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# Stepfather involvement in social interventions made by youth protection services in stepfamilies

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## ABSTRACT

Despite efforts made by management and caseworkers to promote active parental participation in the protective context, fathers or other male figures are often brushed aside from intervention. This paper presents the results of qualitative research on methods used by youth protection caseworkers ( $n = 22$ ) working with stepfather families. The main objective is to identify items that encourage or discourage stepfather involvement in psychosocial interventions. Results showed that certain items do not apply solely to stepfathers, but influence youth protection caseworker decision-making from a broader perspective. Particular characteristics associated with being a stepfather significantly influence involvement practices espoused by caseworkers, notably the absence of legal status and biological connection with the mother's children.

## INTRODUCTION

In recent years, interventions by protective services have undergone many changes. In the past, the prevailing viewpoint was that the State should replace parents deemed incompetent. However, practices in the protective context have been realigned, placing the young person and his or her family at the heart of the intervention. Despite the special challenges inherent in the implementation of such practices, in particular major difficulties experienced by clientele in the follow-up phase and the legal context prevailing in the helping relationship (Corby *et al.* 1996; O'Hagan 1997; Jivanjee 1999a; Saint-Jacques *et al.* 2000), practitioners now encourage active parental participation in all stages of the procedure. In Québec, a French-speaking province of Canada, *Youth Centres* have the mandate to apply actions related to youth protection. The *Youth Protection Act* in force since 1979 establishes guidelines for services offered to families in which the security and/or development of the child are compromised.

However, despite efforts deployed by management and caseworkers to promote this kind of intervention, several authors have noted contradictions

between policies or values espoused by practitioners and the reality of practice itself (Hudson *et al.* 1994; Pouliot & Saint-Jacques 2005). For example, some authors stressed that caseworker efforts to involve parents in interventions were directed more particularly to the child's mother, while fathers or other male figures were often brushed aside (O'Hagan 1997; Daniel & Taylor 1999). Other authors emphasized the significant difference between the apparent overture of caseworkers to include fathers in interventions and the fathers' effective inclusion from a practical standpoint (Edwards 1998; Gaudet & Devault 2001; Pouliot & Saint-Jacques 2005). If these results illustrate difficulties experienced by practitioners seeking to involve biological fathers in their interventions, what may be said about the partners of mothers with children from a previous union? This question appears particularly pertinent in the current context of changing family situations. Indeed, the proportion of single-parent families and stepfamilies in Canada has increased in recent years, from 13.5% and 5.5% in 1987 to 20.3% and 10.4% in 1998, respectively (Duchesne 2001). This trend is even more evident among families served by youth centres. Certain studies based for the most part on

non-random samples suggest that between 19% and 30% of young persons receiving services from youth centres live in stepfamilies (Saint-Jacques *et al.* 2001). Among these stepfamilies, 75% comprise a mother, her children and a man who is neither the biological nor the adoptive father of the children. In Québec, the term 'stepfather' is used to designate these men and includes those who are married to the mother, as well as common-law partners. In this paper, this term and meaning are used because 'stepfather' is more specific than 'partner of the mother'.

This paper presents the results of qualitative research on methods used by youth protection caseworkers working with stepfather families. The main objective is to identify factors that encourage or discourage stepfather involvement in psychosocial interventions, psychology, the environment, education and social services (Jodelet 1994; Arruda 2003). The concept of representation is defined as a subjective construction of reality that develops and changes in relation to knowledge and social and individual experiences (Jodelet 1994). The relationship between representation and experience is twofold. Individual experiences and practices cause representation to evolve; representation, in turn, dictates behaviour and social practices (Rouquette 2000; Trudel 2001). Thus, the use of the concept of representation to understand and explain caseworker behaviour is pertinent. As professional practice is a cognitive, emotional and social construction that, like social representation, evolves on the basis of acquired knowledge, experiences and relationships, Trudel (2001) considers the use of the concept of representation, understood to comprise items that structure and make up these practices, to be more than appropriate. More specifically, the aim of this research is to provide answers to the following questions: (i) How do caseworkers working in youth protection view stepfathers? (ii) What issues are raised by caseworkers when they decide to involve, or not to involve, stepfathers in their interventions? (iii) What are the connections between social representations and caseworker decisions to involve, or not to involve, stepfathers in their interventions?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Stepfather involvement in the stepfamily

Increasingly, the scientific community is acknowledging that the emotional and financial involvement of

fathers in families has a positive impact on children and their development (Amato & Rivera 1999). However, the results of studies on the effects of stepfather involvement in the psychosocial development of children are more ambivalent.

Generally speaking, studies have shown that stepfathers are less involved with their stepchildren, spend less time and share fewer activities with them, and are perceived as less warm and supportive than are biological fathers (Amato & Rivera 1999; Fine *et al.* 1999; Hofferth & Anderson 2003). However, positive and significant involvement by stepfathers can have positive impacts on children. For example, a positive, significant relationship between a young person and a stepfather is associated with better child outcomes (Furstenberg & Harris 1993; White & Gilbreth 2001). The study by D. J. English, D. B. Marshall & A. J. Stewart (manuscript submitted) of young children who were frequently referred to protective services demonstrated that a high level of stepfather involvement is associated with a decrease in symptoms of depression experienced by the child's mother. A decrease in the symptoms themselves is associated with more restrained use by the mother of physical punishment and verbal abuse in a conflict situation with her child.

Stepfathers involve themselves in family life and with their children to varying degrees. Although their commitment is dependent on a multitude of factors, research suggests that circumstances influencing the level of stepfather involvement, such as the age of the child at the time the stepfamily is formed, should be considered. It would appear that stepfathers develop better relationships, and more positive involvement, with younger children than with adolescents (Marsiglio 1992; Hetherington & Jodl 1994; Dunn *et al.* 2000). Hofferth & Anderson (2003) also reported that stepfathers living with the partner's children for a long period of time spent more time and shared more activities with the children and were perceived as friendlier than stepfathers in recently constituted stepfamilies. Moreover, men who are the biological father of at least one child in the stepfamily are more inclined to play the role of father figure to all the children in the stepfamily. Finally, Saint-Jacques (2000) noted that stepfathers who play the father figure role are often found in stepfamilies where the biological father is either completely absent or inactive for the most part in certain aspects of life, such as school supervision, but is present from the standpoint of financial support and leisure activities.

### Parental involvement in the psychosocial intervention

The advantages of active parental participation in the intervention are well documented in literature and considered by several authors as widespread and significant. It is generally recognized that active parental participation decreases the duration of foster care, contributes to a more successful reintegration of children into their families of origin, and encourages parental recourse to resources (Blumenthal 1984; Jivanjee 1999a). Active parental participation is also instrumental in improving parental skills and mitigating parental resistance to the intervention. For caseworkers questioned by Saint-Jacques *et al.* (2000), the fact of actively involving parents also lessens the burden shouldered by caseworkers. Finally, Jivanjee (1999b) notes that parents involved in the intervention perceive in a more positive light the services that are received.

Although each family situation is unique and there are no 'miracle solutions', documented evidence points to certain things that encourage or, on the contrary, act as deterrents to parental involvement in the psychosocial intervention. The authors generally differentiate between issues related to family context, the caseworker, the organizational context or an organization's intervention policy. From a family perspective, a greater or lesser degree of parental motivation for involvement and the type of problem situation present influence the level of parental involvement. For example, research by Saint-Jacques *et al.* (2000) reported that parents of a young person monitored because of behavioural problems become more easily involved in the intervention than those whose child is in care by reason of neglect, abandonment or sexual abuse. The presence of personal problems experienced by parents, such as mental health issues, chronic instability or parental conflict, also tends to impede parental involvement in the intervention (Blumenthal 1984; Jivanjee 1999a; Saint-Jacques *et al.* 2000). Among caseworkers, demonstrating flexibility, openness, respect, empathy and the ability to believe in change and parental skills also encourages parental commitment (Jivanjee 1999a,b; Saint-Jacques *et al.* 2000). For some caseworkers, personal or professional experience as parents or a lengthy experience in intervention also act as facilitating factors. However, a lack of knowledge or training in certain areas (Saint-Jacques *et al.* 2000) or in dealing specifically with men (O'Hagan 1997) has been identified as an obstacle to parental involvement. The organizational context also

plays a role in the decision over whether or not to involve parents in the intervention. Lack of available time for the intervention because of heavy caseloads and bureaucratic constraints is the organizational impediment most frequently mentioned by youth protection practitioners (Jivanjee 1999a). Finally, the non-voluntary context and intrusive nature of the intervention by youth centres, the negative social image of protective services and the paradox of the double mandate of protection and assistance, are deemed obstacles to parental involvement by several practitioners (Jivanjee 1999a; Saint-Jacques *et al.* 2000).

On the issue of fathers' involvement in social intervention, many authors noted the difficulties faced by caseworkers in truly involving men in their interventions, resulting in fathers and other male parental figures being disregarded (O'Hagan 1997; Daniel & Taylor 1999). Edwards (1998), for example, noted that caseworkers questioned in her study constantly alluded to the importance of involving men, but failed in their ability to give concrete expression to the idea. Caseworkers questioned by Pouliot & Saint-Jacques (2005) reported making efforts to involve men, but noted that few of them participated in the activities available to them. A number of reasons have been advanced to explain the rift between caseworker positions and practices on a daily basis. This more or less conscious decision to avoid involving masculine figures in the intervention process may result from the fact that some clinicians remain far from convinced of the usefulness of fathers in the family system and intervention; from the hostility and lack of trust felt by some caseworkers towards men; from caseworkers' lack of training in the specificities of interventions involving men; and from fears of intimidation or violence (O'Hagan 1997; Dulac 1998, 2001; Gaudet & Devault 2001). Research by Pouliot & Saint-Jacques (2005) identifies three reasons raised by caseworkers to explain the difference between rhetoric and practice. Some caseworkers raised legal issues stating that the quantity of information transmitted and their contact with parents depended mainly on parental legal status. As mothers most often have legal custody of the children, several caseworkers have developed the 'reflex' of intervening only with this parent, and not seeking to establish contact with fathers. Other practitioners pleaded that their decision was based on the interest shown by a father in his earlier commitment to the child and his availability and ability to devote energy to the situation. Finally, some caseworkers indicated that their workload and a shortage

of time often act as a damper to their wish to involve fathers.

## METHODOLOGY

### Participants

The information presented in this paper originates with a qualitative study conducted among youth protection caseworkers working for Centre jeunesse de Québec – Institut universitaire (CJQ–IU) or Centre jeunesse Chaudière-Appalaches. CJQ–IU offers services to a mainly urban population, while Centre jeunesse Chaudière-Appalaches serves a rural and urban population. To be retained as participants in the study, caseworkers had to have worked in the ‘application of measures’ service for at least 1 year and to have been in a position to decide whether or not to include the stepfather. Staff members working in this service are responsible for establishing the intervention plan for the child and the child’s parents, and for applying that plan. A total of 22 caseworkers were encountered in the course of this study. Table 1 presents the main characteristics of the sample.

The sample was composed of caseworkers who volunteered to participate in the study. They have been informed of the existence of the project by their team leaders or by research respondents who are staff members responsible for coordinating CJQ–IU research activities. More specifically, research respondents may be called upon to participate in research planning or convey practitioners’ concerns to the research teams. Two caseworkers were recruited directly by a research team member. After the caseworkers were informed of the nature of the project, the names and phone numbers of those interested in participating were transmitted to the senior researcher. Interested candidates were then contacted by telephone by a research team member to make an appointment for the interview. During the interview, participants in the research had to sign a consent form. Caseworker and client names were changed, as was all information that might identify those involved.

### Data collection method

Qualitative interviews were used in this study to explore caseworker representations of stepfathers and to allow a better understanding of the practices underlying decisions to involve stepfathers. Participants’ views were analysed as a way of studying the repre-

**Table 1** Respondent profile

Characteristics	Distribution ( <i>n</i> = 22) <i>n</i> (%)
Gender	
Female	16 (73)
Male	6 (27)
Age categories (years)	
Between 21 and 30	5 (23)
Between 31 and 40	6 (27)
Between 41 and 50	7 (32)
Older than 50	4 (18)
Years of experience	
Five years and under	6 (27)
Between 6 and 15 years	5 (23)
Between 16 and 25 years	6 (27)
More than 25 years	5 (23)
Last level of education completed	
Technical	4 (18)
Bachelor	14 (64)
Master	3 (14)
Information lacking	1 (4)
Field of study	
Special education	2 (9)
Social service	15 (68)
Psychological re-education	4 (18)
Information lacking	1 (4)
Type of family arrangement	
Original two-parent family	8 (36)
Single-parent family	4 (18)
Stepfamily	1 (4)
Childless couple	5 (23)
Single	4 (18)

sentations because they involve the presence of factors deemed essential in the construction of a representation: the subject (the participant in the study), the recipient (the interviewer) and the object (of the study) (Trudel 2001). Qualitative interviews also provide access to ideas entertained by caseworkers in relation to their practice, as they describe their experiences (Trudel 2001).

A semi-structured interview was first conducted among participants to explore their social representations of stepfathers and the reasons underlying their decisions as to whether or not to include stepfathers in their interventions. Use of this method of information gathering is particularly appropriate when the aim of the study is to define respondent perceptions of the object under study, respondent behaviour and attitudes evinced (Mayer & Saint-Jacques 2000). An interview guide comprising the various themes and questions was developed to explore the three major components of any social representation, namely

information, scope of representation and attitude. The interview guide was pre-tested with a caseworker practitioner. At the start of the interviews, the interviewer indicated to the participants that to facilitate exchange, the term 'stepfather' would be used in this project to designate the partner of a woman with children from a previous union. The term would not be used to qualify stepfather involvement, and it applied to men married to these women and men living in common law relationships with these women. Given these details, the participants were then asked to indicate what came to mind spontaneously when they heard the word 'stepfather'. The purpose of this first question was to study the content of social representations endorsed by caseworkers with respect to stepfathers. The caseworkers were then invited to present their last case file involving a young person being monitored who had a stepfather in his or her family environment. The research team elected to ask caseworkers to present their most recently encountered situation in which a child lived with a stepfather, in order to prevent them from choosing atypical cases. Sub-questions were proposed to further guide this segment of the interview. For example, caseworkers were asked to indicate the problem in the given situation, what was targeted by the intervention, which players they chose to involve and why, and to explain the most difficult aspect of the situation and, conversely, the easiest. Then the participants were asked to compare this file to other situations in which they had intervened and where there were stepfathers. They were asked to describe how their intervention experiences with stepfather families might be compared with interventions with other types of family. Brief summaries of a number of difficult situations were also presented to participants. Based on the information provided, the participants had to indicate whether or not they would include the stepfather presented in the description in their intervention. They then had to justify their decision. The brief summaries were developed in co-operation with a CJQ-IU representative. They allowed a more in-depth exploration of the links between caseworkers' social representations and their decisions as to whether or not to involve the stepfather in their intervention, and to compare caseworker decisions based on the nature of the situations presented. Most of the interviews lasted an average of one and a half hours and were conducted in the participants' workplace. Discussions were recorded and then transcribed to facilitate analysis. The information gathered was processed in a theme content analysis using Nud.Ist software.

## RESULTS

### Caseworkers' social representations of stepfathers

To explore caseworkers' social representations of stepfathers in this study, we asked them to state what came to mind spontaneously when they heard the word 'stepfather'. The results indicate that caseworkers' perceptions of stepfathers correspond to a man living with a woman who is the mother of one or more children of at least one former union. The notions of wedlock and kinship dominate the answers catalogued. A stepfather is not perceived as having blood ties or legal ties with the children. He may be married or not to the mother and generally has children born of previous unions. Some caseworkers spontaneously associate the term 'stepfather' with a notion of stability and view this man as someone who can support the mother in her parenting role. Others, on the other hand, associate the word with more negative connotations such as 'complexity' or 'instability'.

Caseworkers rarely used the term 'stepfather', preferring to refer to the man as the 'mother's partner' or 'mother's boyfriend'. The use of the term 'stepfather' seems to be reserved for a man who: (i) has been present in the family for a long period of time; or (ii) is married to the mother; or (iii) is very involved with the mother's children and plays a role similar to that traditionally attributed to the biological father; or (iv) is the adoptive parent of the mother's children; or (v) is the father of a child with this mother. Given the widespread use of the terms 'mother's partner' or 'mother's boyfriend', we asked participants what the expressions meant to them. For several, the main distinction between the different expressions resided in the degree of involvement of these men with the children:

'A stepfather is someone who has chosen to play a role with the children, while "mother's partner" is someone who has chosen the role of partner, but has not necessarily involvement with the children.' (Lise)

The specific use of 'mother's boyfriend' seems to refer to a man temporarily with the family who is not involved with the children. On the other hand, some caseworkers do not perceive any difference between the different expressions. Rather, they consider that the terms refer to the same individual or reflect the different kinds of relationship that a man may have with a woman.

However, some caseworkers prefer to refer to the man based on how he is commonly referred to in the

family. Incidentally, several caseworkers in the study use the terms used within the family to evaluate the quality of the relationship between the stepfather and the other members of the family:

‘When a mother states, “He’s my boyfriend” and the man states, “She’s my girlfriend these days”, I don’t tend to consider the man to be a very good father for the child. I am not inclined to include these men in the intervention plan, because I know that they are only passing through.’ (Fernande)

In summary, the analysis of social representations emerging from caseworker dialogue resulted in a typology describing three kinds of men that caseworkers meet in their work and who are distinguishable by their level of involvement in family life. The first kind of man is an integral part of family life. He has often been in the child’s life for several years and has developed significant emotional ties with the child. He interacts directly with the child and plays a role similar to that of a father. Contrary to the first kind of man, the second kind generally interacts indirectly with the child, acting more in support of the mother in her parental role. The last kind of man met by caseworkers is in a relationship with the mother but is minimally or not at all involved with the children. He is often just passing through the life of the family.

### **Stepfather involvement in the social intervention: the Caseworker’s point of view**

Caseworkers’ stories, in particular presentations of intervention situations and vignettes, allowed the identification of various criteria used in the decision-making process to include or exclude a stepfather during an intervention. The following section presents these criteria.

#### *Precondition to a caseworker’s decision to include or exclude the stepfather during the intervention*

In the opinion of the caseworkers, the mother’s view is particularly important in the decision as to whether or not to include the partner. More than half the caseworkers felt that this opinion should take precedence over other criteria and gave the mother a right of veto allowing her to accept or refuse participation by her companion in the intervention, even if this approach entailed negative effects:

‘I met a mother who asked me not to involve the stepfather. I didn’t insist. [...] I noted that in coming to see us, the mother was making some progress, while the stepfather continued to harbour the image of the son with behavioural

problems. So I said to myself, ‘I have failed! I should have insisted on including the stepfather in the intervention!’ (Marie-Claude)

While the majority of caseworkers do not appear to dispute the mother’s point of view, others ( $n = 3$ ) believe that it is sometimes preferable to get the mother to question her position:

‘Naturally, if the mother says to me, “I don’t want him to know about this and there is no question of his attending these meetings!” I can arrange for the intervention to be directed otherwise, except that I will question such an attitude [...] I will then state: “Madam, to some extent he is part of your life. Why should he not be informed?”’ (Mélanie)

#### *The first inclusion criterion: family member characteristics*

Caseworkers questioned in this study noted that certain characteristics of the child, father, mother or stepfather play a positive role in including the latter in the intervention. Several ( $n = 13$ ) indicated, for example, that when the mother has personal problems or parental incapacities that prevent her from properly meeting a child’s needs, they tend to include the stepfather in their intervention. In situations where it is deemed appropriate, he can offer emotional or material support to the mother that is temporary or more long-lasting. Some caseworkers ( $n = 13$ ) also mentioned including the stepfather when the problem situation was linked to his objectionable behaviour. In such situations, the decision to include the man seemed obvious:

‘When his behaviour is targeted, you have no choice but to involve him [...]. I cannot work with the mother to correct the stepfather’s objectionable behaviour.’ (Stéphanie)

In addition, a majority of the caseworkers ( $n = 18$ ) deemed it opportune to include the stepfather when he demonstrated a wish for involvement and a positive attitude towards the intervention:

‘He asked to be involved. He said: “Look, I am part of the child’s life and the mother’s life and I want to follow the group [...]” He showed great openness. It is the man’s attitude that makes us feel like including or excluding him.’ (Sylvie)

Finally, some caseworkers ( $n = 4$ ) considered that when the father was absent or rarely present, the stepfather could offer a valid male figure for children, particularly for boys, and so they had a tendency to include him.

