

Engaging mothers and fathers: Challenges for social service practices with parents

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Abstract

Within the last quarter of the century, feminist scholars have taken up the challenge of rendering visible the experiences of women in relation to the care of their children. Feminists have documented the longstanding legacy of relying on women as mothers to provide the daily care and nurture of their children. Recent shifts in feminist thinking have recognized that marital status and family composition, socio-economic and employment status, housing conditions, geographic location and mobility, culture and religion figure variously into women's maternal capacities and experiences of mothering. These understandings, however, stand in stark contrast to the actual practices of helping professionals who, whether consciously or unwittingly, continue to scrutinize women's mothering skills and hold mothers to account for the problems and solutions faced by their children while minimizing the emotional and socio-economic contexts that shape women's experiences of mothering. At the same time, social service professionals have to date been notorious for ignoring men as fathers.

Recently, across Canada, the US, and the UK, there has been an unprecedented concern by scholars, policy makers and social workers to engage more actively men as fathers as resources for their children and supports for their partners. This goal is rife with challenges due to men's customary avoidance of help-seeking, and disagreement over the benefits and risks of reaching out to men as fathers. Whereas some feminists have argued for facilitating father involvement in family life, others are cautious for fear of the threat posed by "abusive" men or the glorification of often meagre paternal contributions. Nonetheless, recognizing that helpful interventions and outcomes for children generally rest upon mutual understandings and cooperation around problems, this research investigates social work relationships with mothers and fathers in response to their children's difficulties.

The proposed research is based on qualitative case studies of three distinct social service settings that respond to the needs of families during times of difficulty with a child: a hospital social service department, a community-based family service agency, and child welfare agency. At each site, data collection will entail participant observation, examinations of documents describing mandate, policies, and procedures. Semi-structured interviews between social workers and mother and father clients will also be done. Topics will include their conceptualizations of the difficulties related to the child, their thoughts on social work interventions, and their insights into the pathways, barriers, and consequences of working together.

Taken together, these case studies aim to:

1. trace how women are constructed as mothers and men as fathers by helping professionals;
2. explore how social workers develop relationships with mothers and what efforts they make to engage fathers;

3. identify any obstacles and tensions that arise between social workers, mothers and fathers in their understandings of and responses to the difficulties encountered with their children;
4. explain how and why social work interventions that may ostensibly designed to enhance the well being of children may produce contradictory and unanticipated effects for mothers, fathers and their children.

An immersion into the everyday social work practices with mothers and fathers in three social service settings provides insights beyond the idiosyncrasies of each setting. These case studies will provide understandings of mothers' *and* fathers' individual experiences of parenting and their intersected parenting relationship. This project has direct appeal to social workers and allied professionals who will be invited to rethink policies, procedures and practices that often unwittingly reproduce both mother blame and the invisibility of fathers in relation to their children's well-being. The results of this research will be disseminated beyond scholarly audiences to include training materials and workshop presentations to professionals dealing with children and their families.