

## **Father Involvement Research Alliance**

### **Father Involvement Research 2008** **Diversity Community Visibility** **Conference Report**

By John Hoffman

#### **Introduction**

FIRA hosted Canada's first International father involvement conference from October 22 – 24 2008. Father Involvement Research 2008 Diversity Visibility Community, held at Toronto's Delta Chelsea Hotel attracted 193 registrants, from ten different countries: Australia Chile, Finland, Japan, South Korea, Sweden, Turkey, the US, the UK and Canada. The program offered five thought-provoking keynote addresses, 23 breakout sessions and numerous networking opportunities. In total, over 60 papers were presented at the conference in either a workshop or poster format.

#### **Keynote Addresses**

##### **The Developmental Consequences of Father Involvement for Men and Their Children**

Robert Palkovitz, professor of human development, University of Delaware

Dr. Palkovitz kicked off the conference with a keynote presentation which examined the ways in which fatherhood, particularly active engagement in the fathering role, positively affects male adult development. Most of the father involvement literature, Palkovitz noted, has focussed on the impact of fathering on child development. However, a growing body of research is beginning to document the ways in which fathering leads to true developmental change for men, change that is relatively permanent, functionally significant and qualitatively different from the many other influences on men's adult development such as career, educational attainment, marriage, faith and community responsibilities.

Dr. Palkovitz reported that men's testimony in qualitative studies indicates that fatherhood is the primary shaper of their adult development. For example, men say that once they had become fathers they were motivated to change or improve certain aspects of their life that were "good enough" for themselves or even their partners but not "good enough" for their children. "For many men it seems to boil down to my partner chose me and can walk away if I'm not good enough, but my children didn't get to pick me and they can't walk away." This realization seems to be an important window of opportunity for men to improve their lives.

Not all fathers derive these same benefits. For those who do, it is active engagement in the fathering role and father child relationships that drives the positive developmental changes for men. Dr. Palkovitz concluded that if we can facilitate positive father involvement, not only will it benefit children, it will most likely have a positive benefit for families, communities and fathers themselves.

“It Takes A Village.” Exploring the role of otherfathers in African communities in the Diaspora, Wanda Thomas Bernard, professor of Social Work at Dalhousie University

Dr. Bernard, Canada’s leading expert in Black men’s experience of fatherhood, introduced the conference to the concept of “otherfathers.” These are the male relatives, neighbours and community members who often fill a father/mentor role for children in Canada’s Black communities when there is no biological or social father in the home. She argued that the current discourse about fatherlessness in Black North American families ignores positive contributions made by many Black fathers and also reflects a lack of understanding of the roles that non-biological fathers often play in the lives of children who do not live with or do not have a biological or step father in their lives.

Although almost half of Black children in Canada grow up in single parent families, Bernard challenged stereotypes that Black men are a negative influence on children and that African-Canadian mothers are raising children entirely on their own. Black families, she noted, tend to be based more on the extended family model than the nuclear family model and this approach dates back to the days of the Slave Trade when African children were often separated from parents during transport to North America.

One way communities compensate for father absence is through the parenting done by “otherfathers” and “othermothers,” the grandparents, uncles, aunts, neighbours, teachers and other community members who make efforts to play significant roles in children’s upbringing. These adults make contributions to children’s development and well-being that are seldom acknowledged by mainstream society. In her study of young black men, called *Survival to Success*, 55 percent of participants said they had an active father in their lives, who made important contributions such as being a first role model or mentor, helping with the transition to manhood and motivating children to achieve.

Dr. Bernard’s research also confirmed that factors such as systemic racism, marginalization, poverty and violence continue to affect the health and well-being of Black families and make it more difficult for Black Men to assume the role of provider, which in turn, contributes to instability in Black families.

If we wish to engage more Black men in parenting, we must develop a better understanding of the factors, including racism, that contribute to father absence, develop and/or strengthen mentorship programs for Black children and broaden

our conceptions of father involvement and father-friendly in ways that acknowledge and support the contributions of other fathers.

Why Does Father Involvement Promote Child and Adolescent Development?  
Addressing an under-theorized issue, Joseph Pleck, professor of Human Development and Family Studies at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign)

Dr. Pleck began by noting that, although there is growing evidence that father involvement has positive effects on child development, relatively little attention has been paid to the question of why this would be the case. He then offered a critical examination of four possible sources for a theory of father influences on children's development: attachment theory, "essential father" theory, ecological theory (Bronfenbrenner) and social capital theory.

Attachment theory, he argued, is inadequate as a model for explaining the effects of father involvement because the main period of parental influence in attachment theory is limited to the first years of a child's life and father involvement extends well beyond early child. He also noted that although attachment theory has devoted adherents, not all child development thinkers agree on the importance of attachment as the central shaper of human development.

