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**THE PROTECTIVE POTENTIAL  
OF FATHERHOOD**

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## The protective potential of fatherhood

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# *The Protective Potential of Fatherhood*

My thesis work was focused on defining what Fatherhood means in Kwakwaka'waka communities in order to help frontline workers understand more about First Nation Fathers.

My goal is that doing so will support social service workers to find new meaning, reach out in different ways, and view our Fathers as potentially protective rather than harmful factors (Ball, 2009; Ball, 2013; Ball & Daly, 2012; Strega et al, 2008; 2009).

“Fathers may well be the greatest untapped resource in the lives of Aboriginal children today. If we could understand and support them to get involved and stay connected with their children, that would be a big protective factor for these youngsters as they grow up.” (John, E. 2004)

## *Kwakwaka'waka Fatherhood*

When asking my social worker colleagues if they've ever received training on how to work with and bring in Fathers that have perhaps never been consulted about their children's open files, the answer is often “no” or “well, we've received domestic violence training and how to reintegrate a sex offender training.”

I don't want to dismiss the alarming statistics about the frequency of male-bodied persons perpetrating multiple forms of abuse against women. But there is a lot to say that isn't said about the men who don't fit in this stereotype. I want to break from only conceiving of Fathers as absent or abusive and explore the idea of Fathers as a protective element in their families and communities.

Through the process of hosting conversations with Kwakwaka'waka Fathers, I've learned that the barriers they face are bigger than simply "stepping up to the plate." As I spoke with these fathers, three recurring themes emerged that framed the challenges

### **Understanding these themes can help social service workers better understand and support the fathers they work with in their communities.**

they face when it comes to being involved and connected with their children. I believe understanding these themes can help social workers better understand and support the fathers they work with in their communities. These three themes are: the impact of the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, grandparent roles, and men in culture.

### **FATHERS AND FISHING**

Historically, "men [would] define fishing—especially salmon fishing—as their most important economic activity" and while "many men could earn a great deal more money through logging, but they [choose] not to." (Rohner, 1970) However, the Department of Fisheries and Oceans (DFO) has, over time, made fishing inaccessible as a trade and thus removed a vital part of what has been considered Fathering from the lives of our men.

In the past, the boats were where our men were actively learning how to parent, how to

be responsible, where they listened to their Elders' stories, where they began to step into their parents' and grandparents' boots to bring in the next generation, have been taken away. Losing access to fishing removes food security for many First Nations as well as the financial stability required by the western world. Perhaps worse, it removes our culture and severs the intergenerational knowledge transfer necessary to our survival as First Nations people.

It's on those boats that our Fathers learn about problem-solving and sacrifice, hard work, creativity, failure, and perseverance. Fishing has served as a vehicle to ground us in our culture and has always been a part of our identity. But since the establishment of the DFO, we have been losing all these things. Residential, Boarding, and Day Schools wiped out the opportunity for generations of children to learn from healthy parental role models, the DFO is doing a really good job continuing that genocide.

A prime example of this is the price tags put on the licenses required to fish commercially. These licenses were created and then bought up by colonizers and now cost so much that only the upper class can afford to own one; there is only a very small number of owner-operators. The hot hands that hold these licenses now lease them out at exorbitant rates that make it extremely difficult to make a living after paying for the lease, the crew, the gas, the equipment, and food.

This forces First Nations with boats to work harder for less, often taking out smaller crews to handle the massive job of bringing in enough fish both to sell and to feed their Elders and community members. The pressure to bring in a big-enough catch doesn't allow for the younger generations to be present on the boats in the way they have in the past. The high-pressure environment is not conducive to teaching and the stakes are too high to have extras on board to feed and care for.

This loss of inter-generational knowledge does more than just put First Nations food security at risk. Since the knowledge of how to harvest fish is primarily attained through commercial means, remote First Nations communities are also losing access to the social and ceremonial aspects of fish and fishing. This is resulting in the destruction of culture, belonging, and self for many First Nations Fathers.

## FATHERS AS GRANDPARENTS

Grandparents were, and continue to be, a vital source of learning and parenting. Each of the Fathers that I spoke with commented numerous times on the roles their Grandparents played in their upbringing.

It was very common for children's parents to leave the Village to work for months at a time. Men would primarily head out fishing for months at a time, and the women often worked in the canneries. Children were left in the Villages to be raised by their Grandparents and other community members. This was never viewed as neglect

or as shirking responsibility but was simply the way of life.

In the book, *Recollections of a Coastal Indian Chief*, Harry Assu reflects "When I was a young boy, I spent a lot of time with my Grandfather. He told me stories of his life time on these waters. I learned many things from him." (Assu, 1989, p25) In Isaac's work, Elder Vera Newman "had just about every night with my grandparents" and said "Grandfather sometimes told us legends" and "sometimes he danced for us" and was "always teaching us." (2000)

But today families struggle with the western world's imposition of children being the sole responsibility of the parents—especially when child welfare becomes involved. Child welfare assessments demand the primary parenting responsibility be defined and placed on one or two persons. However, in many First Nation communities, there is no easily identifiable primary parent and the role of grandfather is another that many Fathers have lost access to.

## FATHERS IN CULTURE

Our men hold the responsibility of carrying and passing of names, passing of dances, carrying and sharing of secrets; they're the owners of the honour of hamatsa, they are our composers, our singers, the hosts of our potlaches, our fishermen, and they are our Chiefs (Boas. 1897, 1920, 1921, 1925). First-born sons in our families are taught early on about the importance of upholding their family's name since they are in-line to inherit their family's Chieftainship. (Spradley, 1969,

p. 9; Walkus, 2018). The eldest sons of our families also commonly carry the responsibility of all of the younger siblings. They are given parenting roles very early and help to ensure their siblings' safety and health.

On top of all the responsibilities given to them by their community, they also hold all the responsibilities that western society has placed on Fathers. They must be “all-star” dads and be present and available and have meaningful time with their children. They must also be bread-winners and be able to fully provide for the children and their partners. They must be the do-it-all and know how to accomplish the various tasks associated with masculinity—fixing the sink, putting broken toys back together, building a shed, etc. The cultural expectations and demands on fathers are extensive.

### **We need to create space for Fathers to take a breath, regroup, and regain their place in the community and their power.**

Many of our Fathers have not been able to take the time to step back and look at all the weight that society has put on them or the extreme expectations they face. Instead of thinking and planning how they want to carry themselves in community, they are stuck trying to constantly live up to or prove

wrong the labels and personas placed on them by the western world. I believe that we need to talk more openly about how many roles our Fathers are trying to fill, the places and activities where learning has historically come from, and the changes that have happened to spaces and practices. We need to create space for Fathers to take a breath, regroup, and regain their place in the community and their power.

### **RETHINKING FATHERHOOD**

Jessica Ball states that Indigenous Fathers are “arguably the most socially excluded” persons and that the intergenerational disruptions, residential schools, incarceration, and racism are all key influences on their ability to successfully parent (2009, p. 29, 30). I would add to this list the

DFO's role in removing the intergenerational knowledge transfer and mentorship (which is so vital in First Nations communities) by making fishing inaccessible. So what do we do?

A recent study by Caroline Mniszak, *Exploring the information contexts of young fathers in two British Columbian cities, looked at the lack of appropriate resources for young Fathers (2018)*<sup>1</sup>. According to her work, very little research has been done in the area of young Fatherhood and there are

1. Mniszak defined young as 14-24 years of age for the purposes of her research.

extremely “disproportionate amounts of services and information resources available for young mothers versus young Fathers” (2018). Her work echoes that of Ball, Strega and Brown which also calls for appropriate programs and services designed specifically for Fathers (Ball, 2010; 2012; 2013; Brown, 2009; Mniszak, 2018; Strega et al, 2007).

In order to see our Fathers differently—as protective factors that contribute to children’s well-being—there must be a number of changes: policy reform, patience, positive media representation, new programs, and paternity testing (Ball, 2012). There also needs to be a mentality shift among front-line workers where greater involvement of fathers is sought out and supported rather than labelled as ‘absent’ when the system doesn’t create space for them.

There would be value for frontline workers to learn more about the traditional and potential roles of First Nation Fathers and how they can better and more creatively support and engage all Fathers. Working to increase the involvement and engagement of Fathers will not only increase the health and well-being of their children but of the Fathers as well. And this, in turn, will serve to create “safe, healthy, and nurturing families [that are] strongly connected to their communities and culture.” (MCFD, February 2018).

My research is dedicated to creating change in our systems of care—change

that recognizes the value and supports the involvement of Fathers, Sons, Brothers, and Uncles within our communities within the systems that we encounter. Although western, patriarchal society favours my male counterparts, this is not the case in many First Nation communities. Our men are trying to thrive without many of the supports and programs that are available to our Sisters, Mothers, Daughters and Aunties and we all need to work to change that.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

My name is Laqwalaogwa and I’m from the Ligwilda’xw people of the We Wai Kai Nation. I lived and learned on the lands of the Coast Salish and Straight Salish people

### **Working to increase the involvement and engagement of Fathers will not only increase the health and well-being of their children but of the Fathers.**

for over ten years until my move in 2016, back to my traditional territory where I was born and raised. Although there is no grounding like being home, I am very grateful for the opportunities that the South Island gifted me. I have practiced in the areas of Guardianship, Resources, Child Protection, and Health. I have been a practicing social worker for nine years and continue to find great meaning in this work.

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