WORKING-CLASS GAY DADS: QUEER STORIES ABOUT FAMILY AND WORK

by

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DISSERTATION ABSTRACT

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Context: Recent cultural and legal changes support gay men becoming fathers. Existing research with gay dads has focused almost exclusively on those in the upper middle-class. However, national estimates suggest that working-class gay dads represent a notable proportion of LGBT+ parents. Given the financial barriers to gay fatherhood and that parenting and working experiences often differ based on class—especially during the COVID-19 pandemic—research with working-class gay dads holds promise to broaden understanding of gay-fathered families in the current socioeconomic context. Using the Psychology of Working theory (PWT) as a framework, the present study explored work and family experiences with working-class gay dads living on the West Coast of the United States.

Methods: The primary research question guiding the study was: *How do working-class gay dads' family-work stories challenge the grand career narrative and provide new ways of thinking about parenting and decent work?* I collected and analyzed data using a narrative inquiry methodology, which involved a three-stage interview process, co-construction of narratives with participants, and generation of study themes and structural recommendations.

Results: I organized participant stories into four narrative parts: History, Becoming Dads, Work-Family Interface, and Identity. With participant feedback, I highlighted seven study themes that emerged from the dads' stories (e.g., *Importance of Both Structural Economic Support and Structural LGBTQ+ Support*, *Many Valid Ways to Form Families*). Situating these findings within the PWT model, I demonstrated how economic constraints and marginalization shaped these dads' experiences of decent paid (and unpaid) work, and how their adaptability and volition buffered these impacts and offered pathways to meaningful roles as workers and fathers.

Conclusions: The stories of working-class gay dads expand thinking about parenting and work and extend the research on gay fathering. These stories and related themes provide helpful guidance for structural recommendations that attend not only to LGBTQ+ inclusion, but also policy improvement and economic justice. In so doing, the study sends a message of hopefulness to prospective queer parents while advocating to expand protections and support for all families.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

I trace my academic interest in gay fatherhood to my first term of graduate school in 2017. For my developmental psychology class, I chose to write my final paper about children raised by gay dads. A gay man hoping to become a parent someday, I assumed that gay men could make excellent parents. The existing research confirmed this. Each study I read found no significant difference in children's healthy development when raised by gay dads vs. heterosexual parents, but there was relatively little research on this topic.

Two years later, for my first qualitative research methods course, I needed to conduct, transcribe, and analyze an interview. A lesbian couple I am friends with had recently started the process of becoming foster parents. They graciously allowed me to interview them, and our conversation bounced between laughter, reflection, and genuine excitement about the possibility of raising kids.

I knew after that initial interview that I wanted to learn from more queer parents about their experiences. Taking qualitative research classes in the University of Oregon College of Education, I found myself surrounded by graduate students who wanted their research projects to be personally meaningful and socially just. Within this supportive environment, I began to develop a dissertation idea that would explore the experiences of queer parents.

I narrowed this project from queer parents generally to gay dads specifically for several reasons. First, when compared with lesbian parents, there is relatively less research with gay dads, perhaps in part because there are significantly fewer gay dads

than gay moms. Second, in a patriarchal society, men who take on primary parenting roles go against the grain. I was curious about how gender might uniquely impact gay dads' experiences. And third, I am a gay man who hopes to one day be a dad. This made me personally curious about how other gay men start their families and navigate family and work. When narrowing to gay dads, I kept the project open to gay trans dads. Far too many studies with gay men have excluded trans participants, and the gay/queer trans dads involved in this project strengthened it with their unique perspectives.

When diving into the small but quickly growing body of research with gay fathers, I quickly noticed a pattern: participants represented were disproportionately upper middle class and White. This insidious trend is of course not unique to the topic of gay fathering—Western social science notoriously over-represents upper middle-class White men. There was, however, something about the wealthiness of research participants that stood out among gay fathers. Becoming a gay dad can be expensive, especially through private surrogacy and adoption. Yet, these are the paths to gay fathering often represented in media—think Modern Family and Pete Buttigieg.

The overrepresentation of rich gay dads might make one think that poor and working-class gay dads don't exist. But national population data suggests this is false. Once I became aware of this gap between gay dads represented in research and gay dads in general, I decided to focus this study specifically on gay dads without financial access to expensive pathways to parenthood. By focusing on this population, I hoped to learn from and bring attention to gay fathering narratives often left out of research.

I considered multiple ways of describing the population I hoped to find. Ultimately, I settled on *working-class* because for many people, this descriptor is associated with a positive identity and it holds multiple meanings I hoped to address in my study. Working-class often suggests having relatively less wealth and a position of relatively little power under capitalism when compared with other social class categories. Of course, the term has many definitions, and my queer readers in particular will know the limitations of labels for defining people. Thankfully, the term proved accurate enough to attract the dads with whom I wanted to talk.

The research approach that I chose for this study, narrative inquiry, emphasizes researchers and participants as co-authoring stories in a particular time, place, and relationship. During the summer of 2021, this looked like Zoom calls with working-class gay dads living across the West Coast, all of us impacted in different ways by the ongoing pandemic and other 21st century stressors. My privileged social position as a middle-class, cis White man enrolled in a PhD program has meant that for me, the heaviness of these stressors has been less disruptive in my life than in the lives of most working-class parents and parents of color. This reality limits my ability to fully grasp the lived experiences of the dads in this study, and highlights why a story-based research approach, offering space for participants to contribute nuance and feedback, is so important.

In terms of theory, this project was influenced from several directions. Intersectionality and queer theory helped me think about individual experiences within a broader sociopolitical context, as well as challenging me to reflect on my positionality and research ethics. Psychology of Working Theory (PWT; Duffy et al., 2016) helped

broaden the definition of work and consider how work-family lives are interconnected. My lived experience as a gay man and my professional experience as a therapist-in-training also influenced my thought process and how I showed up as a researcher. Finally, participants brought a critical dimension to theorizing. Their priorities and values, informed by their lived experiences as working-class gay dads, sharpened the direction of the study.

Now, four years after my first research paper about gay parents, I feel excited to share this completed dissertation. In the following chapter, you will find a literature review, which synthesizes previous research on gay dads, working-class dads, work-family interaction, and PWT. Next, I provide a description of the research methods, including recruitment, interviews, participant data, and the analytic process. Then, the part of the project I feel most excited for people to read: participant narratives. The stories are simultaneously queer and ordinary. Readers will likely find elements that surprise them, and other parts that resonate with their own experience. And finally, the dissertation ends with a discussion, with recommendations for how readers might do things differently after engaging with working-class gay dads through their stories. I invite you to read on with openness, allowing the stories to change your thinking in some way.

Literature Search

This chapter includes a review of the literature relevant to this research study. I include previous research with gay dads, working-class dads, and scholarship-activism at the queer/working-class intersection. I also review research on the work-family interface and psychology of working theory (PWT). I used the following search terms in Google

Scholar and the University of Oregon Library Database to identify relevant literature for this review: “queer OR gay AND dads OR fathers”, “working-class OR low-income AND dads OR fathers”, “work AND family AND conflict OR interface OR interaction”, and “psychology of working theory OR psychology of working framework.” I focus on empirical research from the past 20 years, as well as older seminal scholarship, as relevant. I also include relevant data from national surveys (e.g., Pew Research Center) and other economic and political reports to complement peer reviewed publications and provide important context for the study.

Gay Dads

The distinct experiences of gay dads and their children is a young and growing area of research. Gay men in the U.S. have always been parents, but until recent decades, gay men typically became fathers in the context of heterosexual marriage, sometimes coming out later in life or not at all (Tornello & Patterson, 2012). Homophobic social attitudes and legislation made it difficult for out gay men to form families until relatively recently. Until 1973, homosexuality was a diagnosable mental illness in the medical field (Dreschler, 2015). In 1977, 77% of Americans reported that gay men and lesbians should not be able to adopt children. This proportion dropped to 48% disapproving of gay adoption in 2003 and dropped again to 23% in 2019 (Gallup, 2021). In 2015, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that same-sex marriage and fostering/adopting among married same-sex couples would be legal in all 50 states. However, in many parts of the country, gay fathering remains tenuous from a legal perspective. Although most Americans now say that they support gay people raising children, only 28 states have passed legislation that prohibits discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in foster care

and adoption (Movement Advancement Project [MAP], 2022). Eleven states explicitly allow agencies to refuse placing children with LGBTQ+ parents if doing so conflicts with the agency's religious beliefs (MAP, 2022). The variation in state-to-state laws creates an uncertain landscape for gay dads in the U.S., especially those who live in regions with fewer protections.

For gay men in the U.S., several pathways to fatherhood exist, with a range of associated financial costs. The most visible family structure for gay dads, both in the research literature and in the media, is the upper middle class, cisgender couple—usually White—raising children who were adopted or born through surrogacy (Carneiro et al., 2017; Nölke, 2018). Financial and other barriers make these more visible pathways to gay fatherhood inaccessible for many working-class gay men. One of the most affordable ways to become a gay dad in the U.S. is public adoption through the foster care system (Ward, 2018). The costs of private options vary ($20,000-$40,000+ for adoption and $15,000-$150,000+ for surrogacy; Ward, 2018; Dodge, 2019), with international options on the lower end of the spectrum, though some have critiqued for-profit international adoption and surrogacy agencies for exploiting poor families (e.g., No White Saviors, 2019; Salama et al., 2018). Parenting arrangements may also be informal. In ballroom communities, an important part of many LGBTQ Black and Latinx communities in cities across the U.S., some gay men take on the role of "house father" for unhoused queer and trans youth, performing in competitive balls together and creating an affirming family environment for their informally adopted children (Arnold & Bailey, 2009). Although there are multiple ways to become a gay dad, each option carries a cost, and many pathways require significant financial resources.

Despite legal, financial, and other barriers to becoming parents, there are many gay men raising children in the United States. Estimates based on national surveys from 2008-2011 suggested that 37% of LGBT adults were parents, and that LGBT parents were slightly more likely to be people of color than White, living in the Midwest, Southern, and Mountain West regions of the U.S., and to be living in poverty when compared with heterosexual parents (Gates, 2013). The *Generations* and *TransPop* Studies, which recruited participants from 2016-2018, drew from the first national probability sample of LGBQ cisgender adults and transgender adults ages 18-60 (Meyer et al., 2021). The Generations study found that 8% of cisgender gay, bisexual, and queer men had children, and 2% of these men had children under 18 currently living with them. Notably, cisgender gay, bisexual, and queer women were much more likely to have children (23%) and to have a child under 18 living with them (16%). Estimates from the Transpop study suggest that 18% of transgender adults have children, and 8% have a child under 18 living with them, though the rates are lower for transgender men when compared with transgender women and nonbinary adults (Carone et al., 2021). It is possible that the lower prevalence estimates of gay fatherhood from the Generations and Transpop studies when compared with previous data reflect (1) a more robust and accurate methodology (Meyer et al., 2021), (2) a trend in which gay men come out earlier and are therefore less likely to have children in the context of heterosexual partnerships, as was previously common (Gates, 2015), and (3) general parenting trends in the U.S., characterized by decreasing birth rates (Kearney & Levine, 2021) and fewer childless adults expecting to have children for a variety of reasons, including not wanting to, medical reasons, and financial reasons (Brown, 2021).

A large focus of gay parenting research has been comparing the health outcomes of children raised in different family types. Studies comparing the well-being of children adopted by gay fathers, lesbian mothers, and heterosexual parents have generally found no significant differences across family type in psychosocial adjustment in childhood (Farr 2017; Farr et al., 2019) or adolescence (Costa et al., 2021; McConnachie et al., 2021). In other words, this body of research suggests that children adopted by gay men are no worse off when compared with those adopted by heterosexual or lesbian parents. Instead, evidence suggests that other factors, such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) prior to family placement (Costa et al., 2021), adoptive parents' mental health (McConnachie et al., 2021), parenting stress (Golombok et al., 2013; Farr, 2017), and coparenting factors (e.g., satisfaction with division of labor and unified parenting approach among couples; Farr et al., 2019), are what matter for predicting children's healthy development, not the gender or sexual orientation of the parents. Studies comparing outcomes of children born through surrogacy (with gay fathers), sperm donation (with lesbian mothers), and intercourse (with heterosexual parents) have also found no differences in child well-being by family type (Carone et al., 2020; Baiocco et al., 2018).

Some studies have found better outcomes for children raised by gay parents compared with heterosexual parents. In a study comparing adoptive families, Golombok and colleagues (2013) found lower parent ratings of child externalizing symptoms in gay father and lesbian mother families when compared with heterosexual families. Regarding parenting behaviors, Golombok and colleagues (2013) also found that gay dads and lesbian mothers had greater parental warmth and amount of interaction, as well as lower

levels of disciplinary aggression compared with heterosexual parents. In a large-scale, longitudinal Dutch study, children raised by same-sex couples from birth performed better in primary school and were more likely to graduate high school than children raised by different-sex couples. Importantly, this difference remained significant after controlling for parent socioeconomic status and ethnicity (Mazrekaj et al., 2020). Comparative studies do important political work in advancing the legal rights and social acceptance of gay dads, building evidence against the unfounded notion that children need a mother and a father to be healthy (Lamb, 2012).

In addition to examining children's wellbeing, research has also focused on gay dads themselves, particularly in the areas of parenting identity and division of labor. Based on in-depth interviews with gay fathers, Brinamen and Mitchell (2008) proposed a 6-stage identity development model, in which some gay men, after coming out, become increasingly proud of their gay identity, witness the value of gay fathers, and desire to become parents themselves. In this model, the final stage involves identity expansion through the integration of nontraditional *gay* and *parent* identities. Other studies have noted additional changes in identity for gay men who become fathers, including a shift away from dominant gay male culture and toward a more relational and domestic gay masculinity (Armesto & Shapiro, 2011) and a focus on parenting while de-emphasizing career (Panozzo, 2015). Research with Israeli fathers found a significant positive association between parenting identity and meaning in life for gay fathers, but not for heterosexual fathers (Shenkman & Schmotkin, 2016) and greater subjective well-being in gay fathers compared with heterosexual fathers (Erez & Shenkman, 2016). The authors

suggested that gay fathers' intentionality to become parents despite barriers might explain these differences.

Numerous studies have examined how gay couples, and gay fathers specifically, share responsibilities. Gay dads tend to prefer an egalitarian approach to parenting and housework (Tornello et al., 2015), and divide daily living tasks more evenly than heterosexual parents (Farr & Patterson, 2013; Goldberg et al., 2012). Sharing childcare responsibilities more evenly has been associated with greater satisfaction in division of labor arrangements (Farr & Patterson, 2013). On the other hand, Goldberg et al. (2012) found that among gay couples, the partner who worked more paid hours tended to do more traditionally masculine housework (e.g., yardwork, appliance maintenance), whereas the partner who earned less income tended to do more traditionally feminine housework (e.g., cooking, cleaning). When couples report satisfaction with more specialized divisions of labor, however, there is no difference in child outcomes (Farr & Patterson, 2013), and a subjectively fair division of labor, rather than an equal one, may be most agreeable for queer couples (Kelly & Hauck, 2015). For example, in stepparent families, biological gay dads were more involved in direct childcare than gay stepdads, but both fathers shared equally in indirect care work (e.g., cleaning and cooking; Tornello et al., 2015). Gay dads sometimes also negotiate co-parenting with ex-partners after coming out (Bucher, 2014) and/or after a divorce, an additional factor in division of labor for some families.

Finally, some research has more explicitly focused on the sociopolitical location of gay fathers and their families. Perrin and colleagues (2016) found that gay fathers in Tennessee reported more stigma toward their families than did gay fathers in California.

Stigma sensitivity has been associated with greater parenting stress for gay fathers, whereas social support reduces parenting stress (Tornello et al., 2011). Vinjamuri (2015) found that gay fathers responded with empathy to their adopted children's encounters with heteronormativity, supporting them in exploring what it means to be adopted, not have a mom, and share about their family with peers. Carroll (2018a) conducted an in-depth ethnographic study with gay father support groups. She found that gay dads regularly engage in "incidental activism", teaching others about queer families not through planned political action, but through everyday interactions with others in which the gay dads needed to educate others, advocate, and make space for their families.

Carroll's (2018b) work also identified a problem within gay fathering communities—that many gay dads feel "on the margins" within these spaces. She noted that gay dads who were single, who had children through a heterosexual relationship, who were not White, and/or who were not financially well-off felt like outsiders in the gay fathering groups. This critique can be seen in the oversampling of wealthy, White gay male couples. With a few exceptions, the studies with gay dads that I identified in my literature search included samples that were between 76% and 100% White. When education and income data were reported, between 79% and 100% of gay dads in these studies held bachelor's degrees, with high proportions of participants holding graduate degrees, and median annual household incomes ranged from approximately $100,000-$200,00. Exceptions to this pattern included Arnold and Bailey's (2009) study with African American queer and trans young adults in the ballroom community, including a house father, Carroll's (2018b) paper that focused on a subset of BIPOC, working-class, and single parents from a larger gay dad study, and studies that used secondary national

data sets or probability samples that closely reflect the demographics of the country (Carone et al.; 2021, Gates, 2015; Meyer et al., 2021). One reason that most samples of gay dads have been disproportionately White and upper middle class, in addition to longstanding patterns of racism and classism in social science research with human subjects, is the fact that studies focused on gay dads who have their children through surrogacy, for example, represent a privileged sub-population of gay fathers (Carone et al., 2020). Furthermore, trans gay fathers are often excluded from the gay fathering literature, and emerging research with trans fathers has focused on trans men partnered with cis women (e.g., Condat et al., 2020), even as gay/queer and trans identities often overlap (Hereth et al., 2020). In the next section, I review the extant research with working-class dads.

Working-Class Dads

Before reviewing the research with working-class dads, it is important to define *working-class.* Although definitions vary, here I refer to an individual and collective identity characterized by economic precarity, relatively limited choice in work conditions, and distinct sociocultural experiences (Smith, 2010; hooks, 2000). Approximately 30% of Americans self-identify as part of the working-class (Newport, 2018), and this identity may overlap with others including low-income and lower middle-class (Reeves et al., 2018). In counseling psychology research, social class has often been ignored altogether or conflated with socioeconomic status, thereby ignoring the ways in which class shapes individuals' worldviews and behaviors (Liu, 2013). Because academics tend to come from privileged social positions, social class research is often influenced by *classist* beliefs, in the form of stereotypes about poor and working-class

people, which can lead to romanticizing and/or pathologizing working-class experiences (hooks, 2000). Social class in the United States is shaped by capitalism, such that people with more capital (i.e., wealth) have a more powerful class position (Smith, 2010; Robinson, 1983). Under capitalism, people with class privilege tend to ignore the education, healthcare, and housing disparities caused not by working-class people's lack of effort, but rather by a stratified system that perpetuates inequality (hooks, 2000; Smith, 2010).

