

DIGITAL DADS

DIGITAL DADS: THE CULTURE OF FATHERHOOD 2.0

By

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Abstract

This dissertation examines a community of men who write online parenting blogs—known as “dad bloggers.” The emergence of dad bloggers in North America is nascent, under-researched, and a result of recent shifts in work-family arrangements, gender expectations, and the proliferation of social media technologies. Accordingly, this dissertation is designed to provide three distinct, yet interrelated, contributions to the literature on: families and parenthood; gender and masculinities; and media communications and communities. Taking a cyber-ethnographic approach, this is the first study of dad bloggers to collect online and offline data in order to investigate personal, interpersonal, and public meaning-making practices. The entire dataset consists of 1,430 blog posts written by 45 bloggers, approximately 50 hours of fieldwork conducted at The Dad 2.0 Summit conferences from 2016 to 2018, and 5 in-depth interviews. In three substantive chapters, I address: (1) the collective actions and goals that shape dad bloggers’ group culture and public engagement; (2) the creation and dissemination of meanings for fatherhood in an online context; and (3) the negotiation of gendered family roles and articulation of masculinity discourses by fathers. Collectively, this research provides new empirical and theoretical insights about the social construction of fatherhood in the contemporary digital age.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

This dissertation is a product of ongoing ethnographic research on a group of North American fathers who write parenting blogs. Drawing on theoretical and empirical insights from new media studies, social psychological family research, and the sociology of gender, I explore how these “dad bloggers” create meaningful social discourse in three areas. Specifically, I examine their meaning-making practices surrounding: (1) community and culture; (2) parenting and fatherhood; and, (3) gender and masculinity. In the following pages of this introductory chapter, I describe: the social and scholarly context for this project, the research process I undertook, and how this “sandwich-style” dissertation is structured.

1.1 The Research Context

In this project, dad bloggers are the focus. Who are dad bloggers and what do they do? They are a group of men who use blogs and other social media formats to write about and discuss parenting. Though it is difficult to pinpoint precisely when dad bloggers came into existence, I find that most “dad blogs” began to appear on the Internet in the late-2000s. Many of these early bloggers were associated with communities of “mommy bloggers” who, by this time, had developed a distinct and enlarging space within the

blogosphere (see Friedman, 2013; Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2011). As the number of fathers writing parenting blogs increased, they began to carve out their own online spaces and networks across blog sites and platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. At present, there is both an online and an offline hub for dad bloggers in North America. The online hub is the “Dad Bloggers” group on Facebook, which was established in 2012 and now includes over 2,000 members. The offline hub is the “Dad 2.0 Summit” conference, which has been held annually since 2012 and provides bloggers with a public event to network with marketers, researchers, and other parents. Over the past seven years, this event has received notable public attention in articles from *Time* (Steinmetz, 2015), *The New York Times* (Seligson, 2013), *Esquire* (Bateman, 2016), and *The Atlantic* (Gross & Ross, 2013). There has been comparatively less scholarly attention given to dad bloggers and no research published that draws on fieldwork data from the Dad 2.0 Summit or interviews with these fathers (but see Friedman, 2016; Ranson, 2015). My project fills this gap by providing the first ethnographic study of the Dad 2.0 community in North America.

The individual writing and group discussions that occur in these online and offline spaces are varied in content and scope. Dad bloggers write about micro-level personal issues such as how to care for a pregnant partner or what books to read children at bedtime, as well as more macro-level social issues such as advocating for paternity leave and the installation of changing tables in men’s washrooms. The discourse of dad bloggers is thus sociologically intriguing for how it illuminates the dialectical relationship between parents’ personal and public worlds (Mills, 1959). Approaching this

research topic, I have been theoretically and methodologically concerned with the nexus between the personal and public. Blogging and social media use, along with many parenting and family-related practices, are negotiated actions that occur at this personal-public nexus. This project is designed to interrogate how personal and public meanings for parenthood become mutually bound up with the online and offline discursive activities of dad bloggers. As a whole, this dissertation offers insight into the group culture of the Dad 2.0 community, the social and digitized construction of fatherhood, and the individual and collective negotiation of gender expectations by fathers.

Why study dad bloggers? For one, blogs are unique, naturally occurring data that provide windows into individuals' lives in ways that traditional data cannot. Fathers write blog posts on their own volition and in their own words. These posts are, in other words, not qualitatively similar to answers provided in the context of an interview or survey. For these reasons, I argue that an analysis of blog data is able to expand our knowledge of the social realities of fatherhood while simultaneously avoiding common methodological biases. Furthermore, by examining dad bloggers as a group or movement, this research is attuned to addressing social and structural issues affecting fathers in North America. By examining how dad bloggers push back against the lack of parental leave policies, restrictive workplace cultures, problematic media marketing, and narrow visions of masculinity, I present new evidence of social inequalities that fathers currently face. Taking cue from the Dad 2.0 community's own activism, I present suggestions for how bring forth a more equitable society for families. The findings from this study can

therefore advance scholarly research, but also inform policymakers of how to better support parents, in general, and fathers, in particular.

Before proceeding to explain my research process, it is necessary to further contextualize this project with respect to social science literature on media, fatherhood, and masculinities. These three topic areas are equally necessary for conceptualizing and studying an online community of men who write and talk about being a father. What is more, I contend that the emergence of dad bloggers is predicated on recent trends occurring in and across the realms of new media, families, and gender. For the remainder of this subsection, I outline relevant findings from existing research and explain how my study of dad bloggers contributes to each of these literature bases.

1.1.1 The Development of New Media and Digital Publics

“New media” is used as an umbrella-term for computer-mediated communication technologies. Scholars have historicized shifts in new media development by denoting early read-only Internet websites as Web 1.0, while more recent online technologies that allow for two-way communications are referred to as Web 2.0 (Baym, 2015). Social media, which are online platforms designed for individual user-generated content and interpersonal interaction, are the defining tools of Web 2.0. These tools—like Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, and Twitter—have proved to be incredibly popular among the public. A vast majority of Canadians (Gruzd, Jacobson, Mai, & Dubois, 2018) and Americans (Smith & Anderson, 2018) report that they access at least one social media account on a regular basis. With applications for personal, educational, and corporate use

now integrated into computers, tablets, cellphones, and public infrastructure, social media have become increasingly embedded into the most meaningful and mundane aspects of our daily lives (Altheide, 2014; Hine, 2015). Moreover, because these applications are more collaborative and decentralized than mass media and the Web 1.0, they help create extensive social networks that transcend physical spaces and borders. Ultimately, new media has not only provided us with more avenues for communication, it has also fundamentally reshaped the “media logic” that underlies our “interaction processes, routines, and institutional orders” in society (Altheide, 2014, p. 21).

Blogs are considered to be the “backbone of social media” (Rettberg, 2014, p. 14). While early blogs of the Web 1.0 era resembled online journals for personal writing, blogs in the Web 2.0 era are more interactive and foster interpersonal connections and relationships (Baym, 2015; Rettberg, 2014). Social scientists have studied how different blogging communities have emerged based on a shared interest or identification (e.g., Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Hodkinson, 2007; Scheibling, Gillett, & Brett, 2018; Wei, 2004). Of particular relevance to this project are communities of “mommy bloggers.” The diverse research on these mothers has explored how they: seek out emotional support online (Morrison, 2011); rework dominant discourses of gender and motherhood (Friedman, 2013; Lopez, 2009); debate parenting advice and social issues (Steiner & Bronstein, 2017); and negotiate the commercialization of social media (Hunter, 2016). Despite the extensive and still-growing literature on mommy bloggers, there is little research on fathers’ use of blogs and other social media (Dworkin, Rudi, & Hessel, 2018; Lupton, Pederson, & Thomas, 2016). Ranson (2015) and Friedman (2016) are the only

scholars to have explored the content of “dad blogs” written by North American fathers. Common to their findings is an emphasis on the ways in which these men are using online media to push back against patriarchal definitions of family and fatherhood. These two studies, along with those on mommy bloggers, set an important foundation for the current project. I build on this literature by analyzing the largest collection of dad blogs to date and by extending the scope of inquiry to examine dad bloggers in North America as a social group.

To make sense of the communicative practices of online communities and networks, many media sociologists are guided by theoretical insights about public spheres. According to Habermas’ (1989), a public sphere is a democratic space where ideas can be exchanged and public opinion can be formed. By providing highly participatory and relatively unrestricted forums for communication, new media can be seen to cultivate a public sphere—or more accurately: digital publics and counterpublics. The notion of a “counterpublic” refers to a space where oppositional politics and opinions can be expressed (Fraser, 1990) and scholars have demonstrated how counterpublics are sites of discursive activism (e.g., Breese, 2011; Dahlberg, 2007; Gillett, 2007; Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Further, counterpublics can create and mobilize “counterdiscourse” designed to publicly refute and replace more dominant discourses (C. Connell, 2013; Dahlberg, 2007; Eckert & Chadha, 2013). Although Morrison (2011) refers to personal mommy bloggers as an “intimate public” (p. 37), and others (e.g., Friedman, 2013; Lopez, 2009) describe how these women use new media to

combat cultural stereotypes and expectations about motherhood, a framework centered on digital public spheres has yet to be applied to the study of fathers' use of social media.

For this ethnographic project, such a framework presents a useful schema for analyzing the collective cultural work of dad bloggers. It provides me with conceptual tools to unpack how dad bloggers are developing a group “idioculture” of shared knowledge and beliefs that defines them as a “tiny public” (Fine, 2012). It also sensitizes me to the ways in which these men produce counter-discourse in response to hegemonic norms of fatherhood and masculinity, and enables me to consider how this discourse is translated into social action and change. The purpose, therefore, of Chapter 2 of this dissertation is to advance the literature on digital publics by presenting new insights and arguments about a burgeoning and under-examined media community involved in particular forms of advocacy and activism.

1.1.2 The Changing Face(s) of Fatherhood in North America

During this same time period marked by unprecedented advances in social media technology and accessibility, we have also been able to witness notable changes in men's lives as fathers. Much social science research has documented changes in the amount of time North American fathers spend performing parenting tasks. It is generally agreed upon that men's involvement in childcare has increased throughout the 20th and 21st centuries as a response to women's increased involvement in the workforce (Ball & Daly, 2012; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006; Coltrane & Adams, 2008). In the United States, routine childcare done by married fathers has increased more than three-fold from 1965

to 2000 (Bianchi et al., 2006), and in Canada, the amount of time fathers' spent providing help or care to their children has practically doubled from 1 hour per day in 1986 to 1.9 hours per day in 2015 (Houle, Turcotte, & Wendt, 2017). To be clear, women do continue to shoulder the majority of family responsibilities overall (Bianchi et al., 2006; Hochschild & Machung, 2012; Moyser & Burlock, 2018). Yet, the fact remains that parenting practices are becoming a more regular and expected part of fathers' daily routines. As such, being a father is also becoming a more salient aspect of men's identities.

In the face of these trends toward greater paternal involvement, family scientists are emphasizing the need to recognize and analyze greater diversity in the ideals, identities, and experiences of fathers (Ball & Daly, 2012; Coltrane, 1996; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000; Milkie, Bianchi, Mattingly, & Robinson, 2002). A growing body of recent literature examines how men in different roles and contexts construct meanings for their parental identities and experiences. This includes new studies of: stay-at-home fathers (Chesley, 2011; Snitker, 2018; Steinour, 2018); gay fathers (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007); and, low-income fathers (Edin & Nelson, 2013; Roy, 2006). A key influence for how men come to define and make sense of what it means to be a father is their own parental role models (Daly, 1995; Dienhart, 1998; Masciadrelli, Pleck, & Stueve, 2006). What is more, researchers have paid particular attention to how fathers negotiate the performance of nurturing tasks typically associated with "mothering" (e.g., Coltrane, 1996; Doucet, 2006; Ranson, 2015; Risman, 1998). While many fathers are found to undertake "mothering" practices, they

also tend to reaffirm their identities as still men and not moms (Snitker, 2018; Steinour, 2018) and express a continued devotion to paid work (Kaufman, 2013; Townsend, 2002). These findings illustrate how, even as father involvement in parenting tasks and responsibilities changes, traditional gendered meanings for family and work roles can endure.

Popular culture is another site of change and stability for meanings of fatherhood. On the one hand, the shift of increased caregiving by men is reflected in more positive media depictions of fathers lately. Characters who are stay-at-home fathers or gay dads have been popping up in new television shows and movies (Kelly & Tropp, 2016) and tabloid media have used paparazzi footage to praise celebrity fathers like Ryan Reynolds or Ashton Kutcher for performing acts of childcare in public (Hamad, 2014; Podnieks, 2016). Moreover, advertising by brands like Tide, Dove, Pampers, and Huggies have released recent campaigns that are aimed directly toward fathers as purchasers of household and parenting products. On the other hand, representations of “deadbeat dads” like Homer Simpson or Al Bundy are not uncommon on television (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Scharrer, 2001) and parenting articles and books often still encourage fathers to be the family’s breadwinner (Schmitz, 2016; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Fatherhood experts therefore describe the “culture of fatherhood” as fundamentally contradictory: “new” ideals of “good” dads as nurturing and sensitive can appear alongside “old” stereotypes of “bad” dads as incompetent or uninvolved (see LaRossa, 2016; E. Pleck, 2004; Wall & Arnold, 2007; Podnieks, 2016). The imagery and narratives of this culture of fatherhood

provide important fodder with which men construct meanings for their parental identities, experiences, and ideologies.

Examining dad bloggers and their blogs is an innovative way to glean insight into personal and public meanings for contemporary fatherhood. Blogs serve as a platform for men to construct and display their paternal identity, as well as narrate their daily fathering experiences. As they blog and share content on social media, they also contribute to (re)shaping the broader culture of fatherhood in North America. In Chapter 3, I analyze how dad bloggers construct public stories about their personal identities and experiences as parents and consider how cultural ideologies about “good” and “bad” fatherhood are negotiated in these stories. A theoretical contribution of this analysis involves rethinking the blogosphere as a “situated fathering site” (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). As I will explain in detail later, for these men, blogging is not only used to write and talk *about* parenting online, it also becomes *intertwined with* the parenting practices of everyday life.

1.1.3 The Co-construction of Fatherhood and Masculinities

When dealing with the social construction of family roles, identities, experiences, and expectations, it is important to consider how these meanings are gendered. In a basic sense, referring to “motherhood” or “fatherhood,” as opposed to “parenthood,” involves a gendering of women and men’s parental realities. Hence, we cannot fully understand meanings of fatherhood without accounting for meanings of masculinity. To better recognize the diversity of men’s gender identities and performances, sociologists describe how multiple masculinities exist across a hierarchy of social power. R. W. Connell

(2005), in particular, argues that configurations of masculinity can be hegemonic, subordinated, complicit, or marginalized (p. 76). Within patriarchal contexts, attention is typically directed towards the construction and maintenance of “hegemonic masculinities”—that is, culturally exalted forms of masculinity that promote dominance over women and subordinate men (Connell, 2005). Because the heterosexual nuclear family is often considered a patriarchal institution, it is a key site where gender norms and inequalities based on sex difference are reproduced (Coltrane, 1996; Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Risman, 1998, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987). Therefore, taking a gendered lens to fatherhood frequently involves examining how hegemonic masculinity encourages male involvement in paid work and discourages male involvement in domestic work (Coltrane, 1996; Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005; Townsend, 2002). Cultural gender ideals, then, can help to explain how unequal divisions of labor within families persist.

Bearing in mind the aforementioned shifts in family life over the past few decades, it is necessary to look more closely at changes in definitions and expectations for gender roles. Men’s responses to feminist advances—such as women’s increased dedication to work over family—have been both progressive and regressive (Kimmel, 1987). On the one hand, what scholars refer to as “new” men and fathers respond by abandoning the traditional family role of being a breadwinner and welcoming greater practical and emotional involvement in parenting (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 1988; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Wall & Arnold, 2007). By resisting these hegemonic expectations for fatherhood and masculinity, “new” involved fathers are said to be

“undoing” gender in the family (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009). On the other hand, some fathers respond to these changes by relying on essentialist views of gender that condemn the breakdown of heteronormative divisions of family labor. Fathers’ rights groups are especially vocal in claiming that cultural and legal definitions of parenthood have become discriminatory against men by suppressing men’s “natural” predispositions and contributions (Crowley, 2008; Flood, 2012; Gavanas, 2004). Masculinity is therefore a contested terrain for different groups of fathers. Today, men’s parenting discourses and actions can invoke the recuperation and/or rejection of historically dominant gender ideologies.

A number of recent qualitative studies examine how fathers construct masculinities (e.g., Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006; Jordan, 2018; Miller, 2011; Snitker, 2018; Steinour, 2018). For fathers who take on caregiving roles typically associated with femininity, discussing masculinity tends to incite a negotiation of conflicting ideals and devotions. In accounting for their parental involvement, it is customary for fathers to either redefine manliness to be more caring and sensitive (Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012), or “masculinize” the care-work that they do by connecting it to themes of work and strength (Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Jordan, 2018). These configurations can also be interwoven together to create “hybrid” constructions of fatherhood based on hegemonic *and* alternative signifiers of masculinity (Randles, 2018). Explained by Miller (2011), descriptions of fathering practices can illustrate how fathers are “doing gender in traditional ways and at times simultaneously doing – and discursively narrating – gender differently” (p. 1106). Thus, men’s personal stories and

interpersonal interactions about parenting are important data for analyzing how meanings for fatherhood and masculinities become co-constructed—and possibly reconstructed.

In Chapter 4 of this dissertation, I focus on how dad bloggers create discourse about masculinities on social media and at the Dad 2.0 Summit. My analysis here is two-tiered. First, I examine prevalent themes in bloggers’ writing and discussions about gender and masculinities. This phase of the analysis illuminates the complex ways in which these fathers do, undo, or redo gender in narratives about fathering. Second, I use these findings to evaluate how dad bloggers should be categorized as an emerging men’s movement in North America. More specifically, I juxtapose their collective discourse about masculinities and perspectives towards gender equality with that of fathers’ rights groups and pro-feminist men. Combined, these insights demonstrate how dad bloggers are discursively reconstructing fatherhood and masculinities both online and offline.

1.2 The Research Process

The research process for this dissertation began with identifying a timely topic surrounding how fatherhood and masculinity are represented in media. Being aware of the literature on mommy bloggers, I did an initial Google search of the term “dad bloggers” and was met with thousands of results. I decided to then narrow my search to North American dad bloggers since I am a Canadian researcher. What I quickly realized was that there are hundreds of blogs written by North American fathers and an annual conference organized for them called “The Dad 2.0 Summit.” Looking over the Dad 2.0 Summit website (www.dad2summit.com), I noticed that this gathering was open to the

public and that parents, marketers, writers, and researchers were all encouraged to attend. In light of this discovery, I became interested in examining not just the content of “dad blogs,” but also what goes on at this conference. In addition, by using the Dad 2.0 Summit as a starting point for this project, I was able to streamline my approach by focusing in on a specific network of dad bloggers who are associated with the conference. I refer to this group of bloggers as the “Dad 2.0 community.”

With the members of Dad 2.0 community determined as my research subjects, I had to find research methods that would allow me to synthesize and analyze their online and offline discursive practices. From my existing knowledge of methodological texts for interpretive social psychology (e.g., Blumer, 1969; Denzin, 1992; Prus, 1996), I knew that ethnographic methods would provide me with the flexibility to collect and examine multiple types of qualitative data. I then began a review of literature on using ethnographic strategies to study online media and communities (e.g., Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2007; Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015). Similar to more conventional ethnographic research, “cyber” or “virtual” ethnography is concerned with how meaningful lived experiences are constructed by individuals and groups. The key difference is that, for cyber ethnography, there is an overarching focus on the role of the Internet in shaping and communicating meanings. Confirming my assumption, most of these texts also highlight the utility of combining offline methods (e.g., in-person observations and interviews) with online methods (e.g., content analysis of digital media) (see Hallett & Barber, 2014; Hine, 2015). This combination is particularly fruitful for studying an online community—like dad

bloggers—who interact in virtual spaces, but also in public gatherings. I chose to follow these recommendations by collecting data via: (1) observations and interactions at the Dad 2.0 Summit; (2) written posts on blog sites; and, (3) interviews with dad bloggers.