*The second inclusion criterion: the type of bond between the stepfather and the family*

When caseworkers decide to include or exclude the stepfather during their intervention, they also consider the bond existing between the stepfather and the other members of the family. Thus, most caseworkers in this study ( $n = 18$ ) assessed the quality of the relationship between the child and the stepfather and tended to include the latter when this person appeared to be a significant parental figure for the child:

'There was a strong bond; it was obvious that the child was on good terms with the man. When I met with the child, I could see that he was important to the child, so I decided to include him.' (Pierre)

Moreover, despite the existence of a positive relationship between the child and the stepfather, a few caseworkers ( $n = 2$ ) did not always see the usefulness of including this player in their intervention, especially when he was not part of the problem:

'Here was a stepfather whose involvement was positive, who was present, stable and reassuring, yet I felt no need to involve him, you see. [ . . . ] He didn't make waves; he was not part of the problem experienced by the child, so I felt no need to intervene with him.' (Claude)

On the other hand, when a man has fathered a child by the mother and becomes the biological father of at least one child in the family, he acquires a status of sorts, ensuring him a place in the intervention.

*The third inclusion criterion: family functioning*

Caseworkers also based their evaluation on family functioning to decide to include or exclude the stepfather during the intervention. Accordingly, more than half the participants in the study ( $n = 13$ ) included this player when he appeared to have a substantial presence in the child's life:

'He was very present; even more so than the mother at one point. We had to bank on him for sure.' (Richard)

Likewise, several caseworkers ( $n = 9$ ) consider that when the stepfather has been present in the family environment for a long time, or that he demonstrates a level of permanence, it becomes important to consider him in the intervention.

*One important limitation to inclusion: the stepfather refuses to co-operate*

Despite the presence of one or more factors favouring stepfather involvement, most caseworkers ( $n = 18$ )

indicated that there are situations where it is difficult to include the stepfather because he categorically refuses to co-operate. A refusal to co-operate can be expressed in several ways, for example by failing to show up for meetings or by systematically interfering with the caseworker's instructions:

'I have faced a few situations where the stepfather categorically refused to become involved. He was a completely marginal individual, even if he could interact adequately with the child. He was simply a person who was totally unapproachable.' (Jeannine)

In these situations, caseworkers have few means at their disposal to elicit co-operation from the stepfather, except to attempt to convince him of the importance of his participation.

*Exclusion criteria mentioned by participants*

The caseworkers in this study stated that they tended to exclude stepfathers from their interventions in situations of chronic conjugal instability, violence or abuse. Thus, more than half the caseworkers ( $n = 13$ ) preferred not to include men involved with mothers who regularly changed partners. In fact, they failed to see the pertinence of including a person who might quickly disappear from the child's environment. Likewise, several caseworkers ( $n = 14$ ) excluded this player in situations of violence or abuse towards the mother and children.

**SYNTHESIS AND DISCUSSION**

Increasingly, stakeholders are acknowledging that active parental participation improves the efficiency of interventions targeting young persons and their families. Several authors have effectively demonstrated the benefits of parental involvement without necessarily dwelling on the way in which the concept is implemented from a practical standpoint, particularly in the special context of youth protection, where the double mandate of protection and assistance sometimes appears paradoxical. The study presented in this paper explores practices underlying the involvement of stepfathers in youth protection social interventions. Interviews conducted with 22 caseworkers working in the application of measures in youth centres allowed us to review caseworkers' social representations of stepfathers and identify certain criteria used by practitioners in their decisions to include or exclude stepfathers during their interventions.

The statements collected in the course of this study clearly illustrate the diversity of social representations

used by youth protection caseworkers in defining stepfathers. Although there appears to be a consensus on the fact that a man must first be defined in terms of his conjugal relationship with the mother, caseworkers nonetheless differ in their methods of defining the role and position of this player in the family, particularly concerning the children and the intervention. The various ways of defining the place and role of stepfathers seem to reflect the different types of stepfather encountered by caseworkers in practice. This study identified three types of stepfather who may be differentiated from each other by the evaluation caseworkers make of their involvement in the family.