Additionally, in reviewing the research on working-class dads, it is critical to emphasize the relationship between capitalism and racism, and how these systems in the U.S. have created a society in which class and race are deeply intertwined (Robinson, 1983). From state-sanctioned labor exploitation and discriminatory policies against Black communities, to profiting from Indigenous land and resources, to egregious working conditions without protections for immigrant workers, the U.S. class system has consistently privileged whiteness while harming Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (Collins, 1990; Tuck & Yang, 2012). As a result, the U.S. has an enormous racial wealth gap which often creates economic and class inequalities, particularly between Black and White families, even when the families have identical household incomes (Darity Jr et al., 2021). Patterns of race and class inequality are intergenerational. In a nationally representative longitudinal study, Chetty and colleagues (2020) found that Asian and Hispanic children had similar rates of intergenerational mobility to White children, meaning that disparities shrunk between these groups over time. Conversely, Black men had higher rates of downward mobility than White men in almost every Census tract in the country, even when controlling for family wealth, income, and

education. This pattern was not found for Black women, highlighting how structural anti-Black racism socioeconomically harms Black men specifically and, by extension, Black families (Chetty et al., 2020). In a study of middle-class Black families in the D.C. area, Lacy (2007) demonstrates how race vs. class arguments break down, since middle-class Black families share experiences with both lower-class Black families and middle-class White families. Given the connection between race and class, this literature review aims to highlight shared experiences among working-class dads, as well as important distinctions between experiences of working-class gay dads with different racial and ethnic backgrounds.

Parallel to the class bias in gay fathering research, there is relatively little research with heterosexual fathers who are low-income/ working-class (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). A study comparing working-class and upper-middle class fathers who work in healthcare found that the working-class dads employed as EMTs prioritized daily parenting more than upper middle-class dads employed as doctors. The doctors used their flexibility to work extra hours, primarily engaging in "public fathering" such as attending their children's sporting events, whereas the EMTs used flexibility to spend more time with their children at home, both out of desire and necessity to share childcare with their wives, who typically also worked (Gerstel & Clawson, 2014). This pattern held up even when EMTs and doctors all worked 60-hour weeks (Gerstel & Clawson, 2014).

Of course, father involvement in everyday parenting varies substantially by family, ranging from fathers as primary caregivers to those focused almost exclusively on traditional "breadwinner" roles (Braun et al., 2011). However, working-class fathers increasingly want to prioritize involvement with their children (Edin et al., 2019), part of

a broader pattern of reducing the gender gap in parenting (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018)—though gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic created setbacks in this trajectory (Yavorsky et al., 2021) and other factors (e.g., conservative norms about masculinity) may create barriers to men engaging as parents (Legerski & Cornwall, 2010). Many working-class fathers today recall their own fathers as stern or distant and want to be warmer and more nurturing with their own children (Edin et al., 2019). Studies with low-income/working-class fathers have found numerous benefits of parental warmth and involvement for children, including improved developmental outcomes (e.g., cognitive-social and emotion regulation) at the start of kindergarten (Bocknek, 2017) and more determination and academic success in adolescence (Suizzo et al., 2017). Importantly, McCaig and colleagues (2021) found that parent education level was not related to physical play, caregiving, or verbal engagement in study of low-income fathers, challenging the classist stereotype that educated people make better parents.

In fact, previous research suggests that in some ways, working-class parents have some unique strengths when compared with more privileged parents. Lareau (2015) found that children of working-class parents were more respectful and better able to engage in leisure activities without supervision than their middle-class counterparts. Furthermore, working-class parents are significantly more likely than middle-class parents to provide and receive daily support (e.g., help with childcare) from extended kin networks, at least partially due to economic necessity, a pattern consistent across Black, Latino, and White families (Gerstel, 2011; Lareau, 2015). Social psychology research has found that in general, working-class individuals demonstrate more prosocial behavior

(empathy, helping others in distress) when compared with higher class individuals (Manstead et al., 2018), which could be an asset in parenting. Additionally, Wilson and colleagues (2021) documented some of the resilience resources of low-income fathers (e.g., self-esteem, positive affect, healthy coping, social support) that assist with parenting in the context of chronic stress, and they noted that these resources sometimes vary by racial/ethnic group. For example, they found that low-income African American fathers had higher levels of resilience resources overall when compared with low-income White and Latino fathers, although they noted that African American fathers also faced the highest level of systemic stressors.

Numerous studies have also documented the relationship between workplace factors and parenting for working-class fathers. Perry-Jenkins and colleagues (2020) found that among working-class heterosexual couples, having fathers with full-time, stable work during their infant's first year of life predicted fewer behavior problems and more adaptive skills for the children 6 years later. Inversely, unemployment is associated with parenting stress for working-class fathers (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), particularly when dads equate fatherhood with being a financial provider (Braun et al., 2011). Quality of employment matters too. Factors that predict more engaged parenting and lower parenting stress for working-class fathers include supportive colleagues and supervisors (Goodman et al., 2011), workplace flexibility (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), and autonomy at work (Perry-Jenkins, et al. 2020). Workplace flexibility seems to be particularly important—Nomaguchi and Johnson (2016) found that fathers with chronically inflexible work environments experienced more parenting stress than unemployed fathers (and working-class individuals tend to have less control over their

work than middle-class individuals; Smith, 2010). Goodman and colleagues (2011) found that compared with low-income White fathers, low-income African American fathers experienced their workplaces as less supportive—likely due to racial discrimination—which could contribute to disproportionate levels of work stress and, by extension, parenting stress. In a study of low-income fathers in rural areas, those with less education who engaged in jobs involving high levels of care work (e.g., psychiatric aids) had less engaged parenting, likely due to the highly demanding nature of working-class care work jobs (Goodman et al., 2008). Collectively, these studies demonstrate the significant impacts of work conditions on parenting for working-class fathers.

Considering these impacts, the current state of work matters for fathering. Social scientists have argued that the world of work continues to become more precarious due to contextual forces, including *de-unionization*, which undermines workers' rights, *financialization*, which further increases power of wealthy investors, *globalization*, which speeds up the flow of capital while creating poorer working conditions for many, and *digitalization,* facilitating the rise in precarious gig work, in which workers bear the risks of employment without protections (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018). Additionally, the U.S. is the only wealthy nation without federal paid family leave, adding a layer of stress for working parents (Donovan, 2019; Sterling & Allan, 2020), even as the long-term health benefits of paid parental leave—particularly during the perinatal period—are well established (Saxbe et al., 2018). Work precarity has been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, with working-class parents disproportionately impacted by mass layoffs, sector closures, reduced access to childcare (Yavorsky, 2021), as well as inadequate access to sick leave and safe working conditions for required in-person work (Bryant et

al., 2020). Employment loss in the U.S. early in the pandemic was greater for Black, Asian, and Hispanic/Latinx adults when compared with White adults, consistent with historical patterns of structural racism that disproportionately impact working-class BIPOC parents (Gemelas et al., 2022).

In tandem with economic and work conditions, sociocultural factors also shape parenting for working-class dads. According to research tracking values across social classes over time, the values and priorities of U.S. parents today are more similar than ever before (Ryan et al., 2020). While in the mid-1980s, upper-middle class families emphasized more independence and working-class families emphasized more obedience, these trends have converged. Now, parents across social classes report teaching their children to work hard and help others (Ryan et al., 2020). Shared values do not translate to equal opportunities, however. Lareau (2015) documented the many ways that dominant institutions (e.g., schools) disproportionately reward the behaviors of privileged children. She found that working-class youth were less familiar with the informal and formal "rules of the game", whereas middle-class youth received this cultural knowledge through their parents, and felt more entitled to ask for help from teachers, coaches, etc. Dermott and Pomati (2016) argued that a relatively small population of highly educated, upper-middle class parents use their privilege to focus on child-centered enrichment with the goal of cultivating their children for success, dictating unrealistic and highly individualistic criteria for what "good" parenting is. In conjunction with economic factors, the favoring of privileged parenting approaches and entitled children's behavior helps explain why class reproduction is common and upward mobility rare in the United States (Lareau, 2015), even though empirical evidence shows that working-class parents

are just as good at parenting as parents from higher social classes (Lareau, 2015; Dermott & Pomati, 2016).

Despite disparate impacts of economic exploitation on communities of color—particularly Black and Indigenous families—diverse working-class parents share many priorities, including access to decent work, access to high-quality childcare, and safety for their families (Wilson, 2016). However, there are also important differences within the working-class population. One limitation of the body of literature on working-class fathers is failure to attend to the intersection of race and class in analyses. Although the studies reviewed here generally included racially diverse samples, the omission of race-class analyses leaves questions about how outcomes for dads may differ when considering race and class together. Additionally, cultural factors associated with ethnicity, national origin, religion, and geographic region within the United States also influence class experiences for parents (e.g., Edin et al., 2019; Legerski & Cornwall, 2010). For example, over half of working-class Latino fathers in the U.S. are immigrants, and these fathers differ from U.S.-born working-class Latino fathers in their sociocultural experiences, incomes (Karberg et al., 2017), and precarity related to the U.S. immigration regime (Asad, 2020). In summary, intersectional lens is useful for highlighting the distinct and overlapping experiences of diverse working-class dads. Unfortunately, studies with this population have generally ignored sexual orientation.

Working-Class—Queer Intersection

To my knowledge, this is the first study to specifically focus on the work and family experiences of working-class gay dads. However, there is a rich history of activism and scholarship at the intersection of working-class and queer communities.

Black feminists have led this work, developing the notion of intersectionality from their lived experience, and incorporating the interplay of class and sexuality, along with race and gender, into diverse resistant knowledge projects (Collins, 2019). For example, Lorde (1984) critiqued White feminism for its singular focus on gender—erasing the of interlocking impacts of racism, classism, and homophobia on the lives of working-class, Black lesbians. Collins (2000) suggested that the history of Black women's lived experience at the work-family nexus disrupts the notion of public-private separation and demonstrates how structural oppression contributes to Black women's poverty. Furthermore, she noted that unmarried Black women, whether single mothers, lesbians, or transgender women, have lost access to economic resources and other privileges due to not having husbands. hooks (2000) emphasized the importance of addressing class in building toward economic justice. She described the role of lesbians in bringing class consciousness into radical feminism, and she noted that while race and gender had become "fashionable" in academia, class tended to be ignored, even with a widening gap between the rich and poor. Queer Chicana and Indigenous feminists have brought additional theorizing on race, class, sexuality, and gender (e.g., Anzaldúa, 1987). Others have documented the role of queer people in class struggles and the labor movement (Bérubé et al., 2011; Rustin et al., 2003; Frank, 2014) and the stories of queer families that disrupt heteronormative, capitalist expectations (Moniz, 2016).

Intersectional scholarship from the past two decades has critiqued how the mainstream queer rights movement has centered the priorities of White, upper-middle class gay men. This narrow focus can also be seen in queer scholarship (Brim, 2020) and the media, perpetuating "the myth of gay affluence" (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015) and

racism (Ferguson, 2003). Working-class LGBTQ+ people often have different political priorities than wealthy gay men, caring more about access to healthcare, housing, and decent jobs than a singular agenda for marriage equality legislation (Hollibaugh & Weiss, 2015). Barrett and Pollack (2005) found that when controlling for race and ethnicity, gay men with less formal education and lower incomes were less likely to be involved in gay social groups or live in gay neighborhoods, in part due to economic barriers to participation in gay subculture, which tends to be centered in high-cost urban areas. A decade later, Lewis (2016) found that as wealthy gay couples (mostly White) left gay neighborhoods for more privacy, working-class gay men of color increasingly socialized in the traditional gay bars of the city. When gay men do socialize across social classes, working-class gay men may experience marginalization (Burnes & Singh, 2016; Carroll, 2018b). When navigating institutions, working-class LGBTQ+ people often face additional barriers due to having less social and economic capital (Burnes & Singh, 2016).

The work of queer, working-class activists and scholars demonstrates that the experiences and priorities of working-class LGBTQ+ people are more complex, and have more to do with basic human rights, than the mainstream gay rights movement. Activist-scholar Yasmin Nair wrote, "we queers have always had bigger and better dreams, and that attaining the impossible—free healthcare, a world without prisons, no more war—is within our reach" (Weiss et al., 2012, p. 849). This has implications for gay fathering research—focusing on experiences of working-class gay dads aligns with a more inclusive research agenda that pairs economic justice with queer liberation.

Studying Family and Work Together

After reviewing the research on gay and working-class dads, as well as the working-class/queer intersection, I decided to focus on both family and work experiences for this study. When engaging in research with parents, it can be beneficial to consider family and work experiences together for several reasons. First, there is strong evidence that family and work experiences influence one another, so studying them together offers a fuller picture of the contexts in which parents live (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Whiston & Cinamon, 2015). Second, siloed approaches that separate work and family reflect privilege that most working-class parents do not have (Gerstel & Clawson, 2014). Third, both paid employment and parenting responsibilities involve work, so many social scientists advocate for considering them together to provide a more accurate picture of the work parents do (e.g., International Labor Organization [ILO], 2018; Richardson, 2012). Collectively, extant research provides a strong rationale for including both work and family experiences in studies with parents.

First, numerous scholars have presented theories of how work and family experiences influence one another. For example, work-family conflict (WFC) research documents how work and family roles sometimes negatively impact one another (Bryon, 2005; Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016). Conversely, work-family enrichment (WFE) theory suggests that positive work experiences can improve family life, and vice versa (Siu et al., 2010). Frone (2003) suggests that parents engage in an ongoing process to maximize inter-role balance and minimize inter-role conflict. However, expectations that working parents simultaneously be the ideal worker and ideal parent are usually not realistic (Hoobler et al., 2010), and maintaining work-family balance in our society is incredibly

difficult, especially for working-class parents (Bacigalupe, 2002). The nuances of work-family interactions are complex and vary across contexts, yet the work-family interface is clearly an important site for scholarly work (Whiston and Cinamon, 2015; Schultheiss, 2006). We do know that certain factors (e.g., access to quality, stable work) tend to consistently benefit family life (Duffy et al., 2016; Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), and reducing stress at home can help reduce work stress and burnout, though more research in this area is needed (Hakenen & Bakker, 2016).

In addition to empirical evidence for these reciprocal interactions, attempts to fully separate work and family in research reflect the privilege of married, professional men. While middle and upper-class families may be able to live on the income of one parent while the other (usually the mother) stays home full-time, in two-parent working-class families, both parents usually work to make ends meet (Gerstel & Clawson, 2014). Furthermore, dual earner wealthy families are more likely to pay for full-time childcare, which is increasingly cost-prohibitive for low-income families (U.S. Department of the Treasury, 2021), whereas working-class parents are more likely to take on parenting responsibilities themselves and share childcare with extended family and friend networks (Gerstel, 2011). As a result, working-class parents must juggle their schedules to engage in work and parenting tasks, which often requires creativity and tradeoffs. In single parent families, the interplay of family and work becomes more complex. Reflecting the clear overlap of work and family for working-class parents, numerous studies with working-class dads have included both work and parenting variables (e.g., Edin et al., 2019; Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016; Perry-Jenkins et al., 2020).

Finally, both paid employment and parenting responsibilities involve work, so many social scientists have advocated for considering them together to accurately reflect the work parents do. This is part of an ongoing effort to reduce gender disparities in labor and pay. To reflect the labor involved in parenting, other forms of caregiving, and indirect care (e.g., housework), researchers often refer collectively to these contributions as "unpaid care work." The International Labor Organization [ILO] documented that globally, women do the majority of the world's unpaid care work (76.2 percent globally and 61.1 percent in the U.S.; ILO, 2018). When considering paid work and unpaid care work together, women work more hours than men, yet make less money and have less wealth (ILO, 2018). Poor women of color are more negatively impacted by these inequitable labor arrangements (Collins, 1990, Parreñas, 2017). Although these patterns reflect men doing less unpaid care work overall, some sub-populations of men (e.g., single dads, working-class gay dads) also engage in a significant amount of unpaid care work. Understandably, some parents may feel uncomfortable equating their roles as parents with work. However, the concept of unpaid care work is useful in economic/political spheres to account for the contributions of parents. Unpaid care work is often underappreciated and undervalued, even though it is necessary for the social and economic functioning of all societies (ILO, 2018; Richardson, 2012). Increasing recognition for unpaid care work, or the "second shift", is one way to encourage policymakers to support parents through paid family leave, nondiscriminatory policies, and other financial support, such as the 2021 Child Tax Credit during the COVID-19 pandemic, which dramatically reduced child poverty while in effect (Parolin & Curran, 2022).

In summary, considering both work and family experience makes sense when conducting research with parents. Trying to fully separate work and family erases the reciprocal impacts between the two contexts—a reality made clearer during the COVID-19 pandemic. Working-class parents, especially primary caregivers, carry dual work roles—in the workplace and at home. Therefore, theoretical perspectives that account for these dual roles offer a promising foundation for research.

Psychology of Working Theory

One helpful perspective for considering work and family experiences together is the Psychology of Working Theory (PWT). PWT evolved from Blustein's (2001, 2006) Psychology of Working Framework (PWF) which was developed in response to critiques (e.g., Richardson, 1993, Helms & Piper, 1994) of vocational psychology's focus on privileged workers and career choice. PWT aims to challenge the grand career narrative, or the myth that all people can choose a career based on their interests and, through hard work, experience linear, upward progress in a stable, meaningful career. According to PWT, the grand career narrative ignores structural inequalities that make this notion of career unhelpful for the majority of the world's workers (Blustein, 2006). Furthermore, the grand career narrative focuses on paid work alone, ignoring other major life roles (e.g., parent; Richardson, 2012). PWT aims to (1) develop vocational psychology theory and practice that is useful for all workers, not just middle-class professionals and (2) advocate for a world of work in which decent work is more accessible and equally distributed (Blustein et al., 2019b). PWT emphasizes the role of contextual factors in shaping and constraining access to decent work*,* which includes working conditions that are safe, adequate time off, consideration for family and social life, and adequate pay and

healthcare (Duffy et al., 2016). According to the PWT model, interactive impacts of economic constraints and marginalization predict work volition (subjective level of choice in the workplace) and career adaptability (ability to navigate work-related obstacles), which in turn predict access to decent work. Furthermore, according to PWT, decent work provides a pathway for people to meet their basic needs, including needs for survival (e.g., paying bills), social contribution (e.g., helping others/ connection to community), and self-determination (e.g., ownership and autonomy; Autin et al., 2019, Duffy et al., 2016). Importantly, PWT includes both paid and unpaid care work in its framework (Blustein et al., 2019b; Richardson, 2012). Psychology of Working theorists emphasize that economic factors, such as economic inequality and high housing/ health care costs, as well as sociocultural factors, such as structural barriers and discrimination, have a profound impact on shaping people's career decisions and work experiences (Duffy et al., 2016). Psychology of Working theorists seek to advance social justice by considering these contextual variables as central to understanding work experiences (Duffy et al., 2016).

