



Absent and Problematic: The Representation of Fathers in the Program Policies of Organizations that Provide Family-Centred Services in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside

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Abstract

Parenting education interventions and parenting programs are important for health promotion efforts among children and families; however, the majority of parenting programs are directed towards and attended by mothers. This is problematic because research has consistently demonstrated that fathers' active participation in the family can have a positive influence on mothers' well-being, children's self-esteem, success in school, and interpersonal relationships. In this paper, using an intersectional poststructuralist framework, document analysis, and Bacchi and Goodwin's "What's the problem represented to be" approach (WPR), we analyzed the program policies of 12 organizations that provide family-centred services in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. We identified the following three discourses: organizations strive to be client-centred and provide choices; organizations want to empower their participants; and women need safe place to raise their families. Our analysis revealed that fathers are absent or represented as problems in program policies, and that this has consequences for not only fathers but also mothers and children.

Keywords Fathers · Fatherhood · Masculinity · Parenting · Gender

Highlights

- Dominant discourses of gender are upheld through the exclusion of fathers in program policies.
- The exclusion of fathers in policies produces them as either absent/problematic and can adversely affect families.
- Organizations uphold damaging discourses of masculinity that can undermine efforts to prioritize the needs of mothers.
- Changing language in policies may help family-centred organizations shift services and better support families.

Located on the traditional and unceded territory of the Səlilwətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh), the x^wməθkwəyəm (Musqueam), the Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish) and the Stó:lō Nations, the Downtown Eastside (DTES) of Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada, is home to people who are residents of what is considered one of the most marginalized neighbourhoods in North America (Hasson & Ley 1994; Jozaghi et al., 2016). Marginalization refers to the experience

of being denied access to rights and opportunities on the basis of their gender, ethnicity, culture and/or economic status (Hall et al., 1994). To address these issues, the DTES is now a hub of resources, food, and support for individuals experiencing marginalization, such as women, children and youth, street-involved individuals, people who identify as LGBTQI, sex workers, people with disabilities, and people who use substances (City of Vancouver, 2019; Ivsins et al., 2019; Newnham, 2005). Indigenous people are also overrepresented in this community when compared with other areas of the city (City of Vancouver, 2019; Martin & Walia, 2019). Additionally, while the DTES has a relatively small population of children compared to the city overall (City of Vancouver, 2019), there are a number of organizations that provide family-centred services (Ivsins et al., 2019); however, little is known about the services available to and lived experiences of fathers in this community.

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Recent community-based participatory research (CBPR) by Darroch et al. (2021) examined the role of fathers in mothers' wellness in the DTES. In this work, participants revealed that there are a number of gaps that relate to the representation of fathers in organizational policies and services, which cause a number of challenges for both parents and service providers in the DTES (Darroch et al., 2021). Given that CBPR is an iterative process that prioritizes the needs and voices of the community, exploring the nuances within these gaps was a fitting next step in creating change within the DTES community. Identifying how fathers are represented in program policies contributes to better understanding of what services are available to them and their lived experiences as fathers in the DTES. Further examination into the systems of power that have contributed to the exclusion of fathers could also aid organizations in better supporting mothers and children.

To understand how fathers are represented in the program policies of family-centred organizations, we employed an intersectional poststructuralist framework and conducted document analysis on the program policies of 12 organizations that provide family-centred services in the DTES using Bacchi and Goodwin's (2016) "What's the problem represented to be" approach (WPR). We identified three discourses within the program policies: (1) organizations strive to be client-centred and provide choices; (2) organizations want to empower their participants; and (3) women need safe places to raise their families. Our analysis revealed that fathers are poorly represented in program policies and brought light to the ways in fathers are constructed as problems.

Literature Review

In the following section, we explain the importance of parenting programs in communities in which members experience marginalization. Subsequently, we discuss pervasive discourses of gender as they relate to parenting. Finally, we describe the importance of including fathers as well as the challenges that they face in finding support services.

