RESPONSIVENESS IN FATHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIPS: THE EXPERIENCE OF FATHERS

Qualitative interviews with 215 fathers describe the emergent and responsive nature of the father-child relationship and its consequent influence on fathers themselves. Using a social constructionist or dialogic model of relationships, we highlight the importance of understanding the experience of fathers as they are actively engaged in responsive, relational, and interactional activities with their children. Fathers’ descriptions of responsiveness highlight father-child interaction “in the moment,” attention to children’s expression of needs, and the influence of fathers’ own sets of priorities and values. A critical element of responsiveness to children is that it requires shared time between fathers and their children. Responsiveness within the father-child relationship facilitates children’s development and also provides fathers with opportunities to develop and understand themselves differently. The current study contributes to understanding men’s development and the fathering experience by specifically exploring the influence on men of engaging in fathering, of attending to their children and experiencing their own responsiveness.

Keywords: fathering, father-child interaction, development, qualitative research

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Current research suggests the health, psychological, and relational benefits of father involvement for fathers, mothers and children (Allen & Daly, 2007; WHO, 2007). While the effects of father involvement are being documented, the processes by which these potential benefits are enacted are less clearly understood. Palkovitz (2007) argues that it is difficult to theorize and operationalize father involvement as broadly defined. He encourages researchers to “focus attention on conceptualizing and measuring components of father-child relationships that capture the essence of affective climate, behavioral style, and relational synchrony” (p. 194, italics in original). A conceptualization of parent-child relationships as bidirectional has been made (Kuczynski, 2003) which implicates both child and father influences as playing key roles in socialization, the construction of meaning and developmental changes over time. Our intent with the current analysis is to examine one component of relational synchrony by considering how these mutual influences are exerted within father-child relationships and specifically attending to how fathers respond to their children’s cues. In exploring fathers’ perceptions and descriptions of parenting, we are interested in how children guide and shape fathering activity as well as the interactional nature of children’s influence and fathers’ responses. Although we recognize the importance of mothers and other partners in shaping the systemic nature of family relationships, our diverse sample of fathers—many who were not living with the mother of the child—lead us to focus on the dyadic, bi-directional nature of the relationship.

In this study, we are referring to “responsiveness” as most closely aligned with what Palkovitz refers to as relational synchrony and described in the literature as interactions that are finely tuned into each other’s signals, are developmentally appropriate, utilize strategies such as scaffolding, and build on emerging interests (Harrist & Waugh, 2002; Palkovitz, 2007). Parental responsiveness, generally examined as maternal responsiveness or maternal sensitivity, has been conceptualized within several different frameworks of supportive parenting (Landry, Smith, & Swank, 2006) including attachment (Ainsworth, 1973), sociocultural (Vygotsky, 1978), and socialization (Macoby & Martin, 1983) models of child development. Descriptive and empirical studies have demonstrated the value of broadly-defined responsive parenting in enhancing child development (Landry et al.), with multiple aspects of maternal responsiveness implicated, including mothers’ contingent responses, affective support and warmth, joint attention with their child, and language that is matched to that of their child (Warren & Brady, 2007). This research has demonstrated that the quality of mother-child interactions is influenced both by the mother’s ability to read and respond to her child’s cues, and by the child’s ability to give clear cues (Barnard & Solchany, 2002). Interventions with mothers who are viewed as being “at risk” of not being able to meet their children’s needs are designed to both increase their knowledge about child development and support the development of sensitivity or attunement to their particular child (Demick, 2002; Suchman, DeCoste, Costiglioni, Legow, & Mayes, 2008). The reciprocal nature of the responsiveness between mother and child has been shown to provide for interactions that, over time, are adaptive and potentially rewarding for both mother and child (Barnard & Solchany). These parental changes have generally been considered in the realm of maternal behavioural changes in response to children’s develop-
ment (for example, using more language once children begin to use language themselves, Warren & Brady). There has been more limited research extending our understanding of other aspects of how engagement in responsive parenting influences either mothers or fathers themselves (Ambert, 2002; Dillon, 2002). Palkovitz (2007) suggests that it is fathers’ exposure to the myriad internal and external experiences and influences associated with fathering activities more generally “that pull men toward new levels of developmental functioning” (p. 5).

Gender is a central factor in influencing fathers’ experience (Marsiglio, Day, & Lamb, 2000), particularly as it is constructed in their daily lives (West & Zimmerman, 1987) and through institutional practices (Lero, Ashbourne, & Whitehead, 2006). Feminist researchers examining work and family have written about the importance of conceptualizing doing gender (West & Zimmerman). This active description of the ways in which men and women construct aspects of themselves “through relational, interactional labours such as housework and childcare” (Gerson, 1993) demonstrates the importance of understanding the experience of mothers and fathers as they are actively engaged in responsive, relational, and interactional activities with their children. Extending these ideas, we might argue that by engaging in doing fathering, or perhaps more precisely by actively engaging in responsive interactions with their children, fathers become—fitting a social constructionist or dialogic model of relationship that describes the emergent nature of one’s self in interaction with another (Bakhtin, 1986; Gergen, 1994; Shotter, 1992).

We acknowledge the important and concurrent influences of mothers and current partners on fathers’ actions, intentions and meaning making (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Dienhart, 1998). We also recognize the importance of understanding the experiences and meaning-making of other adults engaged in parenting children and those of the children themselves. The broader social discourses surrounding fathering and mothering, both “good” and “bad” also influence father’s meaning-making to a large degree (Marsiglio & Cohan, 2000). The specific focus of this particular research study, however, is on fathers’ experience of their children’s influence and their own response to this in the midst of these multidirectional and complex interactions. In the interest of understanding these father-child relationship processes and their consequent influence on fathers’ behaviours and experience, we utilized qualitative interview data from a large national study of father involvement in Canada for this analysis. As we investigated these fathers’ responses to a range of questions about their experience, we were particularly interested in listening for: (i) fathers’ descriptions of how their children influence their views of themselves; (ii) how men describe the influence of their children on their roles and behaviour as fathers; and (iii) fathers’ descriptions of what aspects of the interaction, of themselves, or of their children they specifically attend to as they interact with their children.

METHODS

We used data from a large partnership-based, multi-year, multi-site research project carried out as a community-university collaboration examining the diverse experience
of father involvement. The data for this paper have been collected from interviews with 215 fathers across seven cluster sites in Canada. In this paper we report on a subset of data focusing on how children influence fathers.

Using diversity as one of the primary starting points, the research project organized seven fathering clusters. Cluster groups were composed of fathers, organizations that serve fathers, and academics. They reflect socially defined subpopulations of fathers who face unique challenges: new fathers, young fathers, immigrant fathers, gay fathers, indigenous fathers, fathers of children with special needs, and separated and divorced fathers.

Each of these clusters was located in a community, involved its own partnership and worked to collaboratively develop an action based research strategy. All of the clusters were launched using the principles of Participatory Action Research (Wadsworth, 1998). Specifically, the activity was participatory insofar as the research agenda was shaped by fathers, community service providers, and university researchers; it was research oriented and involved a collaborative definition of concerns, questions, collection, and analysis strategies; and it was geared toward social action that builds on the findings of the research in order to create sustainable tools and bring about tangible changes in the organization of community services. Many of the cluster groups started with their own focus group or roundtable sessions as a way of further developing a research agenda that was meaningful to them. Each group then went on to collect data using a variety of tools including interviews, focus groups, surveys and on-line questionnaires.

In addition to their own agenda of research, each of the clusters was asked to collect data from their participants on several key themes that emerged in the preliminary roundtable session. We saw these as central thematic questions that cut across the diverse cluster groups and would provide important perspectives on key fathering issues. A group of five researchers (i.e., the “central thematic group”) was formed to design this aspect of the research. The central thematic group worked in collaboration with the cluster leaders to arrive at a set of common thematic questions that included the dynamics of co-parenting from a family systems perspective, intergenerational issues that reflect a changing experience of fatherhood, the challenges of managing work and family, learning to be a father and cultural representations of father involvement. Given that each cluster group was organized somewhat differently and designed their own questions in the interviews, they ended up including the thematic questions in different ways. Some asked these questions separately; others integrated them into their own interview protocols. This resulted in some unevenness in how the questions were asked and the context of the discussion within which they occurred. Some cluster groups utilized individual interviews, while others interviewed fathers with their current partners or in focus groups. For the purposes of this analysis, we are treating all types of interviews as providing contextualized data, and have consequently coded individual, couple and focus group interview transcripts in a similar manner. The variability in context contributes to the variability in the data, with fathers describing their own experiences and sharing their reflections in response to various interviewers and, in some cases, to
what their partners or other fathers have stated. While context and the presence of oth-
ers may serve to validate a claim or encourage consensus, these may also serve to chal-
lenge or provide alternative voices in response. We suggest that this variability and the
presence of multiple voices strengthen the data analysed for this study, and that the
data provided to the central thematic group provided a rich and diverse set of perspec-
tives on these core themes.

The central thematic analysis is based on a collective sample of 215 fathers. The dis-
tribution across the clusters was as follows: immigrant fathers \( (n = 29) \), fathers of chil-
dren with special needs \( (n = 20) \), separated and divorced fathers \( (n = 31) \), new fathers
\( (n = 22) \), young fathers \( (n = 43) \), indigenous fathers \( (n = 40) \), and gay fathers \( (n = 30) \).
Of course, these categories are overlapping, reflecting the intersectionality of father’s
identities and social locations. A new father may also be young and indigenous, a sepa-
rated father may also have a child with special needs. Fathers were also reflecting on
their experience from different points in the family life cycle and their own lives. Rather
than seeing this variability in the sample as problematic, we suggest that the diversity
of fathers’ perspectives are more adequately represented by such a range of identifica-
tions. The primary identification of participants was based on recruitment within the
clusters, and this determined the type of interview in which each participant engaged.
However, fathers’ responses to the thematic questions identified by the central thematic
group were influenced by their experience of fathering within the intersections of their
multiple identities. For the purpose of clarity in our presentation of analytic results, we
have identified participants by these cluster group identities, however we recognise
that this is a limited description of their identity and experience as fathers. For the over-
all sample, 75 percent of the fathers were employed outside of the home. More than half
the sample \( (59\%) \) reported personal income below \$40,000 per year. Only 10 percent
reported income over \$80,000 per year. Participants had an average of two children
with the mean age of all children being 8 years. Fifty-two percent of the children lived
with their father full time, 21 percent part-time and 22 percent did not live with their
father at all. One-quarter of the fathers were born outside of Canada and, while less
than half of participants chose to indicate their identification with a particular ethno-
cultural or ethno-racial community, these frequencies were as follows: Caucasian 10
percent, Aboriginal 19 percent, African 8 percent, Asian 3 percent, Jewish 3 percent, and
South Asian, Soviet, Middle Eastern each approximately 1 percent. Forty-seven percent
of the fathers were married, 16 percent were living together with their partner or in a
common law relationship, and 23 percent were separated or divorced.

The central thematic analysis team faced a number of challenges in trying to make
sense of these data. First, by qualitative standards, this is a very large data set with tran-
scripts that often included a weave of the specific questions associated with a type of
fathering and the broader thematic questions. It was challenging to stay focused on the
thematic questions as they appeared in different contexts and points in the interview.
Second, we began with a team of 10 analysts (5 research collaborators and 5 graduate
students) which involved making a series of pragmatic decisions about who would
tackle what areas. The way that we proceeded with this was to begin with a broad, in-
ductive exploration of the data in order to articulate some of the key themes emerging from these data. Through a series of discussions over time, each of the five collaborators decided to pursue one of these broad themes. We then divided into 5 groups based on the following themes: visibility/invisibility of fathers, fathers and generativity, learning to be a father, children’s influence on fathers, and work and family issues.

This paper is focused specifically on the dynamics of fathers’ responsiveness which emerged in the context of line-by-line coding and discussion by the group considering children’s influence on fathers. To borrow a phrase from the grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), “responsiveness” emerged as a core category that reflected the ways that fathers understood their own development in relation to their children. Although some of the principles of grounded theory analysis have shaped our approach (e.g., emphasis on constant comparative analysis, emergence of categories, development of substantive theory), this study is not technically a grounded theory approach due to the broad and multi site nature of data collection. Specifically, given the complexity of the cluster group structure (geographically dispersed with different interviewers), we were not in a position to employ the principles of emergent design (e.g. theoretical sampling or theoretical saturation) at the data collection phase.

RESULTS

The interview data reveal the responsive nature of the father-child relationship and its consequent influence on fathers themselves. Fathers’ responsiveness can best be understood in the context of (a) children’s needs, how they are expressed by children and understood by fathers; and (b) fathers’ values and priorities. As they engage in interaction with their children and in the roles associated with fatherhood, these men are learning about and redefining themselves as fathers. While attending in some degree to what they learn about themselves, the primary focus of this analysis is on how this responsiveness is expressed and experienced by fathers.

The Emergent and Responsive Nature of Father-Child Relationships

The responsiveness described by the fathers in this study can be understood in two ways: it occurs “in the moment” of interaction, and it develops and evolves over time.

Responsiveness in the moment. This type of responsiveness demonstrates an attention and presence in the interaction that is described by some fathers as being fully present with their children. As one father emphasized: “I really feel like when I’m with my kids, I’m with my kids” (New Father 5). This relationship, built on mutual attention and responsiveness, can begin quite early in the child’s life:

When my daughter was born I was right there. For the whole nine months before she was born, I would sing to her in the womb. When she was born, they cut the umbilical cord and placed her on her mother’s chest. She was about to cry, when I grabbed my drum and I started to sing her a welcoming song…. Soon as she heard
the song, she did not cry and stared at me. I really cherish that I was able to do that.

(Indigenous Fathers 4003)

These fathers talked about being engaged in the present moment through nurturing and instrumental child care tasks, discipline and teaching, as well as shared activities that incorporated play or were seen as unique to this father and this child. They described special forms of play or mutual interests, in particular sports or activities that they shared with their sons and daughters, which were clearly times that were enjoyed by both adult and child. These interactions are based on a direct response by the father to the child that adapts the activity to fit for all participants. For example, one father talked about a game that he designed in interaction with his son and daughter. In the course of describing the game he points to the ways in which it meets his needs and those of his children. He also references the ways in which he has adapted the game to make it more appropriate for his son, who is the younger of the two children:

As soon as I come home, we play and we have this little thing where I give them a “tune-up,” as we’ll call it. My son doesn’t know how to say it right, so I give him a “tunafish,” and I just pick him up, throw ’em around the den a little bit, we wrestle a little bit. As soon as I get home from work I go to my room to get changed, just more comfortable, and they come in and they’re like, ”give me a tune-up, give me a tune-up,” … I guess one of my strategies is, you know, kind of keep it light—keep them distracted with—my son especially, because he’s probably a little bit less mature, emotionally, like, you know, he tends to get a little wound about situations, you know, I try to redirect him—so I think they look to me for having fun.

(New Father 5)

This type of adaptive play requires attention at multiple levels on the part of a father to his child. The game is successful to the degree that this father is “tuned in” to his child’s developmental needs (recognition of less maturity), as well as attending in the moment to his children’s desire to play, level of fatigue, mutual satisfaction and enjoyment of the game.

While rambunctious play may be the way that many fathers and children have fun together and mutually respond to each other, there are other times that were described as being profoundly moving for fathers. One young father spoke with some emotion about the importance for him of having his son recognise him from the time of his birth: “he quiets down, he knows it’s you” (Young Fathers Focus Group 1). Other fathers described “this warm connection” (Separated and Divorced Father 17) or “heart connection” (New Father 15) of holding each other or being together, and talked about hugging, holding, and cuddling together. A father who had been a step-parent to an older child prior to having a biological child spoke of this connection as being critical to the quality of his parenting. He suggested that his earlier parenting had been more “harsh” and that if he had been “connected to her in this heart way, then I wouldn’t have been so mechanically a parent” (New Father 15). The responsiveness that is described by these fathers points to explicit attention to their children—holding, listening,
seeing—and responding to their presence in such a way as to enhance or facilitate a
deeper connection between them.

The fathers who participated in this study also pointed to special days they had spent
together with their children doing something in which they were both engrossed. The
pleasure of sharing time together as father and child was identified, sometimes as a re-
result of direct interaction: “I like the attention, I guess, that I get from my son … I love
seeing him smile … when he is happy, it just makes me happy” (Young Father 32). In
this regard, fathers viewed their own responsiveness to the child as a function of their
mutual attentiveness. As well, fathers spoke of the enjoyment they experienced in wit-
nessing their children’s curiosity, experience of fun, delight in learning, and sharing a
book read together: “Some things that you don’t even think about anymore, they come
home and they are just so fascinated by it. Just looking at their reactions and what they
have to say about things - it is just amazing” (Indigenous Fathers 4008). Not all of these
mutually engaging moments arise in the context of positive events. In the same way as
all family members can exacerbate each others’ level of frustration, responsiveness can
also turn a negative situation around. One father describes his experience of his own
frustration in response to his son’s “whining”: “When I get too frustrated, I start singing
… and when I start singing, he sings with me, he doesn’t cry. And that makes me laugh
and simmer down, and then I’m singing and he stops whining, and that helps me relax
even more” (Young Father 2).

**Being responsive with a future orientation.** While being fully engaged in the present
can be profoundly moving for these fathers, they also referenced the future orientation
to this type of connection and mutual engagement. The development of responsiveness
over time involves anticipating their children’s developmental changes as well as the
changes that will occur in their relationship. One father talked about looking forward
to seeing his children grow up: “I want to be a part of that. I want to experience that with
them … those are the types of things I want out of parenting, for me and for (child’s
name), that we have a relationship that we can talk about issues as time goes on, and
as he gets older, when he’s, you know, a big man” (New Father 12). A young father
identified his anticipation of what will be added to his interaction with his son over
time:

I think kids get more fun as they get older because you can do a lot more stuff with
them. Right now the most fun I can do with my nine month old is play with him,
just sit down and play with him for half an hour. Watch him smile and giggle and
just have the time of his life. But when he gets older, I can go camping and fishing
and teach him to play baseball, to do all this stuff. That’s where they get more;
more fun is at the stage. You’re teaching, you’re bestowing your values on them,
that’s, next to being fun, it’s one of the greatest feelings in the world. (Young Fa-
thers Focus Group 1)

The mutually responsive interaction between father and child allows for each to teach
the other over time. One father talked about this dynamic interaction with a future ori-
entation: “I believe that it’s a growing and evolving relationship and fathers must have that opportunity to grow and evolve with their children, and their children with their father for it to really work” (Separated and Divorced Father 7). Sometimes this kind of responsiveness involves an ability to “kind of go with the flow, and cope as it happens” (Gay Father T2), and to adjust one’s style of parenting to meet both current and future demands. At other times, it may be that more effort is required to make these adjustments as a father: “As children get older you have to make that adjustment … you can’t just say do what I tell you and don’t ask … I kind of fought that part of the change in my parenting. It took me a while to get over and make that change … can’t just say “Do this. Don’t question it”… I have to be ready to explain it” (Father of Child with Special Needs 10).

Fathers who are responsive to their child’s needs over time take developmental changes into account. For example, some of the participant fathers talked about knowing that their adolescent children have different needs with respect to father involvement than they had earlier. One father described how he uses the current situation to shape his focus as a parent: “dealing with my son, the whole issue of trust ... he is fourteen now, so he is just starting, like he smoked marijuana last year and the whole thing about getting the story straight and his honesty and his willingness to be honest is a little difficult but we sort that out” (Separated and Divorced Father 11). A gay father (C9) talked about modifying the amount of information he shared with his son about his gay relationship from more limited talk when his son was nine years old—“to the extent that he was able to understand”—to more explicit talk when they took a trip to San Francisco four years later. Another father described his own attunement based on his awareness of his child’s developmental age: “Sure children can’t talk unless they’re a certain age but they have a certain way of telling you what they want, and you just deal with it that way” (Young Father 19). Fathers of adolescents also pointed to the increased role of peers, dating and extracurricular activities that interfere directly with time spent together. This seems especially influential for fathers who are living separately from their children who talked about having “one night” visits rather than full weekend because they have their teens’ “social life” to take into consideration (Gay Father T5).

The responsiveness on the part of fathers as described above, both in the moment and with a view to the future, appears to be contingent on children’s expression of need as well as the influence of fathers’ values and priorities as a father. These aspects of responsiveness will be explored further in the following two sections.

Responsive to Children’s Expression of Need

The fathers who participated in this study identified the ways in which they responded directly to their children’s needs based on their own understanding of what children were asking for, and what fathers have learned through observation and experience of this particular child. They identified the importance of responding to different children in different ways based on their individual differences, and the learning that came with having more than one child and responding to developmental changes. They spoke of
how this knowledge required time spent together, and of how they adapted their parenting to account for their child’s needs. For example, one father (New Father 5) talked about dropping his son off to school “super-early” because “my son kind of meanders around” and it is important to this father that he allow time for that particular need to be addressed. Another father, who was not residing with his children full time, talked about the importance of moving close enough to his former partner so that his youngest daughter, “she’s kind of a carefree spirit and she would forget things” (Gay Father C6), could walk between her parents’ houses. This level of attending to and understanding one’s child’s needs was seen as a key aspect of fathering for these men, and they talked about the development of this responsiveness from early in their fathering experience.

Many of the young and first-time fathers who participated in this study likened the first days, weeks and months of fathering to puzzle-solving. “I think the first month … trying to figure out, well, she can’t talk, can’t do anything, so when she’s crying it’s hard to figure out, does she need change, does she need food?” (New Father 7) They pointed to their interaction with their infant as not only useful in terms of solving the puzzle of what the child needs, but also as an opportunity to see themselves as fathers.

[Interviewer: At what point did you really feel like a father?] Honestly, might sound funny but it’s when I changed that first diaper … my son was having gastro problems, helping him, that’s when I felt like I was a father, not when my child first came out, when he was first born, I mean the doctors are doing everything … when I stepped in and started doing stuff when my child was at home … that’s when I started to feel like a father. (Young Father 19)

Responsiveness to their child’s needs provides these fathers with an avenue for participating in parenting, for performing their role as a father. While being responsive to a child’s needs in the moment is important, knowledge requires observation and interaction over time according to these men. Fathers who were not living with their children noted the problems that they associated with not spending enough time with their children. One of the separated fathers talked about the importance of this time spent together to a father’s understanding of what his child needs:

You don’t know that your child is teething … unless you were there for the last two weeks to realize that the kid is crying and putting his thumb in his mouth, I wonder why he’s doing that, well you figure that out if you have daily contact with that child. (Separated and Divorced Father 8)

Describing the importance of sharing time in order to understand what is going on for your child and what he/she needs points to the ways in which fathers see their role. These fathers incorporate active attention and interaction into their understanding of what a father does and view this as critical to their knowledge about their child.

Fathers of adolescents in particular talked about the importance of responding when a need is expressed:
The child phones you up and says, I want to see you tomorrow or now, you drop what you are doing and you go see him right then and there, no if and buts about it. If the child says, “Well dad, I don’t want to come over this weekend, I want to go out with my girlfriend”, then you go “No problem, we will see you next time” and then you can hang up the phone and cry. (Separated and Divorced Father 8)

A father’s responsiveness to his child’s needs requires both his attention and his ability to stay present with his child. It suggests increased or modified knowledge about the child and adaptation in fathering over time: “It’s amazing how much a 1 year old, or an 18 month old, or a 3 year old can communicate about what they want, what they like and what they don’t like about what I’m doing. And it’s up to me to pay attention … they’re teaching about how to be a dad” (Indigenous Father 1009). This is not always an easy task, and fathers learn better ways to interact themselves as well: “I think you learn patience, how to take a time out. It’s not really difficult, but it is just such an ongoing process of trying to learn to read your child, and get feedback from your child, kind of interact, get the full interaction and see what the consequences of what you do with your child are” (Indigenous Father 2003).

Responsive Based on Father’s Sense of What is Important

The fathers that we talked with were clear not only about what they learned about their children’s needs from observing and interacting with them, but also about the influences of their own priorities as fathers on what they paid attention to, and the nature of their responses to their children. These priorities, such as discipline or teaching certain values, influence what fathers are attending and responding to, and are enacted in the context of father and child interaction. Decisions about the nature of responses to their children are made within an overall context of fathering with intention and influenced by fathers’ long-term goals for their children. Responsiveness is rooted not only in the child’s needs, but in the ways that one’s priorities and goals as a father influence how these needs are perceived and the range of appropriate parental responses that are considered.

Responsiveness that is driven by fathers’ priorities is particularly demonstrated in the context of discipline. Fathers talked about their ability to see when to “draw the line” (Young Fathers Focus Group 1) in the best interest of their child. In an interview, one new father talked about his view of himself as a father and how that permeates his interactions with his children:

I define myself as a father who’s number one priority over everything else is their kids, who wants to spend as much time as possible, give as much to their kids, make sure my kids are happy, not at the extent of … giving them everything that they want, just with an eye to doing what’s always best for my kids … as much as them being happy, it’s them being safe … ensuring that the right lesson is being taught in terms of, if you don’t eat dinner, you don’t get dessert, you know, it doesn’t make you happy, but … happy is not our priority at this point, right, it’s mak-
ing sure you understand, and so we’re not short-sighted like that, as far as how we make a decision about dinner that—those sort of things can have long term implications. (New Father 5)

In the context of discipline, these fathers indicated that the nature of the responses they made to their children’s needs was influenced by their own priorities as fathers. One father talked about the difficulty that his son has with completing math homework: “He would rather be doing other things, but we push him to do it” (Indigenous Father 5001). While he recognises his son’s preference, he sees this as something that (a) is problematic, and (b) requires his direction or intervention. The nature of his response is determined not only by what he hears from his son but also by his interpretation of the need and his expectations for doing the right thing as a father: “We do it anyways and we tell him that it is just part of life that sometimes you have to do things that are not always fun. You aren’t going to make too much money if you can’t do math.”

The influence on responsiveness of fathers’ priorities is not always described in terms of negative or difficult interactions. The fathers who were interviewed identified the positive feelings they had when they were able to “teach” their children or “help” them in some way. As with the young father who was looking forward to a time when he could teach values while camping and fishing with his son, these fathers also talked about spending time at home helping their children learn skills that would benefit them in their interactions with others at school: “doing it a certain way so he doesn’t get frustrated, but also keep him moving ahead and … motivated” (Father of Child with Special Needs 3). Responding to what they see as their children’s learning needs also requires consistency over time with its attendant challenges. For example, one father talked about the repercussions of raising autonomous children who then make independent choices as adolescents: “I have to follow through on those ideas that I want to instigate into my children…. I have to accept that choice with no anger and move on” (Separated and Divorced Father 8). This points to a complexity of responsiveness that is located not only in the present, but which is also driven by both the father’s overall intention and his view of his child’s future needs.

Together with fathers’ own intentions, the nature of fathers’ responses to their children frequently incorporates mothers’ influences as well as those of other parenting partners. Fathers in marriages or common-law relationships with another parent frequently use the word “we” when identifying priorities for childrearing. For example, one father suggests that “We try not to be strict … but there are consequences when she (daughter) doesn’t listen…. There’s no difference in (mother’s) discipline and mine” (Young Father 5). Other fathers will talk about taking complementary roles (often supporting traditional gender roles) to that of the child’s mother or their partner and being “the disciplinary figure” (Young Fathers Focus Group 1) in contrast to a more “emotional” approach. Some separated and divorced fathers talk about providing for the child’s needs in a way that is quite different from the style of parenting that is practiced in their ex-partner’s home. While this could be seen as developing or differentiating par-
enting styles in response to parenting partners or a gendered understanding of what is entailed in doing fathering, it is also influencing the range of possible responses to his child that a father considers. In other ways, fathers can act to challenge gendered notions of what fathers do in response to their perceptions of what their children need. One father indicated that following his separation he had to change his parenting approach: “The father’s role is firm, while the mother’s role is gentle. I was going to be a single parent, so I had to make sure I showed both characteristics and that was hard” (Indigenous Fathers 6006). He describes how this has made a difference in his response to his children: “Fathers don’t take any garbage. I guess it is ‘this way or the highway.’ But now, it is that I have to try to understand where they are coming from more…. Moms traditionally have had to listen to the entire story. That is what I have had to do and it has been really hard.”

Fathers’ responses to their children are often influenced in part by strategizing with respect to how best to get desired results from their children. One father describes a game that he plays in order to get his son to brush his teeth without an argument. Another describes ensuring that his parenting priorities fit a Canadian context in contrast to his own upbringing: “maybe taking into consideration the cultural difference here and there, so I just from time to time try to modify my attitude and behaviour and probably—I don’t know—of course, I give my daughter more freedom than I had, but at the same time right now she is carrying more responsibility than I had at her age at home” (Immigrant Father 007R). Many fathers we talked with pointed to the importance of “figuring out” parenting in your own way: “You start with a great love for your kids and then you try to find a way to make it work…. I think you really just need to understand who you are and how you are going to get through it” (New Father 4). Intentions, however, do not ensure what the interaction will be like in all instances. The same father who talked about knowing himself and his children in order to engage in parenting in his own way had this to say:

I know that if I do deal with the children in a rational manner and I approach them calmly and I, um, I treat them the way that they should be treated, they typically don’t lose their cool and they act better…. You think that learning—my wife’s the same way—you’d think we’d learn after countless times in repeating that mistake—but we don’t. (New Father 4)

In summary, fathers’ responsiveness in interaction with their children can be influenced by their own intentions, priorities and values. Parenting partners and perceptions about societal values can also serve to influence the ways in which a father reads his children’s needs and the nature of the responses he makes toward them. Responsiveness is articulated not simply as being rooted in the child’s expression or demonstration of need, but also as reflective of the selective attention and understanding that a father has of these needs and the range of possible responses he considers in interaction with his child and in the context of his overall priorities and values as a parent.
Men Learning About and Redefining Themselves as Fathers

As a result of this responsiveness between father and child, there is a change in how fathers see themselves. The men who participated in this study talked about a reorientation in their values and priorities, referring to the “big picture” as becoming more evident to them. One father described the way that engaging in parenting effects this change: “When you have a baby or a child, it’s like, you know, that’s someone you need to look after, right? So every day has a purpose” (New Father 20). Fathers also identified their own increased maturity and the ways in which they are perceived, by themselves and others, as having increased responsibilities and being more “adult.”

I’m not just some Joe doing whatever. I’ve got a kid and I need to think twice. That’s an advantage, for sure! Because just her smiles are way better than going out alone to have a beer with the guys. Seeing her walk around and smile is much more fun. My role as a father makes me more important, because I have to be there and listen to my daughter. She needs me and I try to be around as much as possible. (Young Father 5)

These fathers referenced the degree to which they saw themselves as more “patient” and the importance of this patience in their interactions with their children in particular. Children provide their fathers with opportunities to learn about their own impatience and how to deal with it. A new father described his own experience of this in the following way:

When my son was first born, I found I could get impatient quickly, and some of that comes from his—you know, he’s impatient, he’s not able to communicate well, so he’s upset, and everybody gets a little, you know, excited, let’s say. You know … you just gotta take a second to catch your breath, focus, and understand set expectations for what’s going to come out of this scenario, and then, you know, proceed accordingly. That has improved dramatically, in my mind … I definitely feel like I have matured in the role. (New Father 5)

DISCUSSION

Fathers’ responsiveness, as developed in this paper, serves as a conceptual tool for looking at the process of “relational synchrony” suggested by Palkovitz (2007). Although recent attention has been paid to the development of fatherhood identity in the literature (e.g., Doucet, 2006; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Palkovitz, Copes, & Woolfolk, 2001), this analysis places a specific emphasis on the ways that fathers are adaptive to a constantly unfolding set of puzzles that emerge within the context of their relationships and interactions with their children. Previous work has demonstrated the importance for new fathers of learning through practice (Steinberg, Kruckman, & Steinberg, 2000). Children’s needs, or perhaps more accurately, fathers’ perceptions of those needs influence fathers’ intentions, the nature of their interventions and father-child in-
teraction. Both in the moment, and over time, the reciprocity and adaptiveness of this relationship is demonstrated when interactions are reflective of the uniqueness of this child and this father.

This analysis provides evidence that fathers demonstrate areas of responsiveness that are similar to previously described maternal responsiveness, including sensitivity, attunement, joint attention, and developmental adaptiveness (Warren & Brady, 2007). While it is beyond the scope of this study to determine how or if the benefits to children of paternal responsiveness are similar to those established for maternal responsiveness, what has been demonstrated is the influence that responsiveness has on fathers’ experience and intentions. There are multiple ways in which fathers are “doing” fathering as responsive, interactional and relational activities—with mothers, with partners and other caregivers, and with children directly. This research demonstrates some of the ways in which this responsibility to children takes place. This is not to suggest that it is only within the dyadic father-child relationship that fathering is practiced, but these findings contribute to understanding some of the myriad ways in which fathers’ responsiveness emerges and can be understood specifically within this particular facet of fathering, as well as how these interactions influence the meaning fathers make about themselves. These findings also support the contention that mothers and other parenting partners influence fathers’ responsivity (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Dienhart, 1998). Paternal responsiveness is described in terms of intentions that take into account the influences of others and these fathers’ experiences demonstrate some of the nuances of these influences (e.g., taking into account the approach or presence of mothers and others in fine-tuning their own responses, supporting or troubling traditional gendered expectations of fathers and mothers based on their perceptions of what their children need).

The contribution that the current study makes is to begin to articulate fathers’ experiences of responsiveness in the context of a bidirectional father-child relationship and in the presence of other significant relationships such as those with mothers and partners. It is important to note that the fathers who participated in this study, in describing their own experiences of fathering within their local context, have also been influenced by broader social discourses that increasingly encourage consideration of active father involvement and engagement with children (Marsiglio et al., 2000). While we have articulated an analysis of these descriptions that highlights fathers’ responsiveness, it is difficult to disentangle the influences of these broader messages on what fathers see as significant aspects of their fathering experiences and responsibilities. What these findings highlight is that responsiveness occurs in the process of engaging in mutual interaction with one’s children. Fathers who are limited in the time and direct interaction that they have with their children will have fewer opportunities to experience and exhibit that responsiveness. Fathers’ attunement and sensitivity to their children’s unique needs and developmental changes allow them to provide a context, responsively, in which a mutually satisfying relationship can evolve. Responsiveness to contextual cues, other relationships (particularly those with mothers and other parenting partners), and adaptiveness over time are also evidenced in the descriptions provided by these fathers.
Interestingly, the current literature on parental responsiveness, which has been predominantly focused on mothers, has also been primarily oriented to the influences of this responsiveness on child development. Parents’ experience of how their children’s needs influence their own behaviour and experience, what they are responding to and their sense of how they make these responses has been overlooked to a large degree. Future work might investigate both maternal and paternal responsiveness from the perspective of what mothers and fathers are responding to in their interactions with their children and how they make their responses. Doucet (2006) argues that in order to further our understanding of fathering, a comparison of mothering and fathering is less useful than developing ways to listen for and attend to the particular ways in which fathers “enact their parental responsibilities and ultimately how they reinvent fathering” (p. 225). The current study contributes to understanding men’s development and the fathering experience by exploring the influence on men of engaging in fathering, of attending to their children and experiencing their own responsiveness. Such an exploration has implications for the ways in which we work with fathers in supporting their involvement with their children. Interventions that are designed to promote father involvement, particularly among fathers who may also be seen as at risk of being unable to provide adequate fathering or parenting for a child, can take into account a broadened understanding of paternal responsiveness and interactions between father and child.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This form of research, that emphasizes community university collaboration and the development of research strategies within community university partnerships, often means that the collection of data is not as tightly controlled as it would be in a straight grounded theory approach. In this project, the clusters were asked to collect data for the central analysis team but there was a considerable range in the way that this task was carried out. Furthermore, there were some inconsistencies in the quality of the data that were collected (e.g., skill of interviewer, nature of the probes). Nevertheless the high number of interviews conducted as part of this qualitative project more than adequately compensated for any shortcomings in quality.

One of the strengths of this study is the diversity of fathering experience. In our project, we were committed to the idea that fathering is not a monolithic experience, but rather, needs to be understood within the context of varying parenting conditions. Our efforts to understand the process of how fathers are responsive to children was both challenged and enriched by this diversity. There were times in the analysis when we were tempted to look at these processes within the cluster characteristics because of the unique issues faced by different kinds of fathers. In the end, however, we were satisfied that there are a set of generic processes associated with responsiveness that cut across the different kinds of fathering groups. Future research needs to be attentive to both the nomothetic and idiographic aspects of the fathering relationship. Our focus here was on the nomothetic; there is much work to be done to examine the idiographic
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processes of being an indigenous father, a father of special needs children, or a gay father.

CONCLUSION

In describing their experience as fathers of attending to their children’s needs as they perceive them, of engaging in interaction with their children and in attending to their own priorities and intentions, these fathers have demonstrated some of the ways in which responsiveness is expressed in father-child relationships. Fathers’ descriptions of responsiveness highlight the mutual attention and emergent nature of father-child interaction, children’s expression of needs, and fathers’ own set of priorities and values that influence what they respond to in these interactions and how they respond to their children. Future directions for research include continued investigation of the particularities of paternal responsiveness; exploration of the contributions of interrelationships between mothers, fathers, children, and other partners to paternal responsiveness to children and the impact of this on fathers and their children; and considerations of the ways in which dominant social messages about ‘good’ and ‘bad’ fathering and mothering influence both parental responsiveness to children and subsequent understanding of one’s self as a father or mother.

REFERENCES