PWT has been researched with diverse populations, including undocumented young adults (Autin et al., 2018), racial and ethnic minorities (Guerrero & Singh, 2013; Autin et al., 2021, Duffy et al., 2018; Marks et al., 2020), midlife workers (Kim et al., 2018), and gender and sexual minorities (Douglas et al., 2017; Smith et al., 2020). These studies have consistently found a negative relationship between marginalization and decent work and have also demonstrated that social class/economic resources positively correlate with access to decent work, potentially through the mechanism of *work volition,* or subjective level of choice in the workplace (Allan et al., 2021, Duffy et al., 2018;

Douglas et al., 2017). Notably, in a study with sexual minority adults, higher heterosexist marginalization and lower subjective social class predicted lower access to decent work, highlighting the impact of sexuality and class together (Douglass et al., 2017). Across populations, precarious work—in many ways the opposite of decent work, characterized by stressful conditions, instability, and few protections (Kim & Allan, 2020; Kalleberg and Vallas, 2018— has been associated with poorer physical health, lower life satisfaction, and poorer mental health (Duffy et al., 2019), with workplace fatigue having particularly negative consequences (Duffy et al., 2021). In testing the full PWT model, Duffy and colleagues (2019) found that both economic constraints and marginalization predicted decent work, and work volition fully mediated the relationship between economic constraints and decent work. Additionally, they found a positive correlation between economic constraints and marginalization. Career adaptability also predicted decent work, though this construct was unrelated to marginalization and economic constraints in their study. Overall, this growing body of research provides strong support for PWT to conceptualize peoples' work lives, with additional research needed to clarify the nuances of the model (Duffy et al., 2019).

When developing the Psychology of Working Framework and Theory, Blustein (2001) called for more qualitative research, including narrative approaches, to focus on in-depth accounts from working-class people. PWT research should also contextualize market work with other domains of life, such as family responsibilities (Blustein et al., 2019b, Guerrero & Singh, 2013; Richardson, 2012). Finally, because PWT includes both paid work and unpaid care work, Whiston and Cinamon (2015) proposed research at the work-family interface to better understand how people meet their needs through a

combination of paid work and unpaid care work contributions. The current study responds to these recommendations from PWT researchers while building on PWT's empirical foundation.

Study Purpose and Research Questions

In summary, small but growing bodies of research on gay fathers and working-class fathers demonstrate some unique experiences of these populations. Gay dads face many financial and political barriers to becoming parents. Their family arrangements and parenting approaches often challenge traditional norms, yet their children are just as healthy and well-off as children with heterosexual parents. Working-class dads often engage more directly in parenting than middle/upper-class dads and are just as skilled at parenting. However, precarious work conditions and financial stress can negatively impact working-class dads and by extension, their families. Research with gay dads has focused disproportionately on an upper middle-class population; research with working-class dads has focused on heterosexual couples. Previous research at the working-class/queer intersection demonstrates the value of considering class and sexuality together, but no study to-date has specifically explored the experiences of working-class gay dads. Finally, given the interplay of work and family experiences, research with parents can benefit from considering work and family together, a distinctive feature of PWT. This study fills a gap in the research by examining the work-family experiences of working-class gay dads, asking the following:

Research Question 1: How do working-class gay dads' family-work stories challenge the grand career narrative and provide new ways of thinking about parenting and decent work?

Research Question 2: By living and telling these stories, what possible futures are created for the participants, the researcher, and their communities?

CHAPTER II

METHODS

In this chapter, I first describe narrative inquiry, the methodology I used for this study. Then I explain the research methods, including study design, recruitment, data collection, and analysis.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a story-based, qualitative research methodology developed by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) and used for varied types of social science research over the past two decades (e.g., Estrella & Forinash, 2007; Huber et al., 2013; Blix et al., 2021). I chose narrative inquiry as the methodology for this study for several reasons: (1) the usefulness of in-depth, narrative approaches for studying the experiences of parents, particularly understudied parent populations (Schultheiss, 2006), (2) previous recommendations to use narrative methodologies to expand the Psychology of Working research agenda (Blustein et al., 2016), and (3) the transformational aim of narrative inquiry—explained in the following section—a distinctive feature of this methodology when compared with many other narrative approaches (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020).

Importantly, narrative inquiry is not the only story-based methodology that aims to create positive social change. Indigenous methodologies have relied on stories, particularly oral storytelling, to provide guidance, address community problems, and preserve cultural knowledge for thousands of years (Archibald, 2008; Simpson, 2017). Critical race [CRT] theorists often use counterstorytelling to *talk back* to white supremacist narratives and foster sociopolitical action (Baszile, 2015). My decision to use narrative inquiry was influenced by these and other story-based resistant knowledge

projects, as they demonstrate the effectiveness of stories to address research questions and challenge grand narratives (Collins, 2019).

Philosophical Assumptions

Narrative inquiry is based on the notion that humans live storied lives, and narrative approaches are therefore useful for studying human experience (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In narrative inquiry, the term “experience” carries a particular definition from American pragmatism, a philosophical tradition that emerged in the late 19th century through interactions between knowledge systems of Indigenous peoples and those of European settlers (Pratt, 2002). Pragmatist philosopher and education researcher John Dewey suggested that *experience* is simultaneously personal and social. Therefore, experience cannot be isolated from context, nor can it be entirely attributed to environmental influence. Rather, experience exists through personal and social interactions (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Dewey also argued that experience is continuous: “There is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Collins (2019, p. 173) further elaborates on how American pragmatists conceptualize experience: “Within this expansive understanding of experience as existentially inclusive, continuous, and unified, individuals are not passive recipients of a finished social world; rather, through their relationships with one another, with social institutions, and with the environment (“the objective order of nature”), they actively construct their social world.” Given the assumption that experience is ever-changing and context-dependent, pragmatism rejects essentializing identity categories. Instead, pragmatist thinking suggests that identities (such as working-class, gay, and dad) shape and are shaped by the

social world over time, and "as such are never finished" (Collins, 2019, p. 173). In sum, narrative inquiry is based on the philosophical assumptions that human experience is contextualized, ever-changing, storied, and agentic (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

Narrative inquiry has a different epistemological stance than other narrative methodologies. Many narrative research projects are foundationalist, meaning that they operate with the assumption that narratives describe fixed, objective realities that "await the discovery by the careful and disciplined researcher" (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020, p. 1156). Due to the pragmatist assumption that experience is always changing across time and context, narrative inquirers do not seek a foundational outcome in their work. Instead, they approach the research process as transformative and relational: "The process of narrative inquiry is engaged in, not as a project of developing the most accurate portrayal of experience as it has been previously lived, but as a process of reimagining the possibilities within experience that ontologically transform a person's relation to [their] vocational activity. The stories produced by narrative inquiries earn our commitment, not by being the most accurate—although accuracy plays a role—but through the quality of their promise to ameliorative future relational activity for persons conducting the inquiry and their communities" (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020, p. 1158). In other words, narrative inquiry involves description, but ultimately is guided by a drive to create positive change for researchers, participants, and their communities.

Finally, narrative inquirers emphasize that their projects always occur in the context of a metaphorical three-dimensional space, which includes time, place, and relationships (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Regarding time, narrative inquirers recognize that researchers and participants bring their personal and community histories

to the study, which will continue to change after the project ends. The time during which a study occurs, therefore, provides a time-bound snapshot of ever-changing experience. Conducting this study post Obergefell v. Hodges (2015) means a changed legal landscape regarding LGBTQ+ marriage and parenting protections. Place frames narrative inquiry studies, too. Place-based considerations, such as geographic region and local cultures, matter for respectfully carrying out a study (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). For example, a study with working-class gay dads living on the West Coast of the U.S. would likely yield different results from a study with working-class gay dads in the Southeastern U.S. due to historical, political, and cultural differences between these regions (Perrin et al., 2016). The third dimension of narrative inquiry space, relationships, refers to the relational networks between researchers and participants. Many relational factors influence the outcomes of a narrative inquiry, including the duration and quality of relationships between researchers and participants, the negotiation of power dynamics and voice within researcher-participant conversations, the positionality of researchers in relation to their participants, and the ways in which the research will be used (e.g., does the end product benefit the researcher only, or also the participants and their communities?) Recruiting participants remotely rather than, for example, conducting extensive fieldwork in gay fathering support groups (e.g., Carrol 2018), creates a less familiar researcher-participant relationship. I elaborate further on the three-dimensional inquiry space for this study at the beginning of the Results chapter.

Research Design

Unlike some other qualitative methodologies, narrative inquirers do not follow a preexisting step-by-step protocol for data collection or analysis (Clandinin & Connelly,

2000). This flexibility allows for creativity in the research process, while also underscoring the importance of transparency in methods. Readers should be able to follow how the study was carried out so they can appropriately situate the usefulness and generalizability of study outcomes (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015).

Although there is no protocol to follow, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) do offer clear guidance on several important elements of narrative inquiry, which I incorporated into the study design:

1. Narrative inquiries are strengthened through researcher-participant relationships that unfold over time. Therefore, I developed an iterative, three-interview structure, which allowed for deepening conversations and connection when compared with single interviews. (Notably, many narrative inquiries involve full immersion in a setting over time, like ethnography. Due to pandemic-related safety concerns and the fact that participants were spread across locations, this research approach was not feasible).

2. Broadly speaking, narrative inquiries involve three stages of data: field texts, interim texts, and research texts. My field texts included interview audio recordings, interview notes, journal entries, and survey responses. Interim texts included narrative drafts and survey items. This document is the research text, as it synthesizes field and interim texts, participant feedback, and previous research.

3. Although researchers write research texts, narrative inquiry emphasizes participants as co-constructing the study. Therefore, I aimed to write narratives and themes based in participants' shared perspectives and sought participant feedback on interim texts at two timepoints (during the third interview and post-interviews).

4. Narrative inquiry also includes intermittent conversations with *response communities*, academic colleagues who provide support and reactions throughout the inquiry process. By discussing my study with my doctoral research seminar and dissertation committee, and I received helpful feedback and guidance that informed my methods. For example, response communities helped me determine the length of interviews, language for recruitment materials, and appropriate use of theory for study design.

5. Narrative inquiries exist at the reductionist/formalistic boundary. This means narrative inquirers prioritize the individual experiences of participants while also connecting these experiences to the broader theoretical conversations of the researcher's field. To balance these two priorities, I developed a semi-structured interview protocol that included a mix of life history questions (e.g., *What changed when you became a dad? What does a typical day of parenting look like for you?*) and questions informed by the Psychology of Working literature (e.g., *What makes parenting easier for you? How does your work role impact your*

parenting role and vice versa?) Synthesizing individual experiences with theory is further discussed under "Analysis."

Data Collection and Analysis

Recruitment

I used purposeful and snowball sampling methods in an effort to recruit a geographically and racially/ethnically diverse sample of self-identified working-class gay dads. I limited participation to dads who were currently the full or part-time parent for at least one child under 18 and who lived on the West Coast (Washington, Oregon, or California). I selected these inclusion criteria to ensure that 1) participants could speak to their current experience as parents and 2) participants were living in a region of the U.S. with some uniformity (i.e., progressive LGBTQ+ policies and cost of living significantly above the national average) and with which I am familiar (I have lived for 4+ years in each of these states and reside in one currently). First, I secured institutional review board (IRB) approval for the study. Next, I hired a friend to design a welcoming flier with study information (see Appendix A). Then, I distributed the flier electronically in two waves. For Wave 1, I contacted LGBTQ+ nonprofit organizations and members of my personal and professional networks in Oregon, the location of my home institution. For this wave, I focused on organizations with a focus on serving (1) LGBTQ+ BIPOC communities (e.g., PDX Latinx Pride) and (2) LGBTQ+ communities in rural parts of the state (e.g., Rogue Action Network), as LGBTQ+ studies tend to oversample White, urban populations (Carneiro et al., 2017). I contacted a total of 16 organizations for Wave 1 and five responded and agreed to share the recruitment flyer, including HIV Alliance, PDX Chinese Family Coalition, and Rogue Action Center. Three weeks later, I initiated Wave

2, in which I expanded recruitment to 32 additional LGBTQ+ organizations in Washington, Oregon, or California, and nine responded that they would share the flyer, including Wenatchee Pride, Pride at Work Oregon, and the Center for Sexuality and Gender Diversity in Bakersfield. I also continued to reach out to personal and professional contacts for recruitment support. Many friends, colleagues, and organizations shared the recruitment flier through their Facebook pages and email.

Prospective participants completed a brief interest survey on Qualtrics (see Appendix B). The survey asked participants to input their contact information (name, phone number, email address) as well as demographic information (gender, sexual orientation, social class, race/ethnicity, and city/state of residence). Participants also indicated their current parenting status.

I called all prospective participants who completed the Qualtrics survey to confirm eligibility and schedule interviews. Everyone who completed the survey self-identified as gay (or queer) dads of at least one child under 18 years old and lived on the West Coast (or had lived on the West Coast within the past year). Due to mixed survey responses and the often-conflicting definitions of "working-class" used by researchers, I determined class eligibility through conversation with participants. I described the reason for focusing on working-class gay dads—that most research with gay dads has focused on those who can afford expensive paths to parenthood like surrogacy and private adoption. Eligible participants responded that they viewed themselves as distinct from this privileged gay dad population, (e.g., "Oh, that's definitely not me!"). Ineligible participants indicated that they hadn't understood the meaning of working-class, and, after discussing in more detail, did not feel "working-class" described them due to their

self-reported economic/class privilege. I thanked ineligible participants for their time and encouraged them to refer others who may be eligible. With eligible participants, I briefly described the interview process, confirmed whether they had access to Zoom, and scheduled initial interviews. All eligible participants were given the option to invite their partner to participate jointly, if applicable.

Participants

Ten self-identified working-class gay dads participated in the study: three couples, and four individuals. Importantly, one participant preferred the term “queer” to describe his sexuality but indicated that “gay” also described him. All participants were full or part-time parents of at least one child under 18 years old (range = one to four children, M = two) and lived on the West Coast within the past year. Some participants identified as working/lower-middle class (n=7) whereas others exclusively identified as working-class (n=3). Participant ages ranged from 31 to 60 years ($M = 44.5$, $SD = 10.2$). In terms of race/ethnicity, participants identified as mixed race/Latinx (1), Hispanic (1), and non-Hispanic white (8). Participants identified as trans men (2) and cisgender men (8). Paths to parenthood varied across participants and included biological children from previous relationship (2), IVF in previous relationship (1), public adoption through foster care (5), and altruistic surrogacy (2). Current or most recent employment for participants included: custodial (1), gig/food delivery (1), clerical reception (1), ministry (2), hairdressing (2), resident services for low-income housing (1), housing advocacy (1), and martial arts instruction (1). Participant demographics are presented below in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Self-Reported Demographics

Name*	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Class	Path to Parenthood	Most Recent Employment
Izzy	Cis Male	Hispanic	Middle/ Working	Public Adoption	Custodial Management
Jake	Trans Male	White	Working	Previous Relationship	Gig Work
Chris	Cis Male	White	Working	Public Adoption	Youth Ministry
Thomas	Cis Male	White	Lower-Middle/ Working	Public Adoption	Clerical Reception
Ethan	Trans Male	White	Lower/ Working	Previous Relationship	Resident Services
Sam	Cis Male	White	Lower-Middle/ Working	Public Adoption	Hairdressing
Will	Cis Male	White	Lower-Middle/ Working	Public Adoption	Hairdressing
Tharen	Cis Male	White	Lower-Middle/ Working	Previous Relationship	Ministry
Jimmy	Cis Male	Latinx/ Mixed Race	Lower-Middle/ Working	Surrogacy	Housing Advocacy
Francis	Cis Male	White	Lower-Middle/ Working	Surrogacy	Martial Arts Instruction

Note. Age is not included in table to minimize identifiable information of participants. The mean age of participants was 44.5 years (*SD* = 10.2).

*Pseudonyms

Interviews

With each participating individual or couple, I conducted a series of three, one-hour interviews, each approximately one week apart. Because recruitment occurred over the course of three months, interviews were conducted on a rolling basis, from July-October 2021. Participants were paid $50 after the first interview $50 after the second interview, and $100 after the third interview. Nine participants (90%) participated in all three interviews, and one participated in the second and third interviews only (joining his partner after the first interview).

Initial interviews involved discussion of study logistics, study purpose, and informed consent, as well as a semi-structured interview about the individual's or couple's work and family experiences (see Appendix A for protocol). Sample questions from the interview include: *What does an average day of parenting look like for you? How does your role at your job impact your role as a dad?* Interview protocols were developed based on PWT, research on the work-family interface, and recommendations for conducting oral history interviews put forth by Clandinin and Connelly (2000). For the latter, I listened for the *annals and chronicles*, or major life events and changes described by participants, as well as using open-ended initial and follow-up questions to elicit descriptive narrative detail.

Between each first and second interview, I reviewed the recording of the first interview twice, listening for narrative elements (e.g., specific people, events) that participants described. Then, I created a tailored protocol for the second interview, which included a combination of additional standard questions and follow-up questions specific to the individual or couple. Essentially, second interviews involved deepening

conversations about topics and events discussed in the first interview. During second interviews, I also asked about participants' family and cultural experiences growing up, to contextualize narratives intergenerationally (as recommended by Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Examples of questions that I asked all participants include: *How do you think your experience of parenting is different from other dads, and how is it the same? Could you tell me more about your family growing up—who raised you? What was your family like?* Examples of follow-up questions include: *Could you give an example of what you meant by______? Where/when did* [event previously described] *happen?*

After each second interview, I reviewed the interview recording, noted additional narrative details, and organized the content narratively (i.e., around specific events, with attention to characters, setting, and relationships). Then, I synthesized these data into 4-5 short stories. Importantly, the focus was not only the content or *what* of the stories, but also *how* the stories were told. In other words, my aim in writing these stories was to both document events as participants described them, *and* to highlight the values, challenges, aspirations, and teachings that participants conveyed through their storytelling. For example, Jake described structuring his work schedule around parenting and wanting to appreciate the time he has with Blake while Blake is still a kid. Jake also reported that he often goes to parks with his son. In the narrative, I portrayed the external (e.g., Jake and Blake at the river) and the internal (e.g., Jake's thoughts and feelings): *Today, Jake soaks in their time together at the river, recognizing time as luxurious and limited.* Infusing the dads' values and perspectives into the written narratives was important, so that the stories could offer messages that the dads wanted to convey about themselves and their families.

This process was guided by narrative inquiry's emphasis on stories themselves as agents of change (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020).

During the third and final interview, I explained the rationale for the three-interview process and emphasized the importance that participants saw themselves reflected accurately in the study outcomes. I read out loud through each draft of the 4-5 stories and shared my screen so that participants could read along with me. I paused between each narrative to ask for feedback on whether the dads wanted anything changed, and how to make the stories more accurate (e.g., "Is this you? Do you see yourself here?" Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 148). Some participants also paused me in the middle of narratives to offer feedback, at which point I stopped reading to discuss and document the changes before continuing to read. Participants offered minor feedback on details they wanted changed, such as clarification about specific work responsibilities and benefits, or preferred language to describe where they grew up. Overall, participants reacted positively to the narratives and expressed excitement about seeing themselves and their families represented with depth and accuracy. After reviewing the drafts together, I asked participants for pseudonym preferences for themselves and their family members. Then I asked several meta-questions, including (1) what they would like readers to learn from their stories, (2) recommendations for cultural and policy changes to improve the lives of working-class gay dads, and (3) advice for dads like them who are earlier in their parenting journey. These meta-questions were used to contextualize participants' stories and to write research, practice, and policy recommendations that reflect participants' stated priorities. After the third interviews, I edited the story drafts based on participant feedback. One important methodological decision to note—though I considered it, I did

not provide copies of narratives to participants prior to the third interviews. I made this decision for three reasons: (1) I wanted to see participants' in-the-moment reactions to reading/hearing the narratives for the first time, (2) if participants had concerns about the narratives, I wanted to address those right away, and (3) I did not want to ask the dads to do any additional labor (e.g., reviewing and editing the drafts) beyond the time we had scheduled, as I was only paying them for the interviews.

Analysis

Following the completion of interviews and co-constructing/editing story drafts, my next step for analysis was contextualizing the study within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space. I wrote about the relational, time, and place dimensions of the study before considering themes and other study outcomes. This process of contextualizing is critical to narrative inquiry methodology, as how stories are lived, told, and interpreted would likely look different in another time, place, and relationship (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For example, knowing that this study occurred remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic is necessary for situating the study in time and place. I describe specifics of this study's three-dimensional space in more detail at the beginning of the next chapter.

My next step in the analysis was reviewing participants' answers to meta-questions (e.g., about their goals for the study). Collectively, these discussions during third interviews aimed to get at the question *what do you want this project to do?* Creating projects that do something is the goal of narrative inquiries—based on the assumption that living and telling stories can positively change conditions for participants and their communities. It is presumptuous to say what "positive change" looks like for

participants without explicitly seeking this feedback. Therefore, I relied on participants' answers to these questions as a guiding framework for further analysis. Beginning with the experiences of individual participants is a fundamental component of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006).

Next, I reviewed study narratives and other field/interim texts and coded them narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative coding involves identifying narrative elements, rather than themes, reading the data for what is materially there, rather than interpretively. Some examples include characters (e.g., children, case workers, extended families, housemates, church congregants), settings (e.g., online spaces, apartments, houses, suburbs, immigration/migration, hair salons, a karate school), time (e.g., planning for years, life milestones, childhoods, intergenerational contexts), conflicts (e.g., managing expectations, financial stress, discrimination, COVID impacts, changing family patterns, exhaustion), and other significant plot elements (e.g., going to playgrounds, camping trips, gratitude, surprises, nontraditional work paths). Narrative codes were organized into a single document, with each code labeled with the corresponding participant(s) (e.g., Dad 2), allowing me to view, for example, all the characters across participant narratives. By doing this, I could view parallels and differences, such as the diverse social support structures across participant narratives (e.g., families of origin, queer chosen families, church communities, couples with kids). This coding process expanded my thinking beyond the theoretical/ conceptual, to a focus the "real world" components of participants' stories.

After coding narratively, I returned to my literature review and theoretical framework for the study. Drawing from constructs within PWT, I reviewed field and

interim texts again, this time "thinking with theory" (Mazzei & Jackson, 2012) and noting how PWT brought out new ways of thinking about the data. Mazzei and Jackson (2012) provide guidance for using theory as method in qualitative research, allowing a theoretical concept to guide the process of analysis. In this case, I used the PWT core construct of decent work as a lens for reviewing the data and noting how a PWT framework helped me to further refine study themes. This process involved not only considering the construct of decent work, but also other important PWT constructs including the interface of paid work and unpaid care work, as well as structural and identity-based factors that shape access to decent work. For example, many participants described reducing hours or leaving jobs to prioritize family responsibilities. From a PWT perspective, factors such as family leave policies, childcare access, and individual priorities all played roles in constraining or enhancing access to decent work at these transition points.

Finally, I synthesized these multiple stages of analysis to answer the research questions. Using participant perspectives as a starting point, I integrated narrative elements and theoretical constructs from PWT into three domains: themes across participant narratives, social/policy recommendations, and advice for other working-class gay dads. These outcomes were condensed into a brief survey for the purpose of seeking participant feedback on their perceived usefulness and accuracy.

Follow-Up Survey

In January 2022, 3-6 months after final interviews, I emailed participants a Qualtrics survey to seek their feedback on study themes, sociopolitical recommendations, and parenting advice (see Appendix D). Given narrative inquiry's emphasis on co-

construction between researchers and participants, it was important to incorporate participant input during the interview process and again as part of data analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Participants were asked to rate their level of agreement with each theme, based on their experience, on a 5-point Likert scale, from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Participants were also given the option to add comments to explain their perspective. For structural recommendations, participants rated on a 5-point Likert scale how much they agreed each recommendation would be beneficial at a societal level, and a separate rating for how beneficial it would be for their family specifically, with the option to leave comments. For recommendations for other dads, participants could rate their agreement with each statement, based on their experience, on a 5-point Likert scale, and leave additional comments and recommendations. Seven participants (70%) completed the follow-up survey and were each paid $25. Participant quantitative and qualitative responses were used to edit and condense the list of themes, a process further explained in the Results chapter.

CHAPTER III

RESULTS

In this chapter, I first provide context for interpreting results using the narrative inquiry framework of the three-dimensional inquiry space (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Then, I share participant narratives organized into four parts (history, becoming dads, work-family interface, and identity). Given there is no agreement on a 'correct' way to format narratives (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006), I provide a rationale for this four-part structure. Finally, I present themes based on interview data and participant feedback, connecting these themes to PWT and previous research with gay and working-class dads. In the following chapter, I discuss how these stories and themes generate and inform recommendations for policy, practice, and future research.

Three-Dimensional Inquiry Space

As described in the methods chapter, narrative inquiry emphasizes the context of research outcomes within a metaphorical three-dimensional space, which includes time, place, and relationships (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Based on the pragmatist understanding of experience as contextual and always changing, narrative inquirers stress the importance of knowing when, where, and with whom studies are conducted to make sense of the results (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2006).

Time

Data collection occurred from July 2021 to January 2022. The context of this period is significant from a legal perspective. For one, federal protection for marriage equality was passed in summer 2015, just 6 years before this study—most participants became dads before this legislation was passed. As described in the literature review,

policy barriers persist for LGBTQ+ families in many states. At the time of this writing, congress has not yet passed the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family (ECDF) Act, which would federally prohibit discrimination against prospective foster and adoptive parents who are LGBTQIA+ and/or unmarried (U.S. Library of Congress, 2021). During this study, numerous states have passed anti-trans legislation, and Florida just passed what critics call the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which prohibits discussion of LGBTQ+ families in elementary schools (Lavietes & Ramos, 2022).

Participant ages varied widely, and these intergenerational differences also contextualize the study findings. For instance, younger participants were in their 20s in the early 2010s, a time when societal attitudes and protections for LGBTQ+ people rapidly improved (Meyer, 2016). Older participants, on the other hand, were in their 20s in the 1980s and 1990s, when gay men (and especially trans men and LGBTQ+ BIPOC communities) were less understood and accepted (Román, 1998). While exclusion from mainstream society partially contributed to vibrant queer communities and subculture (Arnold & Bailey, 2009; Román, 1998), marginalization also contributed to high levels of minority stress during a period of tragedy for the LGBTQ+ community (i.e., the peak of the AIDS epidemic in the U.S. Meyer, 2003). Given how quickly U.S. mainstream society has shifted regarding LGBTQ+ acceptance—though many LGBTQ+ rights continue to be a precarious (Lavietes & Ramos, 2022)—it is important to look back and recognize that many participants grew up when the notion of out gay men becoming dads was radical.

Another chronological factor for contextualizing this study is the state of the world of work and economy. Income and wealth inequality in the U.S. has been

increasing since the 1980s, with upper-income families becoming richer, while middle and lower-income families experience wage stagnation as the cost-of-living increases (Horowitz et al., 2020). Furthermore, the world of work has become, in many ways, more precarious, (Allan et al., 2021; Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018), described in more detail in the literature review.

Finally, this study occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, a distinct historical time with profound impact on peoples' work and family lives (Blustein et al., 2020). Most participants were impacted by the pandemic economically, whether they were laid off, suspended from working, or needed to quit/reduce their hours to take care of their children. As a result, during the time frame of this study, many participants were in a state of heightened economic precarity and work transition. In some situations, the pandemic offered increased quality time for participants to connect with their children, but also created stressors in terms of protecting their children's health, supporting at-home learning, and managing expenses on a reduced budget. Some participants also lost family members and other loved ones to the virus. Therefore, the fact that this study occurred during a global pandemic cannot be disentangled from the study results.

Place

Regarding place, participants and I all lived on the West Coast—either during the study or within the past year. Considering time-place interaction, the West Coast is a place with some of the most progressive LGBTQ+ legislation (MAP, 2022) *and* the highest cost of living in the country (U.S. News & World Report, 2022). As a result, it is a region that currently supports wealthy gay dads, but in some ways fails to adequately support working-class gay dads. Though I tried to recruit some participants in more rural

areas, participants generally lived in or near mid-sized and large cities. Many participants (and I) grew up outside of liberal West Coast cities, often in regions with more conservative LGBTQ+ politics. For those who moved in adulthood, moving was often, at least in part, motivated by the desire to live in a more affirming location.

Another place-based consideration is that all interviews occurred over Zoom, almost exclusively with cameras on. Online video platforms like Zoom have become ubiquitous during the pandemic, for everything from distance learning to telemedicine appointments. Given that we were over a year into the pandemic, all participants expressed a high degree of comfort and familiarity with the Zoom platform. Some of the distinctive features of Zoom interviews included increased accessibility (e.g., no need to secure childcare), the ability to recruit participants in a larger geographic area, and the ability to screen share when co-editing narrative drafts. Zoom interviews also offered a window into one another's space, as participants saw the inside of my home office, and I saw participants in their homes. Some participants even asked their children to come over and say hello, something that wouldn't have been possible in a more formal setting. At the same time, video interactions are not the same as in-person ones. Zoom is literally *not* a 3-dimensional space, but rather a 2-dimensional representation. Although it is not possible to say how, I suspect the results would differ in some ways had the interviews been conducted in person, particularly if I also had the opportunity to observe the dads engaging with their children on the playground, at the dinner table, etc.

Relationships

This dimension refers to the relationships between participants, each other, and me. Each participant and I met for three, one-hour meetings over the course of about

three weeks. Multiple meetings allowed for us to develop rapport and get to know one another more than would be possible during a single interview. At the same time, three hours is clearly very limited when compared with long-term fieldwork, as in ethnographic research for example. Participants did not meet one another, but those who participated as couples were able to build on and react to one another's ideas throughout the interview process. For dads who participated as couples and/or while their kids were home, it is likely that the physical presence of family members impacted what participants did and did not share. Third-party presence (especially the presence of a partner) has been found to influence what participants report during research interviews, and may improve data accuracy when discussing topics involving both partners, such as division of labor in household tasks (Schröder & Schmiedeberg, 2020).

As with any researcher-participant relationship, differences in identities, life circumstances, and roles should also be considered when reflecting on the study context, particularly regarding how interviews were structured, carried out, and later interpreted and reported (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Being a gay man with experience in LGBTQ+ communities helped me to connect with participants, empathize with some of their experiences, and notice subtext in our conversations. Also, having lived in Washington, Oregon, and California, my familiarity with the regions in which participants lived gave me a better understanding of place-based considerations. At the same time, I have a substantial amount of class privilege, both as a doctoral student and as someone who grew up in a middle-class household. These privileges shaped my engagement with participants, limiting my comprehension of working-class lived experiences. Furthermore, my identities as cisgender, white, and U.S.-born mean that I hold many

unearned privileges that cloud my ability to accurately represent the stories of participants whose identities and experiences differ from my own. Finally, I am younger than all participants and do not have any children, placing us in different life stages. The purpose of naming these overlaps and differences is not to convince the reader that I am qualified to do this study, or to suggest that because of researcher-participants differences, the results are not valid. Rather, it is to be clear about relational context, which always influences study outcomes, and acknowledge these similarities and differences as a basis for critique of the findings.

To reduce researcher-participant power dynamics, I tried to be consistently transparent with participants. This started with calling prospective participants to screen for eligibility and briefly explain the rationale for the study. Sometimes, during interviews, participants expressed concern that their responses to questions were too far afield from the interview protocol. At these moments, I assured participants that with the narrative approach, interviews did not need to follow a fixed pattern. In the third interviews, I supported transparency by explaining more about the research methodology, including the value of narratives for demonstrating nuance and contextualizing participants' distinct experiences. Across interviews, participants sometimes asked me personal questions, including my field of study and whether I want to become a dad. I answered these questions openly, welcoming discussion about my personal and professional interest in the research topic, as well as my own path regarding family and work life. Consistent with my feminist approach as a clinician and researcher (Conlin, 2017), I view appropriate self-disclosure as an opportunity to reduce power dynamics and make the research process more relational. Participants also held power in our

interactions, such as deciding what to disclose and having the option to withdraw from the study at any time. Particularly given the Zoom format, leaving the study mid-interview, had the participants wanted to do so, would have been relatively easy. I paid participants after each interview to compensate the labor of participating and to encourage continued engagement. Though this payment may have put some degree of pressure on participants to stay in the study, numerous dads shared that they were participating because they cared about the topic, and though the money was appreciated, it was not the primary motivating factor.

These factors of time, place, and relationships cannot be removed or isolated from analysis. Rather, this metaphorical 3-D space (or literal 2-D space via the Zoom platform), is an important lens for understanding the conditions under which the following narratives were co-constructed between the ten dads and me. As I said to participants in our third interviews, there are more than one thousand ways to tell a particular story. The details we focus on and those we leave out, how the story begins and ends, and the interplay between the material ('I did this') and the discursive ('it means that') could all look different if this project were conducted in a different context. Despite the alternative possibilities for these narratives, the ones in this dissertation were written with intention--to provide an accurate and affirming picture of the lives of working-class gay dads living on the West Coast and, in so doing, to broaden the reader's thinking about family and work.

I struggled to determine how to organize the narratives. I thought I might structure them around the seven themes that I describe later in this chapter. That didn't work, however, because the themes came after the narratives were written, and the stories don't

neatly fit into those seven categories. I also considered leaving each participant's stories separate, but that seemed to create a false barrier between the shared experiences across dads. Additionally, I wanted to ensure that each family had a roughly equal amount of content in the Results section, so as not to privilege one dad's stories over those of another dad. After careful deliberation, I organized the narratives into four mini-chapters: history, becoming dads, work-family interface, and identity. I selected these four chapters because (1) they are directly relevant to my research questions, (2), they align with narrative inquiry in terms of structuring by narrative elements rather than by theme (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), and (3) all participants can be included in each mini chapter with this format. In short, the organization is not arbitrary. Additional narratives that were also used in analysis, but that are less directly related to the research questions, can be found in Appendix E.

Apart from minor grammatical edits, I kept each story basically unchanged after incorporating participant feedback from our third interviews, as participants approved specific drafts, and altering the stories would have broken this agreement. The stories have been de-identified to protect the privacy of the study participants. Each participant was given the option to select pseudonyms for himself and his family members. Some dads had partners who are included in the narratives but did not participate in the interviews—only dads who participated are named in the headings.

Part One: History

Izzy

Long before becoming a parent, Izzy learned how to balance childcare and work. He grew up in Mexico, the oldest of five children. Izzy had many fond memories from childhood of spending time with his mom: going out to eat on the weekends, playing in the backyard. She made things happen. When her kids wanted a pool, she brought a large

tub home and filled it with water so they could swim. Izzy's dad was away a lot, often travelling to the U.S. for extended periods of time to make money. From age 11, Izzy took care of his younger siblings while his mom worked. Although the family struggled financially, Izzy's mom worked hard to provide for all her kids. They always had their needs covered.

Around the time he started caring for his siblings, Izzy also took an after-school job at a shop specializing in traditional, handmade chairs. Izzy wanted to do this to help his mom by covering his own expenses. Though she worried about him falling behind in school, Izzy eventually convinced her that he could handle the part-time work. And he did, balancing school, work, and childcare until he graduated from high school. As a teenager, he often felt angry at the situation—that he had so much responsibility, that his mom had to work so hard, and that his dad wasn't around. Now, he understands these events as shaping who he is. At the same time, Izzy wants his kids to have a different experience. He doesn't want them to worry about money, or to take on so much responsibility so young. He wants them to enjoy being kids. Izzy and Tito try to make sure Lala, Kiki, and QB have everything they need, and then some. They remind their kids of the work required to pay for things, so they will appreciate what they have.

Jake

Jake grew up in a working-class family that believed in union jobs as pathways to the middle class. As a child, Jake learned this through listening and observation, also realizing that while his dad's union claimed to support the working-class, the unspoken subtext was to help working-class cis white men. Jake's dad worked as a heavy equipment operator, clocking a million hours. In the winter, the ground froze solid and work became scarce, so to make up for it, Jake's dad worked extra-long days in the summer. Through his union, he had access to a decent salary and benefits. At the same time, he wanted more for his kids, including Jake, preaching that more formal education would lead them to upward social mobility.

For a long time, becoming a dad hadn't been on Jake's radar. In his early 30s, others had imposed the expectation of parenting on him. He'd flown home to come out to his family as trans. They'd thought he was going to tell them he was pregnant. *No. I came here to tell you I've been taking testosterone, and when I die, don't bury me in a dress and don't use that name.*

A few years later, when seeking gender-affirming surgery, Jake again met the expectations of parenthood, this time in a differently uncomfortable way. Accessing gender-affirming care at the time was challenging, and often required lying about pain. After getting a recommendation from some trans friends and then a referral to another provider, Jake found himself in a medical office with a young doctor who agreed to do the procedure. *You can trust me,* she'd reassured him, asking Jake to be honest with her about his medical needs. After Jake opened up, then came the doctor's doubts. *Are you sure you never want to carry your own children? But are you really sure?* Jake was completely sure, had made this decision long before this doctor's appointment.

Ultimately, he got what he needed, but the doctor's questioning felt invasive and inappropriate.

Chris and Thomas

We met on a hookup app—well, website—twenty years ago, Chris recounts.
I Tindered him, Thomas jokes.
And we've been hooking up for 20 years since, they laugh.

Chris was raised in what felt to him like a typical, albeit somewhat chaotic, nuclear family. His mom worked part-time and did most of the parenting. His dad had two jobs, including cleaning offices around town. Chris' family often went to these jobs together, all five of them sharing the tasks of vacuuming, dusting, and taking out the garbage. One thing that stood out to Chris as a kid was the age of his parents—they were 10 years older than most of the parents of his classmates. Now, as an older dad, age hardly seems to matter.

Thomas grew up on a ranch with four generations of family—his siblings, parents, grandparents, and great-grandmother. With an extra mobile home on the property for his great grandma, he and his brother called their place "the compound." Because his parents were away working most of the time, Thomas's grandparents did most of the raising. Thomas recalls something his grandpa, a retired firefighter, would often say. *Good enough for ranch work,* meaning: it doesn't have to be perfect. Thomas sometimes uses this with his own kids.

When Thomas was a young adult, he did some community college and planned to get a 4-year degree. His dad had an auto accident and became paralyzed, so Thomas put his schooling on pause while his dad adjusted to his disability. During this time, Chris and Thomas met, neither expecting anything too serious. They were surprised by how much they connected. Soon after meeting, they moved in together. This helped Thomas save money as he went back to school. Not too long after, they started planning their wedding—in a time before gay marriage was deemed legal by the state. A few years later, when the recession hit, both Chris and Thomas lost their jobs. Unable to afford the cost of living and wanting to live closer to Chris' family, they moved hundreds of miles away. After the move, the conversation about family planning, led by Chris, came to the forefront.

Ethan

Many of Ethan's favorite childhood memories involve art and reading. His family was poor, but his mom, an artist, made sure that Ethan had access to art supplies and books. She homeschooled him for a while—a function of the family's Christian values—trying to shelter Ethan from all things secular. During homeschool lessons, Ethan's mom found ways to integrate hands-on, arts-based learning into everything, which Ethan loved. *The anti-evolution lessons aside, she was a fantastic teacher,* Ethan remembers. Each day, after he finished his schoolwork, Ethan spent many hours by himself, reading outside, sometimes sneaking books about magic that his parents forbade.

As Ethan got older, the tension between his unspoken queerness and the family's strict, religious values intensified. At the time, Ethan didn't talk about being gay, and didn't know the word *transgender* yet. He just knew he was different, a kind of different that, according to his church, landed people in hell. This made Ethan's teen years quite stressful.

Art has always helped Ethan cope with stress. He jokes that their family is cursed: *We're attractive, we're talented, and we can't get out of the arts.* Growing up around his mom's creative projects, Ethan has been an artist himself for as long as he can remember. As a dad, keeping art at the center of their family's culture comes easy. When his kids were little, his mom built a stage so they could do puppetry as a family. Ethan also used to invite neighborhood kids over to host free workshops. *Today we're gonna do watercolors,* he would announce, or: *Today we're gonna decorate cookies. Let's make a big mess!* By now, his kids have dabbled in just about every kind of art, experimenting with all the supplies that Ethan stashes around the apartment.

Sam and Will

When Sam was 16 years old, his eldest nephew was born at home, in the adjacent room. From that day forward, Sam took on the role of primary babysitter for his siblings' kids. The youngest of six, Sam soon had many kids to care for. Sometimes, he'd watch as many as 13 children for a weekend—for him, the more the merrier.

Over a decade later, now teenagers, the nieces and nephews continued to spend a lot of time with Sam and his husband, Will. The couple invited the kids over all the time, sometimes for longer visits during summer and winter holidays. Sam and Will enjoyed spending time with the kids, and they wanted to create a stable and loving space for them. Sam's experience growing up was characterized by neglect, abuse, and addiction. His mom and dad, the 4th stepfather in the family, both worked all the time, providing food and shelter but nothing else—no nurturing or involvement with their kids. As an adult, Sam was the only sibling in his family who didn't struggle with addiction. During one of their regular visits, Sam and Will learned that some of their nieces and nephews were no longer safe living with their parents. At that point, the kids started living with Sam and Will full-time.

Sam and Will had talked about wanting their own kids since early on in their relationship. They became the default parents of their nieces and nephews for several years. Then, Sam's oldest nephew died unexpectedly. After this tragedy, the couple grieved for a long time. Not wanting to replace their nephew, they waited another decade before feeling ready to start their own family.

Tharen

From a young age, Tharen learned what his life should look like. His great-grandparents, immigrants from Sicily, brought their culture to the American Midwest. Passed down from father to son for generations, Tharen inherited an appreciation of Sicilian traditions,

along with a set of patriarchal expectations related to gender, sexuality, and work. Many of these expectations were unspoken, but the indirectness didn't detract from their power. The oldest son in his family, Tharen knew he needed to marry a woman, have children—at least one of whom would be a boy, and provide for his family.

Tharen remembers his young adult self as bound by knots. Trying to live into the images he internalized, he tied himself up. The knots kept unraveling in places, and he would desperately try to repair them, pull them tighter. *I'm straight,* he would say repeatedly to himself. Eventually, he couldn't hold the knots any longer and they fell apart. *Suddenly, what the knots were holding inside of him was finally free to exist.*

Jimmy and Francis

In February 2020, weeks before the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, Jimmy and Francis signed a lease with a new roommate. Facing sky-high rental prices, the couple wanted a bigger living space for when Quinn was born, and splitting rent with a roommate made this possible. With pandemic-related economic impacts, Jimmy got laid off. A few months later, their roommate moved out and, with the country in lockdown, they couldn't find a replacement. Working with their landlord to identify cheaper rental options, the couple ultimately decided to move to the northeast, where Francis's family lived.

They settled on the decision to move for several reasons. One was to help out Francis's parents with their karate school business. Francis, a professional singer, grew up learning karate from his dad. Now, with the family business suffering, Francis offered to help out as a manager and karate teacher. The move was also financially driven. The precarity of renting on the West Coast made moving to a more affordable area appealing. This personal decision aligned with Jimmy's work. After being laid off, he worked for a political party during the 2020 election and then transitioned to the nonprofit sector, overseeing small-dollar donations and membership for a pro-housing organization. Committed to improving housing equity and access in his professional life, Jimmy also felt the real pressures of the national housing market as their family relocated to a more affordable area. The option to work remotely made it possible for Jimmy to keep his new job, a privilege he doesn't take for granted. Perhaps most significantly, living an 8-minute drive from Francis's parents allows for extended family support with Quinn, making the transition to parenthood easier.

Part Two: Becoming Dads

Izzy

Izzy cannot remember a happier day than when his baby was born. That morning, he felt excited and anxious, stomach tight like his body knew she had arrived before he got the news. A couple of nights before, his husband, Tito, dreamed about the baby's birth, but Izzy worried about putting too much hope in dreams. The couple brought another baby into their family a year ago, and due to health issues, the baby didn't make it. The heartbreak from that experience kept Izzy from hoping too fully, protecting himself from

more grief. But despite his caution, he couldn't help but tell his co-workers he'd soon be a father. *Is the baby born yet? Is the baby born yet?* They asked him every day, eagerly awaiting the news. For Izzy, the journey to this joyful day had been long and windy, complicated.

Izzy and Tito had known they wanted to be dads for a long time—this felt normal to them. Tito, the dreamer, wanted five kids. Izzy, more of a realist, thought five might be too many. Regardless of number, they agreed on parenthood, like they agreed on most things. When they first started looking into options, Izzy and Tito realized that becoming dads, as a gay couple, usually costs a lot of money. So, they started saving. Even more affordable options raised difficult life decisions, like choosing whether to pay for adoption or the down payment on a house for their family. Saving for both would take a long time.

As Izzy and Tito waited and planned, something unexpected happened. A co-worker asked Tito if they could take care of a baby for the weekend, a child currently in foster care. When Tito asked Izzy about it, responded, "Sure, we should do it!" With their shared value of supporting kids, this decision came easy. One short stay evolved into years of foster parenting, caring for children for a few days, weeks, or months. Each time, they tried to create a supportive and loving environment for kids who were having a hard time.

One day, after Izzy and Tito had fostered for years, a case worker knocked on their door. "I wanna help you," she told Izzy. "We're gonna have a baby that needs a permanent home." Izzy called her their angel, because she was looking out for them. He and Tito felt so excited to become full-time dads. However, soon after birth, the baby became very sick, too sick to ever come home with them. They continued their work as foster parents, a decision that helped ease the pain of their loss. Almost a year later, the case worker came back, with news about another baby. Izzy and Tito tried to hold back their expectations this time—they didn't tell their family or friends. Privately, they made some preparations, purchasing diapers and a car seat, and shifting from long-term to emergency fostering only.

A month before the baby was due, Izzy and Tito started caring for Lala and Kiki. They reminded the agency, "We have a baby coming soon, we're only able to foster short-term." Case workers kept asking to extend the stay by a few more days, one more week. Enjoying their time with the girls, they always agreed. With each day that passed, Izzy knew it would be more difficult for him to say goodbye to them. The day that the baby was born, Lala and Kiki were still staying with Izzy and Tito.

Late in the morning, with mounting anticipation, Izzy's phone rang and he answered immediately. It was Tito. Heart racing, Izzy listened as Tito confirmed that the baby was born, a healthy baby. Practically running to the school office, Izzy joined a group of his co-workers to share the news. Celebration erupted, and Izzy then waited for what seemed like many hours for more information. At the end of the day, the five of them gathered as a family: Izzy and Tito, Lala and Kiki, and the Queen Bee (a nickname they use for their

baby). As they shared this brilliant moment, Izzy knew he wanted all five of them to stay together as a family. He grinned, overwhelmed with feeling.

Jake

Blake is still a kid-kid. Jake brings him to an elementary school to play basketball, where a shorter basket makes shooting hoops more fun for Blake. Even though he's still little, Jake notices his son growing up. Blake understands things he didn't used to understand, so Jake shares more openly now. For example, Blake no longer shields his son from the hurtful absence of his grandma, Jake's mother. She moved to the West Coast to "help with the baby" ten years ago but, despite living close by, rarely sees Jake and Blake. Jake finds this particularly hurtful, given his mother's greater involvement with his brother's (straight) family, who live more than 1,000 miles away. Jake doesn't talk at length about the situation with Blake, but he doesn't try to hide it either.

One thing that's changed a lot in the past year has been Blake wanting his dad to be more out. Jake doesn't try to hide his transness or "pass"—a troublesome concept—but after he became a dad, he brought it up less often. Conversations with other parents that started with *Hi, I'm Blake's dad, and I'm trans* tended to get uncomfortable for Jake pretty quickly. Now, for his son, he's coming out more. Sometimes at his kid's soccer games, he'll tell other parents he's trans. Then the floodgates open—the other parents start asking personal questions about where the genetic material came from and the mechanics of the whole thing. His straight friends empathize with the other parents—*they don't mean any harm, they're just curious.* This frustrates Jake even more. *When you find out I'm trans, you don't need to know where the sperm came from. Why would you think you need to know that?* he wonders, bewildered that people forget they can Google these questions.

The worst is when people say, *Oh, so you're not Blake's real dad.* This statement hurts. It feels invalidating. So he and Blake talk about it. *What does it mean to be a real dad?* They agree that fatherhood is about taking care of your child's needs and spending time together in a loving way—not about how a child was born. These conversations feel healing for Jake. He also talks with his friend, another trans dad, who reassures him, helping him feel more grounded in his fathering role.

And now that Blake has grown up a bit, he likes doing father-son activities he didn't used to enjoy. Before, they'd go to sporting events together, but Blake would only want to go if a friend came along and often wanted to leave early. A few weeks ago, Jake and Blake got some free baseball tickets through the school district. This time, Blake couldn't hold in his excitement. He was all about the game. The two had fun and felt so close. They stayed until the end, and afterward, when Blake got picked up by his mom, the first thing out of his mouth: *We had the best time!*

Chris and Thomas

The first few weeks that Aspen and Levi came to live with Chris and Thomas, they didn't leave the house. From their trainings, Chris and Thomas learned the importance of nesting with newly adopted children, working to form a secure attachment and build a routine. Thomas took family leave, and Chris also took time off. At the time, Aspen was 2 years old, and quickly adjusted to the new rhythm. Levi, 7, had a harder time. Chris and Thomas tried to help Levi feel safe by playing video games he liked and running around the yard with paper masks they'd crafted. After a few weeks, Chris and Thomas announced that their case worker was coming over for a short visit, just to check in. Upon hearing *case worker*, Levi hid under the table, not wanting to move to a new home again.

Even now, the attachment-forming process continues. After a psychological assessment, they learned that Levi's different ways of thinking and learning were likely caused by complex trauma and not another form of neurodivergence. Going to family therapy helps, as Chris and Thomas learn ways to identify and react to their kids' trauma responses in a loving way. Though parenting feels challenging sometimes, Chris and Thomas love their kids and appreciate their personalities. Chris and Thomas laugh when they see gay-fathered families on Instagram, wearing cute matching outfits on extravagant vacations. These curated profiles don't reflect their gay dad experience at all. Photos of their family camping at state parks, with silly faces, wrinkled shirts, and bedhead from sleeping in a tent—now that's getting closer to a good representation.

Ethan

In his last year of high school, Ethan got pregnant and had his first kid. A few years later, he had his second. Becoming a single parent as a teenager forced Ethan to grow up overnight. At the time, his parents, though adamantly anti-abortion, offered zero financial help. They provided some emotional support, parenting advice, and occasional babysitting—things Ethan appreciated, but not the type of support he could use for food and family housing.

When his kids were still young, Ethan came out as trans and gay. His kids rolled with this, unphased with the transition to "Dad". *Kids are good at adjusting to new things, understanding in different ways than adults.* Even with his kids' go-with-the-flow attitudes, Ethan continues to notice the lingering effects, good and bad, from his upbringing. He feels grateful that his parents have become more affirming since then, regularly voicing that "Jesus loves the gays." As an adult, Ethan still loves art and reading, and he encourages his kids to read about magic whenever they want to.

Sam and Will

As hairdressers, Sam and Will spend their working hours chatting with clients, the salon always buzzing with gossip. *Do my clients come to me for the haircut, or do they come to me for the stories?* Sam wonders, laughing. Some of Sam's clients have been coming to him for haircuts and stories for almost 40 years. These clients listened as Sam and

Will shared the ups and downs with their nieces and nephews and later, when they talked about their process to become foster parents.

One day, while Sam was trimming the hair of a long-time client, she dropped some big news. I want you to adopt my great-grandchild, she stated with a matter-of-factness to show that she made up her mind. Sam had talked with this client about hopes to become a parent, and she'd offered him helpful parenting advice, but he never expected something like this to happen. Though an unconventional way of adopting through the foster care system, a few months later, Sam and Will were in the hospital room for their son's birth. Sam knit a sweater while they waited, and then he cut the umbilical cord. The situation around the pregnancy was complex and traumatic, but the birth itself unfolded like a miracle. Against the medical team's wishes, Sam and Will pushed for Greg's mother to stay with them in the hospital, so she could remember more about Greg's birth. To this day, she continues to be involved with the family, coming over for Christmas, Mothers' Day, and other get-togethers.

Soon after the birth, Sam and Will often brought their infant to the salon while they worked. Sometimes, a nanny would come to help. Other times, Sam and Will set Greg's crib up next to their salon chairs, switching between rocking their baby and cutting hair. Every day at lunch, Will carried Greg around the neighborhood for a walk. Most of their clients expressed approval when the baby arrived. In fact, many seemed more excited about greeting Greg than about getting their hair done. Most special of all, Greg's great-grandmother continued coming to the salon, each time getting to see her great-grandson. Not all the reception was so positive, however. Several of their clients—maybe 15 percent—didn't think a gay male couple should parent. Some of these clients stopped coming to the salon. Others expressed disapproval, and then Sam *mysteriously* had a hard time finding an open appointment for them. Seeing how attentive and loving Sam and Will were with their kids, some of the initially skeptical clients came around over the years.

Now, Sam and Will still talk about their family at work. They feel grateful for the gems of parenting advice they've learned from their clients. And, they remember that talking about family is what made it possible for them to adopt Greg in the first place.

Tharen

The problem is, when we try to live into an image, we always fall short, Tharen reflects now, looking back on his earlier years. *We wind up in a place where we're not happy, maybe even angry.* Tharen married a woman, became a minister, and started having kids. He soon experienced dissonance as a young pastor. Trying to be a good minister by mirroring his role models, Tharen grew disillusioned. He felt bitter toward his congregation but couldn't explain why. With prayer and meditation, he decided to step out of the pulpit and find other, more personally authentic ways to serve God.

Meanwhile, Tharen was trying to live into the image of husband and father at home. Though expected of him, his marriage with Amber felt unnatural somehow. He'd known he was curious about his sexuality since junior high but bent over backwards to quell this

desire. Even in his inner world, where sexual fantasies emerged, Tharen found ways to convince himself that these fantasies were heterosexual. Over time, the effort required to suppress his sexuality reached a boiling point. In his mid-30s, Tharen shared about his questioning with his wife. Once the conversation started, it wasn't long before Tharen came out as bisexual and later, as gay. Amber, crying but also proud of him, took this news hard.

Jimmy and Francis

While most of the city around them slept, Jimmy and Francis stayed up late into the night, fluorescent hospital lights glowing against the darkness outside. Bursting with anticipation, the couple waited as patiently as they could, repeating to each other in half-disbelief: *We're about to have a baby!*

They had travelled to the Southeast for the occasion—one in a series of visits—where the couple's surrogate Jessica, a close friend of Jimmy's, lived with her family. The zig-zagging journey to that night began years prior, when Jimmy and Francis realized both wanted to become dads. After exploring family-planning options, surrogacy stood out as their top choice. The cost, however, seemed almost unthinkable—and would certainly mean taking on substantial debt. As they sifted through possibilities and worked to save up money, Jimmy and Francis shared about their family dreams with close friends. When Jessica learned about the couple's need for a surrogate, she whole-heartedly volunteered. *Are you sure?* Jimmy asked, recognizing the gravity of the commitment. *Absolutely,* she reassured the couple.

Though Jimmy and Francis had been warned against choosing friends as surrogates, the relative affordability made the option impossible to pass up. For months, Jimmy, Francis, and Jessica navigated a web of legal and medical hurdles, doing a lot of research on their own. Though unconventional, their amateur approach worked, and soon, Jessica became pregnant, Jimmy the biological father.

Now, nearly a year later, Jimmy and Francis sat with Jessica through the southern mid-spring night. When Quinn finally entered the world, the couple beamed, completely enraptured by her. Quinn was born in the midst of a dark season for Jimmy and Francis. They'd lost several family members to COVID-19 and other tragedies in the months surrounding Quinn's birth. Now, with Quinn in their arms, a sense of hopefulness eclipsed their grief. In the morning, the couple would face discrimination from the hospital staff, who would refuse to put both of their names on the birth certificate—something yet to be resolved 6 months later. But for now, Jimmy and Francis reveled in their first hours as parents, thanking Jessica repeatedly as they celebrated and watched Quinn sleep.

Part Three: Work-Family Interface

Izzy

Izzy often notices his roles at work and home overlapping, influencing one another. At the school where he works, he is around kids all the time. As head custodian, he keeps the school clean, and he also educates. He teaches kids about following the rules, staying safe, learning. From interacting with hundreds of kids, there are few things about being a foster parent that surprise him. Tito, also an educator, is used to working with kids, too. The two of them bring their experience to their roles as dads, creating a warm, yet structured environment. In the reverse direction, Izzy observes how foster parenting improves his ability to work with kids at the school. Many children he's taken care of at home have histories of complex trauma. Through these experiences, along with the many hours of trainings and YouTube videos he's watched to educate himself, he developed a better understanding of how to support kids experiencing emotional difficulties. The makes him more patient and empathetic with the kids at school.

Sometimes, the roles blur too much. Izzy catches himself bringing his work-self home, a strictness he wants to leave behind at the school. When he notices this, he pauses, reminding himself to relax a bit. He and Tito want to create structure and stability for his kids, but also want the kids to be free to play and make their own choices. They talk about parenting approaches a lot, bringing intention into how they interact with their kids. The two of them grew up in conservative, religious contexts where they were often told what to think and do. Some of these lessons were helpful, but many didn't click for Izzy. He really wants his kids to feel free to think and make decisions for themselves.

Jake

For the past several years, Jake has pieced together various gigs to make ends meet. This works well for his schedule, especially since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, since he has a child at home half the time. He splits all parenting responsibilities with his ex-wife. Jake is over career climbing, no longer interested in working hard for what feels like an empty promise of the American Dream. With gig work, he prioritizes time with his son first, and feels so much more emotionally engaged than when he worked full-time. He's not tied to email, can fully invest his energy in his son. When his son is away, Jake works. He prefers delivering food over other delivery app work—the tips are better. Nobody cares if he doesn't trim his beard or if he doesn't wear socks. He'll also do casual under-the-table jobs, like dog walking, housesitting, and yard work. Limiting taxable income helps him maintain state-funded insurance—a trans man in his mid 50s, losing insurance would be detrimental.

Sometimes, Jake worries about retirement and his son's future. Especially since his dad died a couple of years ago, he thinks about these existential questions a lot. He feels a sense of precarity, crossing his fingers that the car doesn't break down, that no unexpected veterinary bills come up. Even with these worries, he feels healthier now that he works less and has a greater quality of life. Most important to Jake, he's prioritizing his son while he's still a kid.

Chris and Thomas

In the past two years, Chris and Thomas' household went through many changes. It started when Chris was laid off from one of his two part-time jobs as a youth pastor. For a variety of reasons, including wanting his now teenage son to have a youth pastor who wasn't his dad, Chris soon decided to quit his second youth pastor job too. He felt glad for more uninterrupted time with the kids. Even when working full-time, Chris had always immersed himself in day-to-day parenting. Employed by churches, he brought his kids to work with him, setting them up with Legos and art supplies in church nurseries while he planned youth programs nearby. Now Chris had more flexibility for hands-on parenting. When the family wanted a little extra money—for trips and to pay off the car—he picked up shifts as an Uber driver.

Though he didn't know it yet, Chris would soon need this extra flexibility more than ever. A few months after Chris left his second job, his mother fell and needed caregiving. Chris jumped in to help however he could until his mother passed away a year later. As the family mourned this loss, they invited Chris' 84-year-old father, Papa, to move in with them. Chris and Thomas took over the tasks that Chris' mother had done for Papa for the past 50 years, like finances and cooking. Practically before Papa finished unpacking his bags, their house grew by one more. DHS notified Chris and Thomas that Kevin, a child they'd fostered a couple of years prior, was in foster care again. Chris and Thomas considered Kevin a part of their family; inviting him back felt like the only option. Their children, Aspen and Levi, were thrilled, even though this meant the three kids sharing a bedroom this time.

While all these transitions were happening within the family, the world changed rapidly as COVID-19 spread. This forced the kids home for distance learning, which Chris supervised. Every morning, Thomas left early for his hour-long commute on public transit to the medical office where he worked as a receptionist. Chris woke up the kids, fed them, and got them each set up for online school. By 9am, Papa's TV blared loudly throughout the house, often Discovery Channel shows about conspiracy theories. The trick for Chris was spacing the three kids out enough that they wouldn't interrupt each other, and far enough from Papa's TV so they could focus on their work. Not an easy task. The school dropped off free lunches each week, which Chris prepared one at a time—for some reason each kid had a different lunch schedule.

A chaotic time with everyone at home, someone always needed Chris for something. Papa had a couple of medical crises that put him in the hospital, and the kids struggled to stay motivated and missed their friends. At night, after Thomas got home from his long commute, they gathered around the table to eat the meal Chris had cooked. With the six of them, dinner was never boring. During dinner, Thomas caught up on the family's excitement and drama from the day—these conversations usually involved laughing, headshaking, and plenty of movie quotes.

Cautious about COVID-19, they've kept their family at home as much as possible for the past year and half. Though it feels crowded, Chris and Thomas feel lucky to live in the

house they do. They bought it for just over $200,000 at the bottom of the housing crash, with a little help from Chris' parents. Now, they'd pay double their monthly mortgage for a space half the size if they rented in the same city. Between their relatively affordable housing and adoption assistance from the state, the family can make things work on Thomas' income. They think about housing a lot though—that other couples like them couldn't afford to start a family in their suburb anymore, maybe not in the whole metro region. Though this feels discouraging, Chris and Thomas keep rolling with the changes, enjoying summer as a family and looking forward to when the kids can safely go back to school.

Ethan

When Ethan decided to go to art school, his kids supported him wholeheartedly. The timing was tough as a working, single parent. When Ethan had night classes, his daughter took care of her younger sibling. Beatrice often cooked dinner for Remy--she learned to make a mean macaroni. Ethan resented helicopter parenting—he wants his kids to have freedom and life skills—but he also didn't like leaving them at home alone for extended periods. Whenever he could, he brought them to school with him. The kids spent many hours wandering around the college art studio while Ethan worked on projects. They would approach Ethan's classmates and ask: *What are you working on?* Luring them with the free snacks, Ethan also dragged his kids along to arts shows, one of his favorite pastimes. When he presented his thesis, an exhibit about gender identity and surgery, his kids got really pumped about it—they loved seeing their dad in his element.

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Soon after COVID-19 hit, Ethan had to quit his job. He couldn't work remotely, and his kids wouldn't do distance learning without his supervision. With day care off the table for financial and public health reasons, staying home and living on unemployment was the only option.

Though quitting his job exacerbated the family's financial stress, it also improved Ethan's mental health. He'd been working as a resident services coordinator for low-income people in recovery. With a caseload of over 200, it was a highly demanding job. Previously, Ethan worked as an in-home caregiver for adults with developmental disabilities, and before that, in an inpatient facility for teens struggling with addiction. Each of these paid care work jobs required intense emotional labor, draining Ethan by the end of each workday. He felt chronically exhausted—*This work isn't sustainable for a single parent,* he often thought. He'd observe coworkers doing the bare minimum, but he couldn't bring himself to do this; he wanted to treat people with the dignity they deserved. Returning home exhausted, Ethan wished for more energy to care for his kids.

During COVID, he's had more emotional energy for his family. He needs this extra capacity to cope with sharing such a small space all the time. Now that his kids will be back in school soon, Ethan applies for jobs again. He'd love to do work with art, ideally

something that could pay for their family to get a bigger apartment. After years of sleeping in the apartment living room, a little privacy sounds great.

Sam and Will

The pandemic and related restrictions have favored some job sectors over others. Under government lockdowns, white-collar employees work business-as-usual from home, transitioning their meetings from in-person to Zoom. *Essential workers*, from taxi drivers to farmworkers to nurses, must continue going to work, even with the health risks. Hairdressers fall into a third category. Their workplaces deemed illegal by the state, they cannot work at all.

With no work, Sam and Will stayed home all the time with Greg and Steve. While the boys attended online school, their dads tried to stay quiet, Sam doing creative projects around the house and Will gardening. When summer came, the four of them found ways to entertain themselves. They played board games, did puzzles. Sam and Will watched the news more than ever before, while Greg and Steve played more video games. Early in the pandemic, Sam and Will set up an above-ground pool in the yard. This turned out to be a great decision, as Greg, Steve, and other kids in the housing complex spent every afternoon swimming—except for when the air got too smoky from nearby wildfires. The family rode out the uncertainty together. It has been difficult and stressful, but also fun to spend so much time together.

Sam and Will stopped working for about a year. They lost 40% of their clients, some who'd been with them for decades. Even now, as public health restrictions lift, many clients seem wary to come in for haircuts. Some started going to other salons. In a financially precarious position, Sam and Will wonder how they will maintain their lifestyle. They take advantage of all the government assistance they can but have received far less stimulus money than they'd anticipated. Each works halftime to ensure someone is always home with the kids. Slowly, they rebuild their customer base, one client at a time.

Tharen

After leaving the ministry and before coming out, Tharen spent years working two shifts—a series of paid jobs while being the primary caregiver of his growing family. He worked for several years at a cold-storage warehouse, where he alternated between operating the reach truck and the forklift, stacking frozen meals and lots of French fries. Tharen preferred loading and unloading trucks, since he could work outdoors. Working inside the warehouse, he lost feeling in some of his fingers and toes, until his body adjusted and he got some thicker gloves and socks. In some ways, Tharen really enjoyed the job. He never brought work home, and he worked night shifts or early in the day, allowing him to spend a lot of time with his four kids. At the same time, he struggled with the quota-driven work, never able to move quite fast enough. Tharen was working at the cold-storage warehouse when he came out. He and his wife had been contemplating a move for a while, and his wife left for the West Coast for a new job. Very quickly, everything about Tharen's life changed.

Amber moved with their six-month-old daughter, Sophie. Used to being the primary parent, Tharen had spent every day for the last six months with Sophie: changing her diapers, feeding her, and watching her grow. Now, he wouldn't get to see her for months. This absence felt painful, though Tharen clung to hope that he would soon move too. Struggling financially to pay the mortgage and cover his kids' other needs, he decided to bring his other three children westward to be with their mom. Then, Tharen returned to the Midwest alone, still working at the warehouse. With the company of two cats, Tharen processed the changes happening—coming out, moving, missing his kids. When Amber requested that Tharen send the cats, they left too, leaving Tharen alone in an eerily quiet home.

Eventually, Tharen found a job near his ex and kids, so he left his extended family in the Midwest. During this difficult season, Tharen also opened to new beginnings. While attending his grandfather's funeral, a spiritual experience moved Tharen to feel ready to return to pastoral work. He recognized that his grandfather's life had been characterized by service, not trying to fit a religious mold. *If ministry doesn't have to feel forced,* Tharen thought, *maybe I could give it another try.* The pastor at his church provided opportunities for Tharen to give sermons, teach classes, help with communion, and serve on the church council. During this time, Tharen also started dating men, a liberating experience after so many years of denying his sexuality. Through this process, Tharen met Joaquin, a man he'd been chatting with online. They met in a bookstore where Tharen was shopping for a new Bible. Tharen quickly shared that he had four kids and was planning to be a pastor. With these potentially deal-breaking cards on the table, Joaquin didn't shy away. Six months later, Tharen and Joaquin got married.

Jimmy and Francis

For Jimmy and Francis, splitting parenting roles evenly feels important. When growing up, Francis's dad worked long hours at the family karate business, his mom doing the lion's share of day-to-day parenting. Similarly, Jimmy's dad worked two jobs, and though he loved to spend time with his kids, this usually had to happen on weekends. Jimmy's mom worked too, but came home earlier to take care of Jimmy and his siblings, often helping them with their homework. Both Jimmy and Francis understood and appreciated their parents' hard work—working-class, and Jimmy's parents also immigrants. At the same time, Jimmy and Francis wanted to prioritize daily time with Quinn, and they have taken this commitment seriously. Since day one, Jimmy and Francis have alternated who gets up in the middle of the night with her. Strategically, they align these shifts with their work schedules, so each gets a full night's sleep before a full day of work. Both have taken a step back from job responsibilities to allow for more time with Quinn.

Each of them notices their parenting and work roles overlapping in distinct ways. Francis, who teaches karate three days a week, has reignited his passion for martial arts at the same time as becoming a dad. When talking with students and their families about the benefits of karate, he connects this to parenting. *There are so many life skills karate teaches, that we as parents want our kids to learn: self-defense, awareness, dedication,*

confidence, community, physical fitness. Francis's upbringing in a family committed to karate taught him to value these things. Now, he enjoys the opportunity to bring his perspective as a new dad to mentoring students, while also allowing martial arts values to shape his time with Quinn.

Because Jimmy works from home, Quinn often joins him during his meetings. He notes the perspective-shift that happened when work became less important to him than it used to be. *Now, feeding her is the most important thing I need to do. Changing her diaper is more important than anything else.* Jimmy's coworkers know the days when he cares for Quinn, and seeing her smiling, crying, and arm-waving on Zoom has become commonplace. Jimmy laughs that Quinn knows when his most important meetings are, because she always poops right when they start. She has a good time with this, giggling and making a mess until Jimmy can clean her up.

The balance works well for Francis and Jimmy —both getting quality one-on-one time with Quinn in her first months of life, while also sharing the role of providing financially for the family. They hope to soon have childcare support a few hours a week, but never want to stop being the primary caregivers. The high cost of childcare aside, spending time with Quinn is the top priority for both of them.

Part Four: Identity

Izzy

When they came out as gay, Izzy and Tito needed to prepare their families, give them time to let the reality sink in. Izzy was patient with them, but he wouldn't hide his relationship with Tito. Initial reactions hurt, but with time, both families grew supportive. Izzy appreciated the effort their families made to change their perspectives, and how Tito's parents included Izzy as a part of their family. Now they get together all the time—support from family makes parenting easier. Izzy and Tito also have their chosen family, two straight couples with kids who live nearby. They rely on each other for childcare and parenting advice, creating a small parenting community.

As long as they have the support of family and friends, Izzy doesn't care what others think. Izzy doesn't remember a time when his family experienced discrimination. When they go out, they do get a lot of attention though. He and Tito notice the stares and whispers when others see a gay Latino couple with three kids. They notice this most in spaces with other Latinos, something that Izzy and Tito are now used to. "They're not there yet," Izzy assures himself when he sees people staring curiously. He doesn't feel the need to explain the attention to his kids, especially since their family feels so normal to him. For himself, he frames the attention as positive. *People are taking time out of their day to talk about us, like we're celebrities!* This helps make the attention feel better. If someone were to say or do something directly hurtful to his family or kids, he wouldn't tolerate that. So far, he feels grateful that hasn't happened, that he lives in a time and place that he experiences as quite supportive.

As with his gay identity, as an immigrant, Izzy doesn't personally relate with narratives of struggle. Working at his family's restaurant after coming to the U.S., he didn't face challenges with isolation or finding work like he knows other families do. Now through his work at the school, and volunteering with a nonprofit that helps immigrant families, he has connected more with his own immigration experience and learned about others' stories, recognizing the many barriers and difficulties that other immigrant families face. Although he doesn't always exactly relate to what others are going through, he finds common ground and supports families going through hard times.

Jake

On a warm, early summer day, Jake takes his son, Blake and their dog, Sailor, to a favorite place along the river. It's a shady spot with maple leaves overhead. They don't have money for big trips this summer, like many of the affluent families at Blake's school. But the connection between Jake and Blake makes their local outings feel precious and wholesome. They enjoy going to the park to shoot hoops, attending community events, cooking together. Often, like today, they hang out for hours by the river. Jake remembers to pull out his phone to snap a quick photo, wanting to preserve individual moments so the summer doesn't all blur together. Blake does a silly pose with Sailor, a sturdy rescue mix who completes their little family.

Having Sailor around makes parenting easier for Jake. The dog helps Blake learn assertiveness, and about companionship. Not that parenting Blake feels too difficult. An easy kid, Blake came into the world happy to be here. Jake can't recall a time when he needed to discipline his son. It helps that Jake treats him like a person, always telling him how much he loves him, likes who he is, enjoys spending time with him. Although all these things are true, it didn't used to be so easy to show his love for Blake. Jake grew up in a working-class German American family in the Midwest. *Don't speak until you're spoken to,* a common expression from his parents. His father had viewed parenthood as providing, not nurturing. These cultural messages still come up into Jake's thoughts from time to time, often as worries that he's spoiling Blake. Going against his own experience of being parented, Jake leans into an emotion-focused fatherly role, teaching his son—and his son's friends—to recognize and express their feelings. Above all else, Jake puts his kid's needs at the center of their life together. Some of the best times are when the three of them squeeze together on one third of Jake's wide couch, Blake and Sailor cuddling up with Jake and feeling safe. Today, Jake soaks in their time together at the river, recognizing time as luxurious and limited.

Chris and Thomas

For Chris and Thomas, church has always been an important part of family life. Yes, Chris worked at the church as a youth pastor, but their involvement extended beyond that. When they adopted Aspen and Levi, church friends threw a party, showering the family with gifts. Over the years, the family spent a lot of time at church: Sunday school, cleaning up after mission trip fundraisers, and hanging out while Chris worked. Their denomination drew an older crowd, so Aspen was usually the youngest in the congregation. Though they would like their kids to have more peers at

church, Chris and Thomas stay because of their church's queer-affirming stance, something many Christian churches with young families don't offer.

Chris and Thomas feel the discomfort of a fundamentalist-leaning Christianity when they bring Levi and Aspen to visit with their biological grandma. When they first adopted the kids, her response had been, *"Oh. I didn't know they would let two dads do that."* Her disapproval makes their time together strained. Chris and Thomas continue with the visits because they want their kids to have this relationship, even though she questions the couple's right to parent.

In public with the kids, Chris occasionally faces judgment from other parents. For instance, at local parks, Chris sometimes overhears groups of mothers whispering about him. Exchanging looks of concern, the mothers worry that Chris may be a pervert, a tired and harmful stereotype about gay men. Flustered, Chris calls his kids over by name to show that he is at the park with his children. As a loving dad who also works with youth, having his parenthood undermined feels painful. This exclusion makes their church community even more important, a space where Chris and Thomas are respected as parents.

Ethan

When Ethan drops his kids off at school, he keeps his head down to avoid eye contact with other parents. Meeting new people, whether at his kids' school or elsewhere, can feel awkward for Ethan. Reading him as a young, gay man, strangers express surprise when they learn Ethan has kids. Depending on the circumstances, he doesn't want to out himself as trans. Even when people don't ask invasive questions—which they often do—he sees their wheels turning, trying to piece together his life story. His kids get questions too, especially *where is your mom?* Recently, the kids made up a joke that their mom died in a shark attack. Ethan can't help laughing at this, watching his kids pretend to become deeply saddened when people mention sharks.

On dating sites, Ethan tries to strike a balance between casual conversations while also being upfront about his kids. It seems to him that other gay guys feel intimidated by the prospect of children.

Despite these barriers to meeting new people, Ethan surrounds himself with a loving, chosen family. He loves that his kids get to grow up around queer adults. Now that his younger child came out as nonbinary, his daughter holds the role as the only straight person in their group. Friends make parenting more manageable for Ethan. He can have adult time away from his kids, which helps his mental health. His friends also love including Ethan's kids in their movie and board game nights, creating a queer, multigenerational space where Ethan doesn't have to parent alone. Even his queer friends, several in the midst of family planning, have very different life circumstances from Ethan. For one, he'll be an empty nester by the time their kids are out of diapers—*Where were y'all back in 2005?* He jokes, slightly embarrassed that he had kids unexpectedly while his queer friends plan extensively for their families.

About a year ago, Ethan started dating one of his close friends. Beatrice had noticed their chemistry before Ethan did. *He CLEARLY wants to date you,* she told him. Now, they've been dating for over a year. A polyamorous relationship, Ethan and Elliott navigate communication and shared time across their families, including Elliott's other partner and Ethan's kids. The kids grew up around poly relationships and don't think twice about it; like many other kids, they just don't want to see their dad kissing someone. Elliott doesn't have a parenting role, but he does have a strong relationship with Beatrice and Remy. Recently, Elliott brought Ethan and the kids on a trip across the country to meet his family. Ethan had never taken the kids on a trip like that before or gone on one himself for that matter. He had a blast, especially watching his kids have access to the kind of vacation they had seen a thousand times on TV.

Sam and Will

Before Sam and Will adopted, they thought a lot about the type of environment they wanted for their future kids. Between Sam's difficult childhood and the challenges they'd experienced raising nieces and nephews, both Sam and Will wanted their kids to grow up in a safe, nurturing home. Will grew up in a family like this, with affectionate parents and a highly involved mother. She would often tell Will how rewarding it was for her to be a parent, a message that stuck with Will into adulthood. As Sam and Will planned for their new family, they thought about sharing roles so that Will could pass on the love he'd received as a child. Will would bring this warmth to fathering, always doting and nurturing their kids.

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Although their family is different in some ways, Sam and Will show their kids that in most ways, their family is just the same as other families—loving parents doing their best to take care of their children. Even though their family feels normal, they've always received a lot of attention when they go out. People watch them—two white men with two boys, one white and one with darker skin. *People are always trying to classify, quantify, put us in a box,* explains Sam. Sometimes, they must educate the kids' schools about their family so both dads are allowed to pick up the kids. They hope that their children will grow up around families with diverse structures, ethnic backgrounds, and cultures, appreciating the many ways to be a family. Though this often happens organically—they live in one of the most diverse regions of the country— Sam and Will don't seek out adult friends based on their identities. They tried this with other gay dads and found they had nothing in common, except for being gay dads.

Tharen

Now, the dust of transition has settled a bit and Tharen grows used to his new life. On Sundays, he stands in front of the congregation and delivers sermons, now less constrained by the expectations of others. He feels discrimination from the one family that left the congregation because he is gay, but he doesn't let this bother him. Besides, the rest of the congregation supports him. This job also allows more flexibility for long-

weekend visits, and now he and Joaquin have a living space to accommodate Tharen's kids. *Well,* Tharen thinks to himself, *they're technically my kids, but I also want them to be our kids.*

When they were dating, Tharen didn't know when to introduce Joaquin to his kids. Tharen felt cautious at first, and eventually Amber interjected—*What are you waiting for?* Some more slowly than others, each of Tharen's kids eventually warmed up to Joaquin. His youngest son, Benji, became especially fond of his new stepdad, gushing about him to his teacher and classmates at school. The teacher had brought this up to Amber--*Who is this man that Benji can't stop talking about?* When Tharen heard about this, a wave of reassurance came over him, evidence of his kids becoming comfortable with their newest family member.

It helps that in many ways, Tharen and Joaquin are on the same page about most things. Both down-to-earth, they roll with the excitement and chaos that comes with caring for four kids at once, and shrug off the stares their family receives in public. Sometimes, there are noticeable differences though. Joaquin, who grew up in a traditional Filipino family, is more private about his sexuality. He also brings a different cultural perspective to raising children that sometimes conflicts with the white suburban mentality that Tharen brings. The two navigate this dynamic through conversations, as well as trial and error. Tharen works to become more aware of his white privilege in the relationship and Joaquin enters his dad role slowly, building trust with the kids.

With both of their jobs rooted in place, and Joaquin connected to his long-standing social network in the city where they live, moving closer to the kids doesn't currently feel like an option. Tharen dreams of a future where their big, blended family all lives under one roof—or at least in the same neighborhood. For now, Tharen relishes the weekend visits, especially when he gets to do the day-to-day stuff again, like homework help and running errands with his kids. Sometimes, his kids come to church with him, sitting in the pews while their dad preaches.

Jimmy and Francis

Out to lunch, Jimmy and Quinn sit at a restaurant table together, Quinn grinning and making her usual sounds while Jimmy eats and smiles back at her. Suddenly, a white woman approaches their table, reaches out, and touches Quinn. Jimmy clearly taken aback, the woman casually reassures him: *It's ok, I'm vaccinated.* Trying to stay calm, so many thoughts run through Jimmy's mind. *You think that's the only issue here? We're in a pandemic, and what gives you the right to touch my child anyway? White people think it's ok to touch other people's babies, especially if the parent is a person of color. Can you imagine a Black man in a restaurant touching a white woman's baby without permission? No, that wouldn't happen, and if it did, there would be problems.*

Jimmy doesn't say these things out loud, but encounters like this take a toll on him. A mixed race, Latinx gay man living in a small, predominantly white Northeastern town, Jimmy feels the gaze of others whenever he leaves the home. When Jimmy and Francis go out as a couple, people stare, trying to "figure out" the family. When they go

out separately with Quinn, Jimmy is the one who receives unwanted attention. A man at a museum tells Jimmy that his daughter needs a mom, people at the grocery store comment on what a good dad he is—based on what? Taking his kid to the grocery store?—and people feel entitled to touch Quinn. Jimmy is tired of dealing with these interactions, having dealt with similar things his entire life. At home, he processes these events afterward with Francis, who is white. *I know it's anecdotal, but these things always happen to me, not Francis, and the people who say and do stupid shit are always white.* Jimmy makes an effort to educate others, while also wishing that this responsibility didn't fall on him so often.

With these challenging dynamics, Jimmy and Francis lean into the incredible support they've received. When they announced Quinn's birth on social media, old friends and even local politicians sent the couple thoughtful gifts. Family members eagerly come to visit and help with Quinn. *For everyone who doesn't think we should be parents, there are just as many or more who are happy for us. And those are the people who matter in our lives.*

Themes

Across participant narratives, several themes emerged, which help answer the first research question: How do working-class gay dads' family-work stories challenge grand narratives and provide new ways of thinking about parenting and decent work? These seven themes, described below in more detail, include: (1) importance of both structural economic support and structural LGBTQ+ support, (2) many valid ways to form families, (3) others inappropriately seeking information/ crossing boundaries, (4) not taking parenting for granted, (5) prioritizing parenting over paid work when possible, (6) valuing community support, but difficulty finding it, and (7) importance of flexibility. Many themes came directly from participants when asked in our third interviews, "What would you like readers to take away from your stories?" Guided by participant's answers to this question, I looked across interview data to identify a list of themes. After receiving participant feedback on this list, I adjusted and condensed the themes based on feedback.

A large majority of respondents (6-7; 85-100%) indicated that they strongly agreed with 9 of the 12 initial themes. Participants were split on whether they somewhat

or strongly agreed on the remaining 3 themes. No participants indicated that they disagreed with any of the themes. I reviewed qualitative feedback on the items that received weaker endorsement from participants. One of these themes was removed (working-class gay dads have a lot in common with parents in general) because (1) participants expressed concern that this smoothed over significant, distinct qualities of this population and (2) the fact that many dimensions of parenting are universal (e.g., providing for children) is obvious. For another theme, I had suggested that due to legal protections on the West Coast, financial support was more pressing for participants than LGBTQ+ support. Participants pushed back on this, suggesting that both are equally important and influence one another, so I rephrased this theme to reflect the interactive, equal importance of both. Based on participant comments, other themes were condensed or removed due to being redundant or obvious (e.g., working-class gay dads and their families—like all people—are complex and multidimensional).

Although narrative inquiry—like many qualitative methodologies—does not have a high degree of external validity (i.e., results cannot be generalized to all working-class gay dads living on the West Coast), narrative inquiry emphasizes pragmatic validity (i.e., results are useful by deepening understanding about participants and their communities, and thereby facilitating change; Rosiek & Snyder, 2020). Therefore, the themes presented here should be thought of not as universal truths, but as helpful lessons that allow readers to learn from working-class gay dads through their stories. These seven themes have important implications for future research, clinical work, and policy, which will be elaborated further in the discussion section.

I. Importance of both structural economic support and structural LGBTQ+ support

The first theme from the narratives, which provides a foundation for the following themes, is the importance of both structural economic and structural LGBTQ+ support. For these dads, the importance of both types of support emerged before parenthood. For example, dads described three primary barriers in their paths to fatherhood—financial, informational, and legal. Financial barriers included high costs of home studies, medical visits, and other expenses that limited options and prolonged timelines. Although most prospective gay fathers must account for these costs (Carneiro et al., 2017), having lower incomes makes the entry point less accessible for working-class gay men. In terms of informational barriers, many dads described a lack of queer-specific resources about how to navigate adoption and surrogacy. As a result, many sought information through informal channels (e.g., other queer parents in their communities) and/or figured things out as they went. Carroll (2018a) found that informal resource sharing was common among gay dads, in part due to lack of relevant resources available to this population. Legal barriers arose throughout Jimmy and Francis' surrogacy process, and laws permitting discrimination against prospective LGBTQ+ parents for religious reasons constrained the number of affirming adoption agencies available to many of the dads. These legal barriers underscore the highly varied state-to-state policies across the U.S. regarding LGBT families, as well as how religious exemptions offer loopholes to discriminate against LGBT parents, even in progressive metro areas (MAP, 2022).

Although participants were all able to overcome systemic barriers, support from individuals within these systems was an important part of their success. For example, Izzy's case worker served as an advocate for him and Tito to become parents. Sam's client asked him to adopt her great-grandson, bypassing the some of the typical barriers

in public adoption. Chris and Thomas had the support of their children's foster parents, and Jimmy and Francis relied on their friend as their surrogate. Importantly, these stories are about working-class gay men who were ultimately successful in becoming fathers—they do not reflect the experiences of working-class gay men who, due to barriers and lack of support, were unable to become parents even though they wanted to.

Economic and LGBTQ+ support continued to be important for these dads after becoming parents. Their stories show how support in the workplace, or lack thereof, shaped wellbeing and experience as parents. Dads with paid family leave through their employers—a relatively uncommon benefit, especially for working-class people (Donovan, 2019)—described how this eased stress for their families. Izzy noted that because he previously held jobs with fewer benefits and less flexibility, he felt particularly grateful that his current job provided paid parental leave. Others had less support at work. As a single parent, Ethan described the ongoing challenge of taking time off for his kids' medical visits and other appointments. When Sam and Will adopted Greg, they lost clients who disapproved of gay parenting—a clear example of how economic and LGBTQ+ support overlap in the workplace. Jake described a calculated approach to gig work, needing to keep his income in a range that allowed him to maintain public insurance. Despite the precarity of gig work (MacDonald & Giazitzoglu, 2019), losing healthcare as a middle-aged trans man would be more precarious.

Finally, dads described the importance of public assistance during the pandemic. Several dads mentioned how the child tax credit alleviated some financial stress. Ethan noted that increased unemployment benefits early in the pandemic allowed him to continue paying for rent and basic living expenses as he left the workforce to take care of

his kids. For Chris and Thomas, even small forms of support, like free lunches provided by public schools, helped reduce financial strain. The benefit of this assistance for low-income and working-class families has been far-reaching, but the abrupt ending of these programs harms families experiencing financial hardship (Parolin & Curran, 2022).

Collectively, participant narratives speak to the intersectional ways that decent work, both paid and unpaid, is constrained by marginalization. Consistent with previous studies of PWT with LGBTQ+ populations, sexuality and class work together in creating and limiting access to decent work (Douglass et al., 2017). Regarding unpaid care work, these dads often had to overcome numerous barriers related to financial cost and LGBTQ+ identity to become parents at all. If we think about unpaid care work as one dimension of parents' work lives (as many social scientists do, e.g., ILO, 2018; Whiston & Cinamon, 2015), then these barriers raise questions about access to parenting as a source of meaningful work for working-class gay men. In an increasingly precarious world of work, parenting roles offer a stable source of meaning and social contribution that may be difficult to cultivate in the workplace (Blustein, 2019a). For those who do not have access to parenthood, this source of meaning is not an option.

Also, although participants received support from individual people and government assistance programs, these forms of support were precarious, in that they were not guaranteed and/or provided temporarily. Researchers have documented the benefits of workplace flexibility (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), paid parental leave (Saxbe et al., 2018), and financial support for working-class families (Parolin & Curran, 2022), but the inconsistency of these and other forms of support make decent work elusive for many parents (Blustein et al., 2019a). In addition, although working-class gay

dads share many experiences with working-class straight dads within the capitalist world of work, their sexuality adds an additional layer, such as navigating the extent to which they feel comfortable being out at work (Fric, 2019). Structural protection often remains out of reach, leaving participants and other working-class LGBTQ+ parents (and prospective parents) without adequate support, which in turn may contribute to stress and uncertainty (Duffy et al., 2019). Finally, although economic and LGBTQ+ support both mattered for participants, they emphasized that neither on its own fully attended to their families' needs, underscoring the importance of economic policy that is LGBTQ+ affirming, and LGBTQ+ policy grounded in economic justice.

II. Many valid ways to form families

Participant stories also demonstrate many valid ways to form families. Izzy and Tito became foster parents unexpectedly, and after several years of foster parenting, adopted. Jake and his ex-partner had their child through IVF, and now they share custody equally. Chris and Thomas adopted siblings from foster care and then, with their children's input, decided to become foster parents for another child. Ethan gave birth to his children in adolescence and raises his kids as a single dad. Sam and Will became parental figures for their nieces and nephews more than a decade before adopting their own children. Tharen had four kids before coming out and, used to being the primary caregiver, now tries to see his kids whenever he can. Jimmy and Francis weren't sure they'd be able to have a child through surrogacy due to the cost, but with help from one of their friends, they made it happen. Among these seven families, no two paths to fatherhood were the same. Across differences, each dad cared deeply about his children, and demonstrated a strong commitment to parenting.

These stories challenge the dominant culture image of family. Numerous participants demonstrated that family is not tied to biology—it has much more to do with parent-child relationships and an ongoing commitment to care. These dad's stories add to the established body of research documenting that gay men are fully capable of raising healthy children (McConnachie et al., 2021). Sometimes, parenting for the dads was temporary, as in the case of foster parenting and caring for nieces and nephews. Other times, children were present for their dad's coming out process. Kids were raised by single dads, divorced dads, two married dads, and extended family and friends. Chosen families, like Sam and Will's neighbors, the queer artists that do board game nights with Ethan and his kids, and Izzy and Tito's small circle of close friends, all disrupted the narrative of the self-sufficient nuclear family unit, a narrative that neither fits the chosen families common among LGBTQ+ people (Gates, 2017) or the interdependence with extended kin networks often found in working-class families (Lareau, 2015). Participant stories suggest that the overly restrictive Western ideal of mom, dad, and two kids is not essential to form a healthy, loving family.

Tharen and Ethan, who both grew up in conservative, religious families, became dads young and later came out. Previous research has highlighted the unique challenges of coming out in conservative religious contexts, which vary substantially from mainstream society in terms of LGBTQ+ acceptance (e.g., Hinman & Lacefield, 2020). These stories highlight the importance of including gay dads with children from previous different-sex relationships, and not assuming that all gay men were out before having kids (Carroll, 2018b). Many dads in this study explicitly shared that their path to parenthood was one of many valid options. They did not want to discourage other queer

and trans people from becoming parents, they appreciated the diversity of family structures represented in LGBTQ+ communities, and they expressed interest in reading the stories of other dads who participated in this study. With this perspective, numerous dads also described ruling out certain pathways to parenthood for themselves based on financial barriers (e.g., surrogacy, private adoption). This highlights the relatively fewer options for working-class gay men to form families when compared with wealthy gay men. It is possible, however, that by diverging from traditional structures (e.g., adopting older children, raising nieces and nephews, raising kids in blended families), these dads expanded family formation beyond what would be normative for wealthy gay men, who may be more inclined to replicate heterosexual family structures.

III. Others inappropriately seeking information/ crossing boundaries

All participants described being frequently stared at in public, and many reported experiences of more egregious boundary crossings. A similar pattern was described in Carroll's (2018a) study, in which strangers, mostly women, tended to overly praise or undermine the parenting of gay dads. In the current study, boundary crossings seemed particularly common and invasive for trans dads. For instance, Jake recounted numerous, uncomfortable conversations with other parents, usually involving inappropriately personal questions about biology and anatomy. Ethan described avoiding eye contact with other parents when dropping his kids off at school to prevent conversations like this from happening. While being a gay dad invited attention for all participants, being trans added a layer to invasive questioning, consistent with broader patterns of trans people being asked inappropriately personal questions about their bodies (Nadal et al., 2012). In the case of Jimmy and Francis, boundary crossings were both gendered and racialized.

When alone with Quinn, Jimmy received much more attention—both positive and negative—when compared with Francis. At the height of COVID, a White woman touched Quinn in a restaurant without Jimmy's consent, an interaction that seemed driven by white entitlement. Bonds (2020, p. 785) argues that as symbols of "white virtue and domestic order", white women sustain structural racism. While all gay dads may be under scrutiny of women for "managing without moms" (Carroll, 2018a), Jimmy's story demonstrates how the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality can uniquely contribute to white women crossing boundaries with gay dads of color via white entitlement in the parenting domain. Sam and Will also described how race and gender impacted how others perceived their family, as a gay White couple that transracially adopted a multiracial son. They noted that in public, others have always given their family a lot of attention, and though reactions tend to be positive, they do not have the option to shed this hypervisibility. For them, this reality underscores the importance of raising their kids in a multicultural community, to minimize the extent to which their children, especially their multiracial son, feel out of place.

Depending on the situation, dads described different ways of navigating the frequent attention they received in public. Izzy, for example, framed the attention as positive, imagining he and his family were celebrities. Ethan and his kids created inside jokes to use when asked invasive questions, like pretending their mom was eaten by a shark. Jake described a process of intentionally coming out more for his son—though the conversations can be invalidating and stressful, he wants to honor Blake's wish for openness about their family. Jimmy used his various platforms to speak out against racist and homophobic discrimination. For Chris, when noticing other moms whispering about

him at the playground, he felt a need to prove that he was a parent by calling his kids over. Many participants expressed frustration that for straight couples, others don't ask where the kids came from. Consistent with Carroll's (2018a) findings, the dads in the current study often engaged in "incidental activism", teaching others about their families through everyday interactions and visibility.

From a PWT perspective, unwanted attention and boundary crossings constrain decent care work, or the ability to parent freely without marginalization. This marginalization happens because participants parent in a society surprised by dads involved in parenting (Carroll, 2018a), and that often treats dads differently when they are not straight, white, and/or cisgender (Carroll, 2018b). Experiencing or anticipating unwanted attention and invasive questioning complicates daily parenting tasks, like taking kids to the park or the grocery store. Though participants are used to this, it sometimes creates stress for them and their families—stress in addition to other stressors related to finances, the effort associated with daily parenting, etc. Though typically not the primary focus of their concerns, these dads and their families live with chronic scrutiny that other families do not. At the same time, participant stories about reacting to attention, whether through reframing, humor, or education, highlight the dads' volition to protect themselves and their families. Their motivation to protect themselves—and especially their children—likely helps buffer negative impacts of such marginalization on their parenting.

IV. Not taking parenting for granted

A fourth theme from the dads' stories is not taking parenting for granted. Across narratives, a tremendous amount of intentionality went into fatherhood. Many

participants described years of planning, in which they saved money and sought information about their options. During the process, multiple participants experienced chronic stress and uncertainty about custodial rights. Some dads continued their effort to become parents in the face of loss, such as unexpected deaths of family members and adoptions falling through. These stories highlight the work involved in becoming dads as working-class gay men. Persistence, self-determination, and flexibility helped participants through the laborious process of starting families. Ethan, who didn't plan to become a parent, noted often thinking about how much effort his queer friends put into their family planning.

Participant narratives show that although family planning often required substantial effort, it was only the starting point of the dads' intentionality. Each participant's stories highlight thoughtful parenting approaches, including the dads who came out after having kids. For example, many dads wanted their children to have more freedom and emotional learning than they were raised with. Participants also hoped to provide more resources to their children, without their children becoming entitled. Jimmy and Francis expressed desire for Quinn to maintain connection to her dad's culture and the Spanish language, while Ethan emphasized the importance of his kids becoming critical thinkers. For dads adopting from the foster care system, stories involved efforts to learn trauma-informed approaches to parenting, through attending trainings and seeking other resources.

Shenkman and Schmotkin (2016) found positive associations with parent identity and meaning in life for gay but not heterosexual fathers. The authors hypothesized that these dads found their roles particularly meaningful because they knew parenting was not

a guarantee for gay men. In the current study, the dads also seemed to find a high degree of meaningfulness in their roles as parents, consistently highlighting how grateful they felt for their children. This meaningfulness may have been influenced further by the dads' class backgrounds. The dads in the study experienced setbacks in their work lives and knew that dominant culture milestones (e.g., accessing decent work, buying a home, becoming a parent) were not guarantees. In this way, these dads differ from more privileged gay dads who have, for the most part, consistently had access to what they wanted.

The dads also described appreciation for daily activities focused on quality time together, like going to parks, cooking together, camping, family art projects, caring for pets, and board games. Although these events are normal things that families do, the fact that these dads had experiences like this as working-class gay and trans men makes these daily moments more remarkable, in a world that has made it difficult for these men to become parents at all. Perhaps in part due to this reality, but also because they are simply good parents, their stories involve ongoing efforts to develop healing, nurturing spaces for their children. Given the robust associations between meaningful work and work-related outcomes such as job satisfaction, work engagement, and commitment (Allan et al., 2019), not taking parenting for granted may benefit parents as they engage in daily care work tasks. Though more research is needed, finding meaningfulness in one's fathering role may contribute to feeling satisfied, engaged, and committed in the daily work of parenting.

V. Prioritizing parenting over paid work when possible

Connected to not taking parenting for granted, the dads' stories also demonstrate a pattern of prioritizing parenting over paid work when possible. Most described growing up in working-class and/or immigrant families in which their fathers worked hard but weren't consistently available to parent. Like the working-class dads in Edin and colleagues' (2019) research, dads in the current study wanted to be more emotionally and physically present for their kids than their own fathers were for them. Often, dads adjusted their work schedules to be more available for their kids. For instance, Izzy described going to work earlier in the morning, while Tito prepared the kids for the day, so he could be with his kids in the afternoon. Tharen used to have a similar arrangement with his ex-wife, in which he worked the night shift and she worked days, allowing him to help his kids with homework right after school. Soon after becoming dads, Sam and Will downsized from a large salon to a much smaller one, a decision that allowed them more time with their sons. Jake left a full-time job to focus on gig work, which he schedules when his ex takes care of Blake—that way, when Blake is with him, he can be fully present as a dad. Chris recently went from working two part-time jobs to staying home full-time, which allowed him to supervise distance learning and provide support to his own dad, who recently moved in. (He and Thomas noted that this is financially possible because Thomas works full-time). Ethan made the difficult decision to leave work as a single parent during the pandemic, as he wanted to make sure his kids didn't fall behind in school. Though Jimmy and Francis emphasized that they value their careers, they also opted to take a step back from their work, coordinating their schedules so that they split time caring for Quinn. Though many participants enjoyed their work,

they described parenting as more important to them, a priority in values evident through the tradeoffs they often made with paid work.

Although previous research has documented that working-class dads engage in daily parenting tasks in part out of economic necessity (e.g., their partners also work, Gerstel & Clawson, 2014), this does not fully explain the work sacrifices that participants made to engage more in unpaid care work at home. The dads' stories highlight that they value quality time with their children and put this value into action daily. Again, this pattern aligns with research that contemporary working-class dads want to prioritize time with their children (Edin et al., 2019), and may be further explained by the meaningfulness of parenting for gay men (Shenkman & Schmotkin, 2016) and a tendency of gay men to deemphasize paid work roles after becoming fathers (Panozzo, 2015). Because gay men must overcome many barriers to openly parent, it follows that they might prioritize the time they get to spend parenting in a different way than heterosexual fathers, for whom parenting is expected.

Of course, the work-family interface places pressure on parents, and it is not always feasible to choose parenting instead of paid work (Bryon, 2005). Sometimes, participants' paid work roles failed to meet different baselines for decent work as defined by Duffy and colleagues (2016), placing significant stress on the dads and their parenting. For example, Ethan described how his previous care work jobs exhausted him, making it difficult to have energy for parenting. A single parent, these jobs didn't allow Ethan the adequate free time and rest, or the ability to freely take time off for family appointments and emergencies, that he needed. After Tharen's divorce, he could not afford to financially support his children with his full-time job at the warehouse, so he brought his

kids to live with his ex. Although he agreed this was best for their children, lack of access to adequate pay made it difficult for him to spend time with his kids or afford a living space where he could host them for visits. These and other examples from the dads' work histories demonstrate how inflexible and precarious work conditions can interfere with the ability to prioritize quality time with one's children, a reality consistently found in previous research (e.g., Goodman et al., 2011; Nomaguchi and Johnson, 2016). When facing challenging work conditions, the dads in this study consistently described seeking other employment opportunities and eventually leaving unsupportive jobs, allowing for more emotional and/or financial resources to invest in their children.

Sometimes, though adjusting work schedules was not possible, participants showed creative ways to mix their paid and unpaid care work roles. For example, dads brought their kids to work and school with them—to the salon, the church, or the art studio. Jimmy described attending Zoom meetings with his baby. In these situations, coworkers got to know participant's children and vice versa, as dads juggled paid and unpaid care work simultaneously. These situations expose the false boundary between work and family life, and underscore why studying these domains together is critical for understanding the experiences of parents (Whiston & Cinamon, 2015). Bringing kids to work out of necessity demonstrates how these dads creatively navigated the sometimes-competing demands of market and unpaid care work, often with positive, albeit less productive, results (e.g., clients at the salon admiring Sam and Will's baby, Ethan's classmates at the art studio appreciating his kids asking questions about their projects).

These stories about trying to put fathering first, even when it meant reducing hours or losing pay, challenge grand narratives about power and success (Collins, 1990).

Despite progress made in recent decades to create more flexible gender roles, there continues to be societal pressure for fathers to prioritize paid work over unpaid care work (Parker & Stepler, 2017). These narratives show how participants have both adjusted to and challenged the status quo in the world of work (as described by Prilleltensky & Stead, 2012) through small and large decisions to focus on their kids over career advancement.

VI. Valuing community support, but difficulty finding it

The dads' stories also highlighted valuing community support, but sometimes difficulty finding it. Both Jake and Ethan described the importance of support from their queer communities. Jake described finding a more reliable queer community after moving to a smaller city, and Ethan shared how much he appreciates raising his kids in a supportive, queer friend group (and more recently, with the support of his partner). Izzy and Tito spent less time with gay friends after becoming parents, and now are closer with other straight couples with kids. Sam and Will described something similar—they have connected more with straight parents than with the few gay dads they've met in their community. Chris and Thomas primarily rely on their church community for social support—an LGBTQ+ affirming congregation in which their kids have grown up. Though not always easy to find, participants described the importance of gay/trans mentors who offered helpful advice and validation to newer parents. Finally, for participants who received parenting support and help from their own parents, like Izzy, Jimmy, and Francis, this made the transition to parenting less stressful.

Sometimes, participants took active roles in creating the communities they were a part of. For example, Izzy expressed how much he enjoys helping prospective parents,

queer and straight, navigate the public adoption process. Ethan described hosting free art workshops in his neighborhood for kids, sharing his skills and passion for art. Jimmy expressed intention to create more online resources in the future for gay men hoping to become dads. Collectively, these examples show that there is no singular working-class gay dad community; rather, the dads in this study found support through their biological and chosen families, from straight and queer people, and from friends, colleagues, and church communities.

Although participants appreciated the support they had, most also expressed wanting more. Jake lamented that although his mother moved nearby, she rarely spends time with him and Blake, which he attributes to his being a queer trans man. Ethan's parents have grown more affirming over the years, but they weren't willing to help when his kids were little and he really needed help. Dads who have gone on dates described the challenges of dating as single gay parents—not wanting to withhold information but also not wanting to scare people away.

For those looking for a community of gay friends, this could be challenging to find, too. Parents are often at increased risk for loneliness when compared with non-parents, and having few or no peers in similar life circumstances can increase this risk (Nowland et al., 2021). Therefore, being a gay dad, without the support of other gay dads—or at least other parents with children of similar ages—may contribute to loneliness. Tharen noted that he would like to find a group of gay friends, but hasn't been able to yet. Chris expressed frustration that the only gay dads group in his metro area meets too far away, and has too narrow a focus, to feel like a viable community for him. On the other hand, moms groups have also felt unwelcoming for Chris, as he felt

excluded and put on the spot at the same time. Even online spaces, which offer more access to other LGBTQ+ parents, can be mixed—participants noted how these groups sometimes feel overly focused on rich gay parents.

In summary, social support is often important for the well-being of participants and their families, but due to unsupportive family members, difficulty finding relatable gay dads, and other constraints (e.g., geographic location), participants described difficulty accessing the level of support they preferred. As previously documented, gay dads benefit from social support (Tornello et al., 2011) but may find that they don't fully fit in with childless gay men or straight dads (Brinamen and Mitchell, 2008), and gay dads who are not cis, white, and rich may feel left out in gay dad social groups (Carroll, 2018b). Participants described how online spaces sometimes recreate these patterns of exclusion by centering wealthy, attractive gay couples with kids. When parenting offers paths to connection, either with one's children or a broader support system, it holds promise for meeting one's needs for social contribution and community belonging (Allan et al., 2019). However, when parenting feels socially isolating and underappreciated, it seems likely that parent well-being and the daily experience of unpaid care work would be negatively impacted.

VII. Importance of flexibility

A final theme, which connects to many of the other themes, is the importance of flexibility. This showed up across the dads' stories in numerous ways, particularly in terms of gender roles, cultural values/norms, and navigating family and work transitions.

In terms of gender roles, most participants described growing up in families in which their moms did most of the housework and daily parenting, consistent with the

historic and contemporary pressures for women to do a disproportionate share of unpaid care work (Collins, 2019; ILO, 2018). Participants consistently emphasized that while they appreciated their dads' hard work to provide financially, they wanted more equitable and flexible parenting arrangements for their households. This is consistent with research finding more egalitarian approaches to housework and parenting tasks among gay couples (Tornello et al., 2015), and Edin et al.'s (2019) study with working-class dads prioritizing time with their kids. Due to their own mothers' involvement in daily parenting, several dads described drawing from these childhood experiences in their roles as dads. For instance, Izzy emphasized how his mom made things happen on a budget, something he does for his own kids. Ethan's mom used art-based approaches in homeschooling, techniques that Ethan passed on to his own children. Sam and Will discussed how Will's nurturing mother served as a model for how they strive to interact with their children. Across families, participants described thoughtfulness in their provider and caregiver roles, often demonstrating flexibility and transgressing traditional gender norms they grew up with. Even dads who relied on more traditional arrangements, in which one parent worked longer hours outside the home while the other focused more on parenting, arrived at these arrangements through communication and agreement as a couple—not through predetermined, gendered expectations. In this way, seemingly traditional divisions of labor still demonstrated flexibility with gender roles, as described by Kelly and Hauck (2015).

Related to gender roles, participants also described flexibility in navigating cultural dimensions of parenting. For some, this involved the dads modifying values they were raised with. For example, Jake, who grew up in a German American family in the

Midwest, described a culture of deference to authority and few opportunities to express emotions. Though he has sometimes worried about spoiling his son, especially at first, he strives to create a more emotion-focused and communicative environment as a dad. Izzy, who grew up in a conservative and religious family in Mexico, passes on many parts of his culture to his kids, while also wanting them to make their own choices when it comes to religion and spirituality. Tharen navigates cultural dimensions of parenting with Joaquin. Through conversations and trial-and-error, the couple negotiates differences based on Tharen's white, Midwestern upbringing and Joaquin's experience growing up in an immigrant Filipino family. In this case, Tharen works to recognize his privilege in the relationship, and both partners adjust expectations so they can parent as a team. Most participants described reflecting on their cultural and religious backgrounds, using flexibility to maintain and adjust values they grew up with in their daily parenting practices. As the reported values of U.S. parents converge, with most parents wanting their children to work hard and help others (Ryan et al., 2020), these dads demonstrate the distinct ways that values are transmitted and adjusted based on each family's cultural context. Furthermore, previous research has documented that gay men who become parents demonstrate flexibility in how they relate to gay identity and culture, by adopting more relational and domestic gay masculinities (Armesto & Shapiro, 2011). This flexibility may be helpful as dads navigate daily parenting and empathetically respond to their children's encounters with homophobia and heteronormativity (Vinjamuri, 2015).

Finally, participant stories demonstrated the importance of flexibility during family and work transitions. Due to the long and often uncertain process of public adoption, participants who engaged in this path to fatherