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Fathers and the child welfare service: Self-concept and fathering practice

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Introduction

Motherhood and fatherhood are constructed and understood in different ways, depending on the historical and cultural context. Childcare has traditionally been regarded as mothers' responsibility, whilst fathers have had a more peripheral role, mainly linked to financially supporting the family. Over the last decades however, fatherhood and fathering practices have received increased attention, both in research and public debate. The discourse of the "new father" (Lewis & O'Brien 1987 pg. 1) is well known and established during the last three decades, referring to a more engaged and "intimate" (Dermott 2008, pg.2) model of fathering. Eerola and Huttunen (2011) claim that the notion of the "new father" can be seen as a meta-narrative; a culturally dominant story of what constitutes good fatherhood today in certain contexts. Such notions often have an ideologically and normative function. However, it is argued that the depiction of the new father is more about ideology, and how one wishes it should be, rather than about actual practice (LaRossa 1997, 2012, Machin 2015).

Norwegian legislation and family policy interventions have, however, generally gone in the direction of equal and gender-neutral parenthood. In Official Norwegian reports, NOU 2012:5, it is claimed that one of the hallmarks of the Nordic welfare states is a comprehensive family policy with an emphasis on gender equality. One goal of this policy is to promote equal parenthood. Today, Norwegian mothers and fathers are usually both working, and fathers are generally more involved in childcare than previously. Despite several family policy interventions, which are intended to contribute to increase fathers' involvement in their child's life, fathers' role in the work of CWS has rarely been thematised in a Norwegian context (Slettebø 2008); both when it comes to research and political priority.

The CWS is the public agency responsible for child welfare. In Norway, every municipality are obliged to have a CWS, to ensure that children and young people who live in conditions that may be detrimental to their health and development receive the necessary assistance and care at the right time (Government n.d).

Even though we focus on a Norwegian context, this paper also contributes to the broader international literature. Several international studies, and a few Norwegian, have shown that the child welfare work mainly focuses on mothers and that fathers largely experience exclusion from the work of the CWS. This paper is based on interviews with 15 fathers who

have children with differing levels of involvement with the CWS. The aim is to examine the fathers' experiences of fatherhood, factors that are important for their self-concept as fathers, and how this can influence their fathering practice.

Literature review

There appears to be a broad agreement in several studies that the focus of CWS is primarily on mothers, and that fathers are largely excluded from the child welfare work; both in Norwegian (Skramstad & Skivenes 2015; Vagli 2009) and international studies (Brown et al. 2009; Dominelli et al. 2011; Featherstone 2009). A number of authors argue that the child welfare workers see women as responsible for the welfare of the family and children, and routinely disregard fathers when considering the risk and family functioning (Cavanagh, Dobash & Dobash 2007; Coohy & Zang 2006; Munro 1998). Fathers are not considered to be within the core business of the CWS; it is mothers who are seen as the primary clients (Ewart-Boyle, Manktelow & McColgan 2013; Scourfield 2006). The influence of fathers on children's care is rarely considered, neither as a resource nor as a risk factor (Featherstone 2010; Walmsley 2009), and non-resident fathers are rarely considered as an alternative to placements outside the home (Malm, Murray & Green 2006). Fathers must often work hard to be considered as protective resources for the children, even in cases where the mothers are unable to provide adequate care (Ashley et al. 2006; Storhaug & Øien, 2012).

One reason for the one-sided focus on mothers in childcare research and practice is claimed to be that mothers have traditionally been seen as the primary caregiver, and fathers have been regarded as the secondary parent (Dufour et al. 2008). There is a conception that the relationship between a mother and her child is more important and natural than the father–child relationship, which does not seem to be given the same value and importance (Dominelli et al. 2011; Featherstone 2009; Storhaug & Øien 2012; Walmsley 2009). Angel (2007) claims that this can be understood on the basis of theories that the CWS have traditionally relied upon, particularly attachment theories that emphasise the importance of children's relationship with their mothers. Several authors argue that the CWS' practice is characterised by a view of parenting based on traditional and stereotypical gender roles (Ulmanen & Andersson 2006).

In recent years, we have developed a better understanding of the impact fathers have on child development. The extent to which fathers are involved in their children's lives is claimed to have a positive effect on the children's school performance, social skills, cognitive and emotional development (Harris, Furstenberg & Marmer 1998; Lamb 2010; Pleck 2010).

This also applies to fathers who do not live with the children (Downer, Campos, McWayne & Gartner 2008). The positive effects of the involvement of fathers are particularly significant for ‘children at risk’ from families with low socioeconomic status (Sarkadi et al. 2008). Studies also show that in families that have contact with the CWS and where the father is involved in the child's life, even if they do not live together, it is less likely that the child is placed outside the home (Bellamy 2009). Children who are placed in foster care are more likely to return to their home if the father is involved in the child's life (Malm & Zielewski 2009).

Even though the lack of involvement of fathers is largely established as a problem within the international research field, few studies have explored this theme explicitly from the perspective of fathers who are involved with the CWS. Only a few of the international studies that address fathers who are in contact with the CWS use fathers as study participants; for example Cameron, Coady and Hoy (2014); Featherstone (2010), and Zanoni et al. (2014). Shapiro and Krysik (2010) analysed five international journals on social work and found that only 13% of the articles that referred to fathers who have children involved in the CWS actually used fathers as study participants. Several authors (Bellamy 2009; Osburn 2014; Vagli 2009) claims that the CWS’ practice is based on negative stereotypes about fathers; which leads to them being treated with suspicion. The aim of this article is to contribute to an increased knowledge and a more nuanced perception of fathers who are in contact with the CWS: Their experience of fatherhood, factors affecting their self-concept as fathers and potential consequences this has for their fathering practice. The goal is also to increase practitioners’ awareness of how they view and meet fathers, and provide important insights into how fathers can be supported in their fathering role in the most expedient way, for the benefit of their children. The notion of self-concept is based on the definition by Baumeister (1999, pg. 13): “The individual’s belief about himself, including the person’s attributes and who and what the self is”.

Study context

Norway is categorized as belonging to the social democratic welfare model, like other Nordic countries (Esping-Andersen, 2000). The Norwegian child welfare system is described as having a “family service orientation”, and a welfare-oriented system (Fauske et al. 2009; Stang 2007). It focuses both on protecting children from risk, and on promoting social

equality by providing equal opportunities to all children, through a wide range of welfare services (Skivenes 2011). 81 percent of children who have interventions from the CWS, receive voluntary supportive interventions (Statistics Norway, 2016). According to Khoo, Hyvönen, and Nygren (2003: 510), the Nordic child welfare system is one in which all children in need are served; “abuse and neglect are not typical preconditions for beginning child welfare services”. Eight percent of all reports of concern about a child is from the parents themselves (BUF-dir., 2015). The Norwegian CWS has a strong focus on prevention and supportive welfare measures, in contrast to the more risk-oriented systems, with a main focus of identifying risk (Kojan and Lonne, 2011; Stang 2007). Khoo (2004) uses the notions of “child welfare” and “child protection” as a characteristic of the different systems.

Methods

Recruitment and sample

This paper is based on interviews with 15 fathers of children who at the time of the interview had, or had recently had, interventions from the CWS. The fathers were recruited through participation in a survey in the Norwegian nationwide study ‘The New Child Welfare Service’, where 715 parents participated (19 percent of these were fathers), and where the first author was one of the researchers (Clifford et al. 2015). The responses to the questionnaires from the survey were reviewed, and 20 forms where fathers had replied were randomly selected. 15 of these were interviewed. The remaining five were difficult to get in contact with, refused participation or failed to attend scheduled appointments. All the forms were registered with a number code that contact persons in the child welfare departments participating in the project had a link to. They made the first contact, gave information about the project, and asked for the fathers’ consent to give their contact information to the researcher. These contact persons (one or two child welfare workers at every participating office) only had access to the contact information, not questionnaire responses.

The first author contacted the fathers who had given their consent and requested an interview.

At the time of the interview, three fathers had children living in foster care or institutions, and had contact thorough visitation. Four fathers were living alone with the child, and two with the child and a new partner. Four fathers had children who lived with their mother, and had contact with their children during weekends and holidays; two of the fathers had children with two different mothers. Two fathers were living with the child and its

mother. The children living at home received voluntary assistance interventions in the home. There were various reasons why the children had involvement with the CWS. For some, it was because of the child's behavioural problems and substance abuse. For others, it was because of their own and/or the mothers' problems, such as drug abuse and mental health problems. It's worth noting here that interviews with children who have interventions from the CWS could also be interesting to explore. How do they experience the contact with their fathers, and how do this relation affect them and their care situation?

Data collection

All participants were interviewed once, by the first author. The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and two hours, were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed. The interviews were semi-structured and followed an open-ended interview guide. We wanted to explore the fathers' experiences of contact with the CWS, their own experience of fatherhood and what they saw as important in the contact with their children.

Analysis

The analysis was conducted with a hermeneutic phenomenological perspective; Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin 2009). This method is a tool to explore how participants understand their personal and social world (Smith & Osborn 2003; Smith et al. 2009). The analysis was done in several stages, and each interview was analysed separately. After reading through each interview several times, the interviews were analysed in two stages. Initially, a free text analysis was done, where all associations, preliminary contexts and interpretations, contradictions and similarities were noted in the margin. Next, the notes from the first read-through were used to identify larger and more abstract themes. Then all the larger themes that were identified were written down to see if any of them could be combined. Having identified a number of themes that captured most clearly the points of the participants in each interview, we were left with a list of themes from all the interviews. The themes that most effectively helped to illuminate the research questions were selected as the main topics for analysis. The names of the fathers are changed to ensure their anonymity.

Results

The importance of role models

The fathers' relationships with their own parents seem to be important, though via different mechanisms, for their self-concept as fathers, both in terms of what they emphasise in their contact with and care of their children, and for the importance they ascribe to themselves as fathers. Several of the participants were concerned about how the relationships with their fathers, mainly described as poor and distanced, had influenced their own fathering practice. Eric, who lived with his two children and their mother, talked about how his relationship with his own father and stepfather had affected the way he related to his own children:

I really feel that I'm struggling a bit with the whole fatherhood role. As I haven't grown up with my own biological father. So I haven't had any role model who have been... I had my stepfather, he was a father to me throughout. But I always knew that he was not my father, so I kept a distance. So I think I've become a bit like that with my own kids too, that I keep a bit of distance.

Several fathers expressed that their own fathers had only served as negative role models and as a reference point for what they would do differently. They didn't want their children to experience what they did in their childhood. An example is Adam, who lived with his daughter and new partner:

I have grown up without a father myself. He has not wanted to have any contact at all. So that was the motivation for me, so to speak. My children should never have to experience that.

We can see this in the context of the compensation hypothesis, which says that fathers try to compensate for the lack of involvement of their own fathers by making a larger contribution in their own children's life (Coltrane 1996). Several fathers said that being there for their children was an important part of their fatherhood. They did not feel that their own father was there for them, and for that reason this had become an important value in contact with their own children. David, who lived with his two kids and new partner, emphasised this: 'Having contact with your kids and knowing what their values are and how they think, that's important.'

Several of the fathers were keen to convey that although their own fathers had not acted as role models and taught them how to be good fathers, there were others who had been

role models for them. This is also in line with the compensation hypothesis; in the lack of fathers as positive role models, they look to others. Tom, who lived alone with his daughter, found that friends and family were important role models.

I have not had the best relationship with my father. But I have picked things up from others, like my brother and his wife, they are role models, I have sort of kept an eye on them and think they're doing a good job with their kids. And I have other friends with children, and I observe things I think they're doing well. I want to take a bite out of that and make it my own. You patch together some lessons and impressions. I think it's a huge asset to have people around you, who you can build on, and take after.

Williams (2008:488) claims that fatherhood is increasingly individualized and highly reflexive. Fathers have to make sense of their role, and in doing so reflect on and adapt to their own circumstances and to the variety of different models with which they are presented. In this material, it seems that not only their fathers, but also their own mothers are of great significance. When describing their fathering practice and the values they wanted to pass on to their children, most of the fathers highlighted their own mothers as their main inspiration, and closest caregiver while growing up. These relationships were described as much more positive than the relationships with their fathers.

It was my mom who was important, she was the centre for me until she died. When I moved away from home, I talked to her every day on the phone (Noah).

Mothers were highlighted as important role models, partly because they themselves passed on the values that their mothers had taught them. Civility and morality, and the fact that they had always been there for them in their childhood, were brought forward as particularly important.

As will be discussed later, the great importance they attached to their mothers, coupled with the distant relationship they had with their fathers, has implications for their self-concept, especially the importance they attach to themselves as fathers.

These fathers' experiences and thoughts around the importance of role models is not distinctive only for fathers involved with the CWS. Several authors (Masciadrelli et al. 2006; LaRossa 2012) has reported similar experiences among fathers in general. What is interesting to explore, as explained in the next two sections, is how these experiences and conceptions affects their self-concept in the context of CWS involvement, when they are challenged in their role as fathers, with several having their competence as care givers questioned.

Fatherhood as a contrast to motherhood

Doucet (2011: 90) argues that men are attempting to carve out their own paternal identities within spaces traditionally considered maternal and feminine. In this study, this is evident in that several of the fathers seemed to construct their role as a contrast to the children's mothers. The participants were keen to convey that they as fathers, and fathers in general, were different from mothers and that they did things in 'their own way'. There are two areas in particular that are highlighted: setting limits and an emphasis on doing activities with the children. Several fathers highlighted these areas as central parts of their self-concept as fathers, and felt that this was something they were better at or more concerned about than mothers were. Victor, who had three children who lived with their mothers, said that when the children visited him every other weekend and during holidays, he wanted them to do activities together.

So I go with three children to the swimming pool. I've started teaching them to swim. Otherwise we are outside, down by the sea, and in the cinema, we are very active, we hardly ever stay inside, we go out. I like to keep them active.

John, who had three children who lived with their mothers, found it problematic that he had limited finances and could not afford to buy things for the children or take them on expensive activities. He tried to compensate for this by giving them other experiences.

I have tried to give the kids something else that's valuable. We've been doing a lot of walks, gone travelling, in the forest, we've had a big tent that we've stayed in during our holidays, they've had many of those experiences. So I know that part is something they have from me.

It was important for John that this was something *he* did and not the mother. He wanted this to be something that was only for him and the children, something special in his relationship with them.

I think it is important that the mother doesn't have to be like the father. The mother doesn't have to suddenly go out in the forest; she has to be credible in what she does.

Several other studies (Kay 2009; Pleck 2010) also find that being active with their children, and developing friendships with them on the basis of activities is particularly important for fathers. There seemed to be a widespread belief among the interviewees that this was something that belonged to fatherhood, and an important element of being participating and committed fathers. Noah seemed to place a special emphasis on this. He did not feel he was able to live up to this ideal, and thus, his self-concept as a participating and active father was challenged. He had some physical problems, and before his three sons were placed in foster care, he felt frustrated that he had no opportunity to participate in activities with the children.

Seven or eight years ago I started developing pain in my feet. So outside activity was impossible. I sat there for four years looking at the wall. It's difficult to see other fathers who do loads of things with their kids, right. There is frustration, you know. But I've got them into a bit of football and sports. I have tried to pass that on, it's important.

Dermott (2003) claims that fathers' involvement, like doing activities with their children, is not only about acquiescing to societal norms about involved fatherhood. Dermott's study suggests that buying into what is regarded as 'typical' coincides with their own perception that involvement is also pleasurable, and therefore desired.

Setting limits and being consistent towards children was seen as something both they themselves and fathers generally did better than mothers. Several of the fathers linked setting boundaries to security. Victor said: "I am very consistent in what I do. I think mothers are not good enough there. They get too fussy, there is little action".

Another key element mentioned by several of the fathers when it came to constructing their fatherhood as different to motherhood was masculine values. This was something they wanted to convey to their children. John said:

I think it's important that my masculine values are shown, and that I get to present some masculinity when we're together. I find that masculinity is something more than just being big and strong and tough. It should be about being able to express both joy and pain. I think that it's important that children get to do some man stuff too.

As described in the next paragraph, several of the fathers experience that their fathering practice and care skills are questioned by the CWS. Other studies, as described above, show that doing activities with the children generally is seen as important for fathers. However, it's

reasonable to assume that when their self-concept is challenged through a questioning of their role and importance, the need to highlight what they as fathers contribute with regarding their children, and what is distinctive about them as fathers compared to mothers, is reinforced.

It seems that the fathers had an ambivalent view of the feminine aspect that mothers represent. While they were concerned that they, as fathers, represented something different than mothers, most fathers still praised what some referred to as ‘the feminine care’, which was about showing a more ‘soft’ care and cuddling with the kids. Christian emphasised that fathers could be just as good caregivers as mothers. But at the same time he found that there was an area in which fathers fell short, compared to mothers:

I think mothers are better at the soft part, it’s perhaps more embedded in women.

Mothers are mothers, and they are the ones you should be able to go to for comfort when you’re young. I think it's important to be a man and to understand that children need comfort as well. But I think it's easier for a woman to do the soft things.

Child welfare services’ understanding of fatherhood

As described in the introduction, several studies have shown that the child welfare practices mainly focus on mothers. We will now examine how the fathers experienced being met and assessed by the CWS.

Several of the fathers felt that the CWS initially did not want to have anything to do with them, and that they were dismissed as appropriate caregivers. Some fathers, such as Noah, experienced a pressure to move out so that the mother would have a greater chance of keeping the custody of the children.

From the outset, I wasn’t a part of the case. The child welfare services did not want anything to do with me from the first day. They only saw me as a problem; I had to move so that it would be easier for her to get the kids back.

There appears to be a perception that it is primarily mothers who should receive support in order to be able to take care of the children. In cases where the mother has problems, and the father expresses concern for her ability to care for the child, some of the fathers experience problems with being heard and taken seriously. Buckley (2003) describes this as the “motherhood syndrome”. In the perception of mothers’ responsibility for caring for and

protecting the children, there also is a perception that mothers are safer and better parents, and as a consequence, fathers are not heard if they are concerned about the mother's caring skills. Simon, for example, experienced this as a problem:

They invested all their efforts, all resources, on her, despite the fact that I reported concerns, my parents did the same, as did her mother... And still it was 'Keep Simon away', it's the mother we're focusing our resources on.

Several of the fathers talked about being faced with what they called old-fashioned attitudes that mothers were best suited to care for the children. They experienced not being considered as equal caregivers or as participants in the CWS' involvement with the family and, in some cases not even in the children's lives. John was one of the fathers concerned about this:

I feel that the regulations mean that fathers, that we in a sense, we are not equal. As caregivers. Not just that I should have my right to be a father, but also that the kids should be allowed to look at me as a caregiver.

The experience of not being considered as equal caregivers was also related to their experience of being excluded from the involvement of CWS. Several fathers, like Christian, spoke of cases where they were not invited to meetings. "When they wanted to assess the family situation, the mother was summoned to a meeting where she would give information about the children. I heard nothing". This is consistent with findings in the study by Scourfield (2003), who suggested that a dominant discourse about fathers among child welfare workers is one of "men as irrelevant". Noah also experienced this as a problem:

But I came along anyway. Because I was in their lives too. And then I told them that they are my kids too. I want to know what's going on. They said that they would be sending out notices to me, so that I could come to meetings. But they never did.

A number of fathers had an experience of not being seen as important for their children. Some didn't get information about their child's problems, and feel they should have done more for the child earlier; some experience that decisions are made about the child without them being informed and heard. If the mother had negative descriptions of the father, some fathers experienced that the CWS took for granted that this was true. Like John said: "Because of what she told them, they thought I was the problem, and that I didn't care about the children".

Several of the fathers, like David, found that contact with the CWS directly affected their fathering practice:

I couldn't raise my children the way I wanted or the way I felt I could. Had to constantly defend myself to the CWS. If I did anything wrong, they came. I felt that they sat and waited for me to fail at doing something.

An important element in how the fathers construct themselves as engaged fathers, was the way they were fighting for their children. They talked about persistence, fighting to get custody and for children's rights. They portrayed it as a fight against the CWS in particular, and in several cases against the children's mother, to prove that they were worthy caregivers. Several of the fathers were keen to convey that they never gave up. Simon has a daughter who ended up in foster care when she was three years old, because of both parents' substance abuse. He fought for many years after he got sober to get custody of his daughter. For him, this fight was also about showing his daughter that he was engaged and did not give up, but fought on to get custody of her: "I've kept all the documents so she can see what I did when she gets older".

The CWS' and society's understanding of fatherhood seems to be significant for how some of the fathers view themselves and their significance for the children. If fathers are faced with the CWS' understanding of mothers as the primary caregiver and client, this can lead to them being insecure about their own role and importance for the children.

Furthermore, this uncertainty can cause them to pull away. Eric said:

You get a bit like – is it right or is it wrong, or... And so if you're afraid of doing it wrong, then... then I might as well keep away, because then I don't do anything wrong. But perhaps that's when you do the most wrong...

Victor also reflected on the fact that fathers, like himself, chose to move away because they did not see that they had anything to contribute in their relationship to the child: 'I think fathers have little faith that they can do it, you know.'

Discussion

Morgan (2002) argues that to understand fathers' practice, we must see it in the context of other relationships. In this material, we see that the fathers' self-concept and fathering practice

is influenced by the relationships with their parents; partly on their own fathers as negative role models. They do not want the same negative and distanced relationship with their own children. The relationship with their own mothers also seemed to affect the importance they attached to themselves as fathers. Most fathers highlighted their own mother as positive role models and their most important caregiver, and they transferred this into their own families and understanding of themselves as fathers. Most fathers emphasized that they are equally suited as caregivers, and that they should be assessed and met on an equal footing. But still, some fathers ascribed greater importance to both mothers in general, and the mother of their children, than to themselves in relation to their own children. This seems related to their own mothers having a great influence in their upbringing. Like Noah expressed it: “I remember when I was a child; it was my mother who was important”. The fathers’ self-concept thus appears to be composed of both what they see as important in contact with the children *and* what they reject, or want to be a contrast to; as their own fathers and the children's mothers.

Their self-concept as fathers also appear to influence the degree to which they got involved in their children's lives. Many claimed that when they were unsure about what they could contribute with, and how best to deal with the kids, they chose to withdraw, to avoid doing something wrong.

Hegemonic masculinity has been, and still is to a certain extent, linked to employment and the role of breadwinner. Work has thus been central to fathers’ identities. In this sample, the fathers’ identity and self-concept were not closely related to being the breadwinner. This could be because several of them had a relatively weak attachment to the labour market. They emphasised other, closer topics when discussing what was important to them in fatherhood, and constituted themselves as fathers to a greater extent through the discourse of the present father. This discourse was expressed through emphasising elements such as communication, trust and closeness in contact with their children. These elements were also emphasised as a contrast to their own fathers fathering practice. The deficiencies they experienced in their own childhood motivated them to make an effort to ensure that their children did not suffer from similarly unsatisfying relationships (Gaunt & Bassi 2012). The fathers must partly create a new father role because they do not see their own fathers as good role models. Interviews with child welfare workers (Storhaug, 2013) have shown that they to a large extent have a gender essentialist understanding of parenthood, where mothers and fathers are attributed different innate abilities, or lack of abilities, which are important for their ability to provide care. The fathers’ own understanding of fatherhood can also be said to be partially related to such a

gender essentialist understanding. This understanding is expressed partly by the way the participants position themselves as fathers by distancing themselves from what they understand as female characteristics, and as “typical” of mothers. They emphasise that they as fathers have some special characteristics that mothers do not have to the same degree. The emphasis on activities and boundaries as something separate and distinctive in their own fatherhood can be understood as what Aarseth (2007) describes as a masculinisation of a former feminine fields. These fathers’ self-concept as fathers is challenged through the CWS’ questioning of their caring skills, and an experience of being perceived as secondary parents. It’s reasonable to assume they have a reinforced need to position themselves as fathers who do things in their own, more masculine way, and to position themselves as active and involved fathers, who have an important and distinctive role in their children’s life.

Norwegian family policy has a strong emphasis on promoting equal and gender-neutral parenthood, as described in the introduction. However, the CWS’s practice doesn’t seem to be in line with this family policy. The CWS’ assessments and decisions happens in the intersection between general policy guidelines, emphasizing equality of parenting, and the individual CWS workers’ value orientations. This can be understood as a *cultural blind spot* (Osburn, 2014). To challenge this blind spot, there is a need for a greater degree of critical awareness and reflection regarding different understandings of fatherhood, how the CWS relate to gender roles in meetings with families, and how CWS involve fathers in their work. Some of the fathers were expressing uncertainty about their role. If fathers are uncertain of their role and the importance, while being faced with the CWS’ understanding of mothers as the primary caregivers and clients, this uncertainty can cause them to pull away from their contact with both the CWS and the child. This is something the CWS should be aware of in their work with families. In another study conducted by the first author (Storhaug 2013), the CWS workers did not see it as part of their role to involve fathers who are not showing active interest in the case. It may be questioned whether this to a greater extent should be a part of the CWS workers understanding of their role, as some fathers need to be made aware of their importance for their children. Another central question is whether these fathers too quickly are dismissed as disinterested or irrelevant to the work of CWS.

When it comes to changing practice, development of (new) procedures and institutional arrangements are often suggested. Especially in Great Britain, there has been an increased focus during the last five years on the implementation of policies that will contribute to greater involvement of fathers (Osborn, 2014; Scourfield, 2012, 2014). These procedures

include testing at selected child welfare offices of structural procedures to obtain information on fathers, summon them to meetings and make thorough assessments of fathers' influence on the child's care situation. Some international studies also argue that there should be established special services and programs for fathers (Lloyd et al 2003; Zanoni et al 2014).

All child welfare services should develop and implement procedures ensuring that fathers who do not live with the child, get information when it is initiated an investigation and/or interventions for their child. However, greater involvement of fathers cannot be ensured only through procedures and routines. Child welfare work is characterized by complex and normative issues, and it is thus difficult to establish clear criteria for practice. Subjective assessments are a central part of decision-making, and even if we develop clear procedures, child welfare worker's private beliefs and understandings of fatherhood will continue to have a major impact on practice. Another study by the first author (Storhaug 2013) shows that involvement of fathers was a topic the child welfare workers who participated in the study seldom had thought or talked about. It can appear as if the assessment of fathers happens in an unreflected way, which contributes to reinforce and reproduce traditional gender roles, where mothers are still considered as the primary caregiver for the child. In addition to clear procedures and routines on informing and involving both parents, there is a need for a greater degree of reflection.

This requires that both the individual child welfare worker and the workplace together question their own truths and understandings, and how this affects their work with families. A continuous process of reflection can eventually result in a family understanding who also includes fathers as equal caregivers, and that a more father-inclusive practice becomes an integrated part of the CWS' work with families.

When the CWS fail to involve fathers, they might be missing out on important information about the child's situation and a potential resource for the child. The CWS therefore need to develop a family understanding which assumes that both parents are important for the child and that both parents have common responsibilities. It is not primarily for the fathers themselves, or in terms of their rights, that it is important for them to be involved. In most cases, it will be best for the child that their father is involved, regardless of whether the fathers constitute a resource or a risk factor in the child's care situation. The CWS' main task is to ensure that children and adolescents who live in conditions that can harm their health and development receive the necessary help and care at the right time. This

means that the CWS should examine the child's overall care situation to identify matters that may negatively affect their care situation, and potential resources that can help ensure that they receive the necessary care. If the CWS fail to consider how both parents can affect the care situation, it is difficult to see that the child's best interests are promoted. Fathers can be an important part of family dynamics and can influence the child's care situation in various ways, both positively and negatively, even when they do not live with the child. To be able to give the best help to children, it is necessary for CWS workers to have a reflected awareness of how they view and meet fathers. If the CWS meets fathers with attitudes which signals to the father that they see him as irrelevant, this can increase the fathers' uncertainty regarding his role and importance to the child. If the father feels positioned as irrelevant and unimportant, it's a risk that the CWS contributes to the withdrawal of fathers who can be a resource to the child.

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