1.2.1 The Dad 2.0 Summit

I started the data collection process by conducting fieldwork at the Dad 2.0 Summit in February 2016¹. Launched in 2012, this three-day conference has been held at a hotel in a different city in the United States each year. It is promoted as a meeting where bloggers and marketers come together to have an open conversation about contemporary fatherhood and the commercial potential of fathers online. There is about an equal split of programming that focuses on parenting and programming that focuses on marketing. The programming includes speeches, workshops, roundtables, panel discussions, and off-site activities. The participants include dad bloggers, but also invited guests who are celebrities, corporate representatives, motivational speakers, and researchers. The main speeches and roundtables occur in a large ballroom and the workshops and panel discussions occur in smaller rooms spread throughout the hotel. There is also scheduled free time when attendees are able to roam the pop-up “marketplace” where different sponsors and vendors have set up booths to display products and information packets. During this free time, attendees tend to network extensively with others, exchanging business cards and introductions over drinks and snacks. Later in the evening, there are some voluntary on-site activities like “Dad Voices” sessions, which resemble poetry jams

¹ Ethics clearance from the McMaster University Research Ethics Board was obtained on

where bloggers take turns sharing their writing and telling stories. Many bloggers, however, choose to meet up off-site at neighboring restaurants and bars after the day's scheduled events have concluded. Over the past three years, I have been able to integrate myself into these diverse spaces at conferences held in Washington, DC (2016), San Diego, CA (2017), and New Orleans, LA (2018).

As a participant observer at the conference, I took hand-written field notes throughout each speech, workshop, and panel discussion I attended. I would also jot brief reminders to myself about the informal conversations I had. After returning to my room each night, I would type out daily reflections of my thoughts and ideas on my laptop. In writing field notes, my goal was to be as descriptive and accurate as possible so as to “prevent imposing alien meanings upon the actions of the subjects” (Vidich, 1969, p. 79). The analysis of field notes was intended to come later when compared and combined with the other data. Furthermore, I was forthcoming about my status as a researcher. Operating under what Fine (1993) calls “explicit cover,” I informed most people about the intentions of the research I was presently conducting (p. 277). My hope was that being transparent about my role would facilitate, rather than inhibit, integrating into the group and recruiting participants to interview later. By and large, I was met with welcoming responses from organizers and attendees. Especially after I came to be recognized and remembered at the gatherings in the past two years, I was often pulled into packs of bloggers who were embarking on excursions to explore the city at night. An advantage of being a researcher in this capacity was that I was exposed to more candid interactions and the development of group culture “as it is happening” in public settings

(Lichterman, 1998, p. 410). I also suspect that my smooth assimilation into subgroups of bloggers was, in part, because of my outwardly appearance as a man of roughly the same age as most first-time fathers. I was, in other words, someone who looked and talked similarly to a large number of the attendees.

1.2.2 Blogs

My fieldwork at the Dad 2.0 Summit enabled me to begin discerning which bloggers are part of this community, broadly defined. Using my field notes, along with the programming material and business cards I collected, I started to create a list of bloggers associated with this conference. I had an initial selection of around 20 bloggers whose blogs I started to sift through. In exploring these blog sites, I was often able to find more bloggers by following posted web-links and hash-tags. Certain bloggers like Chris Read (www.canadiandad.ca) and Adam Dolgin (www.fodder4fathers.com) even feature dad blogger directories on their websites, which aided me in my search. In addition, I became aware that many of these men communicate on the Life Of Dad (www.lifeofdad.com) message board and so I was able to find other relevant blogs to examine by reading threads on this site. Thus, my approach to collecting blog data involved snowball sampling that grew out of the Dad 2.0 Summit. In total, I compiled a list of 45 North American dad bloggers who were connected to the Dad 2.0 community in some capacity. This initial exploration of the blogosphere lasted from roughly September 2016 to March 2017.

After I determined my selection of bloggers, I then had to determine my selection of blog posts. In my exploratory phase, I realized that dad bloggers write about many other things besides parenthood—like politics, sports, health, and technology. Since this project was designed to focus on meanings for fatherhood, I decided to limit the sampling of blog posts to those that include some form of family-related content. Imposing this limit was an important way to make the collection of online data more manageable and theoretically specified (see Boellstorff et al., 2011). This procedure was also assisted by how nearly all blog posts are tagged with descriptive keywords and most bloggers organize their posts in thematic subsections on their websites. So, in each of the 45 blogs, I collected a total of 1,430 posts that were either tagged with family-related keywords or organized within a family-related subsection. The length of these posts ranged from as short as 100 words to as long as over 5,000 words. I saved the posts into a separate Microsoft Word document for every blogger and organized by title, date, and web address. At this stage, I performed preliminary “open coding” by noting the overarching topic (e.g., “paternity leave,” “parenting advice,” “children’s gender roles,” etc.) of each post based on the title and first few paragraphs (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I also tended to specify the focus of the writing in terms of whether it is about the father himself (e.g., “personal-focus”), his children or family (e.g., “interpersonal-focus”), or the dad blogger community or popular culture (e.g., “cultural-focus”). These initial codes were further developed and changed later in the research process when I analyzed the blog data alongside the fieldwork and interview data.

As I read through and archived blog posts over several months in 2017, I added a number of details to my list of bloggers. In Table 1.1, I note the names of all bloggers and their websites, their geographical location, the year their site has been active since, the number of children they have, and the number of posts I collected. Moreover, I provide demographic characteristics in terms of ethnicity, sexuality, marital status, and employment status in Table 1.2. I must acknowledge, however, the complexity of coding these categories on the basis of interpreting blog data. I have tried to assign these categories accurately based on clear textual or visual cues. I have assessed ethnicity primarily from photos, determined marital and employment status from “About Me” sections of blogs, and deduced sexual orientation often from references to marital status (e.g., writing about a “wife” versus a “husband”). To further mitigate assignment errors, I have chosen to structure the categories as simplified dummy variables of: white or non-white; heterosexual or non-heterosexual; married or non-married; and, employed or stay-at-home. Despite these precautionary measures, it remains possible that some of these bloggers do not identify with the ethnic or sexuality categories I have ascribed to them and/or have had a change in marital or employment status in the time since I conducted this research. I have decided to still include this information because I believe it presents a snapshot of the demographic characteristics of the Dad 2.0 community at the time of this research.

Table 1.1 *Sample of Bloggers (n=45) and Blog Posts (n=1430)*

Name	Website	Location	Active Since	# of Children	# of Posts
Aaron Gouveia	daddyfiles.com	Boston, MA	2008	3	45
Adam Dolgin	fodder4fathers.com	Toronto, ON	2011	2	62
Andy Herald	howtobedad.com	Los Angeles, CA	2011	3	4
Brandon Billinger	therookiedad.com	Kansas City, MI	2010	2	57
Brent Almond	designerdaddy.com	MD	2010	1	35
Brian "Pete" Gilbert	indyschild.com/a-dad-influence	Indianapolis, IN	2012	3	48
Bryan Grossbauer	digitdaddy.com	New Rochelle, NY	2016	2	4
Buzz Bishop	dad-camp.com	Calgary, AB	2009	2	55
Carter Gaddis	cartergaddis.com	Tampa, FL	2012	2	16
Charlie Capen	howtobedad.com	Los Angeles, CA	2011	2	37
Chris Bernholdt	dadncharge.com	NY	2010	3	5
Chris Farley-Ratcliffe	dadgoesround.com	Ottawa, ON	2013	3	50
Chris Peters	ask-a-dad.com	CA	2016	2	9
Chris Read	canadiandad.com	Ottawa, ON	2012	2	29
Chris Routly	routly.com	Portland, OR	2010	2	50
Chuck Vitello	stayathomedadblog.com	Morrisville, NC	2011	1	15
Clint Edwards	byclintedwards.com	OR	2010	3	53
Colby Shipwash	daysofadomesticdad.com	Dallas, TX	2012	5	17
Colin Reed	dadforbeginners.com	CA	2013	1	29
Creed Anthony	talesfromthepoopdeck.com	OH	2011	2	38
Daniel De Guia	fittobedad.com	Santa Rosa, CA	2014	3	15
Dave Lesser	amateuridiotprofessionaldad.com	NJ	2013	2	33
Doyin Richards	daddydoinwork.com	Los Angeles, CA	2012	2	40
Henry Amador	dadsquaredblog.blogspot.ca	Durham, NC	2012	1	23
James Rohl	sahdpdx.com	Portland, OR	2010	3	28
Jeff Bogle	owtk.com	Philadelphia, PA	2006	2	14
Jerry Mahoney	jerry-mahoney.com	New York, NY	2003	2	34
Joel Gracyk	daddysgrounded.com	Chicago, IL	2012	2	29
John Kinnear	askyourdadblog.com	Salt Lake City, UT	2012	2	39
Kevin Zelenka	doubletroubledaddy.com	Las Vegas, NV	2014	2	21
Lorne Jaffe	raisingsienna.com	Queens, NY	2013	1	33
Matthew Fray	mustbethistalltoride.com	OH	2013	--	28
Mike Armstrong	daddyrealness.com	Hamilton, ON	2013	3	15
Mike Heenan	athomedadmatters.com	San Francisco, CA	2014	2	12

Continued on next page

Mike Julianelle	dadandburied.com	Brooklyn, NY	2010	2	56
Mike Reynolds	puzzlingposts.com	Ottawa, ON	2012	2	73
Mitch Chaitin	gaynycdad.com	Manhattan, NY	2010	1	29
Nick Browne	papabrownie.com	Philadelphia, PA	2011	2	23
Oren Miller	bloggerfather.com	Baltimore, MD	2008	2	50
Richard Black	theunfitfather.com	MI	2013	1	30
Sam Christensen	dorkdaddy.com	CA	2011	3	25
Scott Behson	fathersworkandfamily.com	Nyack, NY	2012	1	47
Tom McMillen-Oakley	jesushas2daddies.blogspot.ca	Jackson, MI	2009	2	36
Tor de Vries	andinthedad.com	--	2011	2	11
Trey Burley	daddymojo.net	--	2010	2	28

Table 1.2 Characteristics of Bloggers (n=45)

Ethnicity	Sexuality	Marital Status	Employment Status
White (39) 87%	Heterosexual (40) 89%	Married (38) 84%	Paid Employment (26) 58%
Non-White (6) 13%	Non-Hetero (5) 11%	Unmarried (7) 16%	Stay-at-home (19) 42%

1.2.3 Interviews

While examining data from fieldwork and blogs is useful for learning about *what* meanings dad bloggers create about fatherhood and *how* they communicate those meanings, I also wanted to learn about *why* they blog and come together as a community. To ask these sorts of questions, I determined that it would be necessary to conduct several in-person interviews. These interviews were meant to be supplements to the larger amount and wider array of observational and textual data. In fact, I designed my interview guide *after* I collected most of the blog posts and had already attended the Dad 2.0 Summit in 2016 and 2017. This was done purposefully for a few reasons. First, I

wanted to use the conference as a place to recruit participants to interview, rather than cold-calling them through email. Second, and more importantly, I wanted to use my preliminary understanding of what goes on in the blogosphere and at the gathering as the foundation on which I base my interview questions. I followed a similar trajectory to Hughey (2008) who, in his ethnographic study of a virtual community of African American fraternity members, conducted a content analysis and participant observation of online discussion boards first, and then “developed the interview schedule from themes that had emerged from the first two modes of analysis, while leaving it open ended to embrace new themes and patterns as they emerged” (p. 537). In other words, I wanted to seek out clarification and elaboration on topics and issues that I found to be frequently raised in blogs and at the summit.

This type of approach did not require a large number of interviews from a representative sample of participants. Instead, it required finding and consulting a few insiders who have a close understanding of the inner-workings of the dad blogger universe. Explained by Blumer (1979), “A half dozen individuals with such knowledge constitute a far better ‘representative sample’ than a thousand individuals who may be involved in the action that is being formed but who are not knowledgeable about that formation” (p. xxxiii). With these insights in mind, I reviewed my field notes and brochures from the first two conferences to help narrow down some candidates to talk to. In doing so, I realized that I had already met several individuals who are deeply involved in the Dad 2.0 community. I decided to reach out² to five bloggers who have each taken

² The email recruitment script for this project is included in Appendix A.

on a contributory role (e.g., invited speaker, panel organizer, coordinator) at one of the Dad 2.0 Summit meetings. All of these fathers were receptive to my request for an interview and, in the summer of 2017, I began scheduling meeting dates. I conducted every interview in-person, which was feasible because each of these bloggers lived in the Northeast region of North America and within a six-hour drive from my location in Hamilton, Ontario, Canada. I obtained informed consent³ from each interviewee and recorded each interview on an audio recorder. Although I use the names and web-links that are posted publicly on websites when citing blog data, I decided to provide pseudonyms for my interviewees based on Snee's (2013) recommendations for ethical research on bloggers. This strategy was considered to be ethically sound by the McMaster University research ethics board and I found it to be the best way to acknowledge the participants whose words I draw on. By citing blog posts, I could give public recognition to the authors who wrote them, and by referring to my interviewees with pseudonyms, I could grant them the opportunity and privacy to speak freely about their opinions.

As I thought up questions, I began to divide them into three subject areas that appeared to be prevalent based on what I had been reading in blogs and hearing at the Dad 2.0 Summit. These subjects of: (1) community and culture; (2) parenting and fatherhood; and, (3) gender and masculinity became the three sections of my interview script and, consequently, the three areas of inquiry that I explored for the chapters of this dissertation. I created a semi-structured interview guide⁴ with roughly ten open-ended questions in each of these sections. In the interviews, I would welcome when participants

³ The letter of information and consent form for this project is included in Appendix B.

⁴ The interview guide for this project is included in Appendix C.

digressed in other directions and I would often think of new probes and questions to ask on the spot. Because of the interpretive and exploratory orientation of this cyber-ethnographic methodology, I was motivated to treat these interviews like casual conversations. As such, they were relatively dissimilar from one another and fairly prolonged. The shortest interview lasted just over 90 minutes and the longest interview lasted nearly 140 minutes. In addition to the conversation, I asked the interviewees to write down demographic information about race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, marital status, employment status, household income, and number of children (see Table 1.3). While these details are not treated as units of analysis, I considered them useful for providing a descriptive portrait of the social positioning of the dad bloggers I interviewed.

Table 1.3 *Characteristics of Interviewees (n=5)*

Pseudonym	Race/ Ethnicity	Sexuality	Marital Status	Employment Status	Income	# of Children
Andrew	Black	Heterosexual	Married	Employed	~170k	3
Gary	Black	Heterosexual	Married	Employed	~150k	2
Tim	White	Heterosexual	Married	Employed	~150k	2
Jake	White	Heterosexual	Married	Employed	~100k	2
Rick	White	Heterosexual	Married	Employed	~100k	2

1.2.4 Data Analysis

Once all of my data were collected and transcribed, I was in a position to determine subsamples for a closer empirical analysis. As mentioned just above, the research process thus far allowed me to identify three major subject areas on which to base the substantive chapters of this dissertation. Therefore, I went through all of the blog posts I collected

and performed “axial coding” designed to re-code and evaluate the posts with respect to the chosen three subcategories (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This procedure also enabled me to reduce the number of posts to an appropriate size for a qualitative analysis and create subsamples of blog data based on: community and culture ($n=125$); parenting and fatherhood ($n=201$); and, gender and masculinity ($n=124$). Once divided, I then paired each subsample with all of my field notes and interview transcripts. At this point, I was able perform in-depth “theoretical coding” based on “sensitizing concepts” from my literature review (Charmaz, 2006). This third coding procedure generated many descriptive thematic codes, but more specified analytical techniques were needed to better synthesize, track, and interpret dad bloggers’ discursive patterns across these three types of data.

To analyze the data more deeply, I chose a method that corresponds with my broader cyber-ethnographic approach. An “ethnographic content analysis” is strategy for discovering and tracking meanings in textual data (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). Unlike conventional content analyses that seek to quantify patterns, an ethnographic content analysis involves an inductive, emergent development of themes and theoretical relationships. What is more, it is designed to encourage a constant comparison of qualitative data from different sources including observations, documents, narratives, and media (Altheide & Schneider, 2013). For these reasons, it was determined to be the best method to employ. To facilitate the analyses, I used the Dedoose qualitative data analysis application (www.dedoose.com). In Dedoose, I performed the following procedures: I conducted line-by-line coding of each subsample; counted all codes and created tables of

the code distributions; compared codes in the different types of data; developed thematic categories and nested individual codes within these categories; wrote memos about how codes connect to sensitizing concepts; and, exported textual excerpts that illustrate themes. The goal in analyzing the data in this way was to discover, describe, and interpret discursive patterns in how dad bloggers write and talk both online and offline. These patterns could then be used to generate new theoretical insights about the social and digital construction of fatherhood.

Finally, there is one exception in the data analysis to note. For Chapters 2 and 4, I use data from fieldwork, blog posts, and interviews. For Chapter 3, however, I use only data from blog posts. I made this decision because I noticed that, in interviews and at the Dad 2.0 Summit, the bloggers talk a lot about developing their community (Chapter 2) and negotiating gender expectations (Chapter 4), but talk comparatively less about fatherhood *in itself*. In these spaces, issues that affect fathers are discussed at length, but discourse about specific meanings for what it means to be a father and “do” fathering is less prevalent. But, writing about fatherhood itself is perhaps the most common subject in blogs and so, given the focus of Chapter 3, I chose to examine blog posts only. To do so, I followed the guidelines of a “qualitative document analysis,” which is similar to an “ethnographic content analysis” but catered towards analyzing documents only, rather than a combination of ethnographic data (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese, & Schneider, 2008). It is also more attentive to unpacking how broader frames and discourses shape individual texts. As Chapter 3 will demonstrate, I used this method to investigate how meanings for

fatherhood in blogs are constructed and also in dialogue with cultural expectations for family roles.

1.3 Overview of the Dissertation

The following substantive chapters are three distinct, but related, articles that make up this “sandwich-style” dissertation. I chose to structure my dissertation in this way because I expected that research on dad bloggers could be relevant and contributory to separate literatures on media communications, families, and gender. As such, my first paper is published in *Feminist Media Studies* (Scheibling, 2019), my second paper is in press at *Symbolic Interaction*, and my third paper is published in *Men and Masculinities* (Scheibling, 2018). A clear advantage of this style of dissertation is the ability to publish these articles while still enrolled as a graduate student. A disadvantage is that there is far less opportunity to develop ideas as comprehensively as in a traditional dissertation. Moreover, there is some inevitable overlap between each of the three chapters. I have tried to minimize this as much as possible but there are still some elements that crosscut all three papers. Specifically, reviewing the literature on mommy bloggers and the culture of fatherhood in North America was necessary to include as contextualization for each analysis. Also, the descriptions of data and methods are quite similar overall. Despite these disadvantages and redundancies, I believe that each article presents its own theoretical arguments and advances based on three different sets of empirical data.

In the first article (Chapter 2), I apply and extend sociological and feminist media studies insights on digital public spheres. This literature has explored how online

communities—such as mommy bloggers—use social media for both cultural development and resistance. I conceptualize and examine dad bloggers as a social group who are collectively responding and contributing to cultural models of fatherhood. Drawing on data from fieldwork observations, blog posts, and interviews, I demonstrate how dad bloggers are: (1) developing their group culture; (2) resisting and reframing how fatherhood is represented in popular media; and (3) engaging in social advocacy and activism for issues affecting parents and families. I argue that dad bloggers in North America constitute a “tiny public” who are constructing what I define as the *culture of fatherhood 2.0*.

In the second article (Chapter 3), I present a qualitative document analysis of blog posts ($n=201$) written by fathers ($n=40$) in the Dad 2.0 community. All of the posts used in this analysis are narratives specifically about parenting and provide a window to the familial realities of dad bloggers. Adopting a social psychological perspective, I examine how fatherhood is socially constructed across lines of identity, experience, and ideology. My findings illustrate how dad bloggers reinforce and reshape cultural discourses about parenthood in their writing about: (1) parental role models and “anti-models”; (2) becoming a father and experiencing turning points in identity; (3) navigating work-family balance; (4) fathering as a form of generativity; and, (5) confronting ideologies about “good” dads, “bad” dads, and “superdads.” Social media use is discussed as a part of fathering in everyday life and as a tool to display, promote, and normalize father involvement. To conclude, I re-conceptualize the blogosphere as a new “situated fathering site” where dad bloggers are *doing fatherhood online*.

In the third article (Chapter 4), I investigate how dad bloggers create and engage in discourse about masculinities. Literature from the sociology of gender and families suggests that involved or primary caregiver fathers are often in a position where they must negotiate conflicting ideals about masculinity. Combining online and offline data from blogs, fieldwork from The Dad 2.0 Summit, and interviews, I illustrate how dad bloggers: (1) challenge hegemonic notions of masculinity that uphold traditional and unequal gender divisions at home and at work; (2) construct “caring masculinities” that better reflect their identities as nurturing fathers; and, (3) adopt a pro-feminist perspective that supports advancing social equality. In addition, I use these findings to consider if and how the Dad 2.0 community should be classified as a contemporary men’s movement. I argue that dad bloggers’ constructions of *hybrid fatherhood and masculinities* contest our patriarchal gender order while, at the same time, sustain their statuses as men.

The fifth chapter consists of a conclusion to the dissertation where I summarize and discuss my main findings and contributions. I also make certain projections about the future of fatherhood within mediated society, and provide research suggestions to fill gaps in our knowledge and build from the insights garnered from this project.

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Chapter 2

Fatherhood 2.0: The “Tiny Public” of Dad Bloggers in North America⁵

On February 23 2013, the *New York Times* ran a story entitled, “Don’t Call Him Mom, or an Imbecile” which documented the proceedings of a conference organized for men who write parenting blogs (Seligson, 2013). Referred to as a group of “daddy bloggers,” the article disclosed a number of their shared goals, including a motivation to tell marketers that fathers wish to be portrayed more positively in mainstream media. This account of the second annual “Dad 2.0 Summit” provided the first major exposure of dad bloggers in North America. Since then, these fathers have been showcased in other widely read periodicals including *Time* (Steinmetz, 2015), *Esquire* (Bateman, 2016), and *The Huffington Post* (Joseph, 2017), and in television spots on *CBS*, *NBC*, and *Fox News*. Common to this coverage is an emphasis on the social and cultural changes that dad bloggers are instigating. Katy Steinmetz (2015) goes so far as to say that the Dad 2.0 Summit is at “the forefront of an ongoing revolution in how America perceives fatherhood.” Despite a presence in the public eye over the past five years, this group of men has yet to be a major focus of scholarly research.

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The purpose of this article is to provide an in-depth, cultural examination of dad bloggers in North America. This study uses cyber-ethnographic methods to probe deeply into their group and examine key collective practices both online and offline. In what follows, I begin by describing the literature that informs this research. First, I report on studies of blogging communities and “mommy bloggers,” in particular. Second, I examine how fatherhood has been constructed in popular culture and on the Internet. Third, I outline theoretical insights on public spheres and strategies for conceptualizing and exploring these publics. After describing my data and methodology, I then present and discuss findings that demonstrate how dad bloggers are developing a supportive online community, enacting cultural resistance aimed at changing popular perceptions of fathers. As a whole, this study contributes to the sociological literature on fatherhood and to the burgeoning field of cyber-ethnographic feminist media studies.

2.1 Literature Review

2.1.1 Blogs and Online Communities

Over the past two decades, there has been a proliferation of web-based tools for writing and communication. Blogging has been a particularly common and enduring practice. Similar to an online diary, blogs are personal websites where individuals post written entries that are archived in reverse chronological order (Rettberg, 2014). Oftentimes, a blog also possesses communicative features, like sections for readers to interact with the author. Blogs are therefore not only personal; they are also social and collaborative

(Rettberg, 2014). Blogging can often facilitate and lead to the formation of online communities. Researchers have documented how a variety of blogger groups develop through interaction around a shared identity, such as: goths (Hodkinson, 2007), health-care professionals (Scheibling, Gillett, & Brett, 2018), and mothers (Friedman, 2013; Hunter, 2016; Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2011, 2014; Steiner & Bronstein, 2017). Blogging communities may be founded on certain subcultural qualities and political concerns as well. In many cases, members have joined together online precisely because their interests or beliefs differ from those of the dominant culture offline. Given the nature of this study, scholarship on mothers' use of blogs warrants closer examination.

2.1.2 Mommy Bloggers

The literature on mommy bloggers suggests that mothers can use blogs to discuss and contest prevailing norms and expectations of motherhood. In the virtual context then, blogs can be said to be both shaped by and actively reshaping family discourse. Friedman (2013) explains that through blogging, women are “replacing expert discourse *about* mothers with intimate dialogue by and between them” (p. 44). Similarly, Lopez (2009) calls mommy blogging a “radical” act; bloggers are “creating a different picture of motherhood to what we see in the mainstream media” (p. 732). In addition, blogging is valued for its capacity to incite sympathy from others and feelings of belonging (Lopez, 2009; Morrison, 2011, 2014). Morrison (2011) labels personal mommy blogs as “intimate publics” defined by “twin and *equal* motivations of personal self-expression and community development” (p. 38). Her findings describe the emotional experience of

blogging as well as the possibilities for collective action by bloggers. Social activism, however, may not be a shared focus. Lopez (2009) claims that this community has yet to “come together to tackle social justice or political issues such as parental leave, the cost of daycare and healthcare, [or] workplace equity” (p. 740). Nevertheless, certain mommy bloggers have entered into public debates and protests in recent years (see Morrison, 2011; Steiner & Bronstein, 2017) and ripples of their influence can be seen across the changing landscape of parenting culture.

2.1.3 Fatherhood in Popular Culture

What about fathers? Contemporary popular culture has a preoccupation with both “good dads” and “bad dads” (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Furstenberg, 1988; Kelly & Tropp, 2016; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Pleck, 2004). Since the 1980s, there has been a growing array of media that portrays purportedly “new fathers” and “good dads” who are engaged caregivers, rather than authoritarian or detached breadwinners (Kelly & Tropp, 2016; LaRossa, 2016; Podnieks, 2016; Wall & Arnold, 2007). Lately, we can find more stay-at-home dads as focal characters in television (Kelly & Tropp, 2016), as well as widespread tabloid media coverage of celebrity fathers performing caregiving tasks like pushing strollers and changing diapers (Hamad, 2014; Podnieks, 2016). At the same time, however, there is an enduring trend of representing “bad dads” who are either bumbling, uninvolved, or emasculated when performing childcare (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Kelly & Tropp, 2016; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Pleck, 2004). Parenting magazines still underscore a father’s role as primary breadwinner (Schmitz, 2016), newspaper articles

position fathers as less important and less nurturing than mothers (Wall & Arnold, 2007), and new books simultaneously promote and discourage caregiving by fathers (Hunter, Riggs, & Augoustinos, 2017). Taken collectively, the contemporary cultural model of father involvement is both “complicated and contradictory” (Milkie & Denny, 2014, p. 228). It would appear that ostensibly “good dads” are culturally revered, while “bad dads” remain culturally reprovved.

2.1.4 Postfeminist Fatherhood

To critically unpack popular representations of fathers, feminist media scholars have developed the concept of “postfeminist fatherhood” (Åström, 2015; Hamad, 2014; Podnieks, 2016). Extending from McRobbie (2004) and Gill’s (2007) definition of the postfeminist sensibility as both a recuperation and repudiation of feminist values, Hamad (2014) describes postfeminist fatherhood as “dually articulated through a mutually constitutive binary of strong-sensitive, patriarchal-postfeminist masculinity, with a correspondingly circuitous relationship to feminism” (p. 2). In studies of Hollywood films, television, and celebrity culture more broadly, researchers explain how the representation and celebration of “good dads” can still operate to sustain—rather than challenge—patriarchy and the marginalization of motherhood (Åström, 2015; Hamad, 2014; Podnieks, 2016). Relatedly, Randles (2018) describes how contemporary parenting discourse in the United States constructs “hybrid fatherhood” that encourages caregiving by men but also “legitimizes gender inequality by drawing discursive boundaries around mothering, fathering, and lesser forms of fathering as gendered practices” (p. 526). In the

current context, it is important to analyze discursive constructions of fatherhood with attention toward their relationship to postfeminist media culture and our unequal gender order.

2.1.5 Dad Bloggers

It is important to note, however, that dad bloggers are not celebrities and their blogs are not mass media. Existing studies of dad bloggers present greater optimism about the progressive potential of dad-blogs as compared to popular media. In response to Hamad's (2014) observations of celebrity fathers, Friedman (2016) explains that "men who blog, while still providing only a representation of family life, are, by the act of blogging suggesting an engagement in that life that exceeds that of the posed moments of tabloid culture" (p. 92). She believes that dad-blogs can "interrupt" dominant discourses by "subtly shift[ing] the inherent sexism and heterosexism of patriarchal parenthood" (Friedman, 2016, p. 87). Likewise, Ranson (2015) claims that dad-blogs reframe and promote involved fatherhood not because dad bloggers seek social praise, but because they view normalizing men's sharing of parental responsibilities as "necessary to the achievement of gender equality" (p. 179). Similar to mommy bloggers then, dad bloggers appear to be responding to dominant parenting culture by subverting stereotypes and expectations about patriarchal family roles. The current study looks to build on this literature by analyzing not only *dad-blogs*, but also offline ethnographic data on *dad bloggers*.

2.2 Conceptual Framework: Public Spheres and Counterpublics

Morrison (2011) proclaims that mommy bloggers construct an “intimate public” and so, it is worthwhile to unpack this term. Typically, when social scientists refer to a “public,” their definition is connected to Jürgen Habermas’ theory of the public sphere. Habermas (1989) describes “the public sphere” as a conglomerate of social sites where public opinion is formed (p. 136). Central to his theory is the democratic nature of the public sphere whereby all citizens have equal access and say. This point, however, has been criticized. Fraser (1990) argues that, not only are these spaces rife with formal exclusions, but multiple other publics exist that compete directly against the bourgeois public sphere. What she calls “subaltern counterpublics” are “parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses” (Fraser, 1990, p. 67). Both Habermas’ and Fraser’s notions of public spheres have proved useful for studying forms of mediated communication (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Rasmussen, 2014). Looking at “cyberpublics,” focus is directed toward how citizens use digital media to broadcast “counter-discourse” that stands in opposition to dominant discourses (Dahlberg, 2007, p. 837). Certain researchers have examined how blogs are involved in generating counterpublic spheres. Some examples of blogging counterpublics include: individuals affected by SARS disease (Gillett, 2007); Muslims living in Germany (Eckert & Chadha, 2013); and alternative fashion bloggers (Connell, 2013). Common to these studies is an emphasis on how digital media can be used for *cultural resistance* (see also Hughey,

2008). Evidently, online technologies have become popular tools for public debate, collective representation, and social activism.

The theoretical construct of “counterpublic” has also been met with criticism. Scholars point out that Fraser’s (1990) formulation refers only to members from “subordinated social groups” which can be considered too restrictive (p. 67). Asen (2000) claims that counterpublics should instead be viewed as “emergent collectives” who confront exclusion, but are not solely composed of subordinated people (p. 439). Moreover, Breese (2011) provides a framework that recognizes the variety of public spheres and how they transform over time. A local civic group, for example, may eventually grow into a larger political network (Breese, 2011, p. 142). This model bears resemblance to Gary Alan Fine’s (2012) theory of group action and culture. Small groups, which he calls “tiny publics,” provide “a basis for affiliation, a source of social and cultural capital, and a guarantor of identity, but also a support point in which individuals and the group can have an impact on other groups or shape the broader social discourse” (Fine, 2012, p. 1). From these recent critiques and developments, we can understand public spheres as diverse, fluid, and mobile sites of collective discursive activity.

Finally, it is necessary to clarify how public spheres can be practically examined. Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) outline three criteria: 1) the *communicative spaces* within which a public sphere operates; 2) the *discursive patterns* that distinguish it; and 3) the *participants* who constitute it (pp. 469-470). In addition, they provide three central characteristics of counterpublic spheres. A counterpublic: deconstructs what it deems mainstream and dominant; provides counterarguments; and develops a sense of collective

identity (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 471). In this study, I undertake these strategies by immersing myself in dad bloggers' *communicative spaces*, qualitatively analyzing their *discursive patterns*, and getting to know many *participants* in the community.

2.3 Data and Methods

My methodological approach is referred to as “cyber ethnography” (Gajjala, Rybas, & Altman, 2007). Like more traditional ethnographic research, the purpose is to provide a detailed analytical description of meanings in a cultural context. What is unique to this approach is looking both “inward” to and “outward” from the Internet in order to interpret human experience (Hine, 2015, p. 53). Hence, to be ethnographic, the cyber-ethnographer is expected to explore and compare data from *both* online and offline worlds (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012; Gajjala et al., 2007; Hine, 2015). I also follow Marsiglio and Cohan's (2000) recommendation to use a wide range of research data and methods in order to analyze “the symbolic features of a group's public presentation” as well as “the group's local or national influence” (p. 81). Specifically, I draw on observations, blog posts, and interviews in order to interpret the meaning-making practices of dad bloggers.

Upon learning that the Dad 2.0 Summit is open to the public, I used this conference as a point of entry into the group. I attended each meeting over the past 3 years, totaling 9 days and approximately 50 hours spent in the field. Throughout many speeches and workshops, I took extensive field notes and participated as a “peripheral member” whereby I interacted frequently enough with others to be considered an insider,

but did not take on any functional roles or responsibilities at the conference (Adler & Adler, 1987, p. 36). When meeting with bloggers, panelists, and organizers, I was quickly invited into conversations, activities, and other outings. An advantage of being a participant observer in this capacity was that I was in a position to witness and examine group culture *in action*, as manifested through behavior and interactions in different social settings (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003; Fine, 2012; Magnuson, 2005). Additionally, attending the gatherings granted me the opportunity to recruit participants to interview at a later date.

With a sketch of the community in mind, I turned to the blogosphere to collect my principal dataset. Consulting my field notes and promotional materials, I searched for the blogs of fathers mentioned at the Dad 2.0 Summit. Many of these blogs featured clickable links to the conference website and to other dad-blogs. These links helped me to collect data, but also discern which bloggers were part of this community. Limiting the sample in this way was crucial. Explained by Boellstorff et al. (2012), when dealing with a massive amount of possible online data, it is necessary to set some informed limits (p. 173). As I found blogs written by these men, I then differentiated between types of posts. For this article, I searched carefully for writing about the summit, reasons for blogging, and things dad bloggers have done as a “group” or “community.” This process was facilitated by how most blog posts are *tagged* with keywords that describe its content. As I archived theoretically relevant posts, I assigned initial descriptive codes to each. In total, 125 posts written by 38 bloggers between 2010 and 2018 were used in this analysis.

The final set of data came from face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with five bloggers whom I met at the gathering. Choosing these participants was highly purposive; I sought out “key informants who have a profound and central grasping of a particular cultural world” (Plummer, 2001, p. 154). In other words, all of these bloggers are well-known and influential members within the group. Like Hughey (2008), I developed an interview-guide based on preliminary themes from the other two types of data, which enabled me to clarify and expand on insights gleaned from the summit and blogosphere. More specifically, I asked questions about the formation, actions, and goals of the dad blogger community. Each interview was audio recorded and lasted between 90 and 135 minutes. Although I refer to bloggers whose writing I draw on by the names they present publicly on their websites, I use pseudonyms to protect the privacy of my interviewees.

Once the materials were fully transcribed, I conducted an “ethnographic content analysis,” which is an emergent strategy to discover and compare patterns, themes, and theoretical relationships in textual and media content (Altheide, 1987). To assist in the analytical procedures, Dedoose qualitative data analysis software was used. In Dedoose, the preliminary codes assigned during data collection were elaborated upon so as to create more accurate and descriptive secondary codes. Next, I counted and compared all codes across the three types of data in order to determine those that were most prevalent. This process produced an initial collection of fourteen themes. From this, I was then able to look more closely at the selected texts and collapse many of them into fewer, broader categories.

In all, I use three thematic categories to encapsulate the predominant discursive practices of these men. First, dad bloggers are invested in *community development* and define their group by axioms of inclusivity, interpersonal support, and involved fatherhood. Second, they enact *cultural resistance* aimed at changing popular representations that paint fathers as uninterested in or unskilled at parenting. Third, they use their blogs and the Dad 2.0 Summit as platforms for social and political *advocacy and activism* for issues relevant to parents. Based on these findings, I argue that North American dad bloggers are a “tiny public” who are collectively responding and contributing to our contemporary cultural model of fatherhood. To support this argument, each theme is illustrated in greater detail by drawing on a variety of textual excerpts from blog posts, field notes, and interview transcripts.

2.4 Findings

2.4.1 Community Development

It is readily apparent that dad bloggers express an interest in developing a community of men who are passionate about fatherhood. For many, finding or creating a group for fathers was initially spurred by feelings of exclusion from other parenting spaces, such as daycares and playgroups. Bloggers such as Aaron Gouveia and Buzz Bishop have written about their failed attempts to join groups for mothers and have since used their websites to connect with fathers. Bishop (2016) recounts, “I wanted to meet other dads who were engaged and active in their kids’ lives and starting a blog helped to make that happen.”

Similarly, during a panel at the Dad 2.0 Summit, the founder of a local City Dads Group tells us that, after his request to join a parenting community was rejected, he wanted to create a space where dads could experience “that cathartic feeling of being able to vent and share war stories.” In making their own groups for fathers, however, dad bloggers seek to avoid being exclusionary themselves. Sharing his impression of the gathering, Joel Graczyk (2016) writes:

Dad bloggers as a whole are some of the most welcoming and uplifting groups I’ve ever met. There is a wide variety of backgrounds and belief systems represented at Dad 2.0, but even in moments of disagreement everyone seems to be on the same side. We all want to raise our kids in such a way that makes the world a better place.

When describing and promoting their conference and community, most bloggers stress that inclusion is of paramount importance to them.

Another blogger named Oren Miller is credited with establishing the official Dad Bloggers Facebook group in late-2012. The Facebook page is described by Nick Browne (2015) as “a place for dads of all backgrounds to come together, work on our craft, hone our skills, find support, vent, and almost anything else under the sun. It’s a place for debate, for friendship, for fatherhood.” Having this forum upheld by standards of candid and constructive dialogue is considered invaluable. Blogging and interacting online is a way for fathers to learn about parenting in an intimate and personalized way. Mike Reynolds (2014) explains, “these men aren’t just good at raising kids, they’re good at

raising dads. Not in a way where they head from house to house giving lessons about dad on chalkboards, but in the way where they support one another in trying new things.”

While Miller’s group began small with just a handful of American dads, the Dad Bloggers Facebook page now boasts over 1,200 members from around the world.

In my interviews, bloggers spoke at length about seeking out interpersonal support online. Jake and Rick both characterize the community as deeply important for dads looking to confide in and console one another. Rick explains:

It’s like having your own mastermind group of 1000 people. Feedback and conversation is important. You know, there’s a lot of lonely people out there so to be able to have this to come in and say: “Hey guys, how’s it going?” Those guys need that. Specifically a number of guys need that group to calm them when they’re getting that anxious feeling. It’s important. What Oren started is important.

In a similar way, Lorne Jaffe (2014) writes, “Dad 2.0 and the Dad Bloggers Facebook site are all about at-home and stay-at-home dads working together, being there for each other when we have difficulties, sharing advice and experiences, reminding each other that we’re not alone.” By including sessions on topics like depression, emotional labor, and family separation, the Dad 2.0 Summit provides fathers with spaces to talk through sensitive issues and even openly grieve. Further explaining how this conference is the main conduit for developing a supportive community, Gary elaborates:

When you get an arena filled with [other people] doing the same thing you do, it just gives you a sense of empowerment that you're not alone. You're not alone in what you're doing, and you're not alone in your thinking, and the way you approach the world. Things like Dad 2.0 do the same thing; it shows dads who want to be either vulnerable or share their stories that they're not alone.

It is clear then that dad bloggers use online and offline platforms to build a network of fathers who wish to exchange personal stories, parenting advice, and words of encouragement. In doing so, they are developing a collective identity, a sense of solidarity, and a group “idioculture” of shared “knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs” that “they employ as the basis of further interaction” (Fine, 2012, p. 36).

2.4.2 Cultural Resistance

With a budding network of fathers interacting regularly online, more collective behavior was bound to ensue. Particularly noticeable among dad bloggers has been a shared effort in problematizing representations of fathers. Sam Christensen (2012) describes this trajectory of moving from community development to media deconstruction:

For many of them their blogs were a release, and a way of connecting with a broader community of like-minded people, and in doing so they found that one of the things they had in common was the fact that they took exception to the way dads were generally portrayed in the media.

As mentioned earlier, despite how our culture of fatherhood endorses men's nurturance, much popular media still paints fathers as uninterested in or unskilled at parenting. This issue touches a joint nerve and dad bloggers place various depictions under scrutiny. Spearheading this endeavor is Chris Routly who dissects ad campaigns in his blog and has started petitions that demand companies change their branding. Defending his cause, Routly (2012) argues that both mocking fathers who struggle at childcare and celebrating fathers who perform even the simplest tasks do little to encourage parental involvement and domestic equity. Similarly, Oren Miller (2012b) emphasizes the importance of media portrayal for how it "defines the ways dads are viewed by society" and can socialize a father "into thinking of himself as a secondary caregiver." Adam Dolgin (2014) issues his own call to arms: "I for one am willing to fight for a dad's right to be portrayed as a loving, caring parent [...] There are millions like me, and we're not going to take it anymore." Many bloggers have answered these calls by using their blogs to expose and combat what Jerry Mahoney (2012) calls, "dadsdiscrimination" in pop culture. Targets have included ads by AT&T, Huggies, Jif, Similac, and Tide, and recent television shows like *Up All Night*, *Modern Dads*, and *Guys With Kids*.

