories:
1. What are common themes in each transcript?
2. What contradictions emerge?
3. Are social structures-institutionalized or otherwise-present? If so, how do they appear and what is being said about them?
4. What relationship do the stories have to particular discourses?
5. What do the stories say about the (multiple) lived experiences of class, gender, race, sexual orientation, age, dis/ability, religion and/or geographical locations?
6. Have you clearly distinguished participant’s accounts from your own? Or are their accounts becoming too subsumed by your analysis?
7. Are your analyses relevant to your research questions?
8. Does your writing style acknowledge that your subjectivity mediates the interpretations being made? Alternatively is your tone too apologetic?

(Fraser, 2004, p. 190-196)

Which Fathers?

There were legal, contractual and ethical reasons I could not pursue the most obvious and readily available fathers: those with whom I was already aware and had worked alongside as a child welfare worker. My public service oath, child welfare legislation, social work codes of ethics and university research protocols prevented such contact. I chose instead to recruit fathers from the general community in and around Victoria, British Columbia.

Finding Fathers with Stories to Tell

An email and a recruitment poster attached as Appendix 1 were circulated through my professional and academic networks. Colleagues on Southern Vancouver Island displayed the poster at their respective agencies including street shelters, single parent’s services, advocacy organizations for prisoners, and health resources. I also asked colleagues to discuss participation with any service users that they believed may be interested. I received a number of responses and in the end was able to arrange to meet with and interview four fathers.

The poster circulated for approximately 6 weeks during the spring. I eventually was able to recruit 4 fathers who agreed to meet with me at a local community centre after a brief discussion on the phone. All of the interviews were arranged in a private space near downtown Victoria.
**Ethics: I was once them**

As a component of fully informed consent, one of the first ethical concerns addressed upon meeting each respondent was my status as a former child welfare social worker in the agency that had been involved with 3 of these fathers. It was important to both disclose this prior to interview. At the same time I made it clear that if they disclosed any details that suggested a child, themselves or another was at risk of harm, that I would be compelled to disclose this information to an appropriate support or authority. All four men understood and signed the necessary consents.

**Conduct of the Interviews**

The interviews were conducted at a local community centre near the city core which afforded a reasonable degree of ease of access, comfort, privacy and confidentiality and all four were digitally recorded with the consent of the men. In my initial proposal I indicated that I intended that this research would, “... privilege the interests of both parents and children.” To this end, I conducted the interviews in a fashion that would give power and control to the interviewee. I acknowledge and appreciate that these four men gave me not only their time but trusted me to reliably give an account of their stories in the interest of an improved understanding of the nature and impacts of various social work practices with fathers in child welfare.

I gave a brief account of the nature of the research in my initial telephone conversations with these men. I gave a more detailed account upon meeting with each and they were asked to sign consent documents (a copy is attached as Appendix 2). Each meeting began with informal introduction. I described to each participant the nature of the research and my reasons for the undertaking. I told each father a little bit about myself, my history and family make up and so on. Limited and appropriate self disclosure was both an important carry over from respectful and anti-oppressive social work practice as well as a component of building a relationship with the participants.

It was made clear to each participant that this was their interview and that they could control aspects such as recording. This preliminary discussion was not recorded as I had yet to obtain permission. Any questions or doubts were addressed and formal permissions were signed and witnessed prior to the recording equipment being engaged. Recording equipment was turned off during breaks or for the provision of support information. Each of the participants was asked to describe his experiences with the
child welfare system. The questions below were used as a guide for the interviewer and were not shown to the interviewee. A copy of the interview guide is attached as Appendix 3.

With the recording equipment turned off, each participant father was debriefed using both the form above and questions and suggestions generated by the content disclosed during interview. Each father was debriefed and provided with crisis line contact information. Each was asked if there were any concerns arising and if they had any further questions. Each was invited to contact the researcher in future with any further questions or concerns.

The recordings were preserved in digital format and subsequently transcribed by a staff member in the School of Social Work at the University Of Victoria.

Analyzing the Stories

Most of us have played, during childhood or later, the game telephone. Players sit in a circle and whisper a selected phrase to the person next to them, who in turn whispers to the next person and so on. When the last person on the daisy chain is reached, he or she then speaks out loud the phrase as heard. The results are often hilarious misinterpretations of the original message.

I did not want the stories I heard to be inaccurate or misrepresentative of these father’s experiences as they told them. I cannot deny that there was no effort to determine the accuracy of these accounts. It was, however, not my intention to present this information as being anything other than the subjective experience of these fathers. I was able to provide a degree of check and balance through the use of direct quotes from the interviews with the fathers. I was not successful, however, in following up with the fathers to make certain I had it right. I made every effort to ensure that my interpretation of each story was a credible rendering and one that any reasonable person would accept as such had they been in the room while they were told.

I chose to analyze this data for the themes each story revealed. In thematic analysis emphasis is on the, ".. content of a text, "what" is said more than "how" it is said, the “told” rather than the “telling”. A (unacknowledged) philosophy of language underpins the approach: language is a direct and un-ambiguous route to meaning
I initiated the thematic analysis by first re-reading each of the transcribed narratives several times. I also listened to the recordings of each interview several times in order to ensure both accuracy of transcript and to detect nuances that could have been missed in the transcribed text. This might include, for example, a voice breaking or quavering indicating recalled emotion. Some of this was noted during the interviews but I was more concerned with the emotional well being of the participants at that time. It therefore seemed prudent to review these again.

Once I was satisfied I had a reasonable grasp on the interviews, I re-read them again, this time highlighting with a marker sections of each father’s narrative that detailed the contact and/or lack of contact they had with child welfare social workers. I went over each transcript again in order to identify common themes and ascribed categories that best described the experience as relayed. For example, one father’s account of his multiple efforts to contact social workers could be categorized as “social worker avoidance”. A refusal to consider a father as a suitable carer could be categorized as discriminatory. My familiarity with both the transcripts, the recorded narrative, the first hand hearing of each provided a reasonable check and balance with respect to both the verisimilitude of each account. My professional experience as a child welfare worker was also useful in understanding and interpreting these stories and served as an adjunct to understanding their meaning. My own experiences as a father, and particularly as a father who once stood before the courts seeking custody of his child, also impacted, I believe in the affirmative, my ability to hear, understand and interpret the stories I was given.

There is no effort on my part to deny that my own subjective experience, professional standards and political stance are factors in how I experienced these stories. That said, it would not serve any purpose, least of all my own, to not ensure a reasonable and high degree of reliability with respect to the representation of these accounts. In particular it would not serve the interests of those for whom I advocate daily in professional practice—especially children in need of support and safety.

**Strengths and Limitations**

Any methodological standpoint is, by definition, partial, incomplete, and historically contingent. Diversity of representations in needed. Narrative analysis is one approach, not a panacea, suitable for some situations, not others.
Fraser (2004) and Riessman (2002) argue that narrative analysis is a method well suited to understanding personal stories and the meaning which their narrators ascribe to these experiences. Fraser argues that narrative may be used, “to reinforce but also contest dominant social practices” utilizing a critical social work approach incorporating ideas from feminism, critical theory and/or postmodernism/post-colonialism (Fraser, 2004, p. 180). Neither author suggests, however, that the method is perfect.

There is no suggestion of ‘objectivity’ in the telling but rather the method assumes “positionality and subjectivity” (Riessman, 1993, p. 19). This approach makes no effort to verify the facts as presented by the author. With respect to the current research, the emphasis is upon understanding these fathers’ experience and the meaning they made of these. While I share Riessman’s assertion that this methodological strength, others do not share this view.

Daniel Bertaux, for example, argues that this type of information has value when a significant number of actors disclose common experience. Shared experience serves to verify the facts and these experiences may then be examined for, “recurrent patterns concerning collective phenomena or share collective experience in a particular milieu” (cited in Riessman, 1993, p. 19).

Riessman argues, however, that, “Verification of the “facts” of lives is less salient than understanding the changing meaning of events for the individuals involved” (p. 20.) For Riessman personal stories are of interest precisely because they are interpretations and more than, “just the facts”.

With respect to this study, the first research question is, “What are the experiences of fathers engaged in the child welfare system?” while the second question is concerned with analysing these experiences. The first question is addressed by hearing, recording and understanding the experiences of these fathers from their particular viewpoint, in their own words and with any meanings they may have ascribed to their engagement with child welfare.

Hearing these men’s responses to my questions, listening to their stories in their own words respects the meanings they have made of these events. This yields both rich content and is consistent with a respectful inquiry. Given the dominance of women in front line social work, it is also worth noting that these men are
also being provided with the opportunity to tell their stories to another father with experience both as a practitioner and survivor of child welfare and court systems. The second question is answered through the analysis of the stories.
Chapter Three: Literature Review

Introduction

This chapter reviews social work and related literature regarding the treatment and engagement of fathers in child welfare. I conducted the literature review in two parts. The first of these took place in 2004-05, when I also conducted the original research interviews and in 2009-2010, after a hiatus of several years during which I practiced child welfare social work in England.

When I initially undertook this project in 2004-5, there was relatively little research with fathers in child welfare despite some acknowledgement by researchers such as Brown, Strega, Walmsley and Dominelli in Canada, and Scourfield, Risley-Curtis and Hefferman that there was a paucity of information about this group of men. The passage of time altered this situation. Between 2005 and 2010 Brown, Walmsley, Strega and Scourfield both collaboratively and individually published new materials with respect to fathers in child welfare.

Returning to practice in 2005 provided me with the opportunity to return to front line child welfare practice with renewed vigour and ‘fresh eyes’ after having conducted my initial research interviews for this thesis. While this return took place in another country under different legislation and standards of practice, the similarities and differences with respect to social work practices with fathers were both dramatic and revealing.

In the United Kingdom, unmarried fathers not named on a birth certificate, and step fathers, had no parental responsibilities or entitlements under the Children Act (1989) and other relevant UK legislation. Legislation was amended while I was in the UK and some fathers in these categories gained limited paternal rights. While agencies were required to engage married fathers under various statues and central government guidance, social work practice with these men differed little from practice in British Columbia despite various directives to the contrary.
Role of Fathers

Although Canadian research thus far has contributed to a better understanding of the impact of fatherhood, there is still a long way to go in terms of implementing concrete measures that support a fatherhood in which fathers feel valued, mothers feel reinforced, and children can reap the benefits.

(Dubeau, 2002)

Dubeau’s assertion refers to fathers generally in Canada and is not particular to child welfare engaged families. Andrea Doucet’s research with 118 Canadian fathers concluded that while men do not “mother” in stereotypical fashion, they are capable of meeting the needs of their children. The fathers in this study represented a range of class, race, gender and sexual orientation. These fathers, concludes Doucet, “emulate what we consider stereotypical mothering behaviour,” but they are not mothers (Doucet, A. 2006, p. 224).

Research on fathers in child welfare is even more urgent because there is evidence that social workers in child welfare are not only engaging in oppressive practices with respect to their treatment of fathers but that our oppressive practices with fathers, impact mothers and children adversely (Strega, 2005; Swift, 1995). There are indications of service needs unmet and prejudicial attitudes amongst service providers (Peled, 2000; Sternberg, 2004).

A range of organizations advocating on behalf of children, mothers and fathers have described the difficulties child welfare agencies have in engaging fathers. In their review of non resident and child welfare engaged fathering literature, for example, the American Humane Association noted children and their fathers are poorly served by the child welfare apparatus, especially after children have been taken into care.

Engaging fathers in the lives of their children becomes an even greater challenge when his children are involved in the public child welfare system. This is especially true in cases where the child has been removed from the home and placed in non-relative or stranger’s care. Reunifying children with their birth families, as quickly as possible, without jeopardizing the children’s safety, is the first priority. However, identifying family resources, especially non-resident fathers and paternal relatives, has been challenging for the child welfare system.


This failure to engage with fathers also impacts mothers adversely. A number of feminist researchers note that failing to engage fathers in child welfare settings is a component of mother blaming and oppressive
social work practice with women (Daniel & Taylor, 1999; Strega, S., Fleet, C., Brown, L., Dominelli, L., Callahan, M., Walmsley, C., 2008; Swift, 1995). These authors also note that ignoring fathers may place mothers at risk of violence and/or deprive her of a potentially supportive co-parent.

There is evidence that children experience uncertainty regarding their future and may suffer needlessly when they are placed in care (Craven & Lee, 2006; Lamb, 1997). It is self evident that children may also be placed at risk of further harm when social workers do not engage fathers who may represent a risk to their children since there is no opportunity to either assess or reduce risk effectively without at least acknowledging that the risk exists. These fathers are not provided with the opportunity to take responsibility for their children or, when at issue, allow for the reduction of the risk they may represent to them.

In extreme cases, children have died partly because of a failure to recognize the extent to which a father was either a child welfare risk or asset. The BC Representative for Children and Youth’s 2009 report titled Honouring Christian Lee, found that institutional oversight and a lack of capacity to address the risk a father represented led to the death of this child. The Representative concluded in part that,

> The tremendous risk of harm to Christian was not fully appreciated by those who were in positions of authority because the necessary structural components to do the work of assessing and protecting were not in place.

(Representative for Children and Youth, 2009, p. 65)

Lord Laming’s 2009 Serious Case Review: Baby Peter a report examining the events leading to the death of Peter Connelly a child living in Haringey, London when he was killed. In his report Lord Laming noted that, “Peter had a good relationship with his father, which was seen when he went for his bone scan when only his father could calm his distress” (Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2009, p. 8). Despite this Local Authority social workers were unwilling to place Peter in his father’s care even when he suffered significant and, eventually, life-threatening injuries. Lord Laming concluded that,

> Mr. A was prepared to take time off from work and to get a reference from his employer. There had been no concerns about his care of the children in the past and he had parental responsibility and the right to care for his son. There should have been very good reasons before refusing his offer of temporary care and his rights should have been explained to him.

(Local Safeguarding Children Board, 2009, p. 22)
Had Peter been placed with his birth father he might be alive today.

**Themes Identified in the Literature**

Two significant themes emerged from a review of the literature, both of which are particularly relevant to the current topic. These are:

1. **Father Exclusion**: The fathers of children involved in the child welfare system are often ignored and demonized by child welfare agencies and their social workers.

2. **Adverse Impacts**: Children, fathers and mothers are adversely impacted by the child welfare system’s failure to appropriately engage with fathers.

**Father Exclusion**

Child protection workers often concentrate upon mothers, and ignore or avoid fathers and male cohabitees…ignoring or avoiding men constitutes a serious problem in child protection work. (O’Hagan, 1997)

In their comprehensive review of social work literature with respect to fathers within and outside of child welfare settings, Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer found that the literature was notable for the limited attention given fathers, especially when compared with research into motherhood (Strug, 2003). This review examined how the social work literature described non-custodial fathers and male caretakers. Their summary references 118 articles in 25 social work journals published between January 1977 and December 2000. The authors note significant gaps in the existing information with respect to fatherhood especially non-custodial fathers.

Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer suggest that the literature endorsed a view of fathers as irrelevant, “to the psychosocial development of their young children until the mid-1970’s” and argue that US culture remains "matricentric" with regard to child rearing (Strug, 2003, p. 504). This has led social workers to father absent literature and social work intervention focused largely on mothers raising children alone (p. 504). Further evidence of this maternal focus is apparent in Edwards finding that, “No entry for fathers exists in the index of the 19th edition of the Encyclopaedia of Social Work” (Edwards cited in Strug, 2003, p. 504).
Mothers are routinely held responsible for their children’s well being and safety, while fathers are not. Strega (2008) and her cohort found that in over 50% of the cases, fathers were seen as irrelevant. They also confirmed that fathers were “invisible” and excluded from consideration as caregivers by agency social workers. The same researchers also noted that social workers, “rarely asked about or involved fathers in their casework with young mothers” (p. 712).

