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Perception of father absence in family assessment and intervention: are they not involved because they don't want to be?

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ABSTRACT

Child protection services intervene with mothers, leaving fathers on the sidelines. However, fathers' involvement is beneficial. The aim is to explore fathers' and professionals' perceptions of the factors influencing fathers' involvement in family assessments and interventions. A qualitative design was used and 5 focus groups with 9 professionals, 10 mothers and 8 fathers, and 6 in-depth interviews with 6 fathers were carried out in Gran Canaria (Spain). A thematic content analysis was carried out using QSR NVivo 12. The category Determinants of paternal involvement in family assessment and intervention was obtained, made up of 3 subcategories: Personal characteristics of the father, Social characteristics and Influence of the mother on the father's decision. Fathers claim that fathers' personal characteristics condition their involvement, while professionals argue that it is due to mothers' influence. Implications for professional practice and work with men are discussed. This study is part of a funded research project.

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Introduction

Child Protective Services (CPS) conduct family assessments and interventions (FAI) to promote family well-being and family preservation (European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2023; Guaman-Guaman, 2020). Outcomes improve when all family members are involved (McKee et al., 2021), however, they often intervene with mothers to the exclusion of fathers (De Montigny et al., 2020; Dominelli et al., 2010; Gřundělová & Stanková, 2019; Osborne et al., 2022; Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023; Philip et al., 2019; Symonds, 2020).

Multiple factors explain lower paternal involvement in FAI. These include personal characteristics of fathers, such as their commitment or substance abuse (Drysedale et al., 2022; Olszowy et al., 2020); characteristics of mothers, who take responsibility for attending FAI or exclude fathers to avoid negative consequences for their economic situation (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Symonds, 2020); social

factors, such as living in low-income areas or having family reconciliation problems; and institutional characteristics, such as the absence of father-centred policies, the beliefs and attitudes of professionals, and their ability to relate to men (Drysdale et al., 2022; Olszowy et al., 2020; Scourfield et al., 2014; Zanon et al., 2013).

Professionals' attitudes based on gender stereotypes deteriorate the bond with fathers, as they tend to intervene more with mothers as they consider them more competent in parenting, while perceiving fathers as disciplinarians and emotionally distant (De Montigny et al., 2020; Sanchez-Prieto et al., 2023). Therefore, an egalitarian and inclusive approach should be adopted, beliefs revised and staff trained in working with fathers (Arroyo & Peek, 2015; Brown et al., 2009).

Paternal involvement in FAI produces benefits from a triple perspective: spousal, filial and personal. Spousal, because they improve family relationships, are a source of support for mothers, decrease the likelihood of maternal abuse, and encourage their participation in FAI (De Montigny et al., 2020; Gordon et al., 2012; Osborne et al., 2022). In addition, the inclusion of non-resident fathers promotes co-parenting and equal sharing of tasks during FAI (Brown et al., 2009; Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023). Filial, because regardless of their non-custodial father and residential status, they provide economic support, improve their children's health and the development of social, emotional, physical, intellectual and cognitive competencies, secure attachment and better school adjustment and performance (Attili et al., 2010; Gervais et al., 2021; Miller et al., 2022). In addition, they increase the likelihood of family reunification, reduce the length of intervention, the likelihood of adoption and time in foster care (Arroyo & Peek, 2015; Arroyo et al., 2019; Brewsaugh et al., 2018). And personal, because fathers improve their mental health and parenting skills, increase their self-esteem, self-confidence and personal satisfaction, and reflect on the repercussions of their actions (Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Olszowy et al., 2020; Philip et al., 2019; Smith & Humphreys, 2019; Symonds, 2020).

Although these benefits are known, many fathers are excluded from FAI as they are perceived as absent, disinterested or incompetent (Miller et al., 2022), which contradicts the current trend in fatherhood, characterised by greater paternal involvement in domestic and caring tasks and recognition of their contribution to family well-being (Doucet & Lee, 2014). At the parental level, paternal engagement strengthens the parental bond, promotes the development of their children and reduces risky behaviours. At the marital level, relationships become more egalitarian and maternal empowerment increases. On a personal level, it transforms their identity and improves physical health, although mental health deteriorates, due to the contradictions between the demands of modern fatherhood and the traditional mandates of the paternal role (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Rilling & Hadley, 2023; Sharaievska et al., 2023).

Considering the challenges and paternal contributions, it is essential to incorporate inclusive practices and adapt methods to their needs, otherwise child well-being cannot be guaranteed (Chan, 2012; De Montigny et al., 2020; Doucet, 2006; Miller et al., 2022). Perhaps for this reason, contemporary research is delving deeper into the role of fathers in FAI and recommends listening to the experiences of stakeholders, especially fathers, to determine how to address the challenges associated with FAI (Gordon et al., 2012; Grundělová & Stanková, 2019; Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al., 2023). No studies have been

found that cover this problem in a global way, with the participation of all the agents and from their own reality. In this context, this study contributes to deepening this gap.

Materials and methods

The aim of this study was to explore fathers' and professionals' perceptions of the paternal role in FAI in order to find out the factors that influence their participation in CPS, considering the existing barriers, motivations and social dynamics.

A phenomenological approach was used to explore these perceptions, as it allows participants' narratives to be analysed through their interpretation using inductive and qualitative methods (Lester, 1999). This approach influenced participant selection, by including informants with relevant experiences and using focus groups and in-depth interviews; coding, by identifying emerging patterns; and analysis, by exploring experiences from their own meanings (Atkins, 2018; Lester, 1999). In addition, the theories of Social Constructionism (Berger & Luckmann, 2016) and Symbolic Interactionism (Blumer, 1982) were used to understand how subjects establish and perceive social relations and the processes of attributing subjective meanings.

Participants

The sample is made up of 33 people, 9 CPS professionals, 14 fathers and 10 mothers users. However, in order to meet the objectives of this study, we will only focus on the professionals and the fathers. Thus, with regard to the focus groups, on the one hand, 9 professionals participated in 2 focus groups, mostly women (77,78%) with an average age of 42 years, who mainly work in Social Work (55,56%) or Social Education (22,22%) in public CPS (77,78%). On the other hand, 8 fathers participated in 1 focus group, with an average age of 45 years. They have Vocational Training (37,50%) and other training courses (37,50%), and are unemployed (100%). In terms of family structure, traditional nuclear families predominate (62,50%) with an average of 2 children. As for the in-depth interviews, 6 fathers were interviewed, with an average age of 50 years. They have primary education (50%) and Vocational Training (50%), and most of them are unemployed (50%). In terms of family structure, single-parent families predominate (50%), with an average of one child (see Table 1).

Data collection

Qualitative data collection was carried out following the procedure described by Flick (2007).

First, the literature was reviewed and the objectives were defined. Then, purposive sampling was used to select participants. For this purpose, a key informant sent an email to CPS professionals in Gran Canaria, Spain, requesting their collaboration. These professionals contacted the users to propose their collaboration, emphasising voluntariness, confidentiality and anonymity, and the possibility of withdrawing from the study at any time. Each participant gave prior informed consent to include their contributions. Approval was also obtained from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria.

Table 1. Participant profile.

Technique	Participant	Sex	Age	Formal education	Employment situation	Occupation
FG2	Professional 1	Woman	47	University studies	Active	Social Education
	Professional 2	Man	32	University studies	Active	Pedagogy
	Professional 3	Man	53	University studies	Active	Social Work
	Professional 4	Woman	28	University studies	Active	Social Work
FG3	Professional 1	Woman	26	University studies	Active	Psychology
	Professional 2	Woman	46	University studies	Active	Social Education
	Professional 3	Woman	46	University studies	Active	Social Work
	Professional 4	Woman	53	University studies	Active	Social Work
	Professional 5	Woman	45	University studies	Active	Social Work
Technique	Participants	Age	Nº of children	Formal education	Employment situation	Familiar structure
FG4	Father 1	21	1	Other training courses	Unemployed	Traditional nuclear family
	Father 2	47	2	Vocational training	Unemployed	Traditional nuclear family
	Father 3	54	1	Does not answer	Unemployed	Traditional nuclear family
	Father 4	Does not answer	4	Vocational training	Unemployed	Does not answer
	Father 5	60	1	Primary education	Unemployed	Does not answer
	Father 6	28	1	Other training courses	Unemployed	Traditional nuclear family
	Father 7	52	3	Vocational training	Unemployed	Traditional nuclear family
	Father 8	53	4	Other training courses	Unemployed	Single family
I1	Father 1	64	3	Vocational training	Retired	Single-parent family
I2	Father 2	32	1	Vocational training	Active	Nuclear family without children
I3	Father 3	50	1	Primary education	Unemployed	Single family
I4	Father 4	60	1	Vocational training	Unemployed	Single-parent family
I5	Father 5	41	3	Primary education	Unemployed	Nuclear family without children
I6	Father 6	51	1	Primary education	Active	Single-parent family

FG: Focus Group; I: In-depth interview.

Next, focus groups with CPS professionals, fathers and mothers and in-depth interviews with fathers were designed. Focus groups encourage interaction between participants to understand how they interpret their social relationships, while in-depth interviews are flexible and open-ended, and allow for the inclusion of inaccessible key informants (Anguera et al., 1995; Gervais et al., 2021; Krueger, 2014; Lewis-Beck et al., 2004).

A semi-structured, peer-reviewed interview script was developed for the focus groups (Krueger, 2014), including open-ended questions on family, fatherhood, the role of fathers and the role of professionals in FAI. The content of the instrument was the same for all the focus groups, although certain questions were adapted to the educational level, gender and role of the participants. For the in-depth interviews, a semi-structured interview script was developed, taking as a reference the one used in the focus groups. This allows us to compare the perceptions of the sample. In addition, open-ended questions were added to deepen the discourse of the participants and favour the development of the interviews (Lewis-Beck et al., 2004; Valles, 2000). The questions used to obtain the information for this study were: 'As you know, there are fathers who participate and fathers who do not. Why do you think this is so?'; 'What do you think about the father who does not participate? Why do you think he does not participate?'; 'Do you think mothers can influence whether or not fathers participate? Why?'.

Subsequently, focus groups and in-depth interviews were conducted. In this regard, the criterion of credibility, associated with trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), was ensured to determine the appropriate value when the principal investigators were not involved in conducting the interviews and focus groups, thus maintaining independence with respect to the data obtained.

The interviews and focus groups were conducted by staff with Master's degrees, previously trained and unrelated to the participants. These interviewers explained the procedure to be followed and then explored the issues from the general to the specific. On the one hand, they conducted 5 focus groups, of which 2 were made up exclusively of professionals, 2 only of mothers and 1 only of fathers, applying this homogeneity criterion to favour the expression of opinions (Krueger, 2014). And, on the other hand, 6 in-depth interviews were conducted with 6 fathers who were CPS users, due to difficulties in recruiting men.

Data were obtained through verbatim transcripts of the interviews, recorded with the prior consent of the participants, safeguarding their meanings and interpretations during categorisation. Finally, from the design of the research to the analysis of the results, researchers were available for theoretical and methodological advice. In addition, to ensure scientific rigour, the COREQ checklist was reviewed (Tong et al., 2007) and the research team reviewed the qualitative data and supported the research and ethical governance processes (Mikulcová et al., 2023; Noble & Smith, 2015; Racz et al., 2017).

With regard to the criterion of transferability, as a generalisation for applicability, this article includes, through a rigorous and systematic design, the structure and information so that the results on FAI can be extended to other areas or services that are also developed by CPS. Furthermore, the characteristics of the participants were also included. With regard to the analysis, it was oriented towards the actors of the study (family, professionals and institutions), providing a more general representativeness of the research as a unit that can provide possibilities for other contexts and other studies. Regarding dependability as the consistency of the research, the triangulation of information was carried out using different sources to contrast the process and the findings. Besides the preceding studies, the collection of information, its processing and accuracy in the analysis were identified. Finally, confirmability, in terms of neutrality in the process, is developed. This article describes the selection process of the participants.

Moreover, a research diary was used to record the most important actions and interactions of the process. Likewise, prior informed consent was obtained from participants for the recording of interviews and focus groups, and a commitment to the protection of personal data prevailed.

The subjectivity of the participants was also prioritised. To this end, the positionality of the researchers was valued through critical reflexivity, which allows the influence of beliefs and experiences to be reviewed, different perspectives to be compared and decisions to be made (Gergen, 2009). In this regard, the research team had experience in working with families at psychosocial risk and some of the women in the team had previous experience of family violence and CPS care. All this allowed for practical considerations in the construction of the analysis.

With respect to authenticity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), fairness was guaranteed by respecting the levels of participation of each participant and by including their perceptions fairly in the analysis. In addition, as a dialogical process, the criterion of ontological authenticity was pursued, establishing a process of understanding reality that enhanced the awareness of the participants in the FAI process. In fact, the communicative inter-relationship favoured educative authenticity, mainly in the focus groups, where the assessment of alternative statements allowed awareness to be raised in order to determine the most appropriate information for the conditions in the context of FAI from the CPS. However, catalytic authenticity was more present in practitioners, probably because of its relation to the conditions of FAI performance. Even so, the research includes possible lines of action that arise from the same holistic process of study and are oriented towards transformation and reflection, in order to improve professional performance as a criterion of tactical authenticity.

Data analysis

The transcripts were coded in two phases, using an inductive approach. First, two members of the research team independently coded the first two focus group transcripts. They carried out open coding, applying the methods of elementary coding (sub-coding, In Vivo, simultaneous and conceptual coding) and affective coding (emotion and value coding). Then, they compared their codes and developed a coding system as a whole, using axial coding, which would serve to categorise the remaining transcripts and establish the relationships between the categories and subcategories (Saldaña, 2016). Subsequently, each researcher coded the remaining transcripts alone and a third researcher resolved disagreements. Thus, the final categorisation system was set up (Mikulcová et al., 2023; Racz et al., 2017), reaching discourse saturation (Gibbs, 2018).

Afterwards, a thematic content analysis was carried out. This consisted of identifying common themes and patterns by reading the evidence collected in each category and interpreting it from the subjective perspective of the participants. Then, professionals' and fathers' perceptions of the categories and subcategories were compared using cross-referencing, which generates a multidimensional table relating the categories and subcategories to the sample profile (Alhojailan & Ibrahim, 2012; Bonello & Meehan, 2019). These analyses were carried out with QSR NVivo 12 (QSR International, 2022).

Table 2. Percentage of evidence of the category determinants of paternal participation in FAI according to professionals and fathers.

Category	Subcategory	Subsection	Fathers (n = 14)	Professionals (n = 9)	Total (n = 33)
Determinants of paternal participation in FAI	Personal characteristics of the father	Personality	17,80	0,00	17,80
		Commitment to parenting	9,32	0	9,32
		Traditional beliefs	5,93	0,85	6,78
		Age	5,08	0	5,08
		Negative perception of the FAI	5,08	0	5,08
		Commitment to intervention	2,54	0,85	3,39
		Disorientation	3,39	0	3,39
		Immaturity and irresponsibility	1,69	0,85	2,54
		Resentment towards the ex-partner	0,00	1,69	1,69
		Addictions	0,85	0	0,85
		Separation	0,85	0	0,85
		Health	0,85	0	0,85
		Total	53,39	4,24	57,63
	Social Characteristics	Social pressure	7,63	0,85	8,47
		Work-life balance	3,39	0,85	4,24
		To have custody of the children	3,39	0,00	3,39
		Gender stereotypes	3,39	0,00	3,39
		Lack of references and male support networks	0,85	1,69	2,54
		Total	18,64	3,39	22,03
	Influence of the mother on the father's decision	The mother favours the father's participation in the FAI	15,25	2,54	17,80
		The mother hinders the father's participation in the FAI	0,00	2,54	2,54
		Total	15,25	5,08	20,34
	Total		87,29	12,71	100

n: number of participants.

Results

The category system is composed of three levels. The first level includes the category 'Determinants of paternal involvement in FAI', with 118 pieces of evidence obtained through the sum of contributions from fathers and professionals. This level is divided into a second level that includes 3 subcategories, and the third level includes the 19 subsections that make up the different subcategories (see Table 2).

The subcategory with the highest number of evidences is 'Personal characteristics of the father' (57,63% of the total evidences of the category), representing the main determinant of paternal involvement in FAI. It accounts for 53,39% of fathers' discourse and 4,24% of professionals' discourse. With regard to fathers' perceptions, they report that men's personal characteristics definitely condition their decision to participate in CPS. They claim that fathers with personality traits associated with shame and pride (17,80%), those with a low commitment to raising (9,32%), with traditional beliefs (5,93%), those who are older (5,08%) and with a negative perception of FAI (5,08%) are less likely to be involved. As for professionals, they report that this is due to fathers' resentment towards mothers after the break-up (1,69%), their traditional beliefs (0,85%), their degree of commitment to FAI (0,85%) and their immaturity and irresponsibility (0,85%).

It happened to me too, I was ashamed because I am very shy. (In-depth interview 6)

The father often does things to annoy the mother, not to benefit the children. (Focus group 3, professional 4)

The next subcategory is ‘Social characteristics’ (22,03%). This is considered by respondents as the second determinant of paternal involvement in FAI. It represents 18,60% of the fathers’ discourse and 3,39% of the professionals’ discourse. As for fathers’ perceptions, they explain that fathers do not attend CPS due to social pressure and prejudices in their environment (7,63%), difficulties in reconciling work schedules with appointments with professionals (3,39%) and traditional gender stereotypes. Likewise, they report that non-custodial fathers (3,39%) participate less because they have lost contact with their children or because professionals only contact mothers. Professionals also mention social pressure (0,85%) and barriers to achieving a work-life balance (0,85%), but highlight the lack of support networks and male role models for men (1,69%):

Because they are ashamed to be seen going to look for food or simply to be told that they have asked the social workers for help. I think many don’t do it for fear of what people will say, the shame. (In-depth interview 5)

If it is possible to gather a family member, a reference person, more men, so that together [...] we have to reach them in this way, otherwise it will be very difficult [...] if we want it to be faster, we have to make them see the need they have, in a context where they feel comfortable. (Focus group 2, professional 2)

And, the last subcategory is ‘Influence of the mother on the father’s decision’ (20,34%), considered the third determinant of paternal involvement in FAI. It represents 15,25% of fathers’ discourse and 5,08% of professionals’ discourse. With regard to fathers, they say that mothers can encourage paternal participation in FAI (15,25%). In fact, they explain that when they are in a couple, they motivate each other to attend the appointments, although they state that when they are separated, it is important to have a good relationship with the other parent and to seek the well-being of the children. As for professionals, this is the subcategory to which they pay most attention. They say that mothers can motivate fathers to participate, although they should be cautious not to make mothers responsible for fathers’ decisions. However, they also argue that some mothers have hindered the father’s inclusion in the FAI by manipulating the information received in care and subsequently passing it on to the father or by providing false information about the father:

They can influence them to tell their partners “look, let’s do this work together, it will be good for us, it will help us with the children”. (In-depth interview 5)

I think that she transmitted and manipulated a message to him based on her own interests, not even those of her children [...] and then I think that he had some kind of resistance. [...] In other words, I think that in order to protect themselves in some way, because mothers unconsciously feel responsible for when their children have a difficulty or a problem, it is the mother’s, with the father of the children, they have somehow manipulated the information and things get complicated. (Focus group 2, professional 1)

Discussion

This study aims to explore the perceptions of fathers who are users of CPS and professionals about the role of fathers in FAI in order to find out the factors that determine paternal participation.

Firstly, there are the father's personal characteristics. On the one hand, fathers indicate that the father's personality, his level of commitment to raising and his belief system influence his participation. In this regard, Piotrowska et al. (2017) found that fathers, personality, older age and traditional beliefs about gender roles reduce their involvement. Similarly, Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2021) argue that men with traditional beliefs are less involved in parenting and CPS because they believe it is the responsibility of mothers. This is evidence of how their perceptions and their family and CPS interactions shape and are shaped by the social construction of gender roles (Castro, 2020).

On the other hand, professionals refer to the resentment of the father towards the mother after the break-up. In this line, Vega-Robles and Smith-Castro (2012) indicate that the behaviours of both parents after separation can damage co-parenting relationships and family functioning. Therefore, St.Cyr Brisini and Taylor (2023) argue that positive co-parenting should be promoted from CPS, while Baum (2017) and Chan (2012) recommend understanding how men cope with difficult situations to avoid misinterpreting their behaviours and not labelling them as unhelpful, absent, irrelevant or dangerous.

Secondly, there are the social characteristics. On the one hand, fathers refer to social pressure, difficulties in achieving work-life balance and being non-custodial fathers. Consistent with these findings, Lanier et al. (2017) and Olszowy et al. (2020) report that both parents avoid seeking help from CPS because they are embarrassed to be stigmatised by their environment and judged by professionals, while Osborne et al. (2022) found that the incompatibility between fathers' work schedules and appointments with professionals limits their participation. Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al. (2023) also confirm our results, arguing that non-custodial fathers are less involved because they have no relationship with their children or because professionals only contact them when the mother does not respond adequately to the FAI.

On the other hand, the professionals interviewed refer to the lack of male role models and support networks for fathers. In this regard, Glynn and Dale (2015) confirm that fathers' engagement could increase if the practitioner were a man and a father. Furthermore, Shanks and Weitz (2020) point out that the presence of other men reduces fathers' perceptions of undervaluing and discomfort and favours their empowerment and identity transformation. In this context, interaction with other fathers favours the development of new meanings attributed to masculinity and fatherhood, fostering their involvement and co-responsibility.

Thirdly, there is the mother's influence on fathers. All participants consider that mothers can encourage paternal involvement. Walter et al. (2019) also argue that mothers motivate their partners to participate in FAI. This could explain why resident fathers are more involved in parenting and FAI and are more likely to be included than non-resident fathers (Osborne et al., 2022). However, several practitioners report that mothers can be an obstacle. In this regard, Baum (2017) and Perez-Vaisvidovsky et al. (2023) found that many mothers provide incomplete or biased information about the father or try to prevent him from interacting with professionals, due to pressure to assume the role of primary

caregiver, to avoid negative effects on their economic situation, or to hide situations of family violence (EwartBoyle et al., 2015; Finzi-Dottan & Cohen, 2016; Symonds, 2020).

Conclusion

This study contributes to the existing knowledge in the field of Social Work and other areas that carry out interventions with families, by confirming that fathers' personal characteristics, social characteristics and mothers' influence determine paternal participation in FAI. Based on these findings, in order to increase father involvement, firstly, CPS should provide specific training for professionals to learn about the characteristics of fathers and fatherhood and broaden their skills in working with them. In this way, they will be able to adapt to fathers, understand them and build close and trusting relationships. Secondly, it would be desirable to increase the presence of male professionals during the initial fostering of fathers, to encourage the creation of male support networks in CPS and to promote egalitarian gender roles from childhood onwards. And thirdly, it is essential to contact the father and mother separately to gather information on the family situation before starting the FAI, as well as to strengthen co-parenting relationships from a positive co-parenting approach. These practical implications will improve professional performance and ensure children's well-being.

This study has limitations with respect to the sample, due to the perception and social desirability biases of the participants, the predominant inclusion of fathers attending CPS, and the low participation of male professionals, which is evidence of the feminisation of these professions (De Montigny et al., 2020). More research is needed on the experiences of non-custodial fathers in CPS.

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Ethical approval

This study has been approved by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of Las Palmas de Gran Canaria with the reference number CEIH-2023-01.

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