Dr. Pleck also rejected essential father theory: the idea that fathers make a uniquely male and essential contribution to children's development. For one thing, he noted, all it takes to disprove the theory is, one example of a child raised successfully without a father's presence. He also noted that some research on children raised by lesbian mothers shows that they were doing at least as well as children raised by heterosexual parents. Moreover essential father theory is predicated on the idea that fathers and mothers are always essentially different. While mothers and fathers do tend to differ in some approaches to parenting, there is considerable overlap in what mothers and fathers do as parents. Essential father theory also ignores the considerable diversity of parenting styles among fathers.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of human development and social capital theory offer much more useful frameworks for explaining the ways in which father involvement serves as a protective/risk factor for child development as opposed to an all determining factor. Ecological theory provides a way of examining father involvement as one of many influences on child development. It also takes into account, not only how fathers influence the child directly but also fathers' influence the other social systems that impact children as they grow.

With respect to social capital theory, Dr. Pleck noted that the three recognized aspects of father involvement (engagement, warmth-responsiveness and control-monitoring) all influence family social capital and that fathers also contribute to a family's financial capital and community social capital. He concluded by noting that, as father involvement research and practice move forward, ecological

theory and social capital theory provide the best models for understanding the influence of father involvement on children's development.

Promoting Father Involvement Through National Policies: Assessing What Matters. Scott Coltrane, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, University of Oregon

Dr. Coltrane began by noting that the standard narrative about fathers' participation in child care and housework is that the amount of change from the 1960s has been insufficient given women's increased participation in the labour market. A more positive view is that there has been gradual progressive change in men's lives. Between 1965 and 2003 American men's share of housework doubled from 15% of the family total to 30% and their time spent on child care tripled (women's time doubled in the same period.) In the same period Europe men's proportional contribution to family work (child care, housework, and shopping) rose from 20 % to 35%.

Numerous factors affect men's time spent on domestic work, Dr. Coltrane explained. Generally, married men do less than co-habiting men. Men who work longer hours and earn more do relatively less housework and childcare. Highly educated men and those who believe in sharing family labour tend to do more, and men's contributions go up the more hours their partners are employed.

Dr. Coltrane and colleagues Oriel Sullivan, Linda McAnnally and Evrim Altintas used Norway, Sweden and the UK as a case study for assessing the affect of national family policies on father involvement in family work. Norway and Sweden offer some of the world's most progressive family policies including low cost child care and extended paternal leave with high income replacement including Daddy Days (paternal leave that cannot be transferred to the mother.). The U.K. offers meagre policy support for fathers. Data from the Multinational Time Use Study (which includes Canada, the US, Australia and many European countries) shows that Swedish and Norwegian fathers spent more time looking after children and doing housework than their British counterparts in both 1990 and 2000. Differences between father involvement with children in Sweden and Norway relate to the structure of the leave policies (including age of child, length of leave, and special Daddy Days) and the employment patterns of their partners.

In the 1990-2000 decade, men in all three countries increased the amount of time they spent in family work. The largest proportional increase was 39% in the UK compared to 14% in Norway and 9% in Sweden. Increases in the US were similar to those of men in the UK. American and British men started at lower levels of family work than their Nordic counterparts and they were less likely to utilize publicly supported child care, family leaves, or reduced employment options. In conclusion Dr. Coltrane noted that the harmonized international time-use data base should enable researchers to track and shed further light on

international trends in fathers' domestic involvement and factors underlying changes.

Reference: Oriel Sullivan, Scott Coltrane, Linda McAnnally & Evrim Altintas. Father-Friendly Policies and Time Use Data in a Cross-National Context: Potential and Prospects for Future Research. *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. In Press.

"I'm Still Their Mother." Fathers, Mothering and Maternal Gatekeeping. Andrea Doucet, Professor of Sociology, Carleton University

Andrea Doucet, closed the conference with a new look at what academics refer to as "maternal gatekeeping," drawing primarily from her own research including her qualitative study of primary caregiver fathers (and her book *Dr. Men Mother?*) and a qualitative study, conducted with doctoral student Lindsey McKay, of fathers' and mothers' experiences of negotiating, sharing and taking parental leave.

Dr. Doucet argued that although fathers are increasingly involved in raising children, both men and women still share a belief that child-rearing is primarily female territory and as a result, mothers have a substantial impact on men's involvement in parenting and child care. She also noted that maternal gatekeeping, a term coined to describe the ways in which mothers' attitudes and behaviour can promote or inhibit father involvement in families, does not only come from wives and partners, but that men experience types of gatekeeping in their communities. For example, her study of primary caregiver fathers, showed that men caring for children face increased scrutiny at times. She cited stories of cold receptions stay-home fathers have at playgroups and of a single father who did not feel he could allow his teenaged daughter to have sleepovers because "somebody might think something bad."

Currently, Canadian fathers experience a kind of gatekeeping around parental leave. Dr. Doucet cited data showing that the proportion of eligible Canadian fathers taking leave rose from 3% to 20% between 2001 and 2006 (much of that increase took place in Quebec where, due to "Daddy Days," 56% of fathers now take some parental leave). In spite of the fact that either the father or the mother can take parental leave, both men and women tend to see parental leave as female territory. Mothers will often say things like, "I let him have some of my leave," while fathers sometimes say, "she gave me some of her leave."