Fathers are invisible both in child protection practice, social work education and in much of the area’s related research according to a research cohort at the University of Victoria. Brown and her colleagues noted that the practice of rendering fathers invisible begins early in social work education (Brown, L., Strega, S., Dominelli, L., Walmsley, C., Callahan, M. 2009). In their review of child protection files, “dated between 1997 and 2005 from a child protection agency in a mid-size Canadian city” these researchers also found that a dominant discourse holding mothers, “primarily responsible for the safety, wellbeing and care of children is routinely enacted in child welfare even when fathers are present and involved” (Strega et al., 2008 p. 713).

Fathers who represent a risk to their children are avoided. These men are not properly assessed by social workers according to Brown and others who found that even when considered a risk, over 50% of fathers are neither engaged nor formally assessed for any threat of harm they may represent to their children. Where fathers were identified as a risk to their spouses they were contacted by a social worker in only 50% of cases. When considered a risk to their children, the contact rate dropped to 40% (Brown et al., 2009).

Contradicting this tendency, Brown et al also note that a newly hired child welfare social worker was, “…insisting on the inclusion of fathers in her case planning…” which was according to her supervisor, “…a highly irregular practice” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 28). Earlier related research had asserted that there is, “…nothing in law or policy that prevents workers from taking a more father inclusive approach to practice” (Strega’ S; Brown, L; Callahan, M; Dominelli, L; Walmsley, C. 2006. P17.)

The preceding example of father involvement is not typical in either my professional experience nor is such a conceptual leap usual for practitioners. Social work research and theory, including anti-oppressive practice, does not always manifest in professional actions (Walmsley 2004.). A UK study of 20 social workers
noted, “...that few of the responses reflected the use of theory and research findings” (p2.) In the same paper, Walmsley also noted that,

Canadian social work education requires course work in the social sciences and humanities to encourage social workers to develop a knowledge base founded on the critical assessment of facts and theories. However, the extent to which scientific facts and theories are used in thinking about practice is relatively unstudied.

My observations of social work practice with and without fathers suggests that there is little understanding or application amongst my colleagues of the research that does exist with respect to children and the benefits they may derive from having involved fathers or, conversely, the extent of the risks they may represent when not fully assessed.

Father’s are not present in file materials. Until very recently British Columbia’s child welfare agency created and held files in mother’s surnames only and, when in state care, in the children’s names. In cases where a father resided with his biological children and a step mother or woman other than the mother, the file was held in the name of the woman not related to the children. This naming preference is confirmed by both my practice experience and by Brown and her colleagues (Brown et al., 2009). It is worth noting that child welfare files in the UK are held in children’s names whether in care or not. This however has not changed the reality that fathers remain invisible in many of these children’s lives.

UK social workers in child welfare generally do not work with fathers because they are not seen as particularly important to their children’s welfare. In his study of a child protection team in Wales, Jonathan Scourfield noted that social workers on the team where he was ‘embedded’ saw fathers as threat, useless, absent, and irrelevant and they are not engaged by them as a result (Scourfield, 2008). Scourfield notes that the failure to engage men is seen by social workers and researchers not as, “…an injustice to men, but rather as an injustice to women” (p. 4).

There is also evidence that social workers fail to document whether fathers are present in their children’s lives and that there is little or no effort made to ascertain the veracity of the information on record with respect to their fathering role. For example, in 1999 O’Donnell noted that few workers attempt to either involve fathers or even bother to note their lack of involvement in case records (O'Donnell, 1999). This study further remarked that it is not uncommon for workers to accept on “good faith” a mother’s account of the father’s behaviour and role or his lack of one with respect to his children.
Mothers may conceal the presence of a father in their children’s lives for various reasons. These might be legitimate concerns such as loss of financial support or fear of abuse (Brown et al., 2009). Concealment of fathers might also relate to historic or current relationship breakdown, ongoing interpersonal disputes and child custody issues (Knott, 2004). Social workers may respect their client’s wishes and pursue a dispensation order with respect to the father. This will give legal permission to forgo contacting the father during legal proceedings. I noted, during the course of professional practice, that these dispensation orders, especially at the initial stages, were often based solely on unsubstantiated information and dubious affidavits and/or testimony.

In one admittedly extreme example from my practice, a mother who had lost her children to foster care during a dangerous armed drug arrest advised social workers that the father was deceased. The children entered foster care based on the risk and the information provided by this incarcerated mother. It was later learned that not only was the father alive and involved but that he was both an appropriate alternative carer and had been paying and providing support for many years\(^1\). He was unaware his children were in care because he had been on an extended business trip when the incident leading to their care occurred. While he had not been custodial previously, this father was a positive force for his children and he eventually obtained custody with support from child welfare authorities.

This incident or some variation of it also provides an example of what Brown and her cohort describe as a heroic characterization of fathers (Brown et al., 2009). This refers to the tendency on the part of social workers and others to view fathers who take responsibility for their children as extraordinary. There is some justification for this characterization, since it has to be acknowledged that in many cases it does require heroic efforts on the part of these often marginalized men to accept responsibility for their children given the gender biases of child welfare agencies and their social workers.

Social care agencies just don’t seem to know what to do with men…. They are either actively ignored or overlooked by agencies set up to help families on the fringes of society… To health and social care staff, fathers are often the invisible parent (Inman, 1999)

\(^1\) All case examples have had some details altered to preserve confidentiality.
The service needs of fathers generally are not met with many ‘parent’ support program excluding fathers either deliberately, through being solely for the use of single mothers, because of limited business hours which do not coincide with the needs of working fathers or through the minority status of any father joining a parenting group. Fathers wishing to take the opportunity to address violence outside of the criminal justice system or improve their parenting skills often have nowhere to go for help. There is little evidence of services directed towards them and men’s needs in this area are not addressed (O’Donnell, 1999; Sternberg, 2004).

The support or service needs of specific groups of men, such as non-custodial and step fathers, are overlooked. These men, who may have been very close to their children prior to divorce and separation, are largely ignored (Strug, 2003). This failure to engage male ‘clients’, i.e. fathers, step fathers and other significant men, suggests that the tenets of anti-oppressive practice in social work do not extend to practice with fathers in child welfare settings (O’Donnell, 1999; Scourfield, 2003).

Ignoring the service needs of fathers extends to those in prison as well (Hairson, 1998; O’Donnell, 1999). O’Donnell suggested that lack of attention to fathers by caseworkers in two kinship foster care agencies was a deterrent to paternal involvement. O’Donnell also noted that maternal bias and female carer preference was evident in child welfare social work practice and single fathers were seldom considered as a placement resource for children requiring alternative care.

Paternity designation has implications for determination of Aboriginal identity and, in the case of First Nations, registration (or not) under the 1985 Indian Act. Research with non-Aboriginal fathers has shown that paternity designation has implications for involvement of fathers with their children (Ball, J., & George, R., 2010, p. 128)

First Nations fathers, “have been especially excluded both as a stakeholder group and as a resource for Aboriginal children and youth” according to University of Victoria researchers Ball and George (p. 128). First Nations and Métis fathers and, men of colour are more likely to be excluded from child welfare practices because of racism operant within child welfare decision making (Pennell, 2009; Roberts, 2002). There are also institutional practices and bureaucratic realities emerging out of the Federal Indian Act that create a financial disincentive for the mothers of Aboriginal children to identify the fathers of their children, a practice which also leads to father exclusion.
There exists further evidence that families of colour are prejudicially treated and adversely impacted by child welfare decision makers in a significant fashion according to US researcher Dorothy Roberts (Roberts, 2002). In an earlier work, Roberts defined systemic racism as, “…those established laws, customs and practices which systematically reflect and produce racial inequalities” whether intentionally or not (cited in Pennell, 2009, p. 79).

In 2004 the advocacy organization UK Family Rights Group responded, “… to an increasing number of calls from fathers who had been overlooked when the local authority had decided to take the child into care…” by undertaking research with fathers and mothers within two UK authorities (Family Rights Group, 2009). The initial project goals were to:

- explore the barriers encountered by fathers and paternal relatives whose children are involved with Social Services;
- identify effective ways of working with fathers and paternal relatives and
- recommend steps that could be taken by the judiciary, the courts, national government, and statutory and voluntary agencies.
  (Family Rights Group, 2010)

The results of their research were documented in part on a DVD titled *Fathers Matter: The views and experiences of fathers on their involvement with local authority children’s services*. The fathers interviewed for the video material were from Southampton, Lambeth and Devon. These locations constitute a mid size city, a multicultural area of deprivation within London and a semi-rural area. The fathers interviewed provided a rich source of experience and suggestions from fathers themselves. Some suggestions for practitioners are included later in this document.

This section of the reviewed literature indicates that fathers are excluded on multiple grounds. Many of these prejudices are not exclusively applied to either fathers or men. The judgements and impacts differ however and generally lead to exclusion from their children’s lives and absolution of responsibility for their progeny’s well being.
Adverse Impacts

Excluding Fathers Furthers Poor Practice
With Children and Families

‘A picture on the wall, that’s all I really knew.’ By Tracey
(NSPCC 2008)2

Social workers are uneducated with respect to fathers according to Strug and Wilmore-Schaeffer (2003) who note that social work knowledge with respect to fathering was not a subject considered in any of the 118 articles they reviewed. The lack of research with fathers generally, and fathers in child welfare in particular, are in themselves evidence of a not entirely benign oppression and subsequent exclusion of this group of men. These impacts are not however limited to men but affect all family members — especially children.

Father Exclusion Deprives
Children of a Source of Nurture

Social workers are unaware that fathers have the capacity to provide the nurture their children need. Featherstone, like Lamb and others cited below, has accepted the notion that, “parental warmth, nurturance and closeness are associated with positive child outcomes… regardless of whether these are provided by a mother or a father” (Featherstone, 2001, p. 13). Featherstone also notes that parental characteristics are more relevant to child well being than parental gender. There is also the pivotal notion that the amount of time spent with a child is not as critical as what is done with that time. Benefits are also directly related to an absence of interparental hostility which is a key correlate of child adjustment (Featherstone, 2004).

This and all subsequent photographs are from an NSPCC exhibition of photographs showing young people's views on father-daughter relationships The Fathergood exhibition was at the Rich Mix Gallery, Bethnal Green Road, London E1 in 2008.
Children Lose Out on an Important Relationship Which Positively Influences their Development

There is evidence that fathers are important to their children’s healthy development. Between 1976 and 1997 Michael Lamb edited and authored materials in a series of books examining the role of fathers in child development. At the beginning of this series, many of the work’s writers were divided with respect to the then common perception that fathers were insignificant to shaping the experiences of their children, especially their daughters. This changed over subsequent editions and by 1997, most writers reflected, “widespread acceptance of the notion that fathers are often affectively and formatively salient,” to their children’s well-being and development (M. Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004, p. 1). Lamb and his contributors also argue that fathers are, at least, equally capable of meeting all the needs of their children and that the sex or gender of the parent is irrelevant to meeting that need (Lamb & Tamis-LeMonda, 2004).

Children’s cognitive capacity, mental health and other areas of development are enhanced when fathers are involved in their lives. In their 2001 research with 6 year olds, Dubowitz and his colleagues found that there was “…a substantial body of research suggesting that the presence and involvement of a father figure benefits children” and that, “…fathers’ involvement in their children’s lives is associated with enhanced child functioning” (Dubowitz, et al., 2001, p. 300). These enhancements included, “…better cognitive development and greater perceived competence” (p. 306.) These researchers also found that for, “…children with a father figure, those who described greater father support had a stronger sense of social competence and fewer depressive symptoms” (p. 300). This study was unique in that it directly questioned children with respect to their perceptions of the men in their lives. It is also unique in that many of the children questioned were from what the authors describe as “high risk” families.

Some impacts are described as “modest” and the authors suggest there is much room for further research. While this study had significant limitations, including questions regarding the impacts of fathers versus father figures and other supportive males, the positive indicators were consistent with a broad range of previous studies.

Marshall, English and Stewart, for example, observed lower levels of aggression and depression in 6 year olds involved in the child welfare system if, “…an adult male in some form of father-like relationship was present in the child’s life” (Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001, p. 290). These results, however, diminished
to the point of insignificance when they controlled for mother’s ethnicity, child’s gender, the number of referrals to child protective services, and the presence of domestic violence. These authors conclude that there are nevertheless, “…indirect but still important associations of adult males in these children’s lives….” and further suggest that even multiple father figures may impact the, “the behaviour, health and development of children” in a positive fashion (p. 298).

Swedish researchers reviewing longitudinal studies examining father involvement with their children similarly concluded that the 24 studies subjected to their scrutiny indicated that there, “…is evidence to support the positive influence of father engagement on offspring’s social, behavioural and psychological outcomes” (Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, & Bremberg, 2008, p. 153). These researches considered both biological and non-biological father involvement. The reviewers also note that, “current institutional policies in most countries do not support the increased involvement of fathers in child rearing….” and suggest that, “…there is enough support to urge both professionals and policy makers to improve circumstances for involved fathering” (p. 157).

**Father Exclusion Places Children At Risk of Ongoing Violence**

Social workers in child welfare are not fully addressing potential risks to children and others when they fail to engage fathers. It is worth noting again that Brown and her colleagues found that social work engagement with fathers lowered to 40% when these men were considered a risk to their children (Brown et al., 2009). The exact nature of the risk and potential impacts upon children appears variable especially with respect to aforementioned future physical and emotional well being.

Daniel and Taylor suggest that by failing to work with fathers, social workers and others are ignoring potential risks and assets for both the mother and child (Daniel & Taylor, 1999). This happens when a father is excluded or ignored and therefore neither risk assessed nor provided with the opportunity to make changes. Father exclusion in this context may also lead to an unfair burden of responsibility being placed upon mothers who may be blamed for ‘allowing’ child directed violence to occur and held solely responsible for ensuring child safety.
Father Exclusion Places Mothers At Risk of Violence

When social workers fail to involve violent fathers, mothers are blamed for behaviours that are outside of their control. This may include violence directed towards not only towards the children but also themselves. Social workers are failing to identify and ameliorate risks that can have serious consequences for a mother.

In an example cited by researcher Susan Strega, one mother who had successfully extricated herself from an abusive relationship and had managed to obtain a restraining order removing her abuser from the home was refused assistance to keep both herself and her children safe by the local child welfare authority. This despite the mother, “…having begged the worker to talk to her ex-husband…” (Strega, 2005, p. 25). The worker instead responded with the threat that the children would be taken into care if they saw her beaten again. Strega suggests that this, “…reflects everyday child welfare practice when men beat mothers” (p. 25).

Strega’s example is illustrative of a documented lack of training, awareness and agency capacity with respect to domestic violence (Representative for Children and Youth, 2009). It also illustrates the dilemma, emerging from the current state of practice in child welfare, facing both mothers and social workers in domestic violence scenarios. Most particularly, it demonstrates a potentially dangerous situation for women and children brought about by agency ignorance of both the nature of abuse and their failure to engage these fathers.
Domestic violence has a full range of adverse impacts upon mothers. That women experiencing domestic violence suffer from physical harm is well documented and includes injuries ranging from bruises and fractures (Chez, 1994) through to loss of life. Women also suffer other impacts as a result of abuse. These include loss of relationships, friends and employment as well as mental health impacts such as depression and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Humphreys, 2006). In 2001 Jones, Hughes and Unterstaller conducted a research overview focusing on the symptoms of trauma in 42 studies of domestic violence survivors. These authors found, “…worryingly high rates of post traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) associated with domestic violence” (p. 25). The review found that women who had experienced domestic violence were suffering from a range of PTSD symptoms including, “…flashbacks (reliving the experiences); numbness and denial (emotionally shutting down); and hypervigilance, inability to sleep (anxiety states).” There is also evidence of increased levels of suicide and self harm (p. 24). Child welfare intrusions which do not include holding a father accountable impact a mother’s sense of self, health and well being. This in turn affects her capacity to parent her children. Social worker’s failure to include fathers in domestic violence scenarios in particular fails to ensure maternal well being and safety.