On the other hand, an analysis of caseworkers' statements allowed us to pinpoint a certain number of factors favouring or discouraging the inclusion of stepfathers in interventions. Some of the criteria raised by the participants have been documented in previous studies addressing parental involvement from a more global point of view. Such is the case, for example, with exclusion criteria related to conjugal instability, violence and abuse, and the leading limitation to stepfather involvement, namely a refusal to co-operate, all of which are documented in research by Saint-Jacques *et al.* (2000). This result raises the possibility that certain items do not apply solely to stepfathers, but influence youth protection caseworker decision-making from a broader perspective.

However, the statements gathered in this study suggest that particular characteristics associated with the status of the stepfather significantly influence involvement practices espoused by caseworkers, notably the absence of legal status and biological connection with the mother's children. For some authors, such as Mead (1971, quoted in Saint-Jacques 2000), the importance granted by the participants to parentage may be explained by the fact that our societies privilege relationships in which persons are biologically related, and it is this criterion that justifies intervention among children. This argument might explain why caseworkers involve a stepfather more spontaneously when the latter has subsequently fathered a child by the mother of the stepchildren. The importance that caseworkers grant to the biological connection and legal status also provide an understanding of why several among them consider the favourable opinion of the legal parent vital to involving the stepfather. However, the distinct nature of stepfather status causes caseworkers to make fewer efforts to include stepfathers in their interventions and even leads to them favouring their exclusion, especially when the caseworkers feel that the stepfathers are not co-operative or are impairing the

intervention. In this respect, the fact that a significant number of caseworkers entrust the mother with the decision to include or exclude her companion is an approach that remains questionable. O'Hagan (1997) noted that by acting thus, caseworkers burden the mother with the responsibility for the problem and its solution. As a corollary, it remains to be noted that by omitting to include stepfathers, caseworkers risk decreasing the efficiency of their intervention by depriving themselves of a resource that might contribute to ending the demanding situation. Furthermore, without denying the importance of the mother's point of view in the evaluation of problematic situations, it might prove preferable to combine her opinion with the professional judgement and experience of the caseworker when tackling such problems, in order that the latter is able to make the best possible decision. Incidentally, the participants in this study noted that their experience with these families has shown that it is often preferable to insist that the mother include the stepfather when he is part of family life. Moreover, advancing the refusal to co-operate as a reason for limiting stepfather participation in a context of youth protection, where clients are rarely voluntary participants, appears to be more related to the difficulty of grasping the precise role played by this individual in the family than to a criterion linked to stepfather inclusion or exclusion.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PRACTITIONERS

If it is true that, generally, the presence of a stepfather or stepparent adds a measure of complexity to a situation, it can also mean an additional resource that might contribute to improving the problem situation. The caseworker must then decide to what extent and in which way a stepfather might be involved in the intervention. Criteria raised by caseworkers in this research project could help guide practitioners in their decision-making process. What place does a stepfather have in the family and how do the mother and children view him? Has he been present within the family for some time or has he shown any intention of involvement in the medium term? What kind of ties has he developed with his partner's children? What are his strengths? How might these strengths be used to contribute to achieving intervention goals?

In another vein, interventions in youth protection involve a non-voluntary clientele experiencing major problems. In such a context, the caseworker's profes-

sional opinion is vital in assessing the pertinence of including or not including a stepfather, over and above a mother's reluctance or willingness to involve a stepfather. Moreover, if some situations of abuse or violence render the inclusion of the stepfather undesirable, other situations warrant caseworker insistence that family members (mother, stepfather, father and child) make use of a stepfather's strengths to end the situation with a compromise.

Finally, the study highlighted the need of several caseworkers for better indicators of how they should handle situations involving a stepfather. How far should they go in revealing information to a stepfather or to a father regarding a stepfather? Should a copy of the intervention plan be offered to a stepfather? Can caseworkers have stepfathers sign voluntary measures even if their signature has no legal value? In such a case, what would happen if the caseworker were to present these documents in court? Joint efforts in reflecting on these questions and developing indicators would certainly contribute to facilitating caseworker practices regarding the involvement of stepfathers.

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