But the biggest target of all was Amazon. In 2010, Amazon.com offered a new subscription to "Amazon Mom" that gave members access to deals on family-related products. Dad bloggers—a large number of who are stay-at-home fathers—took exception to the company's use of traditionally gendered language. Their position is summarized by Scott Behson's (2015) post that states, "To many, verbiage like 'Amazon Mom' seems like a small concern. In the grand scheme of things, I guess it is."

However, to me, these words are an indicator of how our society often undervalues fathers and, by implication, places an unfair burden on mothers.” Mobilizing others to the cause, dad bloggers submitted a petition of over 13,000 signatures to Amazon who, in 2015, officially changed their name to “Amazon Family.” As this was a major victory for dad bloggers, I asked interviewees about why this all matters. Jake notes, “As we’ve pushed back at certain brands, they have changed their advertising focus and that changes perceptions, right? Like we’re starting to see ads with competent dads as parents instead of fumbling dads, then that starts to change how people think about parenting.” Expressing his ambivalence towards the petition, Tim describes it as “just a piece” of something bigger. He explains, “I rather try to approach the bigger problem [...] I’m trying to change masculinity and thinking that by doing that, down the road it will be just obvious that we have an Amazon Parents, not Amazon Mom.” Similar concerns are offered by a number of other bloggers. In resisting and reframing mediated discourse about parents, they strive to be understood as socially progressive—not self-interested.

At The Dad 2.0 Summit, bloggers will watch, critique, and discuss myriad media representations of fathers. While doing so, they also continuously and publicly share their own discursive reconstructions of fatherhood on social media platforms in real time, often tagging particular brands or campaigns. What is more, the conference offers bloggers the unique opportunity to speak face-to-face with marketers about their opinions. Of all the companies in attendance, Dove’s presence is most ubiquitous. Representatives from Dove declare that they want to help dad bloggers on their mission to shift public perceptions of

men as fathers. The promotional material they provide highlights the need to “challenge traditional strength” and “celebrate men’s caring as real strength.” Recalling his own collaboration with Dove, Mike Julianelle (2015) writes, “I was grateful for the opportunity to join with them and maybe help change the minds of people who do have outdated ideas of what a dad’s role should be.” As expected, many others feature posts sponsored by Dove on their websites that draw on similar themes of redefining care as strength. While laudable on the surface, it is important to acknowledge Dove’s involvement as a “cause branding strategy” that endorses, but also effectively *markets*, social advocacy (Murray, 2013, p. 84). Underlying the support for changing fatherhood and masculinity remains imperatives of consumption and brand alliance that may compromise—or at least complicate—bringing about actual social change.

2.4.3 Advocacy and Activism

Amidst the frenzy of petitioning media branding, a number of bloggers admit that they recognize that these are not, in fact, the most pressing concerns. Similar to Tim’s position, Gary claims that changing ads are but “small wins in a larger scheme of what needs to change.” What this cultural resistance did do though, was demonstrate that dad bloggers are capable of initiating some real changes in society. Many of these men have since engaged in rallying behind a variety of other causes. Describing the overall political orientation of the group and the fields of debate they tend to enter, Dave Lesser (2016) outlines, “The politics tend toward progressive, especially on social issues. Essays about marriage equality, feminism, transgender issues, gun control and other topics that set the

rest of the planet on fire are liked and shared.” Based on what I have seen, read, and heard, there are three key issues that encompass most of dad bloggers’ advocacy and activism. They are: paternity leave, changing tables in men’s washrooms, and gender equality.

Since dad bloggers are highly devoted to fathering, it is not surprising that parental leave is something they strongly campaign for. This issue is brought up often at the Dad 2.0 Summit, including when co-founder Doug French concludes his opening speech in 2016 by stating: “parental leave is not important; it’s essential and that’s what we’re here to foster.” Several workshops also feature researchers from organizations such as Promundo and New America who present statistics to show how few workplaces offer paid leave and how few men decide to take it. These sessions have made major impacts on some bloggers. Jake, for example, went home with new work aspirations:

After the Dad 2.0 conference, one of the things coming out of that was I want to do more to deal with systemic issues around fatherhood. I thought, “okay, where is the place that I can have the biggest systemic impact?” It’s going to work for the minister who looks after parental leave and families. So, I had some conversations and an interview with his office about being a policy advisor.

In addition, dad bloggers often write about their decision to take leave. Aaron Gouveia (2015) sought to change his workplace culture by taking leave “as publicly as possible,” and using his blog as a way “to help make paternity leave normal instead of shameful.”

Numerous others explain how taking time off enables men to build a closer relationship to their child(ren) and a knowledge base of the practical skills of parenting.

The second issue brought to the fore is that there are insufficient changing tables in men's washrooms across North America. Dad bloggers consider this to be impractical, unfair, and in need of change. Chris Farley-Ratcliffe (2015) explains, "Changing babies' diapers is a basic, frequent need for all parents of all genders. Change tables shouldn't be exclusively in women's bathrooms any more than science labs should only have men's bathrooms." Doyin Richards (2013) and Jerry Mahoney (2012) also choose to highlight how a lack of changing tables in men's rooms is disadvantageous to *mothers*. Put frankly by Mahoney (2012), "Who says wiping poopy tushies is just a woman's job? If dads aren't changing their kids, they should be." Moreover, Mike Heenan (2014) uses inspiring prose to promote taking action:

Write your Congresswomen(men)! Draw up your 'PARITY FOR PUBLIC POTTIES,' signage! Take it all the way to the White House, if you feel so inclined, because, together, YES. WE. CAN. get off of our cramped and squatting duffs in public restrooms and take baby out of that greasy truck stop sink and do our daddying duties like dignified men!

To provide greater clarification, Tim explains to me how there is more to this protest than the physical tables. He says, "it's not just to make sure that there's a change table in all the men's rooms across the United States or North America, but to show people that dads *want* there to be change tables in there."

Lastly, dad bloggers tend to advocate for gender equality. Using his status as a leader in the community, Oren Miller (2012a) reminds fathers of their social positioning in stating, “the big picture is that men, whether they have children or not, are not second-class citizens, and we shouldn't confuse the struggles of stay-at-home-dads with the idea that we're somehow victims here.” In sharp contrast to fathers’ rights groups, most men in this community view social policies and laws affecting families as grounded in patriarchy and more discriminatory against women than men (Scheibling, 2018). As such, they write blog posts that explain how and why men can help support feminist causes. On the topic of sexual assault, Mike Julianelle (2016) states, “You don’t have to commit assault to unwittingly perpetuate rape culture, and sometimes our silence can help enable it [...] If you’re a parent, and especially if you have boys, you have a bigger role to play.” Fathers of sons frequently raise this issue, drawing links between toxic masculinity, male socialization, and gender and sexual inequality. Charlie Capen (2016) urges fathers to teach boys to stand up for girls and “help usher in a more equitable, fair society where men and women can both [be] given opportunities,” while Clint Edwards (2014) describes his plans to teach his son about consent and “non-verbal sexual cues.” Moreover, at the Dad 2.0 Summit, there have been panels about: how to challenge sexism in the workplace; how to cultivate LGBTQ+ inclusion and equity in childcare and education; and how to support the ongoing #MeToo movement. Overall, dad bloggers do not contend that gender equality in society has been achieved and they seek to use online media to advocate for causes that they believe will help advance human rights and social justice.

2.5 Discussion

Like mommy bloggers, I find that dad bloggers are invested in developing a community, challenging dominant ideologies of parenthood, and advocating for social changes to benefit parents. Underlying these findings, however, are a number of tensions and contradictions that require further discussion. First, with respect to community and cultural development, dad bloggers describe their group as made up of an assortment of stay-at-home dads, single dads, married dads, gay dads, and dads of different ethnicities. But this heterogeneity may, in fact, be more of an abstract ideal than a statistical reality. When examining the demographic makeup of the dad-blogsphere, the majority of bloggers appear to be white, heterosexual, married, and class-privileged. Similar to other cyberpublics then, dad bloggers do not wholly evade the barriers and biases they wish to subvert (see Connell, 2013; Lopez, 2009). Although they do champion the values of inclusivity and diversity, the extent to which these values are put into action in building their network and crafting a collective identity is not entirely clear.

Second, with respect to cultural resistance, dad bloggers are producing “counter-discourse” by challenging stereotypical images and narratives that paint fathers as absent or incompetent parents (Connell, 2013; Dahlberg, 2007; Eckert & Chadha, 2013). Their discursive actions can be seen as influential in shifting public focus away from “bad dads” and towards “good dads,” with companies like Amazon, Dove, and Huggies are making changes to their marketing. Yet one should question the extent to which dad bloggers are truly *redefining* aspects of fatherhood. My findings suggest that dad bloggers position

their own cultural work as influential in shifting popular culture's focus away from "bad dads" and towards "good dads." Introducing the latest conference, for instance, Dad 2.0 Summit co-founder Doug French proudly declares that we are seeing less of the "feckless dad on TV" because "the culture has listened" to dad bloggers. This may be true, but it is not entirely novel. That is, especially among middle-class, heterosexual, married, white men, the promotion and practice of involved caregiving are hardly new phenomena (see Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 2016). Furthermore, throughout the 20th Century, a number of other men's groups have protested depictions of "bad dads" (Kelly & Tropp, 2016), and within our contemporary postfeminist context, celebrating "good dads" is arguably already a hegemonic discursive practice in media (Hamad, 2014; Podnieks, 2016). Taking these trends into consideration, dad bloggers are not so much redefining fatherhood altogether as they are revitalizing and reframing the culture of "new" fatherhood through social media technologies and networks (see LaRossa, 2016).

Third, with respect to social advocacy and activism, dad bloggers are in a particularly complex and contentious position. Although they are, by most objective measures, a privileged group of men, they find themselves experiencing similar plights—such as exclusion or misrepresentation—to those who are less privileged. Consequently, we can see some advocacy oriented towards the rights for men and fathers, and other advocacy oriented towards the rights for women, children, and marginalized individuals. Dad bloggers therefore cultivate a "postfeminist sensibility" to the extent that their advocacy represents an "entanglement of both feminist and anti-feminist themes" (Gill, 2007, p. 149). As such, they can also be seen as constructing a collective discourse of

“hybrid fatherhood” that both upholds and breaks down dominant ideals about fatherhood and masculinity (Randles, 2018). All things considered, however, I argue that dad bloggers’ advocacy and activism is more focused on promoting gender equality and advancing social justice than on demanding more privileges for men (see also Ranson, 2015).

The narrative laid out in my findings also suggests that, over time, dad bloggers have transitioned away from criticizing cultural representations of fathers and moved towards supporting broader systemic issues affecting families. Several bloggers have recently helped to develop charities such as Camp Kesem (<http://campkesem.org/>), which offers free summer camp to children with a parent who has cancer, and Dads 4 Change (<https://dads4change.com/>), which highlights and consolidates the causes supported by the Dad 2.0 community. Thus, following a similar trajectory as some mommy bloggers, certain dad bloggers choose to “mobilize their networks into activism in the offline public sphere” (Morrison, 2011, p. 49). Their protests have also likely contributed to recent mandates for more changing tables in public spaces in the United States (see Crespo, 2019; Middlebrook, 2016). But whether or how they have been instrumental in bringing about other policy changes—especially those that concern parental leave—remains to be seen. This is a particularly important question to address. Future research should further investigate the outcomes of parenting bloggers’ social action, as well the tensions inherent to the commercialization and co-optation of parenting blogs by major brands (see Hunter, 2016).

2.6 Conclusion

This cyber-ethnographic study has outlined some of the most prevalent collective discursive practices of dad bloggers in North America. As a contribution to the literature on parenting culture, this work extends that of Ranson (2015) and Friedman (2016), and elucidates how dad bloggers are contributing to cultural models of fatherhood by publicly promoting parental involvement and equality. Further, in producing social discourse about fathers online and at the Dad 2.0 Summit, dad bloggers have established their own shared history, identity, and interactive “idioculture” (Fine, 2012, p. 36). Denoting the twin pillars of parenting and digital media that shore up this community, I define the collective discursive practices of dad bloggers as *the culture of fatherhood 2.0*. Though it will continue to change shape over time, the current culture of fatherhood 2.0 centrally involves using social media to build a supportive network of involved fathers, contest stereotypes about fatherhood and masculinity, provide visibility to caregiving practices by men, and petition for socially progressive policy changes.

This study also contributes to the literature on public spheres by supporting and answering Asen (2000) and Breese’s (2011) calls to examine variety in public sphere formations. Although they are not a subordinated social group, I argue that dad bloggers operate as a counterpublic by how they: deconstruct dominant discourses; provide counter-arguments; and strengthen a sense of collective identity (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 417). More to the point, dad bloggers thoroughly *believe* that they “present alternative perspectives that challenge popularly held views” about fathers (Eckert & Chadha, 2013, p. 940). The annual Dad 2.0 Summit is the specific cultural event where participants

“share history, emotional concern, and a sense of belonging” and, in turn, develop into a “tiny public” (Fine, 2012, p. 164). Over time, the tiny public of dad bloggers has shifted in scale and orientation. What began as a small number of men writing and talking about parenting online is now an international network of fathers who collaborate with major consumer brands, rally behind social and political causes, and contribute to the development of non-profit and charitable organizations. Above all else, these men are vocal and impassioned promoters of nurturance who want to ensure the betterment of the lives of children. Looking forward, it is my hope that the work of dad bloggers, and the alliances they build, will continue to move us toward a more equitable society for parents and families.

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Chapter 3

Doing Fatherhood Online: Men’s Parental Identities, Experiences, and Ideologies on Social Media⁶

Since the advent of the Internet, we have seen an explosive growth of online technologies designed for self-presentation and social interaction. Parents are one subgroup of people who have used digital media to share information about family issues for the past 25 years (Dworkin, Rudi, & Hessel, 2018; Lupton, Pedersen, & Thomas, 2016). What began as text-based chat rooms and message boards for parents in the 1990s has expanded into a multitude of parenting news sites and webpages across social media platforms such as Blogger, Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram in the 2000s. Blogs, which are a particularly time-honored social media format, provide customizable virtual spaces for personal writing and interpersonal communication (Schmidt, 2007). Through interacting and collaborating with others online, bloggers create “communities of blogging practices” who “share certain routines and expectations about the use of blogs as a tool for

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information, identity, and relationship management” (Schmidt, 2007, p. 1419). In recent years, parenting bloggers have developed into different online communities and social networks. Of these emerging groups of parents, “mommy bloggers” have been given the most public and scholarly attention.

The discursive activities of “mommy bloggers” have been investigated in great detail (e.g., Friedman, 2013; Lopez, 2009). This work describes how mothers use blogs to narrate their parental identities and experiences, and to publicly contest cultural ideologies of motherhood. There is comparatively less research on fathers’ use of digital media due, in part, to a dominant assumption that fathers are secondary parents and ergo less likely to create and consume online content about parenting. Very recently, however, scholars have begun to examine “dad blogs” and interactions in the “dad blogger” community. Dad blogs started to surface online in the late-2000s and the existing research looks at how dad bloggers contend with conflicting ideals surrounding fatherhood and masculinities, in particular (see Friedman, 2016; Ranson, 2015). The rise of dad bloggers in North America is still a nascent phenomenon and important questions remain about the ways in which these men create discourse about fatherhood online. The current study addresses this gap in our knowledge by drawing on the most extensive sample of blogs written by fathers to date.

In this article, I present a qualitative analysis of a collection of blog posts ($n=201$) written by dad bloggers ($n=40$) from North America. Adopting a social psychological perspective, I examine how fatherhood is discursively constructed across lines of identity, experience, and ideology. Accordingly, I use a conceptual sorting that delineates between

meanings for “father” (identity), “fathering” (experience), and “fatherhood” (ideology) throughout the sections of this article. In what follows, I begin with a literature review of social science research on meanings for fatherhood. Next, I outline my theoretical framework grounded in symbolic interactionism and describe my dataset and methodology. Then, I illustrate and discuss my findings about how dad bloggers narrate their parental realities online. This study provides an empirical contribution to family studies by analyzing emergent social media data on fathers and a theoretical contribution by re-conceptualizing the blogosphere as a “situated fathering site” (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). Overall, this study advances our understanding of the dialectical relationship between personal and public meanings for fatherhood in the contemporary digital era.

3.1 Literature Review

3.1.1 The Role and Identity of Father

What does it mean to be a father? To answer this question, social psychologists observe how father identities are socially constructed in conjunction with cultural expectations for family roles and interpersonal communication with family members and others (Collett, Vercel, & Boykin, 2015; LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Marsiglio, 1995; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Pasley, Petren, & Fish, 2014; Pleck & Stueve, 2004). Qualitative interactionist family studies tend to adopt a wide lens for interpreting the complex meanings that parents assign to their family role-identities and how these meanings are articulated and enacted in different social contexts. Parents’ own narratives or stories of

family life are ways of “telling the self” that “gives us a way of understanding important aspects of identity” (Pleck & Stueve, 2004, pp. 74-75). From this perspective, we can view blogging as a technology of the self that certain fathers are using to narrate and manage their parental identities in public.

Some empirical research is oriented towards identity construction across men’s “self-as-father trajectory” over time (Marsiglio, 2004, p. 56). Even before they have children, boys and men start to think about fatherhood and describe the role models who have influenced their parental motivations. Men’s own fathers are commonly designated as a source of either inspiration or discouragement with respect to parenting (Marsiglio, Hutchinson, & Cohan, 2000; Masciadrelli, Pleck, & Stueve, 2006). Many sons who have grown up with an absent or uninvolved father explain how they envision and construct their own paternal identity in direct opposition to their father (see Daly, 1995; Dienhart, 1998; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Kaufman, 2013; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Miller, 2011; Townsend, 2002; White, 1994). Dienhart (1998) refers to uninvolved fathers as “anti-models” and shows how sons of anti-models can still become engaged parents by compensating for their own experience as children (p. 57). While men’s own fathers are often cited as primary role models or anti-models, mothers, peers, community members, and characters from popular culture are important secondary models for how fathers come to define their paternal identities.

As men make the transition to becoming fathers, they may experience personal turning points where their paternal identity becomes more central or important to their sense of self (Kaufman, 2013; Marsiglio, 2004; Pasley et al., 2014). The particular

meaning of a paternal identity, however, varies based on the social positioning of the father. Researchers have recently inquired into the meaning-making processes of emergent father role-identities, such as stay-at-home dads and gay dads. The literature on stay-at-home dads demonstrates how these fathers negotiate their identities as men while taking on a role historically assigned to women, often emphasizing that they distinguish themselves as “not mothers” (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006; Snitker, 2018). In a similar way, gay dads must contend with cultural discourses about gender and sexuality that define parenting roles and identities in ways that conflict with their family arrangements (Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007). Evidently then, although we are able to recognize greater diversity in fathers’ roles today, contradictions remain surrounding broader notions about what a father is supposed to be. Examining how fathers describe their self-as-father trajectories in blogs is a fruitful way to unpack these contradictions and negotiations surrounding gender and parenthood.

3.1.2 “Doing” Fathering

What does fathering entail? The parenting practices of fathers are most often studied by measuring their involvement in various domestic tasks and less often studied by interpreting fathers’ own explanations and feelings about how they parent (Day, Lewis, O’Brien, & Lamb, 2005; Dienhart, 1998; Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Yet, in light of ongoing social, cultural, and economic shifts that disrupt traditional gendered divisions of work and family, sociologists have called for closer considerations of diversity in the ideals, perceptions, and realities of father involvement (Coltrane, 1996; Marsiglio, Amato,

Day, & Lamb, 2000; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Milkie, Bianchi, Mattingly, & Robinson, 2002). In answering this call, a variety of recent qualitative and ethnographic work provides a deeper understanding of the meanings associated with myriad parenting tasks and family activities. Conceptually, the interactionist notion of “doing” family can place focus on how parenting is performed and represented to others (Collett & Childs, 2009; Coltrane, 1996; Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Marsiglio, et al., 2005; Shows & Gerstel, 2009). Since social media are public and often widely publicized platforms, they are novel locations to explore how fatherhood is “done.”

Research on what it means to “do” fathering illuminates notable changes and enduring patterns. On the one hand, a growing number of men from different social locations now consider themselves as willing and able to perform the nurturing or “mothering” tasks of childcare (e.g., Coltrane, 1996; Doucet, 2006; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Ranson, 2015). As the respondents in Ranson’s (2015) work describe it, fathering today involves committing to all aspects of childcare and doing “everything but breastfeeding” (p. 39). On the other hand, fathers continue to position breadwinning as a fundamental fathering practice (e.g., Kaufman, 2013; Miller, 2011; Townsend, 2002). Economic provision is thus considered to be simultaneously a part of and an obstacle to father involvement. Aumann, Galinsky, and Matos (2011) explain that many men feel competing commitments to paid work and parenthood and, as a result, are now experiencing comparable levels of work–family conflict to women. As sites for online writing and conversations, blogs provide fathers with virtual spaces to deliberate upon how to balance responsibilities at work and at home.

To make sense of the purpose or impacts of fathering, the concept of “generativity,” which refers to the concern and ability to care for future generations, is often used (Erikson, 1950). Many dimensions of fathering are considered to be generative: they are practices through which men guide and care for their children, setting a foundation for their lives as adults (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Pratt, Lawford, & Allen, 2012). Generativity is not only a way to explain the intentions and outcomes of parenting; it is also a key aspect of men’s autobiographical narratives about fathering (see McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992; Pratt et al., 2012). This means that men frequently refer to generativity when they account for what they do as parents. McAdams and de St. Aubin (1992) call this a “generativity script” (p. 1006), and Pratt and colleagues (2012) provide an empirical illustration of how fathers construct and situate their parenting experiences within such scripts. With blog posts bearing close resemblance to autobiographical narratives, generative themes and scripts are likely to be present throughout blogs written by fathers.

3.1.3 Fatherhood Ideologies

What do dominant discourses suggest about fatherhood? Our norms and expectations for fatherhood in North America have changed over time (for overviews, see Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, 2016; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). To provide an abridged history, a gradual shift in social ideals for fathering have moved away from an emphasis on fathers being breadwinners and disciplinarians, and moved towards an emphasis on fathers being nurturing co-parents (Pleck & Pleck, 1997). This shift, however, is not entirely linear or

all-encompassing. Over the past 30 years especially, popular ideologies of fatherhood tend to represent and bifurcate “good” involved dads and “bad” deadbeat dads (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; Furstenberg, 1988; Kelly & Tropp, 2016). Similar thematic contrasts between “good” and “bad” fathers are also found in political discourse surrounding the responsible fatherhood movement in the United States (Battle, 2018; Randles, 2018). Further, these definitions for “good” fatherhood are often associated with class position and marital status, and viewed therefore as a product of patriarchal social structures and policies (Griswold, 1993; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Randles, 2018). In other words, ideologies about appropriate and successful fatherhood tend to reflect only a particular, privileged minority of fathers in society.

Popular expectations about fatherhood are manifest in cultural images of fathers. Empirical analyses of media representations of families tend to bear out this good dad-bad dad dichotomy. There has been a trend of displaying “good” caring fathers in recent television shows and movies (Kelly & Tropp, 2016), as well as a shift toward representing father involvement as deeply fulfilling for men (Milkie & Denny, 2014). Yet concurrently, other media—and parenting texts in particular—still reinforce traditionally masculine ideals of breadwinning (Schmitz, 2016; Wall & Arnold, 2007), or poke fun at fathers’ incompetence at caregiving (Coltrane & Adams, 2008; LaRossa, Jaret, Gadgil, & Wynn, 2000). At present, the culture of fatherhood is rife with contradictions concerning gendered roles and responsibilities for work and family (Kelly & Tropp, 2016; Milkie & Denny, 2014). As dad bloggers generate online discourse about parenting, they contend

with these contradictions and, in doing so, they contribute to broader cultural models of fatherhood.

Finally, it must also be noted that fatherhood images and ideals do not only have symbolic importance. They are not simply reflections of what we already think about fathers. Rather, fatherhood ideologies act as meaningful discursive repertoires or tools for men to interpret and construct their parental identities and experiences (Berkowitz, 2011; Collett et al., 2015; Lupton & Barclay, 1997; Marsiglio, 1995; Marsiglio et al., 2005; Milkie & Denny, 2014; Ranson, 2015; White, 1994). Cultural and individual meanings are thus weaved together in interaction. As Berkowitz (2011) explains in her study of gay men’s parenting narratives, fathers construct a “self-as-parent identity by absorbing preexisting social and cultural messages and by applying these symbols to their own individual lives and experiences” (p. 517). This statement encapsulates and elucidates the conceptual connection between the preceding sections of this review. Meanings for fathers’ identities, experiences, and ideologies are mutually interwoven and articulated in private and public narratives. This research looks closely at this connection and considers how dad bloggers’ meaning-making practices might collectively create their own fatherhood ideology.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical insights described in the abovementioned literature review are born primarily out of the symbolic interactionist tradition. Symbolic interactionism is a social psychological perspective that attends to the social construction of meaning and is rooted

in a central premise that meanings arise out of interaction (Blumer, 1969; Mead, 1934; Stryker, 1980). Moreover, symbolic interactionism provides a conceptual tool-kit to examine the representation of identity, as well as how meanings are created through personal narratives and embedded in social and ideological structures (Altheide, 2014; Fine, 2012; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). A significant advantage of this perspective lies in its ability to connect the strands between identity, experience, and ideology. Holstein and Gubrium's (2000) framework, in particular, underscores how the "interpretive practice" of identity construction exists at the crossroads of narrative, interactive, cultural, and institutional life (p. 96). For these reasons, symbolic interactionism is the most appropriate theoretical framework for this study of how fathers use social media as an interpretive practice for constructing personal and public meanings for fatherhood.

Within the interactionist heritage, important conceptual inroads have been paved in the field of family studies (e.g., Berkowitz, 2011; Berkowitz & Marsiglio, 2007; Collett, 2005; Collett & Childs, 2009; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Marsiglio et al., 2005; Pleck & Stueve, 2004). This work has extended our knowledge of the ways in which individuals do family by exploring questions about how "family members infuse self-meanings and purpose into family roles" and what strategies "family members use to construct familial realities and negotiate role-identities" (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993, p. 136). Following Marsiglio and colleagues (2000), I examine "the meanings men assign to situations, events, acts, others, and themselves as they relate to aspects of fatherhood" (p. 134). Online blogs are the spaces where I look to discover and interpret these meanings. Approaching the Internet in this way, I consider the blogosphere as a virtual and "situated

fathering site” (Marsiglio et al., 2005). As will be explained later, for this group of men, social media use is indeed integral to their daily lives as parents.

Before presenting my findings, blogs and blogging need to be more carefully operationalized with respect to an interactionist perspective. I view blog posts as personal stories framed by cultural and technological discourses and ecologies (see Altheide, 2014). Blogging, as a form of social interaction, is a way in which fathers narrate, develop, and compare their self-identities and experiences (LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Pleck & Stueve, 2004). Because online blogs are highly visible, they are also tools for “impression management” that allow men to demonstrate and accentuate aspects of their personal lives as fathers to others (Collett, 2005; Goffman, 1959). In other words, blogging is a way for fathers to construct a “public face” of “good” fatherhood by displaying their time spent in activities with children (Milkie, Nomaguchi, & Schieman, 2018; Shows & Gertsel, 2009). Accordingly, I draw on men’s publicly displayed parenting stories in order to interpret meanings for father identities, fathering experiences, and fatherhood ideologies. My analysis of these narratives attends not only to individual and “subjective” meaning construction by fathers, but also how these meanings are shaped by—and actively *reshaping*—“objective” ideological meaning structures about parenthood in North America.

3.3 Methodology

A “qualitative document analysis” is a methodological strategy used to discover emergent and theoretically meaningful themes in textual data (Altheide, Coyle, DeVriese,

& Schneider, 2008). This method is particularly suitable for this study because it permits analyzing meanings in a media text (e.g., blog post), tracking themes across texts (e.g., blogs), and considering how “symbolic representations are enmeshed in a context of other assumptions” (Altheide et al., 2008, p. 130). Furthermore, a qualitative document analysis is informed by both symbolic interactionist and grounded theory perspectives, and therefore complements my theoretical framework. Drawing from grounded theory tenets, the data collection, coding, and analysis relies on an oscillating, constant comparison approach (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This means that these three procedures are not performed linearly and, instead, the researcher moves back and forth between them. I will now explain how I undertook each of these procedures.

The blogs used in this study are taken from an ethnographic project on dad bloggers in North America. They were sampled purposively to reflect what I refer to as the “Dad 2.0 community.” This selection of fathers all live in North America, blog actively about parenting, and have a connection to an annual conference for dad bloggers called “The Dad 2.0 Summit” (see Table 1.1). The majority of men in this community are white, heterosexual, married, and employed, and these characteristics are taken into account in the analytical discussion. For this article, blog posts were first sampled widely, with the only criteria being that they are *tagged* with a family or parenting-related keyword. Next, the sample was adjusted to remove any posts that do not focus on fatherhood and to add other posts that were written in the time since the initial collection. Then, I performed “open coding” to discern general themes in the texts, followed by

“axial coding” to compare the themes and chart patterns across the data, and finally “selective coding” to determine core thematic categories that other themes could be nested within (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The coding and analysis was performed using Dedoose—a qualitative data analysis application. In total, 20 thematic codes were developed, but these were consolidated into 9 final themes that exemplify dad bloggers’ most prevalent meanings for fatherhood (see Table 3.2). These themes are noted in each of the 3 subheadings of the findings section.

This study uses a total of 201 blog posts written by 40 dad bloggers between 2009 and 2017. My analytical interpretation and discussion is guided by and explained through a number of “sensitizing concepts”—such as “anti-models,” “being there,” and “generative fathering”—derived from the literature base outlined above (Blumer, 1969; Charmaz, 2006; Marsiglio, 2004). In the next section, I present my findings organized within a conceptual schema that separates the categories of identity, experience, and ideology⁷ (see Table 3.1). These categories, however, are not mutually exclusive. In many cases, a given blog post is marked with secondary codes from across several categories and this speaks to how meanings for fathers, fathering, and fatherhood often converge and overlap. To illustrate the thematic findings, I draw on a variety of quotes from blog content and make connections to theoretical underpinnings. Following the analysis, I provide a more reflexive commentary about the socio-cultural implications of dad bloggers’ discourse about fatherhood.

⁷ I wish to acknowledge Risman (1998) for developing these categories in her analysis of how children learn about gender in families.

Table 3.1 *Distribution of Blog Posts by Thematic Category (n=201)*

Theme	Percent	N
The Identities of “Father”	36%	72
The Experiences of “Fathering”	35%	70
The Ideologies of “Fatherhood”	29%	59
Total:	100%	201

Table 3.2 *Distribution of Codes Within Thematic Categories*

Theme	Code	Percent	N
<i>Identity</i>			
	Role Models and Anti-Models	35%	25
	Turning Points in Identity	19%	14
	Being “Good” Dads, Not Moms	31%	22
	All other and N/A	15%	11
	Total:	100%	72
<i>Experience</i>			
	Sharing Fatherly Advice	37%	25
	Balancing Work and Family	18%	12
	Fathering as Generativity	28%	18
	All other and N/A	21%	15
	Total:	100%	70
<i>Ideology</i>			
	We’re Not Dopey Deadbeats	27%	19
	But, We’re Also Not “Superdads”	34%	24
	Normalizing Involved Fatherhood	18%	13
	All other and N/A	7%	4
	Total:	100%	59

3.4 Findings

3.4.1 Identity: Role Models, Turning Points, and Being

“Good” Dads, Not Moms

Dad bloggers use blogs to narrate their “self-as-father trajectory” and often begin by sharing stories about their lives before they became fathers (Marsiglio, 2004, p. 56).

Leading up to and following the birth of a child, these men reflect upon the influences that have shaped their understanding of what it means to be a father. It is common to find stories about positive and negative parental role models. On the one hand, bloggers like Jeff Bogle and Daniel De Guia describe how seeing their own fathers being nurturing inspired them to be involved fathers as well. In the words of De Guia (2015):

I know that the active presence of my father throughout my childhood – showing me what it means to be a loving father, a caring husband, and a force to be reckoned with – in my life was one of the biggest reasons why, as an 18-year-old kid in high school finding out that he was about to be a father himself, I stayed in the ring and fought for my family and my children, against whatever life threw our way.

Several fathers, such as Adam Dolgin and Mike Reynolds, also credit non-family members as important mentors. Dolgin (2013) lauds male teachers and coaches who “take on the molding of children who aren’t their own simply because they feel a sense of duty to be good role models,” while Reynolds (2017) lists a number of female idols to emphasize that women can and should be sources of inspiration for men. On the other hand though, there are many dad bloggers who define their identities as fathers in stark

opposition to their fathers. Bloggers like Mike Heenan (2014a) write about the challenges of trying to figure out what it means to be a dad “when you have hardly a single memory of how your father fathered you” and others position their own father’s absence as salient counterpoint for determining what type of father they want to be. Clint Edwards (2015) writes, “I’m going to be the father I never had [...] Rather than getting more pissed off about what my father wasn’t, and using that as an excuse to feel lost, I decided to do something more.” Evidently, dad bloggers’ fathers tend to be depicted in blogs as either role models or “anti-models” (Dienhart, 1998, p. 57). Both of these models are influential for how these men come to construct and display their own paternal identity online.

Moving forward in the self-as-father trajectory, dad bloggers write about transitions to, and turning points in, their paternal identity. Key moments when these men felt like a father for the first time are described at length. After noticing himself talking about different types of strollers at work, Buzz Bishop (2009) realized that “there was a sea change going on in my mind. I made the switch from normal guy to father.” Bloggers also reflect upon how making this switch has affected them. Typically, positive changes are said to result from the transition to becoming a father. Colin Reed (2013) explains how parenthood has made him more mature: “I find myself being more responsible. Caring for another human more than my egocentric self.” Similarly, Scott Behson (2013a) asserts, “I’ve learned to be more patient, more tolerant, and less of a ‘type-A’ person. I’m far happier, more relaxed.” Though there are different psychological and emotional outcomes mentioned, what dad bloggers appear to have in common is a realization that their identity as “father” has taken precedence over other identities. Mike

Julianelle (2013a) shares a comedic story that draws similarities between becoming a parent and joining a cult whereby your “personality has been erased and replaced by that of a children-obsessed robot.” Nick Browne (2016) is more plainspoken in admitting, “If it weren’t for these two beautiful daughters [...] I don’t even know what my identity would be.” Thus, identity “salience” may be both a cause and consequence of blogging; men who are highly invested in their paternal identity may be drawn to write about parenting and writing about parenting may make men more invested in their paternal identity (see LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Pasley et al., 2014; Stryker, 1980).

What are the defining characteristics of a father according to dad bloggers? A variety of inferences are made on the subject of what makes a “good” father. Similar to other studies, most bloggers refer to a willingness to “be there” for his family as the overarching quality of a “good” dad (see Doucet, 2006; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Shows & Gerstel, 2009; White, 1994). Blogging itself is also a way for men to display “the importance of ‘being there’ and demonstrate publicly that they are ‘good’ fathers” (Milkie et al., 2018, p. 5). In addition, dad bloggers stress that fathers are *not* mothers or Mr. Moms. Aaron Gouveia (2014) explains, “Calling dads ‘Mr. Mom’ is a cardinal sin in the dad world [...] Fatherhood isn’t a version of motherhood, and dads aren’t playing the part of a mom.” Voicing these concerns is especially common in the blogs of gay or stay-at-home dads. Brent Almond (2015), for instance, declares, “I am not a mother. What I am is a gay man, partnered for 17 years, legally married for one. What I am is a father. [...] And in our house, ‘mother’ is referred to as ‘The M Word’.” And, venting on behalf of stay-at-home dads, Dave Lesser (2014) writes, “we’re not

babysitters (they're our kids, dude!) and we don't love the term 'Mr. Mom' (would that make our wives 'Mrs. Dad'? That seems dumb.)” So, even in families that break with conventional gender arrangements, meanings for parental role-identities can remain bound up with notions of gender difference. For these fathers, blogs are important tools for personal and public identity work. At the personal level, writing about one's paternal identity can help reinforce commitment to that identity. At a public level, displaying these particular identities on social media is also a way to spread the message that involved fathers are still men and not moms.

3.4.2 Experience: Fatherly Advice, Work-family Balance, and Generativity

Writing about the experiences of parenthood found in dad blogs often takes the form of advice. This advice about how to “do” fathering is either more practical or more abstract in nature. Posts that present practical advice provide stories and tips about parenting tasks and are typically aimed toward first-time fathers. Chris Farley-Ratcliffe (2016) writes a recurring series called “New Dad Guide” where he explains how practices like taking parental leave, learning how to change a diaper, and supporting your partner are ways to develop a strong foundation for and connection to fatherhood. Many bloggers make similar points about how fathering involves caring for and working with mothers, frequently describing the ways in which they are, in the words of Buzz Bishop (2013), “tackling parenting as a team sport.” Posts that present abstract advice often address and

console insecurities that fathers may feel about their capabilities as parents. Referring to what he calls “the secret to happy parenting,” Mike Julianelle (2013b) writes:

Stop worrying about what others think of your parenting. Stop thinking about what someone else is thinking when your kid has a meltdown in Target, or when he eats French fries, or when he watches TV during dinner at the restaurant, or when he dresses like a superhero in public or has a long ‘do or wears pink or plays with a doll or sucks his thumb or cries on the plane. They don’t know your life. They don’t know your kid. They don’t know you. And even if they do, they certainly don’t know any better than you.

Sharing advice serves to inspire new fathers to parent confidently and to frame father involvement as something that is personally fulfilling (see Milkie & Denny, 2014).

Because the majority of bloggers in this sample are employed, a prevalent theme in writing about fathering is the navigation of work and family obligations. Paid work is frequently framed as a constraint on parental involvement that fathers need to try to negotiate. Carter Gaddis (in Capen 2014a) shares his trepidation about working full-time in admitting, “There is no balance. Every minute I’m at work, I feel like I’m missing out on something significant.” Several bloggers mention changing jobs to become more involved at home, like John Kinnear (2016) who reflects, “something in my gut told me that if I didn’t find a way out of that job, Stevie and the kids were going to be the ones that paid the price. Sure, I was bringing home money, but I wasn’t being the kind of

father I wanted to be.” Stay-at-home dad bloggers also write about why they decided to leave the workforce. What is common in blogs by both employed and stay-at-home dads is the promotion of putting family before work. Doyin Richards (2015) presents his justification in stating, “while I sure can’t remember what my first conference call or first performance review was like, I can absolutely remember my daughters’ first words and first steps as if they occurred yesterday” and Scott Behson (2013b) explains how, by being involved at home, he hopes that his son “learns that work-family balance means family first and that his career priorities should take his future spouse/family’s needs into account.” In entries like these, bloggers share strategies for work-family balance to model behavior to their children and to the readers of their blogs.

There are a handful of blog posts that focus less on exchanging personal advice and more on considering what the broader purpose of father involvement is. Put differently, dad bloggers publicly discuss *why* men should be involved parents. The cited reasons are typically explained through notions of “generative fathering” (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Pratt et al., 2012). Dad bloggers provide autobiographical “generative narrations” in describing how they foresee their children learning and benefiting from the nurturance they provide later in life (McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). In one account, Charlie Capen (2014b) defines fathering as a way to give children “experiences, opportunities and resources wherever you can that will build them into self-starting, empathetic, understanding, capable people.” Other bloggers like Richard Black and Carter Gaddis project even further into the future by considering how they may impact how their children come to act as parents themselves. Writing to his children as the

intended audience, Gaddis (2013) expresses, “If I’m fortunate, my true legacy to you will not be the memories and stories you share about me, but how your children remember you.” Fathering is therefore understood and constructed as having a multigenerational influence that extends across time and outside of the home. That is to say, some of these men construct visions of generative fathering that go beyond domestic tasks, such as Mike Reynolds (2016) who states:

Whatever I do going forward will be done with a mind towards making sure I’m doing things that not only would make my daughters proud, but that would make the world better for them. This could mean advocacy work, this could mean traveling more, this could mean lying down with them and not looking at my phone for an hour if that is what they need.

In discussing their motivations for fatherhood, dad bloggers tend to encourage readers and other men to make progressive and lasting impacts in their families and in their communities. Social media are used as platforms to advocate the need for and importance of nurturing and generative fathering practices.

3.4.3 Ideology: “Bad” Dads, “Superdads,” and Normalizing

Involved Fatherhood

As a group of men who think and write about parenting a great deal, dad bloggers are acutely aware of cultural expectations and stereotypes associated with fatherhood.

Unsurprisingly, a stereotype that they take issue with is that of the dopey, deadbeat dad.