**Father Exclusion in Domestic Violence Situations Adversely Impacts Child Development**

Domestic violence scenarios may similarly impact child well being over both the short and long term. Joshi suggests that children,

... who witness intimate partner violence are at increased risk for developmental delay, school failure and a variety of psychiatric disorders including depression, oppositional defiance disorder, and violence against others (USPTF, 2004). Young girls who are maltreated in childhood have also been shown to be at higher risk of adult physical or sexual assault by non-intimate perpetrators … (Joshi, 2007, p. 27)

Current social work practices that tend to exclude or ignore fathers also lead practitioners to ignore the full scope of violence that may be present in a family home. One research cohort found that family violence was not presently defined in a comprehensive fashion and that,

...the present data suggest that although the most common dyads are mother and father and mother and boyfriend, interfamilial violence extends beyond parent figures to extended family
members and even friends. …attention should be paid to all forms of intrafamilial violence rather than what has historically been defined as child abuse or domestic violence.

(Christian, Scribano, Seidl, & Pinto-Martin, 1997, p. 3-4)

There is little disputing that domestic violence affects children in a number of ways. While most of the physical trauma impacting children is minor, there are more severe outcomes up to and including death in a small number of cases of male to female spousal abuse (Christian, et al., 1997; Representative for Children and Youth, 2009). There are concerns for the emotional effects of a child witnessing and living with violence as well as concerns over the impact upon their development and behaviour for a larger number of children.

**Failing to Work with Violent Fathers Deprives Children of Resources and Relationships**

Failing to work with and assess violent fathers also fails to allow children to maintain what may be a relationship with some positive features. Peled (2000) and Sternberg (1997) suggest that we can no longer ignore the importance of the relationships between these children and their fathers, even when their fathers physically abuse their mothers. It is contradictory to expect both parents to take responsibility for their children and at the same time ignore abusive men as fathers. This, Peled argues, is inconsistent with a feminist position that seeks to distribute parental rights and responsibilities (Peled, 2000, p. 183).

The harm that domestic violence represents to children is a particularly complex area for child welfare social workers to assess when trying to make a determination of risk and benefits. The dominant practice orthodoxy within child welfare has been to utilize a limited and sometimes politicized definition of this form of violence as characteristically male to female and exclusively rooted in patriarchy. Child welfare workers often accept uncritically information provided, usually by the mother and her advocates. This tendency has been documented by O'Donnell (1999).
“My dad’s team is Whithaven – he doesn’t support Warrington, they’re my team. But what dad does is even though he doesn’t like Warrington he still takes me to all the games, buys my tickets, makes sure I don’t miss a thing. I think it’s important he does this for me when he doesn’t like it himself.”
By Natalie
(NSPCC 2008)

Father Exclusion, Poverty and Classism

While many social workers are educated in schools of social work that are at least nominally structural in their orientation, class,”...however defined does not figure prominently in contemporary social work literature” (Scourfield, 2003, p. 46) despite the well documented realities of the fathers and families who make up most child welfare caseloads. “A clientele of poor working-class families is typical of child protection practice…” (cited p. 8) and poor, low socio economic status fathers are less likely to be engaged by social workers while their children are more likely to be present on child welfare caseloads. Becker and Macpherson also note that, ‘...the clients of social workers are amongst the poorest in society’ (p. 46).

“In an Ontario child welfare sample, 44% of neglect cases were dependant on social assistance compared with 27% of other forms of maltreatment…” according to researchers at the University of Western Ontario, (Leschied, Chiodo, Whitehead, & Hurley, 2003,p5). In UK research with children, the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children determined that children living with poverty and maltreatment,

… are doubly disadvantaged because the experience of maltreatment may in turn further undermine life chances in the long term. While there is a vast amount of research on poverty and the link to maltreatment, there is a dearth of research in the UK exploring the nature of the relationship between the two.
(NSPCC, 2008, p. 2)
There is no suggestion that that low income families or fathers are inherently abusive but rather that there is an as yet poorly understood link between child neglect and poverty. What is undeniable, again confirmed by both research and practice experience, is that families present on child welfare caseloads are primarily living in poverty. This figure was often 100% in my BC experience of practice and similarly the case in the UK. This link between low socio-economic status and child welfare involvement is also consistent with the fathers interviewed for this research, their children and, with one exception, their families. When social workers fail to engage with poor fathers, structural oppression and its impacts upon parental capacity is both overlooked and potentially replicated.

**Father Exclusion and Race**

In 2001/02 John Fluke et al undertook an examination of the US National Child Abuse and Neglect Data System in order to determine the influence of race and ethnicity in child protection systems (CPS) and, while there were significant confounds, he determined that race was a factor in decision making within CPS agencies. These findings are confirmed by other researchers, including Ards, Myers et al (Ards, Myers, Chung, Malkis, & Hagerty, 2003; Fluke, Yuan, Hedderson, & Curtis, 2003).

There is evidence that British Columbia’s Aboriginal fathers and their children are even more severely impacted by prejudicial attitudes present in the child welfare system because race and racism are factors in child welfare decision making (Pennell, 2009; Roberts, 2002; Strega & Carriere, 2009).

Aboriginal children in BC continue to be disproportionately represented among children in the Ministry’s care. Overall, the number of children in care declined by 11.3 per cent between 2000/01 and 2005/06 while the number of Aboriginal children in care increased. Of the BC child population, approximately 1 in 100 children are in the Ministry’s care. Approximately 1 in 20 Aboriginal children are in the Ministry’s care and approximately 50 per cent of all children in care are Aboriginal according to the Ministry’s website at http://www.bcbudget.gov.bc.ca/2007/sp/cfd/default.aspx?hash=4 Chart...
Children of colour are also overly represented in the looked after populations in the United States (O'Donnell, 1999; Roberts, 2002). These children are more likely to become a child welfare statistic and enter state care (Pennell, 2009). This was also reflected in the interviews I conducted with fathers two of whom were caring for their Aboriginal children both of whom had been in state care.

Father Exclusion Furthers the Oppression of Women

That women mother is a fundamental organizational feature of the sex-gender system: It is basic to the sexual division of labor and generates a psychology and ideology of male dominance as well as an ideology about women’s capacities and nature (Chodorow, 1978, p. 208).

Failure to engage fathers also leads to the reinforcement of a patriarchal and neo-conservative ideal of motherhood which is fundamentally oppressive to women. “Mothering…” writes Swift, “… is the ‘means’ for producing particular kinds of future adults needed by society’s economic arrangements...” (p. 120). Despite significant social changes in the roles held by women at the beginning of the 21st Century mothers, especially mothers engaged by child welfare, will be held to standards of mothering that are not reasonable, culturally relevant, current, realistic, desirable or self-determined. There is a pressure to conform to a hegemonic ideal of motherhood that is oppressive and reproduces patriarchal proscriptions with respect to gender. This is a social pressure to conform rather than action necessary to protect a child’s well being and safety.
This means that mothers alone are subject to proscription with respect to their ‘appropriate’ role if they fail to a range of patriarchal, ideological, institutional, professional and/or sometimes idiosyncratic ideals and standards framed by a worker whose personal values and/or unrealistic agency demands may also hold sway. Swift observes that, “even when mothers are clearly recognized as bright, capable, and skilled they continue to appear in case material as deficient” (Swift, 1995, p. 110). This is due to the previously described proscriptions and the focus on a certain standard of parenting and expectations on the part of child welfare. Father involvement in children’s care holds the potential to liberate women from some aspects of patriarchal and hegemonically proscribed mothering (Chodorow, 1978).

**Father Exclusion Denies Men the Benefits of Fatherhood**

While children engaged in the child welfare system are deprived of their fathers as a resource; fathers, according to the World Health Organization, are denied the benefits they accrue from being actively involved with their children.

Increased involvement in fatherhood benefits the man’s own health and well-being. For example, men who have been recognized in their new position as fathers and experienced emotional support during the pregnancy show better physical and mental health (Diemer, 1997; cited in World Health Organization, 2007, p. 6).

Fathers in child welfare are also denied the opportunity to be fathers, to improve their parenting, to take responsibility for their children and/or their violence (Brown et al, 2009; Scourfield, 2003). If they have an ongoing relationship with their children, it may be destroyed. If they have no present relationship, they are deprived of future opportunities to develop one. They do not have access to services and there are few if any programs available that are designed to meet their needs. Their specific service needs are little known due to the lack of research with fathers and particularly fathers in the child welfare system (Inman, 1999; Strug, 2003).

Institutional deficits, prejudices and oppressive practices not only deprive fathers of the ability to step up and take on the responsibility of providing care, nurture and love to their children but exclusion from his children’s lives also may impact a father’s physical, psychological and emotional health. While there are many confounding factors surrounding these assertions, there are indications that men’s health benefits from fatherhood. Additionally, there is credible evidence for the assertion that, “…fatherhood can profoundly shape the lives of men” and that being an active father has impacts upon a father’s social and familial
connections along with their work lives (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001, p. 392). While Eggebeen and Knoester’s research relates largely to fathers living with their children, indications are that there are positive outcomes for men when they become fathers. The impact on their self esteem and social functioning as a result of exclusion is not known.

“The teddy is my dad. He never shouts at me, if something is wrong he will sit down and talk to me. If I’ve done something wrong he won’t just tell me off he will explain why I was wrong and talk things through, make me understand why. He is my best friend, he is soft and cuddly and safe. He protects me. He is a teddy bear!”
By Reema
(NSPCC 2008)

Father Exclusion is a Denial of Children’s Rights

We are experts of our own lives...participation is our right. We are capable of expressing what is right and what is not and we can even help in implementation and monitoring of the government’s work. Although, almost all the countries have ratified the UNCRC, children’s and young people’s participation is discouraged. (Unidentified Child)
(United-Nations, 2006)

Excluding fathers denies children their rights as stipulated under the UN Convention on the Rights of Children (UNCRC) as well as the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms (The Charter). The former document states in part that,

Article 8
1. States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference

Article 9
3. States Parties shall respect the right of the child who is separated from one or both parents to maintain personal relations and direct contact with both parents on a regular basis, except if it is contrary to the child's best interests.
(United-Nations, 1989)
Excluding fathers without significant grounds fails to comply with the section cited above. Biased child welfare practices deny children access to a full range of family relations as stipulated in Article 8 (1) while failing to provide children access to their fathers violates Article 9 (3) of the UNCRC. With respect to The Canadian Charter, children are arguably discriminated against under Section 12 which addresses "cruel or unusual treatment" and Section 15 which prohibits discrimination based upon age (Canada & Canada. Secretary of State. 1987).

Children are being deprived of their fundamental rights when they are not supported to maintain important familial connections, including paternal relationships. They may lose access to the resources their fathers have on offer often without adequate justification (O'Hagan, 1997.). Their development may be adversely affected as a result (Lamb, 1997).

Children in child welfare settings are doubly marginalized. They believe they are different and are not given the most basic contact with their fathers (Rights4me.org, 2009). Depriving children of the ability to maintain or develop important and meaningful relationships, such as those with their fathers and male carers, may adversely affect their future life chances and educational development (Dubowitz et al., 2001; Kruk, 2008). Children are marginalized and do not have access to all their relations and the cycle of cultural denigration continues for First Nations children in Canada (Ball and George, 2010). They are treated as less than persons in Canadian legal parlance and they have no independent legal voice with respect to their wishes, safety and well being. For example they are not automatically parties of the proceedings under BC’s Child Family and Community Services Act related to their lives.

Findings from the Literature

While the research covers a wide range of topics and subject matter within child welfare, this review of the literature has revealed that social workers in child welfare institutions are engaging in a number of oppressive practices. Three of these are most significant to this inquiry:

1. Social workers in child welfare practice oppressively with fathers. Fathers are not engaged by social workers and/or they are demonized and dismissed. Fathers are being deprived of important rights and responsibilities with respect to their children. They are not able to take responsibility for
their role of ensuring child safety and well being. They are not provided with access to parenting or other counselling resources.

2. Mothers are being blamed, denied potential assets and may be at risk of harm. Mothers are isolated, blamed and made responsible for the behaviours of others and may be at risk of harm as a result of a failure to assess the threat a male spouse may represent.

3. Children’s rights are being violated and/or they are placed at risk of harm. Children are being deprived of important relationships and the resources their fathers have on offer often without adequate justification. Their development may be adversely affected as a result. Their safety is also not assured in situations where male carers may represent a risk.

Gaps in the Literature

Research Specific to Fathers in Child Welfare

Brown and colleagues note some encouraging signs with respect to fathering literature suggesting that, “...there is a small but growing literature on fathers in child and family welfare” (Brown et al., 2009, p. 28). This is encouraging but also confirms that this remains a developmental challenge for social work researchers and reasserts that there is a lack of such research with fathers in child welfare. A portion of the literature reviewed indicates a lack of research with fathers facing a variety of challenges in several categories including child welfare. What research does exist indicates that father’s service needs are not considered and, most critically, social workers in child welfare avoid engaging fathers for multiple reasons.

Fathers, Children and Domestic Violence

Even though many areas of investigation remain without conclusive findings, the literature establishes a few main points

….While direct causal relationships are difficult to establish in the literature, the impact of witnessing domestic violence shows similar negative effects on children. These children experience emotional difficulties (depression, anxiety), behavioral problems (acting out,
withdrawal, poor impulse control, delinquency, bedwetting, nightmares), cognitive deficiencies (maladaptive schemas, poor academic performance), and social adjustment problems (fewer friends and interests).
(Guille, 2004, p. 157)

There are significant gaps in research with fathers and children where spousal violence is present. This is an emotionally charged issue and a political minefield. Much of the information with respect to mother blame, failure to protect and domestic violence in child’s welfare scenarios is gathered from mothers and their advocates and is focused upon the needs and interests of mothers (Peled, 2000). While this is a legitimate perspective it leaves out the views and responsibilities of men and, most significantly, the needs and interests of children.

This is not to say that researchers such as Susan Strega have not made significant efforts to recruit male subjects during examinations of domestic violence in a child welfare context. Strega was frustrated in her attempts to recruit men by a number of bureaucracies. The result was a research article based entirely on information obtained from women (Strega, 2005).

While many researchers and government funded child death reviews such as those following the deaths of Peter Lee, Matthew Vaudreuil and Victoria Climbié recognize the failings of child welfare workers with respect to assessing domestic violence and parental risk, there is a tendency to assert that social workers in child welfare must focus on addressing spousal violence. This presents a number of difficulties for child welfare social workers who already suffer from confusion around exactly whose interests they represent — child or parent. While it is certainly within a child welfare remit to ensure a child is free from violence, arguing that child welfare agencies have the capacity to ensure a woman’s safety in this situation overlooks both the agency mandate, the complexity of domestic violence scenarios and the importance of collaborative working and the role of others with expertise in this specific arena. This latter would include advocates working on behalf of the separate interests of men, women and children.

Further research with respect to father and child relations in domestic violence scenarios as well as safe and best practices for child welfare social workers confronted by domestic and spousal violence is needed.
Child Welfare Decisions and Race in Canada

There are indications that race and ethnicity are considerations in child welfare decision making across several jurisdictions Ards (2003); Ball and George (2010); Maiter (2009). Aboriginal and Métis fathers and families appear to be adversely impacted. Direct research with all parties with respect to racism in child welfare and its impacts upon children and their parents is needed.

Children, Parents and Best Interests

Another failing in the research especially with respect to domestic violence, alluded to above, is the assumption that the interests of mothers and children are identical. There are places where these intersect. Both have the right to freedom from violence for example. But a child’s interests diverge from that of her mother’s when it concerns an ongoing relationship with a former spouse/father. This may be true even when domestic violence has been present. Many assume that a violent spouse is also a violent father. This may or may not be the case and this again is an area in need of further research.

