

FIRST NATIONS MEN EXPERIENCING FATHERHOOD: A META-SYNTHESIS OF QUALITATIVE LITERATURE

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Abstract

Background

Evidence suggests that positive parenting can impact men's mental wellbeing and child development, and male parents have a unique and critically important role as parents. Unfortunately, limited literature is available regarding the First Nations male parenting and the challenges they encounter raising children. Furthermore, the qualitative studies examining First Nations male parents do not appear effective for translating policy and practice. In effect, important knowledge from these qualitative studies is not informing or shaping First Nations male parenting programs. A systematic collation and meta-synthesis of existing qualitative studies may strengthen the evidence base and assist with the integrative knowledge into policy and practice.

Methods

A meta-synthesis of qualitative studies were performed to explore the experiences, barriers and facilitators to parenting among First Nations males. A systematic search in Social Sciences Citation Index, CINAHL, ProQuest, Informit Databases, Expanded Academic, Scopus and Google scholar for e-journals was conducted to identify studies that explored First Nations male parenting, barriers and facilitators. Thematic synthesis was performed to identify the key elements influencing (challenging or facilitating) them.

Results

Nine qualitative studies were identified in the review, including eight peer-reviewed articles and one dissertation. Four themes emerged: (1) the complexity of roles and relationships; (2) poverty and exclusion; (3) sharing and receiving knowledge and (4) keeping strong. Elements across studies were identified as a barrier, facilitator or both to male parenting.

Conclusions: There is compelling evidence demonstrating the critical role of male parents to their own and their children's development and wellbeing. This meta-synthesis generates a much-needed empirical foundation to guide further research, policy and practice for First Nations male parents. The meta-synthesis and the resulting explanatory theory can be used by communities, practitioners and policymakers to identify the barriers and facilitators that support and promote First Nations male parenting from an indigenous understanding of history and contemporary society.

Keywords: First Nations men; health policy; parenting

BACKGROUND

Interrelated social and health issues including contemporary socioeconomic disadvantage, poor health status, racism, colonisation, stolen generations, loss and trauma, impact highly on First Nations men.¹

All these factors are related to a host of social and emotional problems such as loss of masculinity, self-esteem, self-respect, spirituality and identity.² Undermined emotional wellbeing can severely impact men's roles as fathers. Holistic health from

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an indigenous perspective includes the traditional men's parenting role. Hence, male parenting roles need to have greater academic attention as a mechanism for promoting men's health and informing parenting policies and practices. It has also been identified that First Nations parents and families need optimal support to overcome structural and historical barriers that reduce opportunities for good parenting and maintain poorer mental health.⁽³⁾

There is a dire need to collect and collate existing knowledge of the barriers and facilitators that either undermine or promote the role of First Nations fathers as parents.³ Despite evidence demonstrating the critical role that male parents play in their children's development and wellbeing, there is evidence of a shortage of knowledge translation from publications to policy and practice.⁴ The barriers and facilitators to men's parenting from qualitative studies have been more extensively examined in non-indigenous populations.⁵ Previous research aiming to provide an understanding of the challenges confronting contemporary indigenous men's experience as parents have been overlooked because of the limited number of peer-reviewed articles that are qualitative.⁶ It may be that the current lack of support for First Nations male parenting practices is because of the limited uptake of existing evidence in the field.^{3,7} First Nations men are predominantly not represented as parents and are often referred to as neglectful or harmful parents.^{8,9}

Systemic barriers and facilitators impacting Nations male involvement in parenting or child health programs are not highlighted.¹⁰ For example, a scoping review aimed to identify and describe Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander men and parenting programs highlighted the lack of rigorously researched and published literature on the topic.¹⁰

OBJECTIVE

This article aimed to advance and promote better translation of knowledge concerned with the challenges for First Nations male parents by evaluating the amalgamation of qualitative studies. The author also focuses to develop an explanatory theory from

the findings to inform future research, policy and practice more effectively. The meta-synthesis examined barriers and facilitators to support First Nations men's parenting. A synthesis of the literature with this focus will provide a pivotal evidence base to highlight systemic issues. The findings intend to inform the development and rationale for appropriate services and programs to support and promote men's parenting.