On their websites, dad bloggers will deconstruct representations of “bad” dads they find in popular media, as well as discuss this cultural stereotype with broader strokes. Most posts that critique media images of fathers are written with a comedic gloss, like when Chris Read (2012) states, “So today’s Dads are the stereotypical movie imbecile’s [sic], who let their babies eat cigarettes, play in the dryer and swim in toilets? Good to know” or when Mike Julianelle (2014) states, “Everyone mocks us for being incapable buffoons, and that’s cool; as the saying goes, any fool with a dick can make a baby. I don’t take offense.” Others bloggers, however, address the issue with a more serious tone. Chris Routly (2012), a stay-at-home father, writes at length about the negative implications that accrue from accepting or spreading this ideology about fathers and uses his blog as a means to promote involved fatherhood. He declares:

I want EVERY dad to strive to be actively involved with his kids lives as much as possible, not just at-home dads. I want EVERY dad to know he is capable of breaking out of the hands-off, disconnected, incompetent stereotypes that are put upon us, not just at-home dads. I want EVERY dad to step up his game to help change those stereotypes, not just at-home dads.

John Kinnear (2013) describes a similar motivation for why he blogs in saying, “I am willing to do my part to break the stereotype by being an active and visibly ‘good’ dad in the world.” Thus, in some ways comparable to mommy bloggers, dad bloggers have a vested interest in breaking down dominant and stereotypical ideologies of parenthood

(see Friedman, 2013). Because blogs are both personal and public, they can be seen to individually rework, but also collectively rearticulate, fatherhood ideologies about deadbeat and ostensibly “bad” dads.

Yet dad bloggers acknowledge existing representations and expectations about “good” dads too. Particularly noticeable across dad blogs is writing on a recent cultural notion about “superdads.”⁸ The term “superdads” is used in popular press coverage to describe stay-at-home dads or even celebrity fathers who are seen performing childcare in public. What is interesting is that, although many dad bloggers could be accurately classified as “superdads,” they reject this label for quite specific reasons. Critiques of the term are framed by personal stories about receiving praise for doing even the most simplistic of parenting tasks. Addressing compliments he received on his blog, Mike Heenan (2014b) admits, “As flattering as that may seem or may have been designed to be, I want you all, anyone and everyone, to know that I am not some Good Dad Lone Ranger.” Moreover, many bloggers express their apprehension for the term by explaining how our social standards for father involvement are too low. According to Chris Routly (2014), “As a society we’re slowly learning that the bar for Super Mom is ridiculously, impossibly, stupidly high [and] that bar for Super Dad [is] ridiculously, stupidly low.” Other fathers provide related criticisms of “superdads” discourse by underscoring how mothers do not receive comparable applause. As Aaron Gouveia (2015) instructs, “Dads shouldn’t be singled out for praise simply for basic parenting 101. If we accept those compliments while mothers get no public support for the same tasks, we’re automatically

⁸ Dad bloggers’ reference to the term “superdads” is not to be confused with Kaufman’s (2013) operationalization of the same term.

erasing the level playing field.” Overall, dad bloggers are vocally critical of the ideology about “superdads” propagating in popular culture and they explain why they believe this term does a disservice to both fathers and mothers.

It should be clear that dad bloggers’ interpretations and reconstructions of fatherhood ideologies are markedly complex. They reject persistent stereotypes about “bad” dads, while at the same time they also reject more recent stereotypes about “good” or “super” dads. When taken together and combined, these themes create a new ideology of fatherhood that encompasses much of dad bloggers’ collective discourse. This ideology is centered on *normalizing involved fatherhood*. Several bloggers make this conceptual connection and use it to clarify why they choose to blog. Describing the purpose of communities and conferences for fathers, Buzz Bishop (2016) explains that they exist “Because the conversation needs to change. We need to see involved fatherhood as the norm not the outlier.” Likewise, writing to other dad bloggers, Mike Reynolds (2015) expresses, “We need to write about these moments dads SHOULD be doing until they aren’t thought of as exceptional.” Finally, Chris Farley-Ratcliffe (2015) provides a demonstrative summary of dad bloggers’ ideological position and discursive contributions. He writes:

Once it is normal to expect a father to be an engaged parent as opposed to an imbecile who is lucky to last an hour without dropping kids on their heads and losing others under the couch, the compliments will stop. In the meantime we will continue to model what we can do and challenge the

notions that we are incompetent. Slowly, one dad at a time we will raise the bar and expectations of our abilities.

These points consolidate how dad bloggers use social media to reconstruct popular beliefs about fatherhood in a way that promotes the normalization of active and nurturing parenting by men. They view themselves, in Scott Behson's (2015) words, as public "ambassadors of involved fatherhood."

3.5 Discussion

What does it mean to be a father and do fathering today, and how are these meanings interwoven with social and cultural ideologies about fatherhood? To answer these questions, I have presented qualitative findings from blogs written by dad bloggers in North America.

First, I find that these men use blogs to publicly document and discuss how role models and personal turning points have shaped their identities across the self-as-father trajectory. Even as family roles converge and overlap, many bloggers broadcast that meanings for paternal identities remain necessarily different from maternal identities. This discovery substantiates research on how fathers deal with hegemonic discourses about gender and parenthood that contradict their own familial arrangement (e.g., Berkowitz, 2011; Doucet, 2006; Snitker, 2018). Second, I find that dad bloggers share advice about how and why to "do" fathering in everyday life. Narratives of fathering experience highlight issues surrounding work-family balance and conflict, which lends

credence to the claim that fathers today must manage conflicting dedications to paid work and parenthood (e.g., Aumann et al., 2011; Kaufman, 2013; Townsend, 2002). The broader purpose of fathering and blogging is frequently connected to values of generativity. Third, I find that dad bloggers challenge older fatherhood ideologies purporting that men are not nurturing parents. Simultaneously, however, they also challenge a newer ideology that brands involved fathers as “superdads.” Together, these themes represent how dad bloggers “do ideology” (Fine, 2012, p. 94) and form the basis of their group idioculture. Their collective discourse asserts that caregiving fathers should be seen as capable, but also unexceptional. Disseminating this ideology on social media is part of dad bloggers’ larger socio-political goal of *normalizing*—not glorifying—involved fatherhood in society.

For these fathers, blogging is an essential medium through which they develop, display, and compare paternal self-identities and familial realities. As they create and share online narratives about parenting, dad bloggers work towards replacing dominant discourses about fatherhood with the personal triumphs and failures of everyday dads (see Friedman, 2016). Based on this analysis, I argue that the blogosphere and other social media environments should be conceptualized as new “situated fathering sites” where men not only write and learn about fatherhood, but also actively “do fathering” (Marsiglio et al., 2005, p. 4). Bearing in mind that bloggers can receive compensation for their posts from sponsors, blogging can be recognized as a practice of fathering itself—it is a type of digital labor performed for familial provision. Moreover, generating the content for blog posts typically requires involvement in the daily lives of children.

Several bloggers explain how they not only write about and to their children but also include their children in the blogging process by creating stories, photo journals, artwork, and videos together. Blogging, then, can become integrated into more hands-on fathering practices as well and blogs can serve as digital scrapbooks of family history to be passed onto and continued by children and grandchildren. In light of these insights, I contend that social media use is a form of generative fathering for dad bloggers. By elucidating the construction of prevalent meanings in dad blogs, this study offers insight into how fathers are *doing fatherhood online*.

3.6 Conclusion

It must be stated that the dad blogger community is not reflective of most fathers in North America. Rather, they represent a cross-section of predominantly white, heterosexual, married, and relatively affluent men. Without question, the social positioning of many dad bloggers facilitates their ability to effectively manage and display public self-presentations of “good” fatherhood (see Collett, 2005; Goffman, 1959; Milkie et al., 2018; Shows & Gertsel, 2009). I acknowledge, therefore, that the meanings for fatherhood described in this study are bound up with social, cultural, and economic capital and, as such, should not be interpreted as applicable to all fathers. Future research into parenting culture should use diversity as a sampling guideline in order to better understand the interpretive practices of a greater variety of parents. Furthermore, because inquiries into how fathers use the Internet are underdeveloped, many gaps still need to be filled. How do dad bloggers compare to non-blogging fathers in terms of identity salience

and parental involvement? What are the similarities and differences between dad blogs and mommy blogs? How do parents account for and monitor how they publicly share intimate family details online? Exploring these questions will enhance our knowledge of the contemporary social construction of parenthood and how it is situated within an expanding digital landscape and economy.

In closing, this study provides new empirical and theoretical insights about how men create and share meanings for fatherhood through online technologies. It highlights how dad bloggers reinforce and reshape cultural discourses about parenthood in their writing about parental role models, becoming a father, work-family balance, generativity, and “good” and “bad” dads. It also illustrates how fathers employ social media as tools to display and promote father involvement. The results of this research can shed some optimism for the future. In these virtual spaces, dad bloggers not only exemplify men’s ability to be competent and nurturing fathers, but they also explicitly advocate the need for men to take on caregiving responsibilities with dedication and enthusiasm. With their online and offline networks continuing to expand, the likelihood of these messages reaching other young men will increase. As dad bloggers work towards realizing their goal of normalizing involved fatherhood in our society, they also work towards bringing about greater parental equality in our families.

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Chapter 4

“Real Heroes Care”: How Dad Bloggers Are Reconstructing Fatherhood and Masculinities⁹

“Are dads men?” This was the question posed by sociologist Michael Kimmel to an audience of men who write online parenting blogs at the fourth annual “Dad 2.0 Summit” in 2015. Proceeding to provide clarity to what could have been interpreted as a trivial question, Dr. Kimmel explained how conventional understandings and expectations of masculinity act as obstacles to being an involved father. These messages appeared to resonate with this group of North American “dad bloggers” who have since used their blogs and other social media to discuss how they perceive their own manhood, how they define their roles as fathers, and how they teach their children about gender. Recently, several major news media outlets have published stories that highlight how dad bloggers are redefining what it means to be a man (see Steinmetz, 2015). While there is a growing body of recent literature on how fathers construct and negotiate masculinities (e.g.,

⁹ This is an accepted manuscript version of the following article published by SAGE Publications: Scheibling, C. (2018). “Real heroes care”: How dad bloggers are reconstructing fatherhood and masculinities. *Men and Masculinities*. Copyright © Casey Scheibling. DOI: 10.1177/1097184X18816506

Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006; Finn & Henwood, 2009; Miller, 2011; Snitker, 2018; Steinour, 2018), gender discourse in this dad blogger community has yet to be thoroughly examined (but see Podnieks, 2016; Ranson, 2015; Samuel, 2015). The current study addresses this gap in our knowledge of the construction of masculinities by fathers in North America.

Taking dad bloggers as subjects of inquiry is especially novel and timely because they represent a minority of men who choose to write and talk about gender and family in highly publicized forums. I position the emergence of dad bloggers at the intersection of two contemporary trends in North America: the increasing involvement of fathers in childcare (Ball & Daly, 2012; Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006) and the expansion of social media use by parents (Lupton, Pedersen, & Thomas, 2016). With many men becoming more committed to caregiving, they have turned to the Internet to connect with other fathers, share stories about parenting, and seek out advice and interpersonal support. While there are no official statistics available, I find that most “dad blogs” began to appear online in the late-2000s and I estimate that there are now several hundred dad bloggers in North America. Many of these men have met offline at the Dad 2.0 Summit since 2012 and, in turn, developed their own “Dad 2.0” community. While their community is self-described as an inclusive and diverse group of fathers, my research suggests that the majority of dad bloggers appear to be white, heterosexual, married, and class-privileged. Placing this group under study, I draw on online and offline data to examine their meaning-making practices and how these practices are bound up with broader cultural discourses about gender and parenthood.

In this article, I analyze how dad bloggers construct meanings for masculinity. To provide relevant context, I begin by reviewing literature on other men's movements and groups for fathers. Next, I outline how the relationship between fatherhood and masculinities has been conceptualized and researched empirically. I place specific focus on the recent theorizing of "caring masculinities" (Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012; Jordan, 2018) as a way to understand how gender is reconstructed or "redone" by fathers. In my qualitative analysis, I am particularly attentive to whether and how dad bloggers reconstruct masculinity as caring or reconstruct caring as masculine. Also, I use their discourse about masculinities to determine where they should be situated on the ideological spectrum of men's movements that ranges from anti-feminist to pro-feminist. To conclude the paper, I discuss the implications and complications associated with dad bloggers' discursive constructions of fatherhood and masculinities.

4.1 Research Context

4.1.1 Men in Movements

Over the past 50 years, we have seen a variety of different men's movements emerge in the United States (for an overview, see Messner, 1997; Gavanoas, 2004). Many of these movements are considered to be organized responses to feminism. The nature of these responses and the goals of different men's movements are varied; some groups have formed to support feminism, while other groups have formed to combat it (Kimmel, 1987; Messner, 1997). Closest to the feminist pole are groups of "pro-feminist men"

comprised largely of male academics who advocate for feminist causes, discuss how feminism can help men, and fight for the elimination of sexism and violence against women (R. W. Connell, 2005; Messner, Greenberg, & Peretz, 2015). Moving towards the middle of the ideological spectrum are groups who focus more exclusively on men's individual interests and concerns. There is, for instance, the Mythopoetic men's movement whose activities and retreats are designed to help men discover their inner, primal masculinity in order to feel liberated from the oppressive social constraints of contemporary life (Magunson, 2007; Schwalbe, 1996). Then there are groups situated by the anti-feminist pole, such as the Promise Keepers who employ discourses of Christianity and gender essentialism to contest the breakdown of male leadership and the heterosexual nuclear family (Armato & Marsiglio, 2002; Heath, 2003; Messner, 1997). And finally, men's and father's rights organizations who, as the designation suggests, seek to expose the ways men's rights have been violated since women's liberation. Because dad bloggers are also a group for fathers, I examine the characteristics of father's rights groups more closely to further contextualize this study.

4.1.2 Fathers' Rights Groups

Research on father's rights groups finds that these men take critical aim at how fathers are defined by law and treated in legal contexts. In Western countries, father's rights rhetoric is tethered to a central claim that the system of family law is biased towards women and discriminatory against men (Crowley, 2008; Flood, 2012; Gavanoas, 2004; Jordan, 2018; Messner, 1997). Based on 158 interviews with father's rights group

members in the United States, Crowley (2008) argues that these men strongly oppose custody laws because they consider the state to be corrupt, “feminized,” and disrupting “natural” family life (p. 155). To plead the case for shared custody, father’s rightists tend to “masculinize” notions of care by explaining that father involvement is important because children need a *male* influence in their lives (Jordan, 2018). Hence, their definitions for family roles typically bolster heteronormativity and the biological essentialist argument “that fathers, as men, contribute to the development of their children in a unique way” (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005, p. 252). While father’s rightists are acutely concerned with gender discrimination, they believe that men are now more structurally disadvantaged than women. For this reason, the father’s rights movement is often categorized as an “organised backlash to feminism” (Flood, 2012, p. 235; see also Doucet & Lee, 2014).

This literature suggests that father’s rights groups are far more preoccupied with differences between women and men than with the practices and responsibilities of being a father. Similar to the Promise Keepers, father’s rightists aim to “remasculinize American society” by restoring what feminism has allegedly taken away: men’s right to paternal authority (Griswold, 1993, p. 261; see also Flood, 2012; Gavanas, 2004). On the surface, dad bloggers may appear to be categorically similar to a father’s rights group. They are, of course, men who gather together to discuss issues affecting fathers. But their discussions revolve around precisely what father’s rightists tend to avoid discussing: the ebbs and flows of the daily work of parenting. As my findings will also bear out, dad

bloggers have little in common with father's rights groups especially where gender ideologies are concerned.

4.1.3 Fatherhood and Masculinities

Fatherhood is a gendered term used to describe the parental status and practices of men. Different styles of fathering “can be studied in connection to hegemonic masculinity as well as alternative constructions of masculinities that give meaning to men’s everyday lives” (Marsiglio & Pleck, 2005, p. 250). Hegemonic masculinity refers to the most culturally dominant and idealized construction of manhood, defined in opposition to femininity and subordinate masculinities (R. W. Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As Michael Kimmel told the Dad 2.0 Summit audience, our traditional and hegemonic ideals for masculinity inhibit, rather than support, father involvement (see also Coltrane, 1996; Dowd, 2000; Townsend, 2002). This is in large part because men are so commonly told to prove their manliness through homosocial (and often homophobic) competition in the workplace (Kimmel, 2009). As such, financial provision is one of the most enduring signifiers of manhood and fatherhood in American culture (Griswold, 1993; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Townsend, 2002). Yet by the 21st Century, the steady growth of female employment, rising rates of divorce, and stagnant wages for men, changed the socio-economic context for families in the United States (Boushey, 2008) and Canada (Marshall, 2009). In this context, fathers are now expected to take on a greater role in the hands-on nurturance of their children (Coltrane, 1996; Doucet, 2006; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Ranson, 2001, 2015). The current terrain for

fatherhood is therefore shaped by competing cultural imperatives to work and to care (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Ranson, 2001; Townsend, 2002), which have given way to many alternative definitions of masculinity for fathers.

Certain scholars underscore the ways in which fathers use hegemonic masculinity to (re)frame their parental involvement (e.g., Brandth & Kvande, 1998, 2018; Jordan, 2018). This process can include redefining caregiving as manly, but also differentiating such “masculine care” from mother’s care and holding it to a higher status (Brandth & Kvande, 1998). Other research focuses on how fathers can also *de*-gender their parental identities and practices. Especially for primary caregiver fathers, some elements of hegemonic masculinity are upheld, while other elements are resisted and denounced (see Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006; Finn & Henwood, 2009; Miller, 2011; Snitker, 2018; Steinour, 2018). Put differently, fathers are able to construct “hybrid” visions of fatherhood based on a composite of older and newer ideals about gender, work, and family (Finn & Henwood, 2009; Randles, 2018). As Doucet (2006) puts it, by “simultaneously embracing and rejecting both femininity and hegemonic masculinity,” involved fathers are “radically revisioning caring work, masculine conceptions of care, and ultimately our understandings of masculinities” (p. 238). This scholarship reveals that there is considerable flexibility and tension surrounding the construction of masculinities by fathers today.

4.1.4 Doing, Undoing, and Redoing Gender

To better explain how gender is constructed in familial contexts, social scientists often utilize the theoretical concept of “doing gender” (e.g. Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Chesley, 2011; Coltrane, 1996; Deutsch, 2007; Doucet & Lee, 2014; Risman, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 1987, 2009). Defined by West & Zimmerman (1987), they argue that gender is not a trait or a role, but a “product of social doings” that rely on normative conceptions about “essential” sex differences (p. 129). The family is considered to be a catalyst for “doing gender” due to “cultural prescriptions about the appropriateness of men and women performing certain chores” (Coltrane, 1996, p. 50). If we recall that hegemonic expectations for masculinity emphasize putting paid work first, when men prioritize breadwinning and resist domestic participation, they can be said to be “doing gender.” Conversely, when men regularly engage in historically feminized activities like childcare or housekeeping, they can be said to be “undoing gender” (Deutsch, 2007; Risman, 2009; West & Zimmerman, 2009). This notion of “undoing” gender, however, may be downplaying the ubiquity of gendered structures and prescripts in everyday life. Critics, including West & Zimmerman (2009), claim that “undoing” implies that we can somehow evade how others ascribe gender to us and hold us accountable to gender norms. Empirical research has also illustrated how gender can be both done and undone at the same time (Chesley, 2011; C. Connell, 2010; Doucet, 2006; Miller, 2011). The concepts of doing and undoing gender are therefore not mutually exclusive. In order to capture the complexity of how men sustain *and* transgress gender in behavior, interactions, and discourse, it is fruitful to explore how masculinity is *redone*, rather than simply done or undone.

4.1.5 Caring Masculinities

A relevant way in which masculinity can be “redone” is by making it more care-oriented. Elliott (2016) defines “caring masculinities” as “a refiguring of masculine identities away from values of domination and aggression and toward values of interdependence and care” (p. 256). Recent work looks at how fathers in different contexts construct various caring masculinities. Hanlon (2012) finds that fathers in Ireland create flexible definitions of caring masculinity that acknowledge their capacity to express emotion and empathy (p. 202), while Brandth & Kvande (2018) note that Norwegian fathers’ constructions of caring masculinities also involve a “masculine reframing” of caregiving by defining it as “hard work” (p. 10). These insights substantiate Doucet (2006) and Miller’s (2011) earlier arguments about how fathers can simultaneously reinforce and reject hegemonic masculinity. Caring masculinities thus represent a redoing of gender and a “hybridization” of masculinity (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014). Redoing gender in this way “may challenge the essentialized notions of masculinity that shore up men’s power in society, but it does not eliminate gender as a sorting device” (C. Connell, 2010, p. 47). Building on these insights, I examine how dad bloggers’ constructions of masculinities rework, but also reproduce, conventional and hegemonic meanings for gender and parenthood.