Parenting Programs in Communities that Experience Marginalization

Programs that support the complex needs of parents living in communities that experience marginalization provide crucial services, but there are a number of factors that influence program efficacy. It is well known within the literature that parents experiencing marginalization have less access to resources and need additional support services in comparison to those that do not experience

marginalization (Gillies, 2005; Romagnoli & Wall, 2012). Parenting programs and parenting-centred services are used to address social inequities and increase long-term health outcomes for children (Berry & Fraser, 2014; Johansson & Klinth., 2008). Some of the key benefits of parenting education programs identified in a scoping review by the Wilder Research (2016) are improved parental competency, increased positive parenting practices, increased social connectedness, improved child behaviours, improved parent-child interactions, and finally, improved parental mental health. However, Toure and colleagues (2020) also identified that for parenting programs to be successful, certain facilitation factors are required. One example they found is that staff need to deliver programs in a flexible and non-judgemental way to ensure that participants feel comfortable enough to benefit from the material (Toure et al., 2020). Recognizing the context that shapes the lived experience of participants is an important step in providing effective programs.

Some parenting services and programs have faced criticism because there is potential for them to reproduce inequalities and oppression. For example, Indigenous peoples experience tremendous marginalization in Canada (Jacklin et al., 2017; Koggel, 2018). As a result, parenting support services and programs that target this population have been created, though there has been criticism of the ways in which some of these services and programs reproduce the colonial project of disrupting Indigenous ways of being by way of separating Indigenous children from their families (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Suggestions for addressing these concerns include a restructuring of helping practices to shift authority and control back into the hands of the community (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). Indeed, parenting education interventions hold great promise in promoting healthy children and healthy families when these issues are addressed.

Gender and Parenting

Dominant discourses of gender have important implications for both parents and their children. Traditional gender discourses present women as being gentle, caring, naive and vulnerable, while men are cast as being strong, stoic, powerful, and often violent (Albritton et al., 2014). Second-wave feminist movements throughout the twentieth century worked to debunk these discourses to secure equal access for women in economics, politics, and education (McKeen, 2018). Many of these movements endorsed concepts related to empowerment and having control over one's own life as the ultimate goal (Sharma, 2000). However, because these movements were rooted in neoliberalist notions of agency (McKeen, 2018), they relied heavily on self-mobilization

and individualism to meet the goal of empowerment and failed to acknowledge the complexities of access and power that extend beyond gender (Mosedal, 2005). Further, within these movements, critics have identified the ways in which empowerment frameworks isolate and project men as adversarial to women (Sharma, 2000), while ignoring the ways in which toxic, hegemonic masculinity also disadvantages men (Johansson & Klinth, 2008).

Pervasive discourses of gender have implications for all members of the family. Traditional gender ideologies paint mothers as being more naturally nurturing and superior caregivers (Zuo, 2004), whereas fathers are typically stereotyped as being the breadwinners (Allport et al., 2018). Within the literature, parallels have been drawn between the incompatibility of caregiving and hegemonic masculine ideals of being a successful family provider (Bianchi et al., 2000). Indeed, Yarwood and Locke (2016) identified that working-class fathers in the United Kingdom believe that because they are the breadwinners, they are too busy to participate in caregiving. More recently, there has been significant shifts towards a more equitable division of domestic labour and parenting roles, particularly for fathers who are taking on more parenting responsibilities, more household chores, and taking more parental leave (Rehel, 2014); however, this is much more common in populations with higher socio-economic status. Members of populations that experience marginalizing conditions have been found to have more traditional and hegemonic constructions of masculinities (Chairetis, 2019). It is therefore critical to better understand how dominant discourses of gender shape the construction of fathering identities in marginalizing conditions.

Importance of Fathering

Fathers' involvement in their families is often discredited because of pervasive gender discourses, but researchers have consistently shown that their active participation in the family can have positive influences on children's self-esteem, success in school, and interpersonal relationships (Lamb, 2010; Sarkadi et al. 2008). For example, increased involvement from fathers was shown to decrease the gaps in school achievement between socially disadvantaged students and their counterparts (Cabrera et al., 2007). Barker et al. (2017) found that secure attachment between the father and child was linked to a reduction in adverse child outcomes. Fathers' involvement in the family has also been found to contribute to mothers' well-being and reduced postpartum depression (Goodman et al., 2014; McClain & Brown, 2017). In spite of the aforementioned benefits, there are significantly fewer services aimed at providing skills and support to fathers compared to mothers (Bayley et al., 2009; Sicouri et al., 2018).