METHOD

The documentation of challenges and mediators for parenting have commonly applied descriptive and qualitative methods. Given the aim to identify barriers and facilitators to men's parenting, this meta-synthesis, which complies with the PRISMA guidelines, preferred reporting items for systematic reviews and meta-syntheses, focusing on descriptive, fact-finding, qualitative studies for quality and rigour. Our search ensured a comprehensive inclusion of all qualitative studies that concerned First Nations men and parenting across 10 years. The 10-year period marked the start of literature relevant to this field of enquiry. The criteria included studies that identified barriers and facilitators to parenting. Articles were excluded if they were not research-based or lacked rigour. The objective was to identify and synthesise novel descriptive data that aided to inform and shape future interventions rather than examining themselves.

Meta-synthesis is a methodological approach, and "qualitative meta-synthesis" refers to the capacity to build knowledge from the amalgamation of a group of qualitative studies.¹¹ This study aimed develop an explanatory theory from findings from a group of similar qualitative studies.¹² Hence meta-synthesis was applied to examine a sample of qualitative studies related to First Nations male parents.¹³

A broad framework guides the process (refer to Table 1).¹⁴ Table 1 shows the six-step process and gives a basic description of the qualitative meta-synthesis process and the framework of analysis where rich contextual information about the setting and participants can be comprehensively and rigorously captured.¹⁵ The aim was to discover the essential features and attempt to combine a whole phenomenon.¹ The integrated studies were assessed to identify key themes related to First Nations men's parenting.

Table 1. Qualitative Meta-synthesis Process.

1. Formulate a clearlogical research problem and question.
2. Conduct a comprehensive search of the literature.
3. Conduct a careful appraisal of research studies for possible inclusion.
4. Select and conduct meta-synthesis techniques to integrate and analyse qualitative research findings.
5. Present synthesis of findings across studies.
6. Reflect on the process.

Source: Nelson¹⁷ and Brotherson et al.¹⁵
 Nelson;Adapted Erwin E J, Brotherson et al.¹⁵

Step 1. The research questions:

- How many qualitative studies are there concerning indigenous men and parenting?
- What are the key topics/questions of these studies?
- What are the methods used in the studies?
- What are the barriers and facilitators that can be identified regarding indigenous men and parenting?

Step 2. Search keywords.

The following keywords were used to search each database: paternal role, men, male, fathers, fatherhood, indigenous men, native, aboriginal, Torres Strait Islander, First Nations, barriers and facilitators.

The databases included: Social Sciences Citation Index, CINAHL, ProQuest, Informit Databases, Expanded Academic, Scopus and Google scholar for e-journals.

Step 3. Inclusion of articles that referred to indigenous men and fatherhood, using keywords in the title or Abstract.

This meta-synthesis aimed to include only peer-reviewed articles. The database search resulted in only a few relevant articles (N=4). Hence, a web search was conducted, and resulted in the addition of one higher degree dissertation and one government report publications of Australia and Canada was included based on relevance.

Step 4. Data analysis.

The collected data were coded, sorted and analysed with relevance to the research question/problem. Themes localisation, early labels assigned, and mass

data condensed into categories, thereby producing an analysis with the strategic intention of providing a thematic description of the complete data set, looking for critical terms, key events and/or themes.

Step 5. Outcomes of the data analysis.

This step presented the outcomes of the combination of nine qualitative studies presented in a summary table that included the metaphors, concepts or theories identified across the nine studies.¹⁷ Next, a table of the fathering steps revealed in secondary analysis and categorised themes across the nine selected articles.¹⁸

Step 6. Reflect on the process.

It was important from an indigenous perspective to ensure that the meta-synthesis process was consistent with and would reflect indigenous ways of knowing the broader outcome related to the promotion of men’s parenting strengths.