4.2 Data and Methods

This study is part of a larger cyber-ethnographic project on dad bloggers in North America. The purpose of ethnography is to become intimately familiar with a particular cultural group and provide a detailed interpretive analysis of their meaning-making practices (for an overview, see Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Even when studying an online community, cyber-ethnographers advise that, in order to be ethnographic, both online and offline data should be collected and analyzed (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2015). Following these recommendations, I use multiple forms of qualitative inquiry. More specifically, I collect, combine, and interpret data from blogs, fieldwork observations at the Dad 2.0 Summit, and interviews with dad bloggers.

The first and largest set of data is made up of blog posts written by North American dad bloggers. Because blog posts are public “naturally occurring” data, they demonstrate how individuals represent their experiences and, in effect, contribute to the social construction of reality (Silverman, 2011, p. 250). With this study directed towards the social construction of masculinities, I performed “theoretical sampling” by searching for blog posts containing keywords related to gender (e.g. “gender,” “masculinity,” “manhood,” etc.) (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 56). While this sampling procedure restricts the scope of useable content, placing this limit on data collection was deemed necessary. Online researchers (e.g. Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2015) explain that the Internet is simply too vast and unstable to find and maintain a selection of representative data. For this reason, collecting a purposive and theoretically meaningful sample was considered the most productive strategy for the sampling of blogs. This process resulted in the archiving of 124 posts written by 34 bloggers between 2010 and 2017.

The second set of data comes from fieldwork conducted at the Dad 2.0 Summit meetings over the past 3 years. Since 2012, the Dad 2.0 Summit brings parents, marketers, and researchers together to have an ongoing conversation about contemporary fatherhood. Many attendees are members of other localized groups for fathers—such as Life Of Dad, City Dads Group, and The National At-Home Dad Network—who are looking to meet other fathers in person, find inspiration for writing, and learn more about parenting and blogging. At each conference, I attended all scheduled presentations and workshops, and took extensive field notes throughout. I did not cover my status as a researcher and instead used it as a way to start conversations with bloggers, organizers, and invited guests. Moreover, since this gathering is a social space, being in attendance granted me the opportunity to record other kinds of “naturally occurring” data. Like other ethnographers of men’s movements (e.g. Heath, 2003; Magnuson, 2007; Schwalbe, 1996), I focused on how gender is discursively constructed and mobilized in a public setting through interactions and representations. I estimate that I performed at least 50 hours of fieldwork at the summits in Washington, DC (2016), San Diego, CA (2017), and New Orleans, LA (2018).

The third and final set of data consists of semi-structured interviews with 5 key informants. These participants are considered “key informants” because they are longstanding members of the Dad 2.0 community who continue to blog regularly and who have served as coordinators, panelists, or guest speakers at one of the conferences. It is for these reasons that I approached them to be interviewed. I consulted these insiders with the intention of clarifying the discoveries and assumptions I have garnered from

reading blogs and attending the summit. In other words, these interviews were designed to be a supplement to the greater amount and wider array of documentary and observational data. All interviews were conducted in-person, audio recorded, and lasted between 90 and 135 minutes. Although my interviewees permitted me to use their real names in my work, I refer to them by pseudonyms in order to abide by the research ethics protocol of my university. While I asked these men about many aspects of fatherhood and blogging, for this article I focus on their responses about gender and masculinities.

Once the full corpus of data was collected and transcribed, I performed an “ethnographic content analysis” to code, describe, and compare meanings and theoretical relationships across the dataset (Altheide & Schneider, 2013, p. 26). This analytical procedure corresponds with the broader cyber-ethnographic approach that seeks to determine patterns and logics in and across online and offline contexts (Boellstorff et al., 2012, pp. 176-177). Initial open codes assigned during data collection were elaborated upon during closer readings of the text. Then, codes were counted, and similarities and differences between the blog content, observations, and interviews were noted. Lastly, in determining dominant themes and consolidating the data into thematic sections, insights were connected to relevant theoretical foundations. In what follows, I present findings structured within three interrelated thematic categories that yield insight into the discursive constructions of fatherhood and masculinities in the dad blogger community.

4.3 Findings

4.3.1 “The Dangerous Myth of the “Real Man””: Challenging Traditional Masculinity

When examining how dad bloggers write and talk about masculinities, one first notices that a particular type of masculinity serves as a conceptual counterpoint. This particular type of masculinity is that of the hegemonic and “inexpressive, hypermasculine Traditional Man” (Messner, 1993, p. 724). Because being a caregiver is so central to dad bloggers’ identities, defining manliness through paid work, competition, and physical toughness is considered reductive, problematic, and something they wish to explicitly challenge. Bloggers such as Buzz Bishop and Aaron Gouveia explain that being advocates for involved fatherhood requires coming up against traditional notions of “real” manhood. Describing how readers have responded to his promotion of paternity leave and stay-at-home fathers, Gouveia (2013) writes, “[it] gets a significant amount of push-back from people who have an antiquated view of masculinity and what it means to be a ‘real man.’ Dads who actively downshift their careers to ensure more involvement at home face labels of ‘slacker’ at best, and ‘pansy’ at worst.” Others like Chris Bernholdt and Clint Edwards share similar stories about confronting the intersection of hegemonic masculinity and homophobia in their lives (see Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Kimmel, 2009). Bernholdt (2014), a stay-at-home father, decries:

Oh you stay at home? You must be gay. You’re a stay at home dad? When are you going to get your balls back? Man up. Stop being such a pussy. Looks like this dad likes shopping more than his wife. How gay is he?

These are words supposedly spoken by people with some skewed version of what it means to be a “real man.”

Critiques of the “real man” ethos are also pervasive at the Dad 2.0 Summit. In one speech from 2018, blogger Patrick Riccards asks the audience: “Can any of us be proud to be a man anymore?” and emphasizes the problems with remaining complicit to other men’s sexism. He challenges bloggers to be part of a proposed solution by helping to tear down beliefs of what “real men” should be and bring forth a future where “boys will *not* just be boys.”

Dad bloggers highlight many characteristics associated with traditional masculinity that negatively affect men’s personal lives. Emotional suppression is often designated as a primary culprit. In his presentation at the 2017 conference, blogger Doyin Richards cites statistics to show the growth of depression and suicide among men, and positions emotional socialization as an explanatory factor. He claims that fathers can help to reverse this trend by teaching their sons that it is okay to cry by letting them see their own fathers crying. Several bloggers, such as Creed Anthony and Lorne Jaffe, stress the importance of talking about mental well-being as a way to combat repressive stereotypes of how “real” men and fathers are supposed to act. Put succinctly by Jaffe (2016), “Daddies DO cry even if they don’t have depression. It’s time we shatter that myth.” Moreover, interviewees shared experiences of how traditional masculinity can impede proper parenting. In one particularly troubling story, Rick tells me about the time he saw a father yell at his crying son for being a “sissy baby” at baseball practice. Coming to view the experience as a learning opportunity, Rick used this example to teach about

what he believes are problematic gender expectations both to his son and to the readers of his blog.

There are certain dad bloggers who draw clear links between hegemonic masculinity and gender inequality. Brent Almond, Chris Farley-Ratcliffe, and Mike Reynolds each describe how much learned and taken-for-granted male behavior can reinforce rape culture in society. Simply sharing this information, however, is not considered to be sufficient. Reynolds (2017b), in particular, argues that we need to actively “call out” misogynistic men and “challenge the things you don’t like seeing other men do. Challenge them to be better men, not to be a ‘real man.’” In other words, it is not enough to reject misogynistic and sexist elements of masculinity only for oneself; men should also reject the misogyny and sexism of others. Online media and the Dad 2.0 Summit are considered social platforms to contest traditional and hegemonic masculinities, and in the process, construct newer, caring masculinities.

4.3.2 “I Define Manliness as Being a Caring, Involved Dad”:

Constructing Caring Masculinities

By first clarifying what type of men they are not, dad bloggers could then elaborate upon what type of men they are. This discourse typically involves reconstructing meanings for “real” men and masculinities. Some bloggers, like Chris Bernholdt and Adam Dolgin, shore up their identities as fathers by claiming that “real men” are those who actively care for their children. But there are others who rework socio-cultural definitions of masculinity more broadly. Joel Gracyk (2014), for example, writes, “Manhood is about

helping people be kinder, gentler and more peaceful. It's about cooperation and not competition," while Chris Farley-Ratcliffe (2015) proclaims that, "real masculinity is about respecting one another as individuals. It is about smashing the definition of maleness that says we have to be straight and strong and devoid of emotions other than anger." Hence, dad bloggers write about the importance of caring and empathy not only for fathering, but also for socializing boys and men in our culture. Blogs are considered to be an influential medium through which to create meaningful social discourse about masculinities. As Tim explains, he uses his blog to "redefine" and "open up" masculinity, posing questions like: "so if I'm nurturing, can that be a masculine trait as opposed to only a feminine trait?" His hope is that his blog will generate greater discussion about gender flexibility and, in so doing, encourage men to explore and expand their definitions for manliness.

The theme of redefining masculinity as caring is reinforced at the Dad 2.0 Summit in a number of ways. First, in the introduction to the keynote speech of 2017, we are told that this year's conference is about "empowering men to be the best people they can be" and demonstrating that any man can "evolve into a nurturing, caring, loving man." This notion of men *evolving* to become caring is also used by Dove representatives in explaining how their company is working to transform the representation of masculinity in popular culture. Presenting calls for collaborations with dad bloggers, they assert that their brand is "dedicated to celebrating men's caring as real strength [...] as evolved masculinity." Moreover, attendees participate in activities that promote "caring as real strength" throughout the gathering. There is, for instance, the Dove "Real Heroes Roster"

where bloggers nominate men they consider to be “real heroes” and post stories about how “real heroes care” on Twitter using the hashtag: “#realstrength.” There are also workshops where caring masculinities can be seen *in action*. In sessions such as “Men and Relationships” (2018), “I’m Not a Rock” (2017), and “Dad Voices” (2016-2018), topics surrounding depression, emotional labor, and intimacy are discussed, and bloggers will cry, console, and embrace each other. While in some ways similar to other male retreats that provide men with space to express emotion and sensitivity (see Heath, 2003; Magnuson, 2007), dad bloggers’ constructions of caring masculinities are not limited to fleeting and relatively private events. Instead, they purposefully document acts of care through social media to help normalize the expression of emotion and compassion by men.

The abovementioned insights illustrate dad bloggers’ discursive strategies for reconstructing masculinity as caring. There are, however, also examples where caring is reconstructed as masculine. Masculinizing care appears to be most salient for those bloggers who are stay-at-home fathers and this is expected since they take on a role historically assigned to women. Similar to other findings on stay-at-home fathers, stay-at-home dad bloggers explicitly reject inferences to being “moms” or “Mr. Mom” (see Doucet, 2006; Snitker, 2018; Steinour, 2018), and by extension, bolster the fact that dads are men. Biological explanations are sometimes evoked to make this claim, like when blogger Chris Routly (2010) reminds, “It’s really important to understand though that us guys who stay home to take care of our kids are not playing dress-up as women. We are not just moms with penises (penii?). We’re *dads*.” In addition, caring practices become

masculinized when they are described as requiring substantial physical fortitude, or when they are juxtaposed with traditionally manly fields such as sports and the military.

Utilizing sporting discourse and imagery appears to be the preferred method to masculinize care and this is buttressed by how the Dad 2.0 Summit regularly includes professional athletes as invited guests. When, say, former NFL cornerback Charles Tillman is on stage advocating using “our strength to care for others,” he represents an embodiment of masculinized care. When bloggers watch these presentations, they may feel especially assured that caring is masculine because male sports stars are saying that it is.

4.3.3 “Feminism Empowers Me to Be a Better Father”:

Becoming Pro-feminist Fathers

In reconstructing meanings for fatherhood and masculinities, many dad bloggers are either informed by or drawn toward feminist insights and politics. That is to say, they come to recognize considerable similarity between their interpretations of gender and family-related issues and those of feminists. Explained by blogger Oren Miller (2013), although not all dads are comfortable calling themselves feminists, many are “working toward the feminist ideals of gender equality.” Accordingly, the Dad 2.0 Summit tends to cultivate a pro-feminist conference atmosphere by including speeches and panels that address: male privilege; the gender pay gap; racial discrimination; sex trafficking; and LGBTQ+ rights. The purpose of such speeches is to advise that, as human rights activist Derreck Kayongo states, fathers “have to intervene on men who do destructive things”

and, as blogger Doyin Richards states, “we need good men on the side of good women to achieve gender equality.” In addition, during a 2018 workshop entitled “Building a Constructive Dialogue After #MeToo,” bloggers and feminist writers discussed the role that men can play in fighting sexism and sexual assault. Concluding the session, ad designer Amanda Magee tells dad bloggers: “You guys have all the power in the world. If you know a way to speak to men that women can’t, that’s enough for now.” Several fathers have since shared these messages by writing about the panel and their support of feminist causes on their blogs.

Fathers who do openly embrace the label of “feminist” explain why they choose to do so. What is most often cited is a general agreement with the liberal feminist principle that women and men are equal and, consequently, should be given equal opportunities in society. There are certain dad bloggers, however, who write less about feminist ideology and more about feminist praxis. Mike Reynolds (2017a) provides a compelling essay about how women do not need to make space for men in feminism and that men should instead go into their existing spaces (e.g., workplaces, schools, locker rooms) and make them feminist. He writes, “Dads should be feminists because we often operate in spaces that are not feminist and which can greatly benefit from feminist voices [...] These are our spaces to tear down.” It appears that dad bloggers align themselves with feminism(s) to varying degrees: most support a basic belief in gender equality, while others encourage using their influence as men and as fathers to act on that belief.

Finally, how feminism influences parenting practices is also discussed. Fathers of daughters describe how they wish to teach their girls about feminist history. Dave Lesser

(2014) alludes to the benefits of raising children in a postfeminist context in stating, “My daughter will grow up knowing that she can do ANYTHING and that her gender should never be used against her.” My interviewee Jake, on the other hand, positions the feminist movement as more of an ongoing battle and expects that he will have to talk to his daughters about their relative disadvantage compared to men. He tells me, “I think about feminism a lot and I think about how I can help my daughters to be successful [...] but probably even when my daughters are older they’re not going to be treated as equal.” Furthermore, some fathers of sons make a case for why it is even more important to teach boys about feminism. Mike Julianelle (2017) explains:

Maybe you wouldn’t need to worry so much about your daughters if I did a better job raising my sons. Which is why I’m raising mine to be feminists [...] You don’t need to be a woman to be a feminist. This isn’t a gender issue — it’s an equality issue. And if all men took up the cause, there *wouldn’t even be* an issue.

Dad bloggers therefore recognize that parents play a vital role in shaping the ideological views of future generations. Many of these fathers use social media to promote feminist values, and describe how those values benefit not just women and daughters, but also men and sons.

4.4 Discussion

In the foregoing, I have organized and described gender discourse in the dad blogger community along a trajectory that moves from challenging what are deemed traditional and problematic elements of hegemonic masculinity, followed by defining more care-oriented masculinities, and then adopting a pro-feminist perspective. Individually and as a group, dad bloggers in North America exemplify how “fathers are actively building alternative masculinities in contrast to more traditional notions of the emotionally detached, breadwinner-focused image of masculinity and fatherhood so pervasive for many decades” (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012, p. 161). I argue that these discursive constructions represent emergent “caring masculinities” bound up with cultural definitions for involved fatherhood (Brandth & Kvande, 2018; Elliott, 2016; Hanlon, 2012; Jordan, 2018). These constructions also represent how fathers negotiate pervasive and conflicting gender expectations about work and family.

Returning to the question of whether dad bloggers reconstruct masculinity as caring or whether they reconstruct caring as masculine, the answer is that they do both. Most commonly, meanings for masculinity are described as including qualities of care, interdependence, and emotional expression. Less commonly, and sometimes simultaneously, meanings for caring practices are masculinized by dad bloggers in drawing links to strength, work, or men’s unique contribution to parenting. In other words, dad bloggers tend to define themselves as caring individuals, but also unequivocally as still men. Thus, this is evidence of fathers *redoing* gender where resistance and compliance are combined in complex ways (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006; Jordan, 2018; Miller, 2011; Snitker, 2018). Understood in this manner, dad bloggers’

“hybrid” constructions of masculinities both challenge and reinforce our patriarchal gender order (Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Finn & Henwood, 2009; Randles, 2018). Yet it is also my contention that, while not renouncing their identities and statuses as men, most fathers in this community are outspokenly critical of beliefs, behaviors, and representations that espouse male hegemony.

Viewed as an emerging men’s movement in North America, the Dad 2.0 community is notably different from father’s rights groups and the responsible fatherhood movement in the United States. These organizations aim to re-masculinize society (see Gavanas, 2004; Griswold, 1993), while dad bloggers aim to reconstruct masculinity in society. In light of my findings, I argue that they should be categorized as a group of pro-feminist men (see also Ranson, 2015, p. 157). There is, however, considerable ambiguity in how dad bloggers define and endorse feminism(s). Supporting “feminism” is typically constructed as analogous to supporting gender equality and few bloggers write about how and why to put feminist values into practice. Nevertheless, many of these men still choose to publicly speak out about the importance of feminism for advancing social equality and this fact should not go unnoticed, especially in our current landscape of contentious gender politics. As such, dad bloggers should be seen collectively as feminist allies. And, based on past programming, the Dad 2.0 Summit also serves as a space for fathers to learn more about feminist histories, principles, tensions, and goals.

It must finally be pointed out that some of these discoveries are not so novel when one takes into account the demographics of this group. I have noted earlier that the majority of these bloggers appear to be white, heterosexual, and class-privileged. In

reading the data through a more critical and intersectional lens, I assert that most dad bloggers can enact and enjoy gender flexibility and hybridity in part *because* they are privileged in other social positions, such as race, sexuality, and class (see Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Doucet & Lee, 2014; Heath, 2003; Messner, 1993; Randles, 2018). A number of these fathers do openly disclose and discuss the fact that they are relatively advantaged and emphasize why men in comparable positions should use their power to advocate for gender, sexual, and parental equality. But the extent to which these messages have reached men outside their group is not overly clear and more investigations into how dad bloggers translate their discourse into social action are needed. Future research should further examine intersections and inequalities in the dad blogger community, as well as the growing commercialization of social media. How do bloggers' meanings for gender and family roles intersect with those for race, sexuality, and class? Where do marginalized men fit into this community? How do bloggers negotiate their relationships with companies that sponsor them and how do these relationships shape the content that they produce?

4.5 Conclusion

In closing, the main contribution of this study is that it provides empirical weight to the theorizing of caring masculinities as a form of gender hybridity that is differentially and “strategically employed” by fathers (Jordan, 2018, p. 17). More broadly, it also extends our knowledge of contemporary men’s movements and the social construction of fatherhood and masculinities. Like other scholars of the changing nature of fatherhood in

North America (e.g., Ball & Daly, 2012; Coltrane, 1996; Doucet, 2006; Dowd, 2000; Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Ranson, 2015; Townsend, 2002), I believe that redefining masculinity is paramount to increasing involved fathering and social equality. Although their discourse does not wholly break away from longstanding hegemonic notions of gender and parenthood, I maintain that dad bloggers are putting forth a concerted effort to redefine masculinity by publicly promoting men's capacity to be caring fathers and feminist allies. As their reach grows by collaborating with brands, charities, and activists, dad bloggers will play an increasingly important role in shaping the culture of fatherhood in North America. Looking towards the future, we can hope to witness more shifts to recognize and facilitate male caregiving that have been brought about—at least in part—by the cultural work of dad bloggers.

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Chapter 5

Conclusion

The articles of this “sandwich-style” dissertation provide three individual contributions to the sociology of media, families, and gender. Although separated, these articles work together toward a larger goal of presenting a rich qualitative analysis of what goes on in the world of North American dad bloggers. To help achieve this goal, I spent the past four years immersed in the discourse of the Dad 2.0 community. This immersion has resulted in the development of new empirical data and theoretical advances concerning digital cultures, fathering, and masculinities. In these concluding remarks, I outline my key findings and contributions, along with the limitations of each article and some important suggestions for future research and social initiatives.

In the first article (Chapter 2), I focused on questions about how and why dad bloggers have come together as a group and what types of meanings form the basis of their group culture. As I developed these research questions, I was informed primarily by conceptual insights from the sociology of culture and feminist media studies. These insights sensitized me to the ways in which dad bloggers use online media and offline gatherings to network with one another and foster a community of involved fathers from across the continent. But also, and perhaps more importantly, I was able to interpret prevalent collective meanings found in their discursive patterns and consider how these meanings become implicated in broader social discourse and action. Specifically, I found

that dad bloggers not only write and talk about developing their parenting community, but also use social media and the Dad 2.0 Summit to reframe media images of fathers and to engage in forms of social advocacy and activism. For these reasons, I categorized dad bloggers as an emerging “tiny public” (Fine, 2012) and the original findings from this article advance the literature on digital public spheres (e.g., Breese, 2011; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Furthermore, I provided a theoretical contribution by defining the collective cultural work of dad bloggers as the *culture of fatherhood 2.0*. This term can be used (or amended) to describe future discursive constructions of fatherhood in digital media ecologies.

Despite its contributions, this analysis is limited in several ways. First, as this article represents my first point of entry into the dad blogger universe, the results therein are largely exploratory and descriptive. The focus could have been more analytical in terms of testing the theoretical apparatuses and hypotheses of other media sociologists. Nonetheless, I believe that these findings are still important for better understanding the history and goals of dad bloggers since, at the time of writing, there were no academic publications using offline data on this community. Second, while my cyber-ethnographic approach enabled me to look carefully at a selection of dad bloggers and their blogs, I was unable to make more far-reaching claims about dad bloggers from outside of the community. I think that my closer, qualitative analysis could be accompanied by a larger, quantitative network analysis so as to provide a more comprehensive representation of dad bloggers’ networks and clusters (see Jackson & Banaszczyk, 2016; Jackson & Welles, 2016). Third, and this limit also applies to Chapter 4, I rely quite heavily on very few

interviews. Although this was done by design, performing more interviews would only improve my understanding of *why* these fathers blog. Especially since the existing research focuses primarily on examining the content of dad blogs (e.g., Friedman, 2016; Ranson, 2015), future studies should consider conducting a greater number of in-depth interviews with a wider variety of dad bloggers.

In the second article (Chapter 3), I looked more squarely at what meanings for fatherhood are constructed online. To structure this article, I was informed by the need to specify between meanings for father identities, fathering experiences, and fatherhood ideologies (see Coltrane, 2004; Miller, 2011; Morgan, 2004). Given these three categories and my overall interpretive methodology, my theoretical strategy was to draw from and build upon concepts from Symbolic Interactionism. In performing a document analysis of blog posts, I presented arguments about how dad bloggers use social media for identity projects, for “doing” and “displaying” fathering experiences, and for negotiating dominant ideologies about fatherhood. Based on these findings, I discussed the personal and public implications of constructing and disseminating these meanings online and concluded that blogging is a form of “situated” and “generative” fathering for dad bloggers (for explanations of both these terms, see Marsiglio & Roy, 2012). As a whole, this article helps to extend Symbolic Interactionist family studies toward new media content, formats, and contexts.

Like my two other articles, this analysis is constrained in scope due to my chosen methodology and a lack of existing research on fathers’ use of digital media. Unlike my two other articles, it is also limited in terms of the variety of data used, since I draw only

on blog posts. I did, however, use a larger sample of posts from a greater number of bloggers than those in the preceding and following chapters. Moreover, the framing of this article may read as unnecessarily broad. Put differently, analyses of men's parental identities, experiences, and ideologies could instead be made into three separate papers that delve into greater detail. I chose to include all of these categories in one paper based on the data collection and emergent coding procedures I undertook (see Section 1.2), but I acknowledge that my findings may have been more robust if I focused on only one of these categories. Further expanding on identity theory seems to suggest a strong direction for future research. Dad bloggers should be explicitly examined in terms of identity “salience” and “commitment” and compared to non-blogging fathers (see LaRossa & Reitzes, 1993; Pasley, Petren & Fish, 2014). Such an analysis would permit drawing inferences about how dedicated dad bloggers are to a fathering role and how blogging might serve to reinforce that dedication. Relatedly, this study prompts the following question: Are dad bloggers *actually* more involved at home than other fathers in North America? Or, are they just capitalizing on presenting a public face of “good” fatherhood online? (see Milkie, Nomaguchi, & Schieman, 2018; Shows & Gerstel, 2009). Collecting and analyzing time-diary data from bloggers could be a productive way to answer this question (see Bianchi, Robinson, & Milkie, 2006).

In the third article (Chapter 4), I conducted my most conceptually streamlined analysis of dad bloggers' discourse. This analysis was focused on the topic of masculinity, in particular. I came to this topic upon realizing that these fathers do, in fact, write and talk specifically about gender a great deal. To provide appropriate scaffolding for this

article, I relied on concepts from the sociology of gender and empirical studies on men's movements. This framework allowed me to adopt a dual-focus of examining the discursive meanings of masculinities and the ideological positioning of dad bloggers as a men's movement. My conclusions from this analysis built on recent theorizing about "caring masculinities" (e.g., Elliott, 2016; Jordan, 2018) and "hybrid masculinities" (e.g., Bridges & Pascoe, 2014; Randles, 2018). I argued that dad bloggers construct discourses of hybrid fatherhood and masculinities that are more progressive and pro-feminist than those of most other organized groups for men and fathers. Yet these discursive constructions still tend to bolster dad bloggers' statuses as men, to varying degrees. A key contribution of this article is how it illustrates the utility of examining configurations of hybrid and caring masculinities among different groups of men and remaining analytically sensitive to contradictions inherent in gender narratives.

Many of the limitations of this article are the same as those for Chapter 2 and do not need to be repeated. A limit specific to this article, however, is only a brief consideration of how meanings for gender intersect with those of sexuality, race, and, class. Indeed, the contemporary sociology of gender emphasizes the use of "intersectionality" theory to better tease out how axes of oppression overlap and amplify based on social positioning (e.g., Collins, 2000; Ferree, 2010). Although my limited attention to differences among sexuality, race, and class is due, in large part, to the demographic makeup of the dad-blogsphere, an intersectional analysis can provide further insight into: how socio-economic status helps shape and sustain the Dad 2.0 community; the differences between straight and gay bloggers in terms of how they

construct fatherhood and masculinities; and, how online discourse promoting gender and sexual equality is or is not reflected in the actions of dad bloggers offline. Finally, an additional shortcoming of this article is that I did not use the results to develop any new theoretical ideas or concepts. Instead, I apply and extend the insights of others, while specifying what is unique to my findings on dad bloggers. Therefore, the theoretical outcome of this analysis may be viewed as more modest than those of the other two articles.

To revisit the question posed at the outset of this dissertation: Who are dad bloggers and what do they do? Dad bloggers are community of fathers from across North America who write and talk about parenting on social media platforms and gather annually at the Dad 2.0 Summit. In the online context of the blogosphere and the offline context of the conference, dad bloggers are documenting their self-as-father trajectories, sharing narratives and advice about parenting, and creating broader socio-political discourse about issues affecting families. In performing these communicative acts, they are also developing the culture of fatherhood 2.0. At present, this culture is shaped primarily by a motivation to challenge popular ideologies and media stereotypes concerning men's involvement in parenting and, in turn, construct discourses of fatherhood and masculinity that are more inclusive, competent, and care-oriented. "Doing" fatherhood in this way serves two main purposes. First, dad bloggers wish to provide visibility to caring practices by men in order to help normalize involved fatherhood in society, with the desired goal of bringing about policy changes to better support parents and families. Second, dad bloggers choose to use blogging as a part of parenting itself.

They integrate social media into activities with their children, generating a compilation of family history and, oftentimes, financial compensation from sponsors who invest in digital content creators. For these reasons, blogging is a multidimensional facet of fathering for dad bloggers; it is implicated in their generative parental practices and it is a form of economic provision for their families. As our online infrastructure and economy continue to expand, we can expect to find more avenues through which the personal lives of parents and children become mediated and monetized across digital public spheres.

Taken all together, this dissertation provides the most comprehensive examination of dad bloggers in North America to date. By combining multiple types of qualitative data, it presents an in-depth ethnographic analysis of the strategies by which dad bloggers create meaningful social discourse. It is noteworthy that much of this discourse becomes interwoven with forms of advocacy and activism. Dad bloggers make clear that a number of obstacles continue to constrain father involvement in Canada and the United States. In particular, fathers need to be better encouraged to view the daily care of children as something that is necessary and normal for men to do. To this end, shifting media representations of fatherhood and masculinity can bring about cultural change with respect to expectations of male nurturance. And, expanding men's access to parental leave, flexible work hours, and physical resources for childcare like diaper changing stations can allow a greater number of fathers to establish a foundation for fatherhood that increases their commitment to parenting. These cultural and structural changes will, in turn, help to reduce gender inequality by enabling men to take on more familial responsibilities often shouldered primarily by women.

Social policy initiatives surrounding family, work, and gender should take seriously the concerns voiced by dad bloggers in this dissertation and on digital media platforms. Because they can be seen as promoters or even gurus of caregiving, social workers could reach out to this community to find fathers who are able to teach workshops about practical parenting skills and act as mentors to young, at-risk men across the country. Moreover, with many bloggers keen to become authors of their own books about parenthood, it may be worthwhile for publishers to build partnerships with these men so that their writing can become published and distributed to programs and populations that can benefit from their insight. Such endeavors fall well within this group's wheelhouse of capabilities and interests. In the future, I will expect to see dad bloggers continue to form alliances with other social change agents invested in social justice for parents, families, and minority groups. As I continue to become more involved in this community, I also become more inspired by what they do. Moving forward, I remain dedicated to working alongside dad bloggers in championing the normalization of involved fatherhood and advancing social equality in North America.

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Appendix A

Email Recruitment Script

Email Recruitment Script for: “Digital Dads: The Culture of Fatherhood 2.0”

Subject Line: McMaster University Study on Dad-Bloggers in North America

Hi [insert participant name]

[If applicable] It was great to connect with you at this year’s Dad 2.0 Summit!

I am contacting you today to ask if you will be willing to participate in my own research study on dad-bloggers. Overall, I am interested in learning more about the *meanings* of contemporary fatherhood and how blogging is used to shape paternal experience, identities, and culture. If you are willing to be interviewed, I would love to talk to you about your blog, your family, your experiences as a father, and the dad-blogging community at large. The interview is expected to last about one (1) hour, and will be scheduled at a time and location that is the most convenient for you.

It should be mentioned that there are minimal risks involved in participating in this study. Your privacy and comfort is my utmost concern. Therefore, I will be using pseudonyms for all the names of participants in this study. You do, however, also have the option to be identified and cited if this is what you prefer. A letter of information and consent form

providing the full details of the study are attached to this email for your convenience.

This research has been reviewed and accepted by the McMaster Research Ethics Board.

If you any have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study will be conducted, you can contact:

The McMaster Research Ethics Board Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

c/o Research Office for Administration, Development and Support

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

I would like to thank you in advance for your time and consideration. I hope to hear from you.

Casey Scheibling, M.A.

Ph.D. Candidate

Department of Sociology

McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

(905) 525-9140 ext. 24481

E-mail: scheibc@mcmaster.ca

Appendix B

Letter of Information / Consent Form

A Study Entitled: “Digital Dads: The Culture of Fatherhood 2.0”

Principal Investigator:

Casey Scheibling (Ph.D. Candidate)

Department of Sociology

McMaster University

Hamilton, Ontario, Canada

(905) 525-9140 ext. 24481

E-mail: scheibc@mcmaster.ca

Purpose of the Study:

You are invited to partake in a study about North American fathers who write online parenting blogs. This research builds upon recent social science literature that analyzes changing gender relations in North American families and the increase in caregiving fathers. The overall purpose of this study is to examine what fatherhood means to “dad bloggers.” I am most interested in learning about how blogging and the Internet are used to shape their paternal experiences, identities, and culture. While this study is concerned centrally with definitions of contemporary fatherhood, other inquiries about the

relationships between gender, work, and family will also be explored.

Procedures involved in the Research:

Part of this research involves conducting interviews with “dad bloggers” either in person, over the telephone, or Internet. Before the interview begins, you will first be asked if you would like your identity to remain confidential through the use of a pseudonym. For those who consent to an interview, I will then ask permission to record our conversation in order to ensure an accurate transcription. I will begin the interview by requesting some standard demographic information such as age, marital status and employment type.

Following this, I will ask questions about: your experiences as a father; your daily life at work and at home; your parenting blog; and the dad blogger community. The interview will be scheduled to meet your convenience. The estimated length of the interview is one (1) hour, but can run longer depending on your participation.

Sample Questions:

- a) How would you describe your identity as a father?
- b) How are work and family responsibilities divided between you and your partner?
(if applicable)
- c) What do you think are some of the most salient issues affecting fathers today?
- d) Why did you start a parenting blog and to whom is it directed?
- e) What role(s) does blogging fill in your daily life? Is it a career or pastime? How and why is blogging relevant to fathers?
- f) Do you consider yourself to be part of the “dad blogger” community? If yes, how

would you describe this group? What are its interests and goals?

Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:

There are minimal harms, risks, or discomforts that result from participating in this study. While some of the questions in the interview may be considered personal or private, you do not need to answer any questions that make you uncomfortable or even disinterested. You are also allowed to withdraw from the interview at any time. Should you do so, you can also decide whether or not any prior information that you provided remains in the study. There will be no consequences for withdrawing participation.

What is more, each participant has the option to have your identity protected. All names can be given pseudonyms in order to ensure complete privacy. For those who wish to be protected in this way, only I, Casey Scheibling, will know your real identity and will take all necessary steps to protect this information. I want to emphasize that it does not make any difference to me whether or not you wish to be identified. I take confidentiality as the standard and want you to choose whatever choice you are most comfortable with.

Potential Benefits:

This research does provide potential benefits to the participants. If you do not wish for your identity to remain confidential, you have the opportunity to promote your personal blog or organization through my study. Regardless of whether participants choose to be identified or not, the findings of this research can help to give voice to diverse types of fathers who may be less visible in society at large. Thus, this research is expected to be beneficial to the community of North American dad bloggers in particular, and to parents

in general. The benefits may go beyond social recognition as the data could even be used towards work-family policy implications or changes once the study is completed.

Confidentiality:

You are participating in this study confidentially unless you request to be identified. For those who wish to remain confidential, every effort will be made to protect your privacy.

I will not use your name or any information that would allow you to be identified.

However, since your community is relatively small, others may be able to identify you on the basis of references you make. Please keep this in mind in deciding what to tell me.

The information you provide will be kept in a locked desk and/or on a password protected computer where only I will have access to it. Once the study is complete, an archive of the data, without identifying information, will be maintained.

Participation and Withdrawal:

Your participation in this research is voluntary. As aforementioned, you do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to answer. Moreover, you can also withdraw from the study, for whatever reason, even after signing the consent form. Withdrawing is possible up until approximately May 2019, when I expect to submit my dissertation. If you decide to leave, there will be no consequences to you. In cases of withdrawal, any data you have provided in interviews will be destroyed unless you indicate otherwise.

Information about the Study Results:

I expect to have this study completed by May 2019. If you would like a brief summary of the results, please let me know how you would like it sent to you.

Questions about the Study:

If you have questions or need more information about the study itself, please contact me by email at: scheibc@mcmaster.ca

This study has been reviewed by the McMaster University Research Ethics Board and received ethics clearance. If you have concerns or questions about your rights as a participant or about the way the study is conducted, please contact:

McMaster Research Ethics Secretariat

Telephone: (905) 525-9140 ext. 23142

C/o Research Office for Administrative Development and Support

E-mail: ethicsoffice@mcmaster.ca

Informed Consent:

- I have read the information presented in the information letter about a study being conducted by Casey Scheibling of McMaster University.
- I have had the opportunity to ask questions about my involvement in this study and to receive additional details I requested.
- I understand that if I agree to participate in this study, I may withdraw from the study at any time or up until approximately May 2019.
- I have been given a copy of this form.
- I agree to participate in the study.

I agree that the interview can be audio recorded.

Yes.

No.

Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the study's results.

Please send them to this email address: _____

Or to this mailing address: _____

No, I do not want to receive a summary of the study's results.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Name of Participant (Printed) _____

Appendix C

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Introduction:

Hi [insert participant's name],

Before getting started, I just want to thank you again for agreeing to be involved in this project – it means a lot to me. I want to remind you that your participation is both confidential and totally voluntary. You do not need to answer all or any of the questions and you can decide to drop out of the study at any time with no consequences whatsoever. You also do not have to fill in the demographic criteria listed just below if you do not feel comfortable.

In addition, I wish to briefly mention that my research is not evaluative. What I mean is that I have no interest in judging your performance or opinions of parenting. Rather, this study is exploratory and interpretive – I seek to understand your views and experiences, but not measure whether they are “right” or “wrong.” In other words, my aim is to understand what fatherhood means to you and to other bloggers.

This interview/questionnaire is divided into three parts. For each, I provide a short write-up that explains why I'm interested in these areas. The first section includes questions about fatherhood so as to gain a better understanding of how you view yourself as a father. The next section includes questions about gender and family roles in society. The

final set of questions is more about dad bloggers as a social group. Please write as much as you like by adding space wherever needed. I don't expect the answering of these questions to take longer than 1 hour, but please take as much time as you need. After I receive your responses, I may want to contact you for a brief follow-up.

Demographics:

What is your age? _____

What is your race/ethnicity? _____

What is your marital status? _____

How many children do you have and what are their ages?

What is your employment status and job?

What is your household income?

Section A – Fatherhood:

These first questions are designed to allow me to answer my overarching research question, which is: what does fatherhood mean to dad bloggers? I'm interested in this question because I believe that dad bloggers are a group of men who are highly, or at least publically, invested in the identity of "father." Many of these questions may seem quite common sense or mundane to you, but I assure you that there is a lack of scholarly attention to what fatherhood means to different groups of men.

1. Can you describe for me what it felt like to become a father for the first time?
2. What are the main events or experiences through out your life that have shaped your understanding of fatherhood? These can be from before and after becoming a father.
3. Who are the main people who have shaped your understanding of fatherhood? Do you have parenting role models? Why or why not?
4. Where would you rank “father” in a list of your identities and why?
5. Do you think that your identity as a man and as a father has changed over time?
6. Thinking of yourself, how would you describe your role as a father? What is involved in how you “do fatherhood” everyday? This does not have to be restricted to time with children.
7. Thinking more abstractly, what does it mean to be a “good” father or a “bad” father?
8. What obstacles do you feel that you face as a father? What do you wish you could change?
9. I have noticed that a lot of dad bloggers feature parenting tips on their websites. What would be the best advice that you’d give to an expectant or new father?
10. At risk of being redundant, what does being a father mean anything else to you?

Section B – Gender & Families:

Questions about gender are always important for research on families. But what is more, from reading blogs and attending the Dad 2.0 Summit meetings, I have noticed that gender is a prevalent topic of discussion among dad bloggers. I'm interested in learning more about what you think about expectations of masculinity, the role of gender in the family and society at large. I understand that gender is a highly politicized topic, but please bear in mind that your responses will be kept strictly confidential.

11. Can you describe for me the ways you learned about what it means to be a man?
12. What are your opinions of expectations of masculinity in our culture? What do you agree and disagree with? What would you change?
13. How would you define your own sense of masculinity?
14. What are the differences between you and your partner's parenting practices?
15. A question that has floated around in the sociology of families for decades is:
Can men "mother"? What do you think about this question?
16. Are fathers disadvantaged in any way because they are men? Have you any experiences of being negatively affected by gender stereotypes?
17. Do you think father involvement is important because children need a male influence in their lives? Please explain in as much detail as you can.

18. How do gender expectations affect your children and how do you teach them about gender?
19. What is your overall opinion of gender as a form of social organization? In what ways are gendered divisions beneficial or detrimental?

Section C – Blogging Community:

It has been made apparent to me that many bloggers are members of local communities of fathers (e.g. The City Dads groups) or broader social networks (e.g., The Dad 2.0 Summit; The “Dad Bloggers” Facebook; The National At-Home Dad Network).

Questions here are designed to teach me more about blogging practices, and the values and goals of the dad blogger community. But let's start first with the origin of your blog.

20. Why did you decide to start a parenting blog?
21. In your blog, what do you write about the most and why?
22. When you are making a blog post, who are you most often writing to? Is your expected audience often the same as your actual audience?
23. If you were to generalize, what do other dad bloggers typically write about?
24. How are dad blogs different from one another? Which blogs do you prefer and why?
25. Do you consider yourself part of a dad blogger community? If so, please explain your motivation for getting involved.

26. What do you think is the purpose of dad groups and The Dad 2.0 Summit?
27. If you were to try to speak on behalf of the dad blogger community, what would you say are the collective values of the group?
28. What about the collective goals of the group?
29. Do you think that dad bloggers are instigating forms of social or political change?
If so, in what ways?
30. Is there anything that you hope these communities will change or pursue in the future?

This is the end of the interview.

Thank you very much for your responses.

If you have any questions or comments, please feel free to contact me at:

scheibc@mcmaster.ca.