Barriers to Fathering in Communities that Experience Marginalization

In addition to there being far fewer father-focussed parenting programs compared to those for mothers, fathers face a myriad of barriers when attempting to access parenting support services (Summers et al., 2004). Fathers who experience marginalizing conditions are often subject to discriminatory discourses that present them as absent, selfish, and lazy (Coley, 2001). Because there are so many more programs for mothers, some fathers report that they fear that the program material will not address their unique needs (Bayley et al., 2009) or they will feel criticized, judged, or discriminated against (Summers et al., 2004). Studies have shown that child welfare practitioners rarely invest in fathers, and that fathers are given significantly less supervised visits with their children than mothers (O'Donnell et al., 2005). Moreover, despite the knowledge that men are more often homeless than women, there is a dearth in housing programs and initiatives that are appropriate for fathers and their children (Rogers & Rogers, 2019). Fathers have also reported that they do not know these programs exist, struggle to know where to find them, and feel frustrated by the programs' mother-centred content (Panter-Brick et al. 2014). The ease with which a participant can locate services that are relevant to them speaks to the importance of adequate representation in program policies and mission statements in non-profit organizations, and can have significant implications on feelings of inclusion for participants (Kosny & Eakin, 2008).

Fathers endure a number of challenges when parenting because they can face discrimination (Amato, 2018). With limited programs available to address coping strategies for fathers, fathers experience fewer opportunities to work towards self-improvement and address patterns of abuse when compared to mothers (Bayley et al., 2009). In addition to not having the opportunity to gain parenting skills, being excluded from parenting programs means that fathers are less likely to develop friendships and find role models through which they can gain skills in and confidence about their parenting (Eddy et al., 2019). The barriers to parenting programs that fathers face may be indicative of the ways in which fathering is undervalued in comparison to mothering.

This review of literature provides insight into the ways that discourses of gender and masculinity have shaped fathers' lived experiences of accessing parenting support services. Given that there is little known about fathers living in Vancouver's DTES, our goal in this research was to understand how fathers are represented in the program policies of organizations that provide family-centred services in this community.

Theoretical Framework

To unpack the ways in which gender discourses related to masculinity and fatherhood are embedded within, and contribute to the language used in program policies, we engaged with intersectional poststructuralism. Intersectionality theory enables an examination of the ways in which differences between marginalizing characteristics, such as ethnicity, class, religion, and sexuality are not mutually exclusive, but are rather inherently intertwined (Choo & Ferree, 2010). Intersectionality restructures our understanding of social categories of difference and disadvantage by examining the historical, intellectual, and political ways in which they are connected (Cho et al., 2013). Poststructuralism can complement intersectionality by exposing how meaning is relative, constructed through discourse and changes over time (King, 2015). Poststructural theorists work to examine the ways in which dominant discourses are often presented as being the “truth” through exposing systems of power embedded in language, texts, and culture (King, 2015).

By adding a poststructural lens to intersectionality theory, intersectional poststructuralism can be used to undermine the construction of identity categories like gender, ethnicity, and sexuality as static and two-dimensional (Staunæs & Sondergaard, 2010). In revealing the processes that shape dominant discourses about identity, intersectional poststructuralism is effective in contesting the ways in which language, texts, and culture are often presented as truth. Intersectional poststructuralism has been criticized by researchers for its inability to provide practical strategies for addressing inequities (Dressler & Babidge, 2017). However, understanding the context and meaning behind the processes that shape experiences of identity is helpful for revealing new strategies and steps that can be used effectively in dismantling power structures (Roseberry, 2010), as well as leveraging the experiences that are marginalized by dominant power systems, often called subjugated knowledge, to reveal what is often overlooked (Prins, 2006).

While recognizing our own positionality, privilege, power, and access as a white, straight, cisgender, middle-upper class, educated, and able-bodied woman, we used intersectional poststructuralism to investigate how discourses of fatherhood are constructed in program policies in the DTES. Armed with the intersectional poststructuralist understanding that gender hierarchies are not only constructed but interconnected and dependent upon each other (Roseberry, 2010), this theoretical framework enabled us to unpack the gendered discourses of mothering and fathering that (re)produce particular understandings of fathers in program policies.

Methodology

We utilized Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016) WPR approach as our methodology. The WPR approach can be used to show how governmental policy practices actually produce problems by presenting them as a certain kind of problem. Through this approach, scholars are encouraged to critically engage by thinking about which problems are being addressed, who those problems concern, and what role the government has in solving problems (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016).

While the WPR approach is traditionally focussed on government policy, Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) contended that “text is used as a lever to open up conversations and reflect on the effects that are rendered by constituting a problem in a particular way” (p. 17). As such, certain elements of the WPR method also useful for conducting analyses with less formal documents and policy, like program policies, where others are not. When taken together, mission statements and program descriptions work as program policies because they indicate internal workflow, and they communicate organizational information to external audiences (Kirk & Nolan, 2010). For example, as discursive commitments, organizational mission statements also reflect the purpose and value of helping individuals who experience marginalization (Kosny & Eakin, 2008). In addition, program descriptions are tools used internally by leadership, managers, staff, and funding agents to create budgets and provide a blueprint for service-delivery and serve as guideposts for individuals seeking services (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). For these reasons, program policies are a useful tool for understanding how fathers and fatherhood are represented by organizations providing family-centred services in the DTES.

Problematization, an important site of analysis within the WPR approach, is to question or apply critical analysis to a text or a document (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Through using a WPR approach, analysts reveal what kinds of problems are designated as requiring attention or resolution, and why they are seen as issues in the first place (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Arguably, the most notable aspect of a WPR approach is that scholars work backwards from the proposed resolution to how the problem was originally represented (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) identified seven steps to employ when engaging in a WPR approach. These steps served as guideposts for the analysis of this project, and we describe how we broadly applied them below and go into further detail in the results section.

While the list of steps is comprehensive, a WPR approach does not provide a list of prescriptive recommendations for ways to take action but moves beyond broad declarations in an effort to understand perspectives that are often silenced or ignored (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). To begin, we identified what was being problematized by

policy makers, or in this case organizations providing family-centred services, in their program policies. Secondly, we looked for concepts, assumptions and binaries that were embedded in the problem representation. We paid particular attention to whether there were any possible patterns in how or why this issue was problematized and connected them to systems of power (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). We then considered how the problem representation had developed across time and cultures in an effort to locate historical patterns (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). We focussed on any potential silences and unproblematized elements in an effort to destabilize the problem representation (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Because the goal of WPR researchers is to disrupt assumptions that present certain discourses as true, we carefully considered how lesser known and more marginalized knowledges and experiences could be valuable sources for disrupting “consensus” presented in policies (Bacchi & Goodwin, 2016). Further, in conjunction with an intersectional poststructuralist framework, we sought to better understand how the historical influences of gender, ethnicity, and class have contributed to the language used in program policies.

Methods

Inclusion Criteria

To examine ways in which fathers are represented in program policies in the DTES, we conducted a comprehensive examination of organizations that provide support to women, families, and children in the DTES. In September 2020, we used a map from the City of Vancouver (2019) that identified the boundary of the DTES and created a list of organizations that indicated that they provide family-centred services on their website that are located within the designated catchment area. We then examined 20 documents or websites in total and conducted a document analysis of their program policies, which were comprised of their mission statements and program descriptions. Notably, all the documents and websites were up to date, as they had recently modified their information due to the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions; thus, we were confident of their accuracy.

Document Analysis

Document analysis is the systematic review of both electronic and print documents as a way of gaining insight into the context of a phenomenon and the power of text (Bowen, 2009). Using document analysis can reveal how text (also understood as discourse) can illuminate systems of power and the structural sources of inequity (Hodder, 2000). Indeed, document analysis provides important information

about the way in which research participants live their lives or can reify participants’ experiences (Bowen, 2009). Conducting document analysis of websites has been used in studies that have been effective in revealing the ways in which text is used to strategically conceal inequities (Ninpanit, 2020; Saichaie & Morpew, 2014). Bowen (2009) noted that it is important to consider the intention of the person who crafted the document. With this in mind, we recognized the potential to explore the ways in which discourses of gender, class, and ethnicity were implicated in the mission statements and program descriptions and ultimately selected document analysis.

The final list included twelve organizations that offer family-centred services: Sheway, YWCA Crabtree Corner (CTC), Indigenous Early Years Services (IYES), Downtown Eastside Women’s Centre (DEWC), DTES Neighbourhood House, Union Gospel Mission (UGM), Ray Cam Community Centre, Strathcona Community Centre, Budzey Building, Sorella Housing for women and children, YWCA Cause We Care House, and YWCA Crabtree Corner Housing.

Within these organizations’ websites, we searched for and identified the organization’s mission and program descriptions. Subsequently, we scanned and selected any text that described the programs and services that the organization offered. Our final step in completing the table was identifying who the organization served. We then copied all the relevant information from the website and organized it within a table (see Table 1). We identified any text that referenced families, children, women, mothers, men, fathers, or was relevant to the goal of this project. Within the literature, it has been noted that researchers engaging in document analysis should be conscious that documents may not be complete and should recognize the context in which these documents were created, as it may provide insight that would otherwise go unnoticed (Bowen, 2009). In the context of this research project, the information that is missing will provide crucial insight into the representation of fathers in the DTES.

Results

Through the application of the seven steps presented by Bacchi and Goodwin (2016), we identified the following three discourses: organizations strive to be client-centred and provide choices; organizations want to empower their participants; and women need safe places to raise their families.

Organizations Strive to be Client-centred and Provide Choices

The first discourse that was repeatedly presented in the program policies was language that indicated that

Table 1 Participant Demographics

	Men (<i>n</i> = 9)
Age (years)	
Range	28–61
Mean	34.1
Sexuality (%)	
Heterosexual/Straight	100% (<i>n</i> = 9)
Indigenous Identity (%)	
Yes	33% (<i>n</i> = 3)
No	67% (<i>n</i> = 6)
If you identify as an Indigenous person, are you: (%)	
First Nations	11.1% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Métis	11.1% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Inuit	11.1% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Education Level (%)	
Some elementary school	
Elementary school	33.3% (<i>n</i> = 3)
Some secondary school/high school	44.4% (<i>n</i> = 4)
Completed secondary school/high school	11.1% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Some college or university	–
Completed college or university	11.1% (<i>n</i> = 1)
Completed graduate or professional degree	–
Are you currently in a relationship with a partner? (%)	
Yes	56% (<i>n</i> = 5)
No	44% (<i>n</i> = 4)
How many children under 18 are you providing direct care to (%)	
0	
1–4	100% (<i>n</i> = 9)

organizations strive to be client-centred and provide choices. Sheway, a harm-reduction pregnancy outreach program for substance-using women, states on their program description that they “base their program model on women’s ability to influence the conditions of their lives” (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2020, para. 2). The organization also reports that their “services are provided in response to the needs of pregnant and parenting women” (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2020, para. 2). Sheway’s website does not reference fathers or families – just women and children. Another organization, IEYS, which provides culturally sensitive support and prevention strategies to families who have children aged 0–6 years old, states that the focus of their services is on “prevention strategies” and “participation [in their program] is voluntary” (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2020). The program description also states that, “even though services are directed towards the child, [their] program provides support for the parents and family as well” (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2020). CTC, funded through the

YWCA Vancouver, also alludes to being client centred as they offer a wide range of services that are delivered in a way that “meets women where they are at” (YWCA Vancouver, 2020, para. 1). The program description of CTC clearly states that their services are for marginalized women and families; there is no mention of fathers.

Organizations Want to Empower Their Participants

The second discourse identified from the data pertained to providing services related to empowerment. All but two programs identify that their services are intended to empower, motivate, and educate women and their families. The mission for CTC notes that they offer “wide range of programs and services to help marginalized women and families living in the DTES to feel healthier, more connected, and empowered to make positive choices” (YWCA Vancouver, 2020, para. 1). The mission also states that programs and services provide participants with “the support [they need] to move forward in life” (YWCA Vancouver, 2020, para. 1). IEYS state that one aspect of their mission is “empowering families to become active participants in the community” (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2020). The third example is from the mission of the DEWC, which states that it strives to provide programs that nurture and empower women and children (DEWC, 2020, para. 1).

The remaining program policies use wording that refers to growth, independence, and prosperity. The Budzey Building, a housing program for women (Trans, Cis, and Gender Diverse) and for women-led families, helps participants “navigate the change from previous housing situations or homelessness into stable, supported, permanent housing” (Raincity Housing, n.d., para. 1). Ray-Cam Community Centre (2020) endorses a capacity-building approach that “provides opportunities for individuals to enhance and use their own abilities” (para. 1) and “assists in the positive growth of individuals, family, and community life” (para. 1). The two programs that did not include language associated with empowerment were both women’s-only housing organizations: Sorella Housing for Women and Children and YWCA Cause We Care House.

Women Need Safe Places to Raise Their Families

The third and final discourse generated from the data relates to safety and providing a safe place for families to access services, attend programming, or live. The mission for IYES, notes that they “provide support for families with Indigenous children through fostering and nurturing a safe and healthy family environment between families and community services” (Vancouver Aboriginal Health Society, 2020, para. 1). DEWC notes that they offer “a

refuge for women and children in the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver” (DEWC, 2020, para. 1). Furthermore, their mission is “to provide a safe, nonjudgmental environment for women from all walks of life” (DEWC, 2020, para. 1). Another organization, The Sanctuary, a women’s shelter that provides 24-hour support to women who struggle with substance use and are being discharged from the hospital, states that their program, “provides a safe place for single women, and women with babies to stabilize and begin their recovery journey” (Union Gospel Mission, 2020, para. 3). They further state that their programs help “vulnerable families to be well supported as they break intergenerational cycles of poverty” (Union Gospel Mission, 2020, para. 3). Notably, one organization DTES Neighbourhood House provides a program called “Fathers for Thought”—however this is not reflected in the mission statement (DTES Neighbourhood House, 2020).

Within the results, there are multiple housing initiatives that emphasize safety. First, the Budzey Building, which provides housing for women and women-led families, uses a “gender and diversity lens that supports an inclusive, safe, and vibrant community, making it possible for everyone living at the Budzey to flourish” (Raincity Housing, n.d., para. 1). Second, the Sorella housing program states within their program description that, “staff offer social supports and are responsible for managing the front door of the building, working to ensure the safety of the women and children who live there” (ATIRA Women’s Resource Society, 2019, para. 2). Finally, Crabtree Corner housing identifies that their housing facility, “is open to women and children who need a safe, affordable place to call home” (YWCA Vancouver, 2020, para. 1).

Discussion

Bacchi and Goodwin (2016) have argued that analysts using the WPR must recognize not only what is included in policies but also what is being left out. We found that the program policies of the 12 family-centred organizations in the DTES that we examined included mothers, children, and families, but fathers were only mentioned in one program list. The discourses that we identified refer to choice, empowerment, and safety for mothers. While programs that indicated that they support families, it is unclear if and how fathers may access services. Through the application of Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016) questions, below, we demonstrate how the exclusion of fathers does two things: (1) produces them as either absent or as problems, which can disadvantage not only them but also mothers and children; and (2) ignores the intersections that shape fathers’ lives and creates additional barriers for single, gay, and trans fathers.

Organizations Strive to be Client-centred and Provide Choices

The first discourse we identified within the results was that women and mothers in the DTES have diverse needs and that services should be offered in ways that create options that best suit their individual circumstances. What is being problematized is an organizational approach that forces particular kinds of services and programs onto participants. Given the extreme poverty, violence, and homelessness in the DTES, community organizers and policy makers have adopted progressive social justice strategies and the community is now internationally recognized for its harm-reduction programs (Bozinoff et al., 2017). Within the context of families, the Sheway program was created because one in every two babies in the DTES was being born substance affected and being apprehended by social services at birth (Garm, 1999). In recognizing that abstinence approaches were neither safe nor effective, community organizers proposed the development of a program that would provide high-risk mothers with health care, housing, alcohol and drug treatment and counselling within a harm reduction philosophy (Gartner et al., 2018). The emphasis on harm reduction is reflected in the client-centred language used in the program policies of family-centred services. Language used in the program policies, like “meet women where they are at” and “in response to the needs of women,” is reflective of an organizational philosophy and discourses that endorse participants as experts in their own lives (Hasenfeld & Garrow, 2012). This discourse and style of service delivery were adopted to challenge pervasive power relations within support-service models and social-work practices that perpetuate colonialism and hierarchies of power (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019; LeRoux, 2009). This is particularly apparent in the program description for IYES, where they explicitly identify that “participation is voluntary”; as such, the organization is indicating the ethos of the program model, while also informing service users that their autonomy will be prioritized in the program.

While the focus on mothers creates a counter discourse to the traditional nuclear family that is oriented around the father as patriarch (Allport et al., 2018), the language used in the program policies can allude to the notion that men are not seen as viable choices as parents or worthy of receiving services. This phenomenon is grounded in dominant discourses of low-income, substance-using, homeless, and often racialized fathers as uninvolved and selfish (Coley, 2001). Lacking nuance and considerations of the ways in which gender, ethnicity, sexuality, and income contribute to the marginalizing conditions that some fathers face, this discourse can impede upon men’s ability to meet the expectations of fathering (Marsiglio et al., 2005). Furthermore, the absence of fathers in program policies indicates

that services are available for single-parent and/or women-led families only. A single, gay, or trans father would not be able to identify services that are curated for him. Single parent, female-headed households and are, indeed, more prominent than single parent, male-headed households (Statistics Canada, 2014), and while the need for services for women-headed households is undeniable, we must also consider who is being excluded and how it limits individual choice – including a mother’s choice to have her child’s father in her life.

Excluding fathers from policies arguably perpetuates barriers to fathers receiving parenting services and programs (Bayley et al., 2009; Sicouri et al., 2018), it is fundamentally disconnected from what the literature says about the improvements to mothers’ wellbeing and reduced experiences with postpartum depression when children’s fathers are involved in parenting (Goodman et al., 2014; McClain & Brown, 2017). Similarly, excluding fathers can impinge upon the benefits that children can experience when their father is involved in their parenting (Barker et al., 2017; Cabrera et al., 2007; Lamb, 2010; Sarkadi et al., 2008). Furthermore, the exclusion of fathers can have serious implications for young, single, racialized, migrant, gay, or trans fathers who are heads of households. Assuming that a mother will be present ignores their needs and further marginalizes individuals based on their various intersections. While the results of this analysis demonstrate that organizations are making an esteemed effort to challenge historical inequities and provide essential services, without the inclusion of fathers, they are unfortunately perpetuating damaging discourses of gender and fatherhood that can adversely affect fathers, mothers, and their children.

Organizations Want to Empower Their Participants

The second discourse we constructed from the results indicate organizations’ commitment to empowering their participants through their services and programs. Based on Bacchi and Goodwin’s (2016) assertion that the way policies propose to do something, the contents of a policy indicate that policy-makers believe something needs to change. As such, women’s dependency on men, as well as support from institutional and governmental aid, is being problematized. Autonomy for women has been at the forefront of a number of feminist and social justice movements (McKeen, 2018); however, discourses of empowerment have received criticism because of the ways in which the goal of freedom is often connected to hierarchies of power and embedded in capitalism (Mosedale, 2005). Much of the language used, like “move forward in life,” “enhance,” and “use their own abilities,” is closely aligned with hierarchical discourses of empowerment that uphold capital as synonymous with power (Mosedale, 2005). Within these discourses, there is a lack of intersectional awareness of how identities interact to create marginalizing

conditions and a failure to recognize systems of power that perpetuate disparities in the extent to which a woman can be *empowered* (Sharma, 2000). A discursive read of language like “empowered to make positive choices” that is used in program policies can infer the ways in which women and mothers in the DTES are seen as capable of improving their circumstances if they take individual responsibility, which puts the onus on the individual to empower themselves instead of recognizing systemic limitations.

Within the second discourse, there was no mention of fathers as potential participants. Sharma (2000) noted that critiques of empowerment discourses are often marked by an adversarial projection of men. Indeed, in conjunction with the capitalist undertones of empowerment, the exclusion of fathers from the policies can reinforce messages that fathers can hinder women’s autonomy and are therefore not worthy of investment. The ways in which fathers can support their partners is thus not prioritized and the intersectional aspects of fatherhood are ignored. In a recent study with mothers and fathers in the DTES, mothers reported that as they experienced the benefits of participating in family-centred programs and services (Darroch et al., *in review*). The mothers in the study felt frustrated because they developed coping tools and life skills that their male partners, who could not access the same supports, did not; in turn, mothers felt burdened with caring for their partners as well as their children (Author, under review).

In some instances, neither mothers nor fathers were included in the policies. However, much of the language indicates that the services prioritize women. In this way, the program policies imply that mothers in the DTES who are experiencing marginalization are more likely to be single or will act as the primary caretakers of their children even if the family consists of two parents. The exclusion of fathers resonates with discourses that men do not need support or assistance in the same way that women do, which is upheld by masculine characteristics of stoicism, strength, and resilience (Johansson & Klinth, 2008). These assumptions run the risk of creating program infrastructure that focuses solely on the mother-child dyad and ignores the presence and potential of fathers. Taken together, we can see how the exclusion of fathers based on program policies can limit fathers’ potential to be with and support their family and further marginalize single, gay, and trans fathers.

Women Need Safe Places to Raise Their Families

The third discourse we constructed from the results is grounded in the need to provide women and children safe places to raise their families. Indeed, it is widely recognized that women who experience marginalizing conditions and gender-diverse individuals experience disproportionately higher rates of intimate-partner violence (Lippy et al.,

2019). Organizations that provide safe housing options, support groups, and intervention programs for women who have faced gender-based violence are thus essential. The language used in the program policies, “women from all walks of life,” “having staff manage the front door to ensure safety,” and “stabilize on their recovery journey,” highlight the rates of violence, substance use, and homelessness that are particularly prevalent in the DTES (City of Vancouver, 2019). However, the language used in program policies, like “refuge” and “ensures the safety” of women, is implicit in discourses of gender in which women are produced as being inherently vulnerable and in need of protection, with men being portrayed as powerful, angry, and violent (Albritton et al., 2014). Discourses such as these contribute to fathers being left out of the program policies.

Our finding of only one father-focussed program in DTES organizations’ policies is consistent with scholars who have found fewer efforts or resources available that are aimed at improving emotional wellness and coping strategies for fathers when compared to those available to mothers (Eddy et al., 2019; Panter-Brick et al. (2014); Summers et al., 2011). Leaving fathers out of policies not only disadvantages fathers, but it can also subordinate mothers who *do* have supportive partners. Indeed, excluding fathers from program policies may have direct implications on the experiences of mothers living in the DTES. Our review found that there is only one option (the Budzey building) that is available in the DTES for mothers who want to live with their male partners *and* children. This finding is congruent with the literature that shows there are very few social housing options that are available for families in which the father is present or one of the primary caregivers (Barker, 2017; Rogers & Rogers, 2019).

The lack of two-parent, family-centred housing options open to fathers may be driven by dominant discourses that produce men as being inadequate caregivers (Albritton et al., 2014). Additionally, it is paralleled by the discourse that if there is a father present then he will adopt the traditional role of breadwinner, financially provide for their family, and the family will then not require additional support or housing. These discourses fail to recognize the ways in which ethnicity, sexuality, and access to income can shape men’s ability to financially support their family. Further, it is important to note that program infrastructure that does not include fathers can disadvantage both mothers and their children by leaving mothers to shoulder the majority of the parenting duties (Johansson & Klinth, 2008), while perpetuating stigmatization of fathers who experience marginalization.

Implications

The program policies included in our analysis indicate that organizations have developed policies that are intended to

address the needs of mothers in the DTES; however, the policies do not address the needs of fathers. As a result, there are some important implications for service providers, parents/caregivers, and clinicians that are highlighted in this paper. For service providers and clinicians who do not acknowledge fathers in their program policies, these organizations not only uphold damaging discourses of masculinity but can also unwittingly undermine their own efforts to prioritize the needs, choices, and autonomy of mothers. Furthermore, for families in the DTES with two fathers or those led by trans, or single fathers would have a very difficult time locating services within the organizations’ mandates. Much like the fathers identified in this study, they would have to negotiate with staff to access programs.

Limitations

As with all studies, this policy analysis has some limitations. The main limitation of this study is that family-centred organizations in DTES may have policies and practices in place to address the needs of fathers that may not be listed on their websites. As indicated in the literature on document analysis, researchers need to consider the ways in which data within documents may be misinterpreted or taken out of context (Hodder, 2000). Given this consideration—in conjunction with findings from Darroch et al. (2021) that indicated that service providers in the DTES may negotiate their organizations’ policies to provide services for fathers, it is important to recognize that our findings may not provide a complete representation of what is happening in the community.

Conclusions

In this policy analysis, we found that not only are fathers poorly represented in the program policies of family-centred organizations, but that their exclusion has a myriad of consequences for not only fathers but also mothers, and children in this community. Importantly, we do not deny the need to provide services to mothers and their children on the DTES—these are urgently needed. Our findings show, however, that fathers in this community have few services available to them. They, too, deserve services and support. By highlighting the ways in which dominant discourses of gender are upheld through the exclusion of fathers in program policies, this analysis affirms the power of language and contributes to novel ways of applying the WPR approach. Additionally, our research is one of the first to focus on fatherhood in the DTES; thus, we hope that this work incites a much needed conversation about supporting fathers. As this paper is part of a larger CBPR study, we will share our findings in a report to the community in the hope

that family-centred organizations in the DTES can use it to shift their services to better support fathers, mothers, and children. We believe that this work is relevant outside of the DTES and can encourage other family-centred programmers to reflect on their own program mandates. Efforts moving forward should consider organizational level strategies of including fathers and their children in family-centred programs in a way that is inclusive and safe for all.

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Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare no competing interests.

Ethical Approval Ethics approval for the broader research project was received from University of British Columbia H17-02851, although no ethics approval were required for this aspect of the research.

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