RESULTS

A meta-synthesis methodological approach was carried out on the included eight peer-reviewed articles and one honours thesis conducted in Australia and Canada. eight one nine

Summary of article aims included in the meta-synthesis

Jia¹⁹ aimed to provide a descriptive analysis of the development of a young indigenous father’s support group between 16 to 25 years of age. One of the aims of this support group was to change the perceptions and attitudes of young fathers. Particularly to see that raising children is not only a women’s business. The group initially provided support for the young

fathers and assisted them with coping strategies such as supporting their partner and playing positive role models for their children. An addition was a structured culturally appropriate anger and stress program, which aimed to empower the young fathers and to enhance their strengths as young parents.¹⁹

Kurti et al.²⁰ provided an Australian Commonwealth Government funded descriptive analysis of the “Strong Fathers Strong Families” program across 12 sites in Australia. This program aimed to promote the roles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers, grandfathers and uncles. The program also encouraged them to be healthy role models and nurturing fathers to children in their care and support their partners, pre-, during and post-birth.²⁰

Dennison et al.²¹ conducted 41 qualitative interviews with indigenous males across two North Queensland high-security prisons (Stuart Correctional Centre, Townsville, and Lotus Glen Correctional Centre, Mareeba). The interviews examined how dads felt about their role as parents (paternal identity) and documented the perceived challenges they encountered in maintaining positive relationships with their children.²¹

Ball²² reflects on an earlier study involving indigenous fathers and their roles in caring for children. The article described historical challenges, such as the diminishment of their roles as fathers following years of colonial interventions, and explored indigenous fathers’ contemporary experiences of fatherhood in that context.²²

Laws and Bradley²³ focused on the lack of attention and absence of literature involving the transmission of health knowledge from men to boys in Australian society. In addition, the authors drew on the personal experiences working with indigenous and non-indigenous Australian men and identified a lack of literature in this area that inform practice and raise awareness among health professionals supporting male parenting.²³

Maslen²⁴ provided a literature review that identified the roles that fathers played in Australian society. In addition, the thesis aimed to provide clarity around the current situation for indigenous fathers and the role they play within contemporary society. He also documented the holistic benefits that fatherhood brings

to family and folks. The author, being an aboriginal father, also drew on his own fatherhood experiences.²⁴

Manahan and Ball²⁵ explored aboriginal fathers’ support groups in British Columbia, Canada. The authors focused on male involvement in parenting, particularly with the factors required to enhance the role of fathers and parenting their children. The article investigated family-centred programs and the father-participant rates in attending those programs. Furthermore, the study is considered the impact of colonisation and assimilation on parenting and the importance of holistic healing moving forward for indigenous men.²⁵

Reilly and Rees³ examined 31 interviews with expert First Nations community members to understand the roles of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers, grandfathers and uncles. This article studied men’s business and women business pre- and post-British imperialism. It explored the reasons why some men were ““feeling embarrassed about parenting. It focussed on the need to overcome shame and improve parenting confidence through attending men’s groups as a safe space for promoting healthy male role models. The study discussed yarning and storytelling data and identified four categories of bias that could inform future policies and practices: cultural bias, institutional and professional bias, and content, resources and policy bias.³

Hammond²⁶ provided a narrative description of a father’s program within a jail setting. He explored aboriginal inmates’ experiences as fathers whilst incarcerated. The program was interactive—allowing men to share and receive information about the fatherhood experience without being judged. In addition, the program also provided a space for men to support each other as they discussed the roles of being good dads, in -and outside prison.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

All articles were analysed by first considering and grouping data to identify themes. Each theme was created based on systemic research aims concerning challenges, barriers and facilitators for male parenting and was viewed as dominant, unique and dissonant. In the tradition of thematic analysis, the predominant themes were first identified as following the above