Children’s Rights

There is little material with respect to the interface between child welfare social work and children’s rights. There was little information available to indicate that the UNCRC was a consideration in child welfare social work practice. This despite caring platitudes from agency bureaucrats, ministers of the Crown and politicians in Canada, British Columbia and England’s central government all of whom have signed on to the Convention.

Pursuant to articles 12 to 15 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Committee recommends that the federal government dedicate resources towards ensuring that children’s input is given considerable weight when laws, policies and other decisions that have a significant impact on children’s lives are discussed or implemented at the federal level.

(Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2007)

There were few items of significance that focused on children and their rights under the UNCRC. One such was a Canadian Senate report titled Children: The Silenced Citizens which focused largely on the jurisdictional implementation of the convention in Canada. This report concluded that, ‘…the Convention
on the Rights of the Child is not solidly embedded in Canadian law, in policy, or in the national psyche' (Standing Senate Committee on Human Rights, 2007).

While all the previously noted deficits in the literature are significant, the lack of material with respect to the rights of children engaged in the child welfare system compounded by the lack of material specific to the engagement between these children and their fathers and father figures is a barrier to improving social worker practice and ensuring children’s well-being. That states may be failing to ensure that child welfare legislation, policy and practice are consistent with children’s well being and child rights is critically important if we are to ensure the primacy of the well being and best interests of children.

There remain significant impediments to proactive practice with fathers in child welfare that requires further exploration and explanation. Some of the barriers are legislative and jurisprudential or administrative and bureaucratic. Other barriers emerge from the culture of social work and its roots in ‘women’s work’. All of these impediments are patriarchal and solidly situated within the neo conservative capitalist hegemony of this point in history.

**Addressing the Gaps**

This research cannot remedy all of these information gaps. What I can do is begin to address a small segment of a substantial research chasm. I propose to do this by interviewing fathers who have children involved in the child welfare system. I am seeking to hear these stories with a view to understanding, informing and, possibly, improving social work practice with fathers.
Chapter Four: Four Fathers: One Story

Introduction

I interviewed four men with respect to their experiences as clients of the child welfare system. All of these men, their children and their partners are identified by pseudonyms in this document. Some of the location and non-critical details of these stories have been altered in order to preserve confidentiality.

All of the stories revealed a background with some degree of deprivation or a lack of privilege. All four were living in poverty at the time of the interviews. One father was homeless. All were dependant upon social assistance. Each had struggled with multiple challenges including issues related to addiction, life threatening/chronic illness, physical/emotional pain and/or mental health impediments.

Each father had experienced a loss of power and autonomy and was subjected to institutional power wielded by predominantly female child protection social workers. It is difficult for anyone to recount painful events, especially those that describe the teller’s failings. In these cases each father suffered and each relived some of the pain of those events in the telling. I was struck by both the candour and the courage on display as they told their stories to a relative stranger.

The four fathers interviewed were of apparent European heritage. All might be described as having working class origins. Two fathers had vocational training while one was attending college or university. Some had careers which they abandoned and none were working at the time of the interview.

Two fathers discussed their experiences of foster care as children. One father made a reference to his own father while another discussed the discipline with which he had been raised. Two fathers had some contact with extended family. Two had full care and custody of their children and both of these were lone parents. Two had not seen their children for extensive periods of time. Three of these men were biological fathers to daughters while one was both father and stepfather, also to girls.

These fathers could be described as having had both current and historic physical, emotional, mental health and addictions challenges. All were experiencing either one or more mental and physical health
issues. These included HIV, addiction, post-traumatic stress and chronic physical injuries following an accident. One had made a serious suicide attempt.

Two of the three had been in prison and one was effectively homeless and living on the street. All were in receipt of some form of social assistance at the time of interview.

None were actively in receipt of supportive social work services relating to their children, although two had open protective daycare files. These are usually kept open in cases where children are considered to be ‘at risk.’

The following is the result of my efforts to summarize and analyze their stories. I have made every effort to ensure accuracy. I acknowledge, however, the presence of my voice and subjectivity as the editor and author of the following.

**Edward’s Story**

**Who is Edward?**

Edward is a 31 year old Caucasian male and primary caregiver of an 8 year old daughter. He has been principal or exclusive parent to (or care provider to) his daughter for most of her life.

Edward’s own childhood was spent in Eastern Canada in a situation he describes as “…poor and disenfranchised”. He was incarcerated for 18 months at the age of 16, an experience he characterizes as “not easy”. Edward referred to both his parents during the course of the interview and noted the recent death of his own father. He did not provide any details with respect to the scope of either his historic or current relationship with either of his parents.

By the time he entered adulthood, Edward had become, “…a gang member, drug dealer, drug user, the epitome of, you know, of a thug.” He was involved in gang life in both Canada and the United States and it was during this period that he also contracted HIV. Edward reports that his life began to change shortly after learning of this infection.
Some time after his diagnosis, Edward became a counsellor with a peer support agency as part of his effort to “give back” and help to educate youth about HIV. It was during this period of recovery from addiction that Edward met the Aboriginal woman who would become Sara’s mother. Edward says that after learning of his new partner’s unplanned pregnancy he had an epiphany and, “became a real man” committed to his own survival for the sake of meeting his responsibilities to his unborn child.

Did I protect her? Hell, yes. I put her on HIV drug therapy. I made sure she got the best therapy before it was even available in Canada….making sure she takes the ECT\(^3\) in the first 6 weeks that she’s born. Making sure she’s in for blood tests to make sure she’s negative…doing everything to keep this baby safe…

After the baby’s caesarean delivery Edward accepted the responsibility for most of her care. He was the one rising in the night to change diapers, make bottles and heat them up to feed the newborn. Breastfeeding was proscribed as mum was also HIV positive and the parents wanted to ensure that the baby did not contract the virus. Edward performed care and nurturance duties while at the same time attending school full time. During the day he would come home at lunch time to check on mum and baby.

Edward’s relationship with the woman he sometimes referred to as his “wife” began to break down around 6 months after Sara’s birth. Edward and his partner had planned to be married and had attended pre-marital counselling. It was during the counselling that Edward began to see signs of incompatibility with the baby’s mother.

Edward and his spouse initially approached MCFD\(^4\) for assistance when Sara was still an infant. Edward believed the Ministry could help them with the challenges of being HIV positive, recovering addicts and new parents. The parents did not expect that it might also lead to Sara being taken into foster care.

**They Took Her for No Reason**

I remember crying like a baby because I never knew they had so much power to seize my child… instead of offering assistance, the easiest solution was to remove the child… she was seized for 6 months…

\(^3\) This could be a reference to ZDV also known as Zidovudine which is a retro antiviral used to prevent HIV transmission from mother to foetus.

\(^4\) MCFD refers to the Ministry of Children and Family Development. Throughout this section it may also be referred to as the Ministry.
Sara was taken from both her parents' custody when less than one year old following an incident in which the mother was found unconscious on the front lawn of the family home in the early hours of a summer morning. Edward was in bed asleep at the time and Sara was asleep in her crib.

Edward first became aware there was a problem when paramedics and police entered the home and advised him of his wife's situation. He advised them that he had, “…a couple of drinks” the previous evening as did his spouse. They had then both gone to bed. Edward speculates that his wife went out after he had fallen asleep in a search for alcohol. The specifics of how she had come to be passed out on the lawn could not be recalled by mum who Edward describes as “dazed and confused” at the time.

Edward believes MCFD social workers seized his daughter during this incident because they were aware of his history. They likely could smell alcohol on his breath and he freely admitted to having had some beer. He offered to take a breathalyser test but this was declined. MCFD social workers did not permit him to call his father, who lived 5 minutes away, as an alternative emergency caregiver. He pointed out that the house was clean, that he had been fully capable of providing care, the baby was “where she was supposed to be…” and that neither parent had harmed their daughter. None of this had any effect on the decision taken by the MCFD social workers attending.

They Lied

…I did not trust basically anything they were telling me. It wouldn't matter if they told me they thought I was the most caring parent in the world, I would not trust a thing they were telling me… I've seen them lie in the reports, I've seen them doctor stuff up… I've seen them take my child out of my arms unjustly...

Edward attended court the day after Sara’s removal. He was “pretty shocked” upon reading the social workers report to the court which stated that the child had been taken into care because a, “needle-like object” had been found on the floor of the family home. This concerned Edward who was no stranger to the court system. He was worried a judge might believe this to be a syringe and make a link to Edward’s past drug use. He requested clarification from the social worker and was told that a safety pin had been
found on the floor. That detail was not, however, in the court report. He attributes what he believed to be obfuscation to a particular social worker who had engaged in a “twisting of the words.”

Sara remained in the Ministry’s care for the next 6 months.

They Can’t Be Trusted

…you think once you fly straight now and go to college; they’re never going to screw you around, so you tell them the truth. This is who I was and this is who I am today …the biggest mistake I made was when we went to them for help, was telling them the truth.

Edward believes that the biggest mistake he made was being truthful during his request for assistance from the MCFD social workers. This was prior to the incident leading to Sara’s removal. At that time he had told social workers about his history with the police, his current HIV status and that he was, “…an ex-friggin” junkie on the street.” Edward trusted social workers with his information in order that they might better give him the help he needed to ensure the safety and well being of his daughter. Edward came to believe that his honesty led to prejudicial treatment by Ministry social workers. He also believes the mother’s race and former status as a child in care were factors in their treatment.

They’re Prejudiced

…they felt that there was no possibility I could succeed as a successful father with all the odds of, against me being disenfranchised, HIV positive, no education even though I was in college…

While Sara was in foster care both Edward and his partner were asked to take regular drug screens for opiates and were also asked to participate in both psychological and parental capacity assessments. Edward was also asked to provide access to his medical records. Edward co-operated with most MCFD demands but he questioned the reason for the latter because he believed the Ministry would be, “…perched like vultures to swoop in and say I’m unfit to care for my child” should he become ill as a result of his HIV infection. He believed that MCFD and their social workers were prejudiced against parents with HIV regardless of their health status posing the following question: “….I’d like to know the statistics on how many HIV positive parents still have their kids when their kids are born healthy.”
Edward believes that Sara’s mum was subjected to prejudicial treatment by Ministry workers because she was Aboriginal and had grown up in state foster care. She would not participate in the parenting programs and assessments the workers suggested would address her neglectful parenting despite significant pressure. Edward believes this was because of her experience of social workers and abusive foster care and was supportive of her position stating that she,

…had reason not to trust them….she grew up in the Ministry’s care and there was no one there to protect her. And then they were saying they were there to protect us now. How could she trust them? Did I blame her? Absolutely not…

They Made Me Jump through Hoops

Edward was not only pressured by social workers to attend parenting programs and undergo drug screens but he was also expected to ensure that mum would do the same. Edward was harassed by social workers to separate from Sara’s mother, because of her failure to comply with their directives. Social workers, “…felt that neglect was a big thing with my ex…” The Ministry had already made Edward responsible for ensuring that Sara was not left alone with her mother or he would be, “…found a neglectful father…” Despite his own knowledge of the challenges facing his spouse and the concerns of the social workers Edward told them he,”…wasn’t really ready to dissolve my family at that point… I believed that with some additional help that she (Sara’s mum) may be able to still get it together.”

More Relationship Stresses

It was after Sara was returned from Ministry foster care that Edward came to understand that he could no longer remain with his partner. He also came to believe that Sara may not be safe in her mother’s sole care.

This concern for his daughter’s safety was precipitated by several circumstances including a serious incident during which mum “slapped” the baby because she was playing with her food. This took place shortly after Sara was returned from 6 months in foster care. Edward was very aware of the harm that could befall a child, particularly an infant, following a blow to the head and he was also worried about the possibility that Sara would be taken into Ministry care again. Mum moved out shortly after this incident.
Helpful Social Worker

Edward found that once he had his own place without mum as well as custody of Sara and a new social worker that the Ministry’s attitude changed. The new worker told Edward that he had, “….made some healthy decisions for your daughter and we wish you the best and we can support you in any way we can.” Despite his relatively good relationship with the new social worker, Edward told the Ministry he did not wish their assistance any longer. His relationship with the Ministry, however, was not yet over.

They Have Us under Surveillance

Edward and his daughter’s involvement with the Ministry continued for several more years. During this period Edward was placed under surveillance and visited unannounced by social workers in several communities. He moved several times, partly to get away from the surveillance to which he was subjected. The stated reasons for ongoing Ministry involvement varied from social workers believing he had too much money to concerns over a reunification with mum. Edward underwent several more urine tests and accusations of criminal activity. None was substantiated.

Edward did make further efforts to reunite with mum. These were not successful. The final effort ended in a suicide attempt by mum and it was at that point Edward ended any attempts to get back together.

Edward and Sara continue to receive daycare support through an MCFD file. The usual condition for such support, according to Edward, is a perception that the parent may constitute a risk to their child.

Brian’s Story

Who is Brian?

Brian is a 49 year old father of a five year old daughter name Melissa. Brian has no other children. Brian grew up with his mother and four siblings in Calgary.
Childhood

Brian had a “kind of a wild childhood in and out of trouble” with a two month stay in a foster home when he was 16 or 17. This stay was brief because he ran away and stayed away, “…until I was old enough and they didn’t chase me anymore.” Brian returned to live with his mother once child welfare officials stopped searching for him.

Adulthood

Brian worked, “…in a bunch of various jobs” including warehouse work, house painting and logistics. He eventually became a long haul trucker, a position he held for about 13 years. He also worked more recently as a meat packer, asbestos remover and day labourer. It was while working in Calgary that Brian met the woman who would become Melissa’s mother.

Fatherhood

Brian’s spouse⁵ became pregnant shortly after the couple had decided they wanted to have a child together. While mum had several children from previous relationships⁶ this was Brian’s first child. The couple was living in Brandon, Manitoba at the time but they made the decision to move to Surrey, BC during the second trimester so that mum could have the baby in her home town.

Brian began working at various temporary positions following the move to Surrey. This continued after the baby was born but working even these short term positions became difficult for him because, “the mother started being, she didn’t want to stay home with the child”.

⁵ The ethnic and cultural background of Melissa’s mother is not known.

⁶ All reside with their respective fathers


Fathering and Caring

During this period Brian would do double duty: paid work outside the home as well as primary care for Melissa upon his return from work. This care included bathing and feeding his newborn daughter. It also included soothing Melissa when, “…she’d be crying at night so I’d pace the floors with her and stuff”. Brian suggested that the mother’s care consisted of putting, “…the kid in a little bed type thing and she would be there with a bottle propped up and sort of just ignored for most of the day.”

Relationship Stresses

While difficulties surrounding Melissa’s care began almost immediately after she was born relationship breakdown came to an apex about four months later, with mum acting, “…haywire.” Brian believed that his spouse, “… didn’t want to be the mom. I could see that…”

Brian also discovered that his partner had been using drugs and had spent 3 months rent money on crack cocaine. Brian learned this only after his landlord came to the door of his apartment looking for monies owed. Brian was very surprised that,

I didn’t pick up on it. She seemed to function normally… seemed normal to me. I mean the mother was always kind of high strung. But for whatever reason I didn’t notice any signs of anything with her until it was too late.

Child Welfare Involvement

The relationship continued to deteriorate until finally reaching crisis one night with mum demanding that Brian leave. On that occasion mum had arrived home late at night with a, “bunch of people” with her who, “…were partying and looked like they wanted to party some more.”

While Brian agreed to leave the family home immediately he did not believe mum was in any shape to care for 4 month old Melissa. At the same time Brian believed he could not take Melissa with him because, “I don’t have anywhere to take her.” He then reiterated that mum was in no shape to care for the baby and that he was going to call “family services.”
I Called for Help

Brian and his family's initial involvement with child welfare began during this crisis, with a call for help initiated by Brian himself out of concern for his daughter’s safety. Despite this Brian found the call difficult to make.

*I went across the street and phoned them and it was actually a hard enough thing to do. Like phone to get her taken away from the mom....*

They Didn’t Believe Me

Brian also had a difficult time convincing the after hours emergency social worker he contacted that night that the situation was dire and that the baby was at immediate risk,

*...whoever I was talking to on the phone it took me a good hour to actually get it through that person’s head, no I don't need somebody sent round tomorrow to look into it I need somebody sent like right now immediately, this child is in danger.*

The social workers eventually agreed to come and assess the situation. Melissa and her mother were taken that night to stay with her maternal grandmother.

Melissa Stays with her Grandmother

Melissa’s mother left the baby with her mother the next day so that she could get some of her clothes. She never came back.

During this period Melissa remained with her grandmother for about a week. Brian returned to Calgary to find work while the whereabouts of Melissa’s mother was not known. By the end of a week Melissa’s grandmother telephoned Brian in Calgary to tell him she needed to return to work and that Melissa would need to go into the Ministry’s care. Melissa was taken into care and remained there for the next 8 months of her brief life.
Melissa Enters Foster Care

Brian sought legal advice immediately after being informed that Melissa would go into foster care. He had been happy to have her remain with her maternal grandmother because he felt that Melissa would do best in,

...a stable family environment. I thought maybe that’s for the best. At the same time though it was, well, how much of her am I going to get to see?

Once Melissa’s grandmother had decided she could not care for her granddaughter, Brian was not happy with the prospect of his daughter entering foster care. He agonized over, “…what was best for her, the little one?” finally coming to the realization, “… if I don’t step up then she’s going to go and who knows where she’ll end up.” Brian then began several months of frustrated attempts to reach social workers in Surrey to discuss his and Melissa’s needs.

Social Workers Avoided Me

Sometimes I’d wait for days and days and days and I’d have to phone 2 or 3 days. It was like she wasn’t returning my calls.

Brian remained in Calgary working and attempting to retain both legal counsel and legal aid in British Columbia so that he could be properly represented in court proceedings. He came eventually to the realization that he could not effectively deal with the issue and the Ministry from “600 miles away” so he told his family, “…I’m not getting anywhere here. I need to go back there. At least I can deal with somebody face to face rather than having them hang up…” He gave up his position and returned to live in the Lower Mainland.

Social Workers Accused Me of Lying

When discussions between Brian and the Ministry, social workers eventually did take place, the latter questioned his assertion that he was not a drug user. They also did not believe he was unaware of mum’s drug use during the relationship. On these occasions he felt he was treated in a disrespectful manner and was being accused of lying by some Ministry staff. During the few times he was able to speak with his worker he felt that,
...her attitude sucked because she was telling me okay, well I understand this business with the mom but it's been my experience that if the mom is involved in drugs and things like that, usually the other parent is too.

Brian was, “offended” by the social workers assumptions that he was both a user and a liar and felt the worker was, “being rude to me”. This particular social worker did not wish to discuss his child and her needs with Brian and told him on several occasions that, “…I don’t even want to talk to you right now…” after which “… click she hung up on me…”

**Social Workers Were Prejudiced**

Brian tried to please Ministry social workers and convince them he had viable plans that would allow him to care for his daughter while working. He proposed purchasing a long haul truck with a large sleeping cab. He further suggested that since Melissa was a baby it might be feasible to take her with him as he “…truck(ed) up and down the road for three years. The truck would pay for itself by then and with any luck I should be able to buy a house”. When he made this proposal to social workers they told Brian they “…didn’t like that idea at all…” and that Melissa required stability and, “… can’t be travelling up and down the highway”.

Brian was confident that he could care for Melissa full time given that he had already done so during her infancy. Brian also had several years previous childcare experience gained while charged with caring for his younger siblings while his mother worked. One of these was an infant at that time while the other was a preschooler. Brian also understood that raising a child could be difficult, an understanding gained from his mother who,

...tried to work and stuff so a lot of times me and my brother would have to pick up looking after the kids type thing….I can appreciate now like how hard it had to have been with her like with four kids….I think I learned a lot of it at home.

Ministry social workers did not share Brian’s confidence in either his understanding of the difficulties facing parents or the needs of children. They also did not consider his previous caring experience and demonstrated capacity to nurture Melissa as sufficient indicators of his abilities as a caring father. They told him he needed to take some parenting courses.
...as it got a little bit closer to it looked like they were going to return her then they started asking me questions like that you know parenting stuff. And they suggested you know that you need to take some parenting courses, certainly that'll help you and it's something that you need.

Brian became involved in a number of parenting courses while at the same time working in temporary positions. He found some of the material useful while much was less relevant to Melissa at her particular stage of development. Brian was about to resume care of a one year old but the course material, “...looks more geared towards four or five or something.”

Melissa returns to Brian

I up and moved back.... I did that and it took me eight months. You know they wanted me to take parenting courses and things like that so I did. Then right on her first birthday we went to court and they gave me custody of her.

A month after Brian resumed care of Melissa, he moved to another community in order to avoid contact with mum who was not permitted to see her daughter because of a court order prohibition. Brian also felt that the baby’s mother was harassing him so he advised the MCFD social worker that he was relocating. Brian was given the option of keeping his file open but he decided to close it as he believed he had no need of further supports.

4 Years on.....

“Everything was going fine...” with respect to Ministry and there was no further intervention over the next few years. Melissa did suffer from a slowly developing bowel which led to her being hospitalized twice during her early years for a combined 3 month stay. Melissa remains under a paediatrician's care but has had no further hospitalizations.

Brian met the challenges created by the bowel problems which included administering large doses of prescription laxatives. The condition and required medication created difficulties with toilet training and Melissa remained in diapers until well into her fourth year. Her toileting challenges meant that Melissa could not attend a regular daycare program until her bowel had developed further.
Brian began to feel challenged by Melissa’s behaviour as she was entering her 5th year. He found that Melissa would no longer do as she was told and that he did not know how to effectively deal with her challenges. These behaviours included, “…screaming and stuff” which she just won’t stop as well as, “…bang her head on the wall and things like that…” Brian cannot get her to calm down during these incidents and has told professionals that he, “…has a hard time dealing with it”.

During one such incident as Melissa was, “…yelling at me and wouldn’t listen to me” Brian responded by “…getting louder”. This eventually caused neighbours to phone the police. The police in turn brought in a social worker from the Ministry of Children and Family Development.

**Social Workers Didn’t Listen**

_The social worker came, the next, by the next day. I said maybe I need some anger management…Why don’t you get me into something like that? I said well like for me to get yelling, to the point where I’m yelling at the child and the child’s yelling back well I know that’s not helping matters. We talked and she didn’t seem, feel like there was any need for anything really…._

Brian had both identified his need and was well prepared for his discussion with the social worker. He had researched and located what he believed to be a suitable anger management program for himself where, “…a lot of their clients are involved with the ministry…” His request for anger management was refused, however, and the ministry worker left without any further offer of support other than a continuation of his daycare subsidy.

**Social Workers Wouldn’t Help**

Brian contacted the anger management program after this meeting and asked them to intercede with the MCFD social worker on his behalf. The social worker again refused to fund the program because anger management, “…was not identified in the meeting as a need” and the Ministry would not pay the $200 to $300 cost because, “…the way the budget is right now…we can’t do it”.

I Helped Myself

Brian made efforts to understand Melissa’s actions and was, “…trying to find ways for myself not to react”. Despite his recognition of the problem and his efforts to react appropriately there was both further police and social work involvement as Brian and his daughter continued to scream at each other. While there was criticism of Brian from both police and social workers, no help was forthcoming.

Brian continued to seek support and eventually located a conflict resolution program that he believed might assist him. Melissa has recently begun to attend daycare and kindergarten. The daycare is experiencing similar challenges with respect to her behaviour.

Social Workers Didn’t Try to Understand

Brian was aware that Melissa’s behaviour may be partly attributable to her mother’s use of drugs while pregnant. Melissa was tested as an infant but Brian was advised at the time that, “…she was fine at that age but they said as she gets a bit older, starting into the school years, you might start noticing behaviour problems”. Brian is currently seeking to have Melissa re-assessed because her behaviours are seen by both himself and educators as “extreme.”

While Brian believes he continues to need help and education to be an effective father, it also appears that the Ministry is not providing Brian with the support he needs to be an effective parent.

Brian continues to father Melissa.

Andrew’s Story

Who is Andrew?

Andrew is a white middle aged father and stepfather to two daughters: April aged 9 months and Layla, aged 11 years. Neither girl lives with Andrew nor had he seen either child for several weeks prior to this interview.
Childhood

Andrew was his mother’s “miracle baby” who survived a difficult birth due to a heart defect. Andrew was raised by two parents who, “…ruled with an iron fist…” with, “…very European upbringings and standards that the kids did what the parents said…do this or else…” In childhood Andrew learned to be, “a struggler instead of a fighter”. Andrew was sexually abused by an unspecified person, “…for nine years…” as a child. This led to him running away from home.

Andrew is a, “good outcome of good life skills” because of the severe regimen of consequences employed by his parents including, “ultimatums, conditions, grounding, fun things taken away…” Andrew continues to have a close relationship with his parents.

Adulthood

Andrew completed his high school education as an adult at Camosun College. He worked a variety of jobs including trucking, construction and cooking. Andrew is, “…a jack of all trades but master of none”. Upon completion of his ABE\(^7\) he took a few courses and eventually started a small gardening business which he operated successfully for 7 ½ years. He was unable to continue operating his business following a motor vehicle accident.

As an adult, Andrew had a, “…few relationships that didn’t go anywhere…” because “…I didn’t pursue as much as I wanted” until he eventually met and began a relationship with his “fiancée” in 2003. He described the relationship as, “…too much, too fast, too soon…”

Fatherhood

Andrew became a stepfather to 11 year old Layla several months after he became involved with his biological child’s mother. While Andrew and the mother lived together, Layla lived primarily with another stepfather for the first 7 months Andrew and his fiancé co-habited.

\(^7\) Adult Basic Education
During his partner’s pregnancy Andrew was worried about the prospect of fatherhood both because the relationship had many ups and downs from the outset and he was not certain how he could support the family.

**Fathering and Caring**

As noted Andrew became a carer to Layla prior to the birth of his own child. He took responsibility for driving her to school, taking her on outings and providing supervision as well as ensuring that she followed, ...her nightly routine before bed, brush teeth, use bathroom, put on pajamas. If you wanted a snack, have a snack at least a half an hour before you brushed your teeth…

It was important to Andrew that she learned, "...the life skills and the morals that my, both my parents were teaching me".

Following April's birth, Andrew also changed diapers, bathed and fed his newborn daughter. This took place largely under the, "...strict enforcement…” of her mother. Andrew agreed that the children’s mother was a “foreman” when he performed childcare duties in her presence.

Andrew's caring role continued in a modified fashion following separation from his spouse several months after the birth of the baby.

**Relationship Stresses**

There were many stressors in the adult relationship almost from the beginning. Andrew was aware that his then spouse had, “...a past track record of being with very abusive men (and) also an upbringing of drug abuse, alcohol abuse and sexual abuse”. Despite their many challenges to relationship stability, the couple became engaged in August of the year they met.

Andrew broke up with the children’s mother 4 times during the approximately 16 months they were together. Andrew describes her as, “...ruling with an iron fist…” and as a person who issued many ultimatums. At the same time he describes himself as a, "...person who is easily manipulated". He felt used by his former fiancée.
Health Challenges

The stress generated by the relationship combined with injuries from an earlier motor vehicle accident led Andrew to seek assistance from his general practitioner for lack of sleep and depression. His physician prescribed anti-depressants and sedatives when the relationship completely broke down for the final time.

Child Welfare Involvement

The Ministry of Children and Family Development had a 7 year history with the family and, “…knew of the mother, the mother’s track record…” prior to Andrew’s entering the picture. Andrew’s 11 year old stepdaughter had been known to the child welfare system in British Columbia since the age of 4 and had spent time in both foster care and resident with extended family members.

I Was Not Told My Stepchild Was Taken Away

Some time after the couple separated Andrew learned that Layla was taken from his former fiancée by Ministry social workers. This information came to him via his mother. Andrew subsequently learned from police that an investigation was underway with respect to Layla and her possible abuse by mother’s current roommate. He was also told by police, that his stepdaughter had been interviewed and that, “…your oldest daughter speaks very highly of you”.

Social Workers did not tell Me My Child was in Danger

Andrew was not contacted by social workers with respect to April and her safety until after Layla’s removal. He has made several efforts to contact the Ministry but has yet to hear back from anyone at the children’s Ministry.

They Didn’t Talk to Me

Andrew: The Ministry knew she had a boyfriend.
Interviewer: Are you sure of that?
Andrew: Positive…They knew that I was the father…
Interviewer: Okay so did they ever interview you at that point?
Andrew: No…
MCFD social workers had ongoing concerns with respect to the mother and her older child. They knew mother’s location and, “…what she was doing and basically who some of her friends were, associates, god parents, etc. etc.” Andrew believed they also, “… knew of her childhood history of abuse and neglect.” Despite their awareness of, “…the daughter’s track record or past…” and their eventual knowledge of Andrew’s status as father of the new baby, they did not contact him.

Social Workers Are Not Hearing Me

I was supposed to be getting a phone call Monday from the Ministry of Children and Families okay. I did not so I phoned them and I had a whole list of information that I was going to tell social services because I felt that the home, the mother, the friends, the babysitters and the lifestyle was unsafe for both girls. I still have not got contact back from the ministry saying that there was a follow up okay.

They Haven’t Acknowledged My Role as Father and Carer

Andrew was never contacted nor interviewed by Ministry social workers regarding his role as a caregiver and step/father to either child even after the removal of his 11 year old stepchild. Neither was he contacted regarding safety concerns for his biological child who remained in her mother’s care. This led Andrew into depression and an attempt at self harm.

Suicide Attempt

I poisoned myself…Seventeen hours of convulsions, hypothermia, throwing up, projected diarrhea…discharges from my nose; blood in my mucous, redness in my vomit, redness in my diarrhea. …It was diazenon. An insecticide…

Andrew made a suicide attempt just one month after breaking up with the children’s mother. He is now recovering from this event.

Andrew remains out of his children’s lives and continues in his efforts to reconnect with them.
Greg’s Story

Who is Greg?

Greg is a 39 year old stepfather to two girls age 12, and 13 and father to a daughter who is 6 years old. At the time of the interview he had not seen either his two stepdaughters or his daughter Tiffany for approximately 16 months. Greg describes himself as an alcoholic.

Childhood

Greg, “…grew up in a great family atmosphere…” in Eastern Ontario with both parents and 3 siblings. Greg’s parents are still together and, although elderly and past retirement, his father continues to work.

Adulthood

Greg finished high school at the age of 18 and almost immediately enlisted in the Canadian Navy as a hull technician. After training he was posted to Halifax where he remained until he left the military. He subsequently returned to his home town and worked various jobs including a retail position in a liquor store and grounds maintenance worker. He eventually re-enlisted in the military and trained as a metal tech servicing aircraft. He lived for several years at bases in Canada and Germany. He was eventually posted to the First Gulf War in 1991.

Greg returned from the Gulf War and was posted to Quebec base and, finally, British Columbia. It was while he was posted in Quebec that he met and moved in with a colleague, the mother of two girls who would eventually become his wife and mother to his child.

Fatherhood

While Greg’s wife had joint custody of her two daughters from her previous relationship, they were resident with their father in another city and visited for holidays and alternate weekends. While Greg had a role in their lives, he was not a significant carer with respect to his stepdaughters at the outset. Greg’s fathering role began with the birth of his own daughter Tiffany.
Greg shared the care of Tiffany with his spouse and fathered her in the same fashion as his father had cared for him. This included tucking her in bed, telling her bed time stories and taking her to the park. Greg also ensured she went to bed, “at a proper time” and would sleep in her room with her if she had a nightmare. Tiffany was his, “little gem”.

During her first few years both parents were working and Tiffany spent business hours in daycare. This changed when she was almost 3 years old and Greg was discharged from the military.

At Home with Tiffany

Following Greg’s discharge from the military he became a stay-at-home dad and primary carer to Tiffany during daytime. Greg’s care for Tiffany included having her help in the kitchen and letting her, “…stir the pot…” when cooking while at the same time ensuring she understood the stove was hot. He watched cartoons with her and took her shopping for groceries. While they were out in the community Greg would help her to understand street safety and traffic lights.

Greg’s primary care of Tiffany ceased, however, when

...my wife came home, I thought, well she’s there to watch my daughter now. Supper’s on, I made supper, the house was clean, it’s time you know for me to party. It’s time for me to have some drinks you know.

Depression, Addiction and Post Traumatic Stress

Greg started “drinking heavy again...” during the period he was caring for Tiffany at home. He was, however,

...trying to especially when I was with my daughter you know I wouldn’t drink around my daughter during the day or anything because I, you…I now I might have a cold beer or two but I wasn’t doing anything.

Alcohol had been a problem for Greg for some time and it was a factor in his discharge from the military. He had been struggling with changes within military culture that restricted alcohol use and,
...stopped the drinking. It was a shock to a lot of people that work sort of in that party frame of mind or if you had a problem with alcohol….It used to be acceptable to come into work hung over in the military. It used to be acceptable to have a couple of cold beers at lunchtime.

In addition to his alcohol use, Greg was suffering from knee problems that required two separate surgeries. He was also struggling with depression and, while he did not know it at the time, post traumatic stress following his Gulf War experiences.

Greg continued to use excessive amounts of alcohol and while he, “...wouldn’t drink a twenty-sixer every night…” he could and he would if, “…it was a Friday night and I wanted to get looped”. He was, “…seeing a social worker…” for his drinking but there was no other social work involvement. Greg’s wife became so concerned about his drinking she called the RCMP to the home one night when he was “… really drunk.” She told police she was” …sick and tired…” of Greg’s drinking and she wanted him removed from the family home. They complied with her request and removed Greg.

**Restraint**

Greg’s wife eventually sought and obtained a restraining order that forbade him from contacting her or the children. Greg has not seen his daughter or step daughters in 16 months⁸ and he has been either in prison or homeless for much of that time. He has never been assessed with respect to his capacity as a parent and there has been no contact from child welfare or any other authority with respect to his children.

**Summary of Fathers Interviews**

These interviews yielded significant amounts of information with respect to these father’s historic and current experiences of the British Columbia child welfare apparatus. While each fathers’ circumstances were unique, their treatment was similar in significant areas that echo the findings from research. All four were excluded and ignored at the outset by various professionals including child welfare social workers. They were disbelieved and discredited. They were ignored as resources for their children. All 4 had great difficulty being considered as suitable carers to their children and stepchildren and each one has struggled

---

⁸ At time of interview in June 2005
to not only retain his relationship with his children but also to obtain even a modicum of information with respect to their well being. This has happened despite all having provided some degree of primary care for their children and stepchildren.

While their treatment by social workers was similar, the outcomes with respect to each father and children were not identical. Two of the fathers managed to regain sole custodial care of their daughters after periods of care extending from 6 months to one year. These two men have cared for their daughters for over 4 years at the time of interview. The remaining two fathers had not seen their children and had no information regarding their safety and well being at the time they were interviewed. One father was restrained by a court order due to his addiction and mental health challenges while the other was excluded from contact for no apparent reason.

Their experiences with the child welfare apparatus, and those of their children, were directly the result of the gendered nature of child welfare social work. The remainder of this work is concerned with an analysis and discussion of these experiences.
Chapter Five: Discussion

This research seeks to answer two questions through interviews with four fathers engaged in the child welfare system. These are:

1. What are the experiences of fathers engaged in the child welfare system?

2. What do these experiences indicate for children, men and women involved in child welfare systems?

In the following section, I will discuss the information provided in the interviews with respect to the above questions and in light of the reviewed research.

Experiences: Andrew, Brian, Edward and Greg Encounters with Gendered Prejudice

These fathers told stories of exclusion, mistrust, avoidance, disrespect, deception and disregard. Their accounts suggest that all four were subjected to objectifying treatment, as were some of their partners. They were not considered capable of providing basic care to their children despite prima facie evidence to the contrary. They were disregarded by social workers in the manner described by Scourfield (2003) and UK fathers interviewed by The Family Rights Group (2009). They were rendered invisible to varying degrees in the fashion cited by Brown, Callahan, Strega, Walmsley, & Dominelli, (2009).

Their relationships with their children and stepchildren were, at best, reconstructed and redefined following child welfare involvement. At worst their relationships with their children were destroyed. To these fathers the child welfare social work interventions appears intent on reconstructing their roles. It so doing it alters their relationships with their children in a fashion that suits the views, prejudices and needs of a child welfare apparatus rooted in neo-conservative and hegemonic notions of paternity. These do not include notions that men are nurturing and capable of meeting the needs of children. The evidence is, however, that all 4 were capable, to varying degrees and in much different ways, of meeting the needs of their children.
Prior to Child Welfare Involvement

These father’s relationships to their children were significantly different prior to child welfare involvement. Each had their relationships to their children and stepchildren altered once child welfare became involved.

All Four Fathers Provided Significant Care

Each father provided nurture, physical and emotional care to their children and stepchildren in a diverse fashion consistent with research outlined by Lamb (2004); Pleck and Masciadrelli (2004) and Miller & Maiter (2008).

Greg, Edward, Brian and Andrew all reported that they had at varying times fed, bathed and clothed their children and stepchildren and had provided both sole and joint care. They read to them at bedtime. They changed diapers and fed infants day and night. They taught their children the mundane tasks of everyday life: how to clean their teeth, wash and brush their hair and safely cross the street. They read the girls stories. They kept them safe within the framework of their diverse family arrangements.

Brian bathed and fed the newborn Melissa and would soothe her when she cried at night. He would pace the floor with her until she was calm. He has had sole care of his daughter for most of her 5 years and continues to ensure that her needs, including her significant medical challenges, are addressed. At the same time he also continues to seek support to address what he has identified as his lack of parenting skill.

Greg was full time parent to his biological child and had visitor status with his partner’s other children who lived full time with their father. Greg provided daily primary care for his daughter while also suffering from then undiagnosed post traumatic stress.

Edward rose in the night to change diapers, make bottles and heat them up to feed his newborn. Even when he attended school full time he would come home at lunch to check on mum and baby. He made certain that Sara was protected from possible HIV transmission and made certain that all necessary medical follow up was in place.
Andrew cared for both a stepdaughter and a daughter. Andrew’s care of Layla involved driving her to school, taking her on outings and providing supervision as well as providing structure. He made certain that she had a nightly routine that included brushing her teeth and using the bathroom before bed. When April was born Andrew took on the additional responsibilities of feeding, bathing and changing diapers. Each father demonstrated care and love in individual and unique ways. They ensured their girls’ needs were met as any parent of either gender might in the first decade of the 21st Century.

After Child Welfare Involvement

Fathers Caring Abilities Ignored

Andrew, Edward and Brian had their parental capacities and paternal relationships ignored and discounted by MCFD and its’ social workers especially during crisis and child removal scenarios. Edward, for example, went from full time parent to occasional visitor to his child following her removal by emergency social workers. On the face of it, his daughter’s removal was unwarranted. She was asleep in her home with a capable carer, her father. While Edward does not argue that his spouse had little or no capacity at time of removal he asserts that he was fully capable of caring for her and volunteered to take a breathalyser or any other test of his immediate capacity. He was fully cooperative with emergency personnel and social workers.

Not Assessed

Greg has never been contacted or assessed by any social workers from the Children’s Ministry regarding his relationships with his children or stepchildren. While Greg’s circumstances and those of his child and stepchildren are somewhat different from the other 3 fathers he has had extensive contact with the courts and prison systems as well as addiction and homeless services. Despite his imprisonment and extensive contact with both government and contracted agencies with professional staff that includes social workers, none have seen fit to consider the needs of either this father or his children. This led Greg to undertake reestablishing contact on his own initiative.
Greg has made many starts in his effort to restore contact with his children but has been unable to locate any program or organization that is willing to help him reunite or regain some form of relationship with his daughter. This includes legal advice. While this does not directly speak to the issue of his treatment by child welfare social workers, it goes some way towards confirming the attitudes that exist with respect to marginalized and poor fathers outlined by Scourfield (2002, 2003) and imprisoned fathers Hairston (1998). These attitudes are also reflected amongst child welfare social workers. It is difficult to imagine a mother attempting to reunite with her children facing a similar situation of institutional neglect.

Both Greg’s and Andrew’s experiences with child welfare social workers are minimal since neither is currently in contact with their children and step children and both have been either avoided or completely disregarded by child welfare social workers. Greg has not experienced subsequent forms of oppressive practice from MCFD by virtue of this avoidance and failure to assess.

This also means that neither Greg nor Andrew has been assessed with respect to any risk they may represent to their children. While there are no known issues with respect to domestic violence and these two men, Greg’s exclusion from the family home in particular may have some basis in risk to his spouse, child or both. Andrew made a significant suicide attempt which does indicate risk to him and possibly others. The failure to assess these men in any fashion is consistent with findings outlined by Brown et al., (2009); Scourfield (2003); and Strega (2008).

Avoided

Social workers avoided Andrew and Brian in a more active fashion. Brian was not contacted when Melissa’s mother abandoned her within hours of having been taken to the grandmother’s home during an emergency child welfare intervention. He was subsequently avoided by social workers during her initial period of foster care when MCFD staff continually failed to return his calls.

Andrew too was avoided by social workers who failed to advise him of safety concerns impacting his daughter Layla. Andrew learned that his stepdaughter had been removed from her mother’s care in conversation with his mother. His attempts to contact social workers regarding the safety of his, much younger and hence more vulnerable child, Layla were initially ignored and when he did eventually make contact with a worker he was told to, ‘get a lawyer’. This latter advice to fathers is not atypical and was
cited verbatim by Brown et al., (2009) in their examination of how fathers in a mid-size Canadian city were treated by social workers and family serving agencies.

Andrew pressed on but was provided with no information regarding the details of the risk and the steps taken to ensure the safety of his infant daughter despite his legitimate concerns for her well being in the same risk situation as his stepdaughter. The failure to provide him with information is not only oppressive practice and a breach of ethical codes but is also a violation of Section 31, 34 and 38 of the Child Family and Community Services Act, British Columbia’s child welfare legislation, ("CFCSA," 1996) as well as MCFD practice guidelines and standards in force during the 1990’s and into the next decade.

Social worker avoidance and failure to contact fathers when their children are at risk, removed or otherwise engaged by child welfare systems has been noted by Brown et al., (2009); Daniel & Taylor, (1999, 2001), Featherstone (2006); and O’Hagan (1997). Fathers interviewed for the documentary video Fathers Matter also disclosed similar avoidance and it has been observed in professional practice.

**Disbelieved**

Ministry social workers did not believe Edward when he told them he was clean with respect to drug use. Edward alleges that social workers attempted to mislead the court when justifying the removal of his child by describing a “needle like object” as having been found in the home. This information was presented in the social worker’s report to the court following Sara’s removal. Edward believes the social worker was attempting to suggest to the court that a syringe had been found and that he had reverted to drug use. Upon being pressed by the court, the social worker eventually clarified that the object in question was a safety pin. This suspicion was largely due to their perception that Edward had access to economic resources. Edward was then subjected to repeated urine testing for drugs. This latter procedure is humiliating in several ways in addition to the implicit invasion of privacy it constitutes given that a credible outcome requires that the tester see the urine emerging from the body. Not one of these tests showed any evidence of drug use according to Edward.

Social workers also accused Brian of lying regarding his own use of drugs. He was offended by this accusation and the social worker hung up on him on more than one occasion because he would not admit
to such use. The social worker insisted that Brian not only was aware of his partner’s drug use but that it was her experience that what was true for one was true for both.

The circumstances surrounding child welfare intervention reported by Edward, Sara’s removal and subsequent risk reduction strategies were exaggerated and disingenuous. This form of demonizing and prejudicial and oppressive agency practice with fathers is discussed by Risley Curtiss (2003); O’Hagan (1997); Roberts (2002), Scourfield (2003); and Sternberg (2005).

Denied

Edward and Brian each made requests for assistance both prior to and after child welfare involvement. Both Brian and Edward were able, eventually, to obtain partial help based on the false assumption that their children were at risk of harm. This has been limited to daycare funding rooted in the conjecture that their girls are at risk. It has been provided despite there being no evidence of current risk. Ministry policy permitted this funding solely where social workers indicated the possibility of harm befalling a child. Parent support and anger management services have not been provided despite repeated pleas from Brian and evidence that he is not coping well with Melissa and her behaviours.

Andrew and Greg have never been provided any services related to their parenting or support for their children since resuming their custody. Brian has noted that what is available is not relevant to his or Melissa’s needs.

These experiences are consistent with indications of service needs unmet and prejudicial attitudes amongst service providers outlined by English (2009); Huebner (2008); Peled, (2000) and Sternberg, (2004).

Threatened

These fathers’ experiences with social workers were not limited to being discounted and ignored. They were also subject to threats and had both their character and capacities questioned. Edward, for example, was told by social workers that if he left his child alone with her mother he would be, “found a neglectful father.” He was also encouraged to separate from his partner.
A proposal made by Brian that would have allowed him to both work and care for Melissa was rejected out of hand and there is no evidence of any effort to work with Brian around a proposal that would have both allowed him to work and care for Melissa.

**Positives**

Edward did have a positive experience with a social worker. Edward reported that once he had obtained custody of Sara he was able to develop a relatively good relationship with one social worker. His case worker told him he had made healthy choices for his daughter and offered some additional supports.

**Summary of Fathers’ Experiences**

Having a child removed, legitimately or otherwise, is a traumatic experience which invariably leaves scars on the survivors. Andrew and Greg have not fared well. Neither had seen their children for long periods of time when interviewed. Andrew made a suicide attempt while Greg continues to struggle with addiction. Neither of the latter two fathers is in receipt of any services related to their children or their status as fathers.

The experiences and impacts suffered by these fathers as a result of exclusionary social work practices by were significant. Each has suffered variously as a result. All were denied their day-to-day responsibilities for their children and the emotional, psychological and social benefits that they accrue from exercising care. This meant no diapers to change, no stories to read, no meals to prepare, no tuck-ins and no rising to soothe a crying infant. Their desire to nurture, cuddle and care was denied them. During the course of interview for this research it was apparent from tone of voice and demeanour that his was painful for each father. While I cannot say for certain exactly what each father suffered, but in my own experience, it was like the pain following the death of a close family member.

Evidence has been provided by Edward and Brian that social workers made efforts to engage the mothers in their children’s lives. This included permitting Brian’s spouse to take the child to her mother’s home despite her intoxicated state. Social workers were, at least at the outset, willing to engage mothers who

---

9 During the course of practice, I have known one father and one mother to die of apparent suicide following child removal or upon being served with court documents outlining the case for foster care.
refused their approach in one case and abandoned her child in the other. They were also willing to engage a grandmother but not a grandfather. They were not, however, willing to engage capable fathers early on even after the mothers and grandmother were incapable or unwilling to provide care. They similarly were unwilling to engage Andrew as a possible alternative carer to his stepdaughter. This reluctance to engage fathers and a stepfather demonstrates that there was a failure to recognize the capacities of Edward and Brian to care for their children and Brian for his stepchild. The significance of relationships with their fathers was ignored until long after it became apparent the mothers and female relatives had little or no capacity to care for these children.

Brian and Edward were able to focus their efforts on regaining care of their children and both have succeeded. Their continued parental role is not, however, without both the usual and some extraordinary challenges for which they have received little or no support. This is partly due, again, to refusals by MCFD for requested services but is also because of a lack of trust on the part of the two fathers with custody. This lack of trust is based on their past experiences with the child welfare system.

**Deprived of the Benefits**

Fatherhood is a transformative event presenting a range of benefits and opportunities (Dykstra, 2009). Edward stated his life changed for the better when he became aware his partner was pregnant. These fathers were deprived of the positive impacts that fathering has upon men over both the short and, in two cases, the long term. Men who are resident and actively involved with their children are more satisfied with their lives; they socialize more and have greater involvement in their communities (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001).

**Impacts upon Mothers**

The impacts of gendered social work practices are not limited to fathers. Women and children too suffer from these discriminatory practices.
Mothers: Deprived of Services

The mothers of these children and former partners and wives to these fathers were not interviewed for this research. There is evidence that the impacts of father exclusion and prejudicial practices extend to the mothers of these children as well.

When MCFD refused Edward’s initial request for supportive services Edward’s partner, Alison, was unable to obtain the assistance requested as well. One initial impact upon this mother was the loss of her child to the care system at a very young age where she remained there for many months. Her contact with the child was erratic and she had not seen her for many years at the time of Edward’s interview. This may be at least partly due to the Ministry’s failure to provide assistance and timely intervention when needed and requested by Edward.

The Ministry’s reaction to Brian’s partner Marnie was similar in some respects. While her exact history is not known, there was evidence that she had been unable to care for children previously as none were in her care. At the outset, and despite her incapacity to provide for her daughter during a crisis which found her partying and intoxicated, the Ministry moved her to her own mother’s house with her child. She abandoned her daughter within 24 hours and has made only a few attempts to see her since that time. She is currently restrained by a court order from contact.

Edward’s and Brian’s former spouses have lost all contact with their children. Both of these women are restrained from visiting and seen as a risk to their daughters. They are no longer a presence in their children’s lives and the emotional toll of this absence upon these women can only be imagined. They may be suffering additional impacts both direct and indirect. The volume and severity of the social proscriptions heaped upon women who are seen as incapable of care or dangerous to their children is almost without measure.

The two mothers who retained custody of their children may have suffered adversely from the removal of these fathers from their children’s lives. These mothers are now facing challenges of raising children without economic or other support from these men. Both of these fathers were providing significant
amounts of both income and/or care of the children prior to separation/divorce and/or child welfare intervention.

There are also the well documented impacts of father absence upon child behaviour and well being with which these mothers will need to cope. These may include increased levels of aggression, poor peer relationships and other behavioural and psychosocial problems (Dubowitz, et al., 2001; Lamb, 2001).

Andrew's former partner has sole responsibility for Layla and a history of being unable to care for her previous children. She will be held solely responsible and subject to mother blame in the fashion outlined by despite the Brown et al., (2009).

Children

Children are also impacted by father absence. Depriving children of access to their fathers deprives them of a wide range of potential supports: economic, social and emotional. In so doing it violates both their rights and their well being.

Children's Rights Ignored

Article 8
1. States Parties undertake to respect the right of the child to preserve his or her identity, including nationality, name and family relations as recognized by law without unlawful interference.

2. Where a child is illegally deprived of some or all of the elements of his or her identity, States Parties shall provide appropriate assistance and protection, with a view to re-establishing speedily his or her identity.
- (United-Nations, 1989)

A state has responsibility to ensure children's well being and assist families to do the same throughout the course of their lives. When it fails to do so, the state may be violating the fundamental human rights of children as well as specific legislation and agreements such as the UN Convention on the Rights of Children. Both Canada and British Columbia are signatories to this convention.
Both the UN Convention and the BC *Child Family and Community Service Act* recognize the importance of a child’s family to her well being. The CFCSA states in its guiding principles that, “...a family is the preferred environment for the care and upbringing of children and the responsibility for the protection of children rests primarily with the parents...” The Act further states that when a family is able to ensure a safe and nurturing environment, “…with available support services...” then these should be provided (“CFCSA,” 1996). It should go without saying that fathers are a part of a family.

Both the UN Charter and the CFCSA also recognize the importance of listening to and hearing children. The CFCSA for example requires that “…the child’s views should be taken into account when decisions relating to a child are made...” and that, “…kinship ties and a child’s attachment to the extended family should be preserved if possible...” (“CFCSA,” 1996) There is little evidence that processes that actively engage a child and her views, either directly or through an advocate, are operant in British Columbia. There is some evidence that the UK has processes that give children the opportunity to be heard but, there is evidence from the NSPCC and children themselves that they remain unheard despite these processes.

The four fathers interviewed have been carers to a total of 7 children. All seven have been deprived of contact with their fathers for length periods of time. Some have not seen their fathers or stepfathers at all since either he or they were removed from the family home. One stepchild had not seen her father for many months and she has no knowledge of why this man is no longer in her life. Her infant sister has similarly been deprived of contact with her father.

Deprivation of contact between children and their families, fathers included, without significant grounds is a violation of both the British Columbia statute and the UN Convention. In these cases there is little evidence of “significant grounds” that would justify the elimination of contact. There is, however, evidence that there was a failure to fully assess whether such grounds existed at any time.

Failing to ensure reasonable contact between a child and their families during a period of care constitutes a failure to comply with provisions in both the UN Charter and British Columbia’s current child welfare legislation. It is ultimately a failure to ensure primacy of the well being and the rights of children in child welfare decision making.
Children Deprived of Active Father Involvement

For a child, just knowing that her father loves and values her has a profound and immediate effect on her well-being. Babies get their sense of security and love from having their needs met promptly and from how they are touched and handled. For a father, being an active parent opens a new world of love and affection that never before existed. Being an active parent will also have a positive effect on the baby's mother. Taking care of a baby is tiring work and sharing the responsibility means that you will both have more energy for your relationship with each other. If you are no longer involved with the baby's mother, sharing the parenting means that she will have the time to rest and renew her energy. That will make her a better mother to the baby. (British Columbia, 2009)

These fathers' experiences suggest that social workers who engaged these families did not heed the advice from the British Columbia health ministry cited above. The exclusion of fathers as carers led to three of these children being taken into the care system. All of the children involved had their relationships with their parents and stepparents significantly disrupted and, in some cases, permanently altered as a result of the state and institutional responses to perceived risks to their safety and well-being. Each child lost daily nurture and care from her father during her infancy for periods ranging from 6 months to ongoing. Two children lost permanent contact with their mothers as a result of events that are at least partly related to father exclusion.

The children who have lost contact with their fathers are deprived of the benefits of active father involvement. Evidence has been cited from Lamb (1997, 2001, and 2004) and Marshal, et al (2001) that provides support for the benefits that children derive from the involvement of all their parents or significant relationships in their lives, including fathers and stepfathers. The full range of benefits to children derived from father involvement is broad in scope. In their 2007 summary of the research concerning the beneficial impacts of involved fathers Allen and Daly note researches that have reported improved cognitive functioning in infants, evidence that children are better problem solvers as infants and better academic achievers when they first reach school. The same review reported that these children are more likely to enjoy school and obtain both higher education and better economic status as a result. Children with involved fathers accrue emotional, psychological, social and physical benefits according to the research
examined by Allen and Daly who also note the limitations of this research which includes over reliance upon single informants and the US base of most researches in their review (Allen & Daly, 2007).

With certainty one, and possibly two, of the children involved may have had First Nations or Métis heritage through their mothers. This connection to culture has been lost. There does not appear to have been any involvement with a band, Métis association or other First Nations organization. This happened despite legislation and policy requiring placement with an Aboriginal family.

The full range of harmful impacts that may befall these children as a result of the events and oversights related to father exclusionary practices may not yet be manifest. As they develop and grow older each child may experience additional impacts similar to those experienced by the children of divorce. It is not uncommon for children to blame their caregiving parent for the absence of the missing mother or father. There may also be physiological manifestations of emotional and health impacts such as those experienced by Melissa. While her particular challenge may relate to her development in utero, problems like encopresis in children have emotional components.
Chapter Six: Conclusion

The goal of this research was to document and analyze the experiences of fathers whose children are engaged in the child welfare system. The rationale for the research was that the child welfare system was treating fathers in a prejudicial fashion. This was an oppressive practice neither consistent with social work values nor serving the needs of families and children.

The fathers interviewed told stories of exclusion, prejudice, and disrespect. These were chronicles of busy social workers within child welfare institutions engaging in discriminatory practices. These fathers told tales of poor families struggling to survive while being monitored by an institutional culture focused on what Jonathan Scourfield has described as defensible actions rather than child well being and the provision of parental supports (Scourfield, 2003). These fathers’ experiences support two significant conclusions:

1. **Child welfare institutions and social workers, engage in oppressive practices with respect to fathers:** This occurs when social workers fail to engage fathers and practice in a fashion that has the effect of ignoring their rights and responsibilities for their children. It also has the effect of making mothers and other female carers solely responsible for an abusive partner’s behaviour. At the same time child welfare workers are failing to assess both the risks and benefits a father may represent to a child.

2. **The rights of children engaged in the child welfare system are violated:** Child welfare practitioners and The Ministry of Children and Family Development in particular fail to ensure the guaranteed rights of children, as defined in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. They also fail to ensure that their actions are consistent with sections of British Columbia’s Child Family and Community Service Act.

My interest in institutional proscriptions and prejudices with respect to fathers began with a personal trouble. It was my own experience of gendered prejudice during a civil court custody trial that led to my initial interest in the sociology of the laws affecting children and their families. This interest eventually led me to child welfare social work. Despite my own experience with gendered prejudice, I both observed and became complicit in practices that were discriminatory and oppressive with respect to the fathers of
children on my caseloads. This happened early in my 11 years of child welfare practice and tension between my personal, political and professional values and these discriminatory practices eventually led me to question these practices and undertake this research effort.

From the literature review I learned there was relatively little research focused on the children and fathers who were engaged in the child welfare system. The literature also indicated that fathers in child welfare often were not provided with the opportunity to take on responsibility for their children, were considered irrelevant to child well being and were generally ignored and avoided. They were also unable to accrue the benefits of fatherhood and were not able to address issues such as their violence or their role in the ongoing oppression of women.

I also learned, during the course of this review, that mothers were often held entirely responsible for their children’s welfare and were blamed when fathers were abusive to children. Lack of father involvement also meant that mothers could not benefit from an involved co-parent and potential support. They were also subject to violence when fathers were not properly assessed for risk.

The literature indicated that father exclusion meant that children on child welfare caseloads were not accruing the benefits of an involved father. The literature indicated that children could profit from increased father involvement by better cognitive development, school behaviour and life chances. They had no opportunity to voice their wishes. Children’s views were not obtained either directly or through the use of advocates solely concerned with their interests. Their access to all their relationships was not upheld and their rights under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child were violated.

From the fathers interviewed I learned that the importance of the relationship between these children and stepchildren and their fathers had been denigrated and/or discounted at various times by both social workers and the courts. These fathers told stories of being ignored, mistrusted, disbelieved, misjudged, avoided, misled and placed under surveillance. They were not provided with father specific services and what help they did receive was given under the assumption that their children were at risk of harm.

There were indications from these fathers that they and other family members were impacted by classism, racism, ageism, ableism and sexism. Two of these mothers were Aboriginal and suffering from addition
and possible mental health concerns. One had grown up and been abused in Ministry care. All these men were poor and in receipt of social assistance or indigent services at time of interview. Three of the four fathers were suffering from serious illnesses and addictions. All were subjected to objectification as a result of their gender. Ageism impacted the children, none of whom were able to give voice to their interests or obtain independent legal representation.

And Finally.....

I write the closing words of this thesis while once again employed as a social worker in British Columbia’s singular child welfare agency. I left this agency 9 years ago and since that time have practiced in adult psychiatric facilities, with indigent populations in Canada and children and families in the UK. I have returned not to child protection social work but to work with children and families with special needs. This is voluntary social work practice significantly different in many ways from my previous experience in this agency but not, I believe, dissimilar to child welfare practice in the UK. This is because English practice focuses on both child safety as well as children’s needs that are unrelated to safety but necessary for well being. While there are significant differences between my experience of children and family practice in British Columbia and England, it appears that both jurisdictions continue to have challenges, prejudices and proscriptions that need to be addressed in order to improve practice with fathers. While I cannot do a great deal to motivate change from above, I can improve my own practices in the interests of the families and children with whom I work.

Others who have examined our collective failings with respect to working with fathers have suggested a number of ways we can improve these practices. I also include some thoughts of my own.

Improving our Practice with Fathers

Our approach to fathers must be comprehensive at the outset. This means that we include biological, step and social fathers based on the relationship they have, not with the child’s mother, but with the child. We should never utter the phrase “mother and child” as if this is a unit. This may be problematic for some but, again, we are advocates for children. If a relationship is positive for the child, it needs to be explored. If the
nature of a relationship is unclear or if contradictions exist, these need to be explored. If a relationship is dangerous to the child this too needs to be explored and the danger addressed.

I would suggest that, notwithstanding the practice principles outlined subsequently, social workers in child welfare need to ensure that we engage anyone who has a significant relationship to a child. This principle has sound roots in British Columbia’s current legislation, policy and practice. Simply put it suggests that anyone with a significant relationship to a child may be a party to issues impacting that child because of their importance to her and potential as a support. We also need to understand whether the inclusion of a particular party may represent a risk to a child and we need to include male carers in our initial contacts, assessments and care plans from the start.

Concrete Steps for Practitioners

A number of researchers have made suggestions to help child welfare practitioners better engage with fathers. These are based upon the stories fathers told of their experience of child welfare social workers. In one example, a Canada-UK cohort of researchers examining father absence/inclusion outlined practice principles and strategies which may prove a useful starting point for practitioners wishing to engage in anti-oppressive and feminist informed work. These authors contend that child welfare social work has focused almost exclusively on mothers leading to, “…mother-blame and father-absence…” (Brown et al., 2009 p. 252). They conclude in part that this not in children’s interests and suggest that workers may better resource children by, “…seeking out and engaging fathers and father figures, including perpetrators, both as risks and potential assets” (p. 252). It is noteworthy that these researchers, like Peled (2000) do not exclude violent men out of hand. They stress, however, that father inclusion cannot be done in a fashion that further oppresses mothers. Their detailed suggestions are useful and worth consideration. The principles, which I have chosen to outline in bold, are listed below:

**First Principle - Acknowledge their existence**
First Practice Strategy - Acknowledge their presence

**Second Principle - Understand there are many different ways to be a father**
Second Practice Strategy - Be strengths-focused
**Third Principle - Violence does not necessarily eliminate men from being involved as fathers, but it must be taken up directly with them**
Third Practice Strategy - Respectful practice involves holding fathers accountable

**Fourth Principle - Understand the context**
Fourth Practice Strategy - Be knowledgeable about structural contexts and how location affects father involvement
(Brown et al, 2009, pp 248-252)

UK researcher Jonathan Scourfield outlines what he labels ‘practical measures’ designed to enhance the practice orientation of social workers with respect to gendered work. It is useful to remember that in the UK the child is considered the client and that files are held in children’s, not mothers, names. His suggestions follow:

- Consider parents to be clients as well as children
- Consider involving men at every stage of the child protection process if they are involved in their children’s lives whether or not they have parental responsibility
- Consider abusive men to be appropriate targets for intervention
- If the cause for concern is the man’s behaviour, he could be the main focus of intervention rather than the woman (although she will need support)
- Men can of course be engaged by social workers for challenge as well as for support
- Innovative pro-feminist cognitive-behavioural work with violent men can be used as a model for work with men who abuse or coerce women and children in other ways
- Women who live with abusive men cannot necessarily act to remove them because social workers tell them to, for all kinds of reasons. In responding to such women, social workers perhaps need to try and understand the world from the women’s own perspective whilst of course having regard to the well-being of the children
- Every family is different and every child will experience their situation differently. Formulaic responses to any kind of child maltreatment should be avoided.
- Managers should be aware of how choices about targeting particular forms of child maltreatment can impact differentially on men and women
- Inappropriate use of the term ‘parents’ should be avoided.
(Scourfield, 2003,p178)

Implementing and utilizing principles and strategies such as the above might involve radical changes in practice and even resistance from some practitioners and managers. That said, there is nothing in current BC or UK legislation that prevents implementation and there is statute, guidance and policy directives that

---

10 Unmarried fathers do not have automatic parental rights in the UK. Only those who have an agreement with the mother, who jointly register the birth of a child or who are married enjoy automatic entitlement.
might assist in implementing strategies such as those suggested by Scourfield and Brown et al. This includes Family Group Conferencing, Working Together Frameworks and British Columbia’s Family Development Response to name just some examples.