Another less obvious form of gatekeeping that fathers face is when their parenting is judged in terms of how much it resembles mothering. She argued that professionals and parents may ignore or undervalue some of men's contributions to parenting if they view fathering through a maternal lens.

Overall, Dr. Doucet said her work has brought her to an increasing understanding that although there are times when fathering and mothering are indistinguishable, gender-related factors still contribute to making fathering different from mothering

-5-

at times. Factors such as having a male or female body, gendered upbringing and backgrounds, and gendered social identities can sometimes affect the way fathers assume and play out parenting roles and can contribute to the gatekeeping fathers experience when they become involved in caring for children.

#### Breakout sessions: Paper presentations, workshops, roundtables and research posters.

Small group sessions offered delegates a chance to hear from researchers and community practitioners with expertise in myriad areas. Most sessions were about either understanding fathers or working with fathers. The most common theme was vulnerable fathers in a general sense. Almost one third of the breakout sessions were to subpopulations of fathers who face unique issues, are at-risk or vulnerable. The next most common themes were father education/programming and the transition to fatherhood.

A sampling of presentations is listed below.

#### Sub-populations of Fathers

- young fathers, Annie Devault, Université de Québec en Outaouias,
- the fathering experiences of men who are recent immigrants to Canada, David Este, Admasu Tachble, University of Calgary, Iraj Poureslami, University of Victoria
- fathers whose partners experienced postpartum depression, Carol Hauer, Murray Weeks, DADS Study, multi-site project headquartered at the University of New Brunswick
- the experiences of gay fathers, Chris Veldhoven, the 519 Church Community Centre, Rachel Epstein Family Services Association of Toronto, Jeremy Davies, University of Manchester
- supporting Indigenous Fathers, Jessica Ball, University of Victoria,
- fathers and child welfare services, Jean-Phillipe Tremblay, Université de Québec en Outaouias, Susan Strega, University of Victoria
- fathers of children with special needs, Ted McNeill, Hospital for Sick Children, Toronto

#### Father education/programming

- a school-based parent education program for fathers which has been operating in Turkey since 1997,

- It's Different With Dad, a Quebec-based public health initiative to include fathers in early intervention programs. Guadalupe Puentes-Neuman, Stephanie Breton, Université de Sherbrooke
- Dads Make A Difference, an adaptation of a program originally developed in Texas, Theo Boere, Nanaimo Men's Resource Centre
- More Than A Haircut, a program for fathers in Toronto's West Indian Community, Dalton Higgins, Susan Gowans, Macaulay Child Development Centre, Toronto
- the Father's Network, a six-week father education program Newfoundland, Derek Singleton, David Jeans, Janeway Family Centre, St. John's Newfoundland
- Focus on Fathers, an education program in York region offered in seven languages other than English. Ed Bader.
- The Parenting Partnership, a program designed to help new fathers and mothers become a strong, well-informed and effective parenting team. Carol Crill Russell, Invest in Kids

#### Transition to Fatherhood/Early parenting

- father's experiences of breastfeeding, Francine de Montigny, Université de Québec en Outaouias
- results of a study to assess the effectiveness of a video-feedback educational intervention for first-time fathers, Karen Benzies, University of Calgary
- long-term implications of parental leave in Finnish Fathers, Jouko Huttunen, University of Jyväskylä
- fatigue in first-time fathers (Lynn Loutzenhiser, University of Regina)
- Dad and Baby in the First year, Andrea Doucet, Carleton University
- Vital Communities Vital Support, a one year study of how well new parents feel supported by their communities, including data from a large sub-sample of fathers. Carol Crill Russell, Invest In Kids

#### Non-resident Fathers

- Low-income, non-resident father involvement with toddlers, Natasha Cabrera, University of Maryland
- Paternal responsibility and parenting after divorce, Edward Kruk, University of British Columbia
- Maintaining Paternal Relationships After Separation, Gilles Tremblay, Laval University

Other themes covered by presenters included: fathers and work, fathering and men's adult development, co-parenting, promoting father involvement, and influence of father involvement on aspects of child development and policies affecting father involvement.

#### Conclusion

Father Involvement 2008 demonstrated that, on an international level, father involvement is an active and growing field both in terms of research and programming and education for fathers. The conference all illuminated the numerous positive impacts of FIRA's research and knowledge dissemination activities and also the growing number of community and regionally-based father involvement initiatives and programs across Canada. In 2002, when the stakeholders gathered for a meeting to identify researchers, community partners and possible research themes for a national research project, it was hard to find even 15 to 20 Canadian researchers engaged in fatherhood research. Father Involvement 2008 attracted some 45 Canadian professors, graduate students and other researchers who are currently doing research related to father involvement and many more were unable to attend due to other commitments.

Moreover, although Father Involvement 2008 was positioned primarily as a research conference, close to one third of the attendees were Canadian practitioners working with families, including representatives from fathers' programs in Alberta, BC, Newfoundland, Ontario and Quebec. This indicates a growing desire among Canadian social workers, parent educators, public health officials and mental health professionals to improve their knowledge of father-inclusive practice and programming. It also shows there is a growing recognition that father involvement is a relatively untapped resource for supporting healthy child development, family well-being and the health of communities.