Table 2. Key Concepts Focusing on Barriers and Facilitators for Male Parenting

Reference	Title	Journal	Organisation	Key concepts
Ball ²²	Fathering in the Shadows: Indigenous Fathers and Canada's Colonial Legacies	A working copy of an article published in <i>The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science</i> , 624 (July), 29–48	University of Victoria, School of Child and Youth Care, Victoria, British Columbia, Canada	The diminishment of indigenous men's roles as a father following years of colonial interventions, and the impact on indigenous fathers' experiences of fatherhood.
Dennison et al. ²¹	"My Life Is Separated" An Examination of the Challenges and Barriers to Parenting for Indigenous Fathers in Prison	<i>British Journal of Criminology</i> , 54, 1089–1108. Advance Access publication September 22, 2014	Griffith University, Mt Gravatt Campus, Queensland	The roles of indigenous males while in prison and examining the effect on paternal identity including the challenges in maintaining positive relationships with their children from within and outside the prison.
Jia ¹⁹	Indigenous Young Fathers' Support Group	<i>Aboriginal and Islander Health Worker Journal</i> , 24 (1). January/February 2000	CentaCare, Brisbane	Providing support for the young fathers to assist them with coping strategies for dealing with daily and life stressors that impact them and their role as parents. The group also focuses on how to support their partner and be positive role models for their children. The culturally structured appropriate anger and stress program aims to empower young indigenous fathers and enhance their strengths as young parents.
Kurti et al. ²⁰	Descriptive Analysis of the Strong Fathers Strong Families Programme Final Report	Prepared for the Department of Health. December 2013	Urbis	Targets the promotion of the roles of new Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers, grandfathers and uncles. Furthermore, it encourages them to be healthy role models and nurturing fathers to children in their care, and be supportive to their partners, particularly during and after birth

(continued)

Reference	Title	Journal	Organisation	Key concepts
Laws and Bradley ²³	Transmission of Health Knowledge and Health Practices from Men to Boys Among Aboriginal Communities and Non-Indigenous Australians: Searching for Evidence	<i>Contemporary Nurse</i> , 15:249–261	University of South Australia, Adelaide, Australia	Targets the absence of literature in this area to inform policy and practice. Aboriginal family members may take on the role of caring for children; however, the father should have a central role in raising his children.
Maslen ²⁴	Aboriginal Fathers/ Fathers Roles: Are They Recognised in Australia's Contemporary Society?	University of Sydney, Library Honours Thesis 2005	Yooroang Garang: School of Indigenous Health Studies, University of Sydney	Documents the importance of the roles indigenous fathers play within a contemporary society and the benefits fatherhood brings to holistic wellbeing of family and societies.
Manahan and Ball ²⁵	Aboriginal Fathers Support Groups: Bridging the Gap between Displacement and Family Balance*	<i>First Peoples Child and Family Review</i> , 3 (4), 42–49	University of Northern British Columbia, Canada	Aboriginal fathers support groups in British Columbia Canada, targeting the involvement and enhancing of roles for fathers and their children, with a holistic health approach using traditional practices.
Reilly and Rees ³	Fatherhood in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Communities: An Examination of Barriers and Opportunities to Strengthen the Male Parenting Role	<i>American Journal of Men's Health</i> , 12 (2), 420–430	University of New South Wales (UNSW), School of Psychiatry, Sydney	Document's barriers and opportunities to support the roles of Aboriginal men as parents. Traditional versus contemporary parenting, communities advocating Aboriginal men's roles as parents and addressing bias and barriers, creating a better way of doing business that will allow confident strong fathers, grandfathers and uncles.
Hammond ²⁶	Brothers Inside: Fathering Workshops with Aboriginal Prisoners	<i>Australian Journal of Adult Learning</i> , 5 (2), July 2011	Family Action Centre, The University of Newcastle	The fathering workshop with Aboriginal prisons highlights that, although fathers are imprisoned, it does not have to interfere with men being responsible dads. Men learn what that means and to overcome challenges to being in prison and outside prison as indigenous dads.

data and then coded and analysed.²⁷ The depth and complexity of the data within each study is well defined as the author worked towards answering the research questions from across the entire data set. This generalist approach is particularly critical when investigating an under-researched area and when views on topics are unknown.²⁸

KEY THEMES

Complexities of roles and relationships

To understand the complexities of the roles and relationships in parenting within an aboriginal society, the knowledge of kinship is pivotal. Dennison et al.²¹ suggest the complexity of the notion of kinship is greater within indigenous communities compared with relationship roles within mainstream Western society families. For example, every male within a clan group is either defined first by being a father, grandfather, uncle or brother, and all have a role in raising children.²¹

Since colonisation, the roles and responsibilities of traditionally defined men's- and women's businesses have been undermined. Many aboriginal fathers have identified that the ongoing effects of colonisation and assimilation into non-indigenous ways of behaving have changed their traditional roles as fathers favouring female parenting roles, as in Western society. The undermining of the male parenting role, and the process of achieving it, has caused trauma amongst many men.^{19,25} In effect, colonisers privileged women's parenting roles, which served to alienate men from parenting and promote the false belief that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women's business is to raise the child and that the health of children rests with women.¹⁹ Despite the influence of colonising practices, Law and Bradley²³ argue that fathers still play a central role in the upbringing of their children. They also suggest that, within Aboriginal and Torres Strait culture, the critical distinctions between the accepted roles of men and women within Aboriginal society around the upbringing of children have persisted despite colonisation.²³ Furthermore, Reilly and Rees³ identified that roles, relationships and connectedness for men as parents were clear to everyone within tribes and determined the behaviour of individuals.³ The importance of recognising and

celebrating "Lore" to determine men's- and woman businesses is central for men to regain confidence in the parenting role.^{3,24} Malsen,²⁴ viewed the role of fathers as complex and specific in the raising of their children, beyond men being the breadwinner as in Western tradition:

"The importance of fathers extends beyond economics. Their involvement as nurturers, disciplinarians, teachers, coaches, and moral instructors is also critically important to healthy development and maturation of their children."²⁴

Poverty and exclusion

Poverty relates not only to being disadvantaged financially but also to psychological destitution related to undermined connectedness between aboriginal fathers and children because of colonisation. Both forms of poverty are barriers to parenting. A previous study by Ball²² has been claimed that indigenous fathers are the most socially excluded population around the world concerning parenting.²² The study also showed that socioeconomic factors (poor education), ongoing impacts of colonisation (separation of children from families based on racist policies), Western-imposed mother-focussed parenting programs and child welfare practices that removed children from families were factors that affected positive fathering.²²

Colonisation commonly included the relocation of indigenous people from their traditional land by Western colonialists who gained economically from exploiting it for housing, farming or mining. Taking land from First Nations people caused them to experience survival-related and spiritual poverty, and relocating has and continues to directly interfere with culture, family, kinship and parenting practices. The roles of aboriginal fathers have been displaced. The pathways by which Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander males learn to be men have disintegrated after learning how to be a father within contemporary society.^{21,25}

Receiving and sharing knowledge

A facilitator for men's parenting is the unique and effective capacity that First Nations men have for sharing and receiving knowledge. Law and Bradley²³ claim that, regardless of challenges related to where men live (prisons, suburbs or traditional land) or with a partner, children, stepchildren or alone, First

Nations men are uniquely skilled to pass on health knowledge and practices to their children.²³ These include deeply embedded traditional verbal skills that combine oral traditions via storytelling, land-based experiences, artistic activities and ceremonial practices.²⁹ This approach to educational knowledge orientation regarding parenting can be invaluable in improving educational outcomes for indigenous fathers. Jia¹⁹ observed that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander fathers' parenting is and heart-based.¹⁹ In addition, First Nations fathers see themselves as role models for transferring cultural knowledge, to encourage their children to work hard and make good decisions.²¹ This traditional motivation for parenting by men needs to be identified in policy and practice and fully supported by governments and society. First Nations men learn from one another as they observe other men's parenting and interaction with children, aiding the value of men's groups for sharing knowledge of parenting amongst male peers.^{22,25} Nonetheless, Malsen²⁴ reflects on policy and services not adequately reflecting on how men share and communicate parenting knowledge, and ultimately on how services need to facilitate those cultural exchanges in contemporary times:

"...if services are not culturally appropriate, then Aboriginal men will not feel comfortable using them."²⁴

Keeping strong

The indigenous term "keeping strong" (mentally well)—is linked with sustaining empowerment and confidence in First Nations men, providing them with a sense of belonging in their family and society as parents. In addition, for parenting programs to be culturally inclusive for First Nations fathers, grandfathers and uncles, policy reforms are needed to reflect the importance of the parenting role to men's empowerment and wellbeing. The meta-synthesis demonstrates that policymakers should emphasise identifying and reducing structural, personal and social barriers for First Nations fathers for improved parenting involvement. Men's roles as parents may result in creating a stronger sense of empowerment for First Nations fathers.²² Reilly and Rees³ found that men who regularly attended men's groups were

more confident to engage with community activities, including parenting programs. Therefore, men who participated in their local men's group seemed more empowered.³ Manahan and Ball²⁵ suggested that First Nations Men support groups have provided fathers with the opportunity to observe the value and importance of other men's interactions with their children, providing a safe space and a positive environment to strengthen the male identity and increase feelings of empowerment.²⁵

The need for cultural frameworks around support services for Indigenous fathers, and for positive reflections of Indigenous men in caregiving roles is important in Indigenous fathers keeping strong.²²

DISCUSSION

Nine studies were identified for inclusion in this novel meta-synthesis, which aimed to analyse data concerning barriers and facilitators to First Nations men's parenting. The objective was to translate critical findings in qualitative studies that have been largely overlooked in policy and practices related to men's parenting in the indigenous context. Elements across studies were identified as a barrier, facilitator or both to male parenting. The dominant themes found in the meta-synthesis were: (1) complexity of roles and relationships- No importance to the indigenous understanding of men as parents in current policy and practice. (2) poverty and exclusion- identify the need to ensure that men are not good parents in the indigenous context based on economic and spiritual means. (3) sharing and receiving knowledge- demonstrates the intrinsic skill and capacity that men have for communicating parenting knowledge both the couple and their children. (4) keeping strong- emphasises the critically important role that parenting can play in strengthening First Nations men's identity and empowerment. The importance of strengthening mental wellbeing by way of empowerment and the parenting role is critical for future policy and practice in situations where indigenous men have faced widespread forms of discrimination, marginalisation and trauma.

The qualitative meta-synthesis broadly aimed to identify First Nations men's strengths. This article and its key themes form a guide to ensure that men can

actively embrace their rightful roles as positive, engaged fathers, uncles and grandfathers within contemporary indigenous society. Although the primary focus of this article was on men and their wellbeing as parents, the meta-synthesis also revealed the significance of the parenting role to children's health and wellbeing. The evidence suggests that child development and functioning are positively impacted by healthy male role models, particularly fathers. As Canuto et al.³⁰ suggested, "...the value and importance male parents can add to the lives of their children should not be underestimated."³⁰

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The findings in this meta-synthesis need to be recognised and supported by governments as a strategy for policy and procedure leading to "constructive change" towards the betterment of men as parents and for First Nations children and communities. In addition, the significant role of men as parents may provide self-esteem and empowerment to fathers and give them the capacity to strengthen the interrelationships between family and community. Empowering fathers, uncles and grandfathers to acquire the skills necessary to take greater control and responsibility for the family, work, and community life creates a ripple effect for positive change.³¹ First Nations men should advocate the importance of the development and continuation of successful male inclusive parenting programs. Having strong fathers, uncles and grandfathers acquiring the skills necessary to take greater control and responsibility for individuals, family, and community life create sustainable empowerment, enabling First Nations men to address all challenges in front of them.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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