…it is open to social workers to resist the dominant occupational discourse, although it may be difficult (or impossible) to do so within the discursive spaces in which they operate… (Scourfield, 2003, p150)

Brid Featherstone notes that, “…each practice situation obliges the weighing up of hopes, fears, constraints and resources of those involved” (B. Featherstone, 2009, p190). Whatever we do as individual practitioners to ensure improved practice with fathers Featherstone further asserts that social workers, “….cannot bear the brunt of this project alone-social policies are crucial as are well resourced (this includes emotionally resourced) work environments” (p. 190). Making changes from within child welfare is a very difficult, perpetual and often frustrating process and might be, “…deep and potentially painful” (Featherstone, 2001, p185). That said small individual changes may be significant. The same author has also commented, with respect to her investigations with fathers in child welfare, that one of, “…the things that comes across from this research is how often individuals can make a difference” (Family Rights Group, 2009). Some of the fathers interviewed agree, fair minded social workers were key to their success.

Suggestions from Fathers

I did not ask the fathers I interviewed whether they had any advice for social workers or other fathers engaged in the child welfare system. This was on oversight on my part. It is not only fortunate that others have asked this question but it is also significant that the responses that follow were not only revealing but resonant with the experiences of the paternal subjects I interviewed.

In 2004 the advocacy organization UK Family Rights Group responded, “…to an increasing number of calls from fathers who had been overlooked when the local authority had decided to take the child into care…” by undertaking research with fathers and mothers within two UK authorities (Family Rights Group, 2009). The initial project goals were to:

- explore the barriers encountered by fathers and paternal relatives whose children are involved with Social Services;
identify effective ways of working with fathers and paternal relatives and
recommend steps that could be taken by the judiciary, the courts, national government,
and statutory and voluntary agencies.
(Family Rights Group, 2010)

The results of their research were documented in part on a DVD titled Fathers Matter: The views and experiences of fathers on their involvement with local authority children’s services. The fathers interviewed for the video material were from Southampton, Lambeth and Devon. These locations constitute a mid size city, a multicultural area of deprivation within London and a semi-rural area. The fathers interviewed provided the following edited suggestions to other fathers involved with child welfare services:

“Don’t give up, just constantly do what I done. I constantly rung...kept in contact...just bugged them every single day until they actually kinda took notice.”

“If you work with social care no matter which way the decision goes you’ll find out...you’ll find it works better I think.”

“Stay away from social services as much as you want....as much as you can.”

“Social services, with the best of respect, they’re not important, Your child is important and you have to think just because they may not know or may not agree with you, you have to think about things you can do as a parent rather than thinking about what they can do to help you.”

“I would say find out how you stand legally.”

“If you want it you want it I guess. You either want your son or you don’t want your kids. If you do want them you got to stress it, let them know...’cause when I let them know they was telling me, ‘Base’ are you sure you want to see your son?’ And that was upsetting me more wasn’t it? Obviously if I’m tellin’ you how can you ask me. ‘Am I sure?’ If you want to see your son, just keep goin’ for it man.”

“It’s just been so great to have some support there...to help me get through it ‘cause if I didn’t I don’t think I woulda done it on my own. You know, I couldn’t thank ‘em enough.”

“The quicker you just do everything they’ve got to say even though sometime it might be hard and you don’t agree...if you don’t agree you voice your opinion but make sure you think about what your ‘gonna say before you say it.”

This advice resonates with the experiences of the fathers I interviewed in 2005. Brian and Edward would no doubt have shared some of the foregoing assertions. This would likely be the case for the advice to, ‘bug them every day’ and constantly ring. They would also like agree with the advice to do what social workers ‘say’ and ‘stay away for social services’.
Fathers Advice for Social Workers

Some of the same fathers had advice for social workers in child welfare:

“Don’t rely too much on experience and what things in the past may have told you with families. You know every family situation is different”

“Try to get to know the parents before judging them. Like a new social worker that we’ve got she’s got a good technique. The first time she came to visit she didn’t read any of our files so she hasn’t got any image sitting there. She came and met us and spoke to us and tried to get to know us”

“Everything’s down to time. And everything seems like it’s got to be done by time with social services. Never enough time for social services and time is what is needed.”

“Be positive. Think positive. You know always support the people with the positive not negative. Try to be realistic and optimistic about things. Don’t always say: ‘What happens if?’”

“Answer the phone calls! Get them more involved earlier on”

“Don’t treat a person as a monster basically. Don’t go on what’s on a piece of paper.”

“Treat ‘em equally. It’s not all just about mums. To be honest view a dad the same as you’d view a mum.”

“All they cared about was the child which is good but they didn’t really care what we were doin’ workin’ or not like job problems or not….they didn’t even care whether I saw my son or not.”

“Everyone has a heart. Take the time to get to know the person, not on the piece of paper.”

“Just give people a chance. See how they doin’. Don’t judge people from the first sight. You can’t judge a person from the first time you see him. You know you have to give him a chance. At least give one chance, that’s what I am saying, one chance and see how he workin. I’m not askin’ for 3, 4 chances, 1 chance and see how workin with it.”

Don’t judge. See who we are. Get to know us. Give us a chance. Treat us equally. We are all different. Take the necessary time. We are human beings. Keep in touch. Be optimistic. Very basic admonitions to a profession that is ethically and otherwise bound to maintain the best interests of clients, respect the intrinsic worth of persons, carry out duties with integrity, advocate for programs and services that benefit clients and do nothing to bring the profession of social work into disrepute (British Columbia Association of
Social Workers, 2003). That synopsis of select sections of the BCASW Code of Ethics is all that is being asked of child welfare social workers by fathers with whom they are engaged. The request is reasonable and we, as a profession, should be able to comply.

Policy Implications

The project of improving child welfare has some significant policy implications for child and family serving agencies such as the Ministry of Children and Family Development, the Attorney General, the Representative for Children and Youth as well as other government ministries and departments in British Columbia.

The evidence from these fathers suggests that child rights are not central to child welfare practice in British Columbian in particular. These fathers’ children had their rights violated when their relationships to their fathers were ignored and even denigrated. They appear to have spent needless time in care at very young and tender years when the forging of paternal bonds is critical. Some of these children had their relationship to their fathers and stepfathers completely severed at the time of interview. These practices and the policies/policy vacuum from which they are derived do not serve the interests of children.

Child serving agencies, ministries, and policy makers in British Columbia must ensure full adherence to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child in policy and practice paying particular attention to all sections contained in Article 3, and Article 9 as well as Section 1 of Article 8. All branches of the provincial government and provincial ministries should undertake a review of all relevant programs, policies, and legislation to ensure compliance, particularly from this paper’s perspective, the support of a child’s right to be involved with both of his or her parents.

To move practice within MCFD in this direction, this ministry should develop a standard which clearly states that fathers, stepfathers and others must be engaged immediately and at all points of contact when children are either supported or deemed to be at risk whether before the courts or not. Decisions to exclude fathers should be documented and approved by senior management. This could begin with relatively simple measures, such as changing the current file naming convention that places files in mother’s names. The UK practice of holding files in children’s names might be considered for example.
Father involvement must be a consideration as MCFD and other ministries improve practice guidelines around domestic violence guidance. This guidance should consider the current research and best practices with respect to both the adverse impacts of violence and father exclusion. It is encouraging to note that there are some MCFD initiatives that are consistent with father inclusion and could potentially improve practice. These include the Alternative Dispute mechanism, Family Group Conferencing and the focus on family strengths.

The Ministry of Public Safety and Solicitor General should implement and fully fund child and family visitation facilities and programs for all fathers and stepfathers incarcerated in BC prisons.

The Representative for Children and Youth should continue to monitor adherence to the UNCRC across all ministries. Concrete efforts should be made to improve co-operation between this office and all government ministries and enhancements to the review processes now in place should be considered.

These suggestions are preliminary and I am certain that many other suggestions might emerge from many quarters. The ultimate goal of the policy suggestions above is the assurance that the needs and well being of children are paramount in both policy and practice and that these are both commensurate with the best research available.
There is a great deal of evidence contained in this document and elsewhere that, wherever safe and possible, children benefit from a fathering relationship. There is also significant evidence that social workers and others in child welfare do not act in a fashion that ensures that these relationships are not only possible, but given the opportunity to flourish. We have heard from academics, advocates, mothers and fathers that we need to change our practices to ensure father involvement in the interests of children. What more do we need?

The final thoughts on fathers go to some of their children. While this research has not taken place directly with them, it has been undertaken in their interest. It seems fitting to close with some of their thoughts on their fathers. The following is a series of photographs, captions and comments from the NSPCC’s 2008 photographic exhibit “Fathergood” an exhibit that displayed, “… young people’s views on father-daughter relationships. Alongside positive images of warmth and support is work illustrating loneliness, absent fathers and lost love” (NSPCC 2008). These images were all obtained from girls and female youth involved in the child welfare system in the UK. Given that all 4 of the men I interviewed fathered girls, it seems appropriate to close with several; images from this exhibit.
Text: The eye

“My dad is always helping me to see what’s best and keeping an eye on me.”

By Abi
No through Road

"I sometimes feel like talking to my dad is like trying to go down a NO THROUGH ROAD. It will always amount to nothing."

By Charlene
- Reema: “All the words on the fridge good and bad are what my dad means to me.”
- NSPCC

Edwina: “A Father who is broke and drunk; has no money, gets depressed and is sick of life so he drinks.”
“A picture on the wall, that’s all I really knew.”
By Tracey

Medals and trophies

“Without my Dad I wouldn’t have achieved any of this.”

By Abi


Appendices

Appendix 1: Recruitment Poster

Appendix 2: Interview Consent Form

Appendix 3: Interview Guide
Appendix 1: Recruitment Poster - Throwing Dad under the Bed

Fathers

Fathers and the Child Protection System

Are you a father or stepfather whose children have been involved with the child protection system?

A University of Victoria graduate student and researcher would like to interview you about your experiences.

If you are interested or would like more information, please contact David Roy at 250-818-9377 or droy@uvic.ca
Appendix 2: Consent Form – Throwing Dad Under the Bed

Participant Consent Form
(Researcher’s Copy)

Fathers Experiences with Child Welfare

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled “Fathers Experiences with Child Welfare” that is being conducted by David Roy. David Roy is a Graduate Student in the department of Social Work at the University of Victoria and you may email him if you have further questions at droy@uvic.ca.

As a Graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a degree in Social Work. It is being conducted under the supervision of Andrew Armitage. You may contact my supervisor at 250-721-8333 or by email to aarmitag@uvic.ca.

Research Purpose
The purpose of this research project is to ensure that fathers involved with child welfare are given an opportunity to describe their experiences with the child welfare system. It is hoped that social work educators, child protection workers and others involved with child welfare will use this information to improve current practice with parents and children.

Research of this type is important because all of a child’s relationships are important and indications are that fathers are often overlooked by child welfare social workers.

Why You are Asked to Participate
You are being asked to participate in this study because you have had experience with the child welfare system and it is the researcher’s goal to ensure that you are given the opportunity to tell your story in a safe and supportive environment. The researcher believes that the information you can provide is important.

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will include at least 2 interviews and other events to be determined by the researcher, yourself and the other fathers who may be involved in this research.

Recording of Interviews
With your permission, all interviews will be audio-recorded. With your permission, some interviews and discussions may be video-recorded. The recorded information will be transcribed or coded and identifying information will be removed using voice and image altering technology, a pseudonym or code number. The video will not be used for any other purpose without your permission and it will be destroyed at the end of
the project if that is your wish. Audio tapes may be retained for further analysis unless you wish these destroyed as well. Material will be stored in a secure location at the University of Victoria.

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, including the loss of several hours of non-work time.

**Risks and Benefits**

There are some potential risks to you by participating in this research and they include resurrecting negative feelings from the child welfare experience. To prevent or to deal with these risks the following steps will be taken:

- David Roy will provide you with an emergency contact number in case of crisis
- David Roy will provide you with a means of contacting him during office hours should you wish to discuss any aspect of your feelings during the course of this research.

The researcher seeks to both understand and ensure validity of the participant’s experiences with the child welfare system. Your participation may enable you to better understand that experience and share it with both professionals and others with similar experiences.

**Participation is Voluntary**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be destroyed upon the completion of the study or by June 2006.

**Conflict of Interest**

The researcher may have a relationship with some potential participants as a former child protection worker for the Ministry of Children and Family Development. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken:

The researcher, David Roy, has no current relationship with the Ministry. Historical and other information revealed by participants will not be disclosed to any other party by the researcher except as outlined in Section 14 of the Child Family and Community Services Act which states that:

> A person who has reason to believe that a child needs protection under section 13 must promptly report the matter to a director or a person designated by a director.

- CFCSA
Anonymity and Confidentiality
In all cases except the above, your identity will not be revealed by the researcher and the data will be coded in such a fashion as to ensure anonymity.

Data from this study will be disposed of by June 30, 2006 unless separate permission is sought to preserve it past that point.

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with social work educators and practitioners. This may take the form of a paper in a research journal, a popular article in a newspaper or a presentation at an academic conference.

In addition to being able to contact the researcher and the supervisor at the above phone numbers, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545).

Other individuals that may be contacted regarding this study include:
- Other fathers such as yourself
- Child protection social workers

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

________________________  __________________________  _________________
Name of Participant          Signature                     Date

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.
Appendix 3: Interview Guide - Throwing Dad under the Bed

Obtain first hand accounts from fathers involved with the child welfare system

1. Record this information in fathers’ words.

Primary Question
Describe your experience with the child welfare system.

1. Interview Prompts: What is/was the composition of your family?
2. How would you describe your relationship with your children prior to the involvement of child welfare?
3. How did child welfare come to be involved?
   - how did you learn that your children were the subject of child welfare concern?
   - what was the situation?
   - who else, with a relationship to the children, was involved?
4. Describe the social workers involved.
5. How did they treat your children, their step/mother other family members?
6. How did they treat you?
7. Was there court activity and, if so, what happened?
8. What was the eventual outcome/ is the situation ongoing?
9. How do you feel about your experience with the child protection system?
   - in what fashion was your status as the children’s social/biological father considered?
   - did the social workers and the courts consider your relationship to the children important?
   - did others (contracted agencies, psychologists etc) consider your relationship with your children important?
   - how was this reflected in your experience?
   - who do you think understood the significance of your relationship with your children?
   - who did not understand the significance?
   - was your or your children’s race a factor?
   - was your economic status a factor
   - was your gender a factor?
10. If your social workers (or other pros in child welfare) were here before you today, what would you say to them?
11. Do you have any advice for other fathers involved with child welfare?
12. Do you have anything else you would like to say?

Debrief

a. How are you feeling…ok?
b. Do you need to talk about this interview more or to another person?
c. Do you have anyone you can talk to later on?

Provide 24/7 crisis line number 386-6323 and daytime telephone number for interviewer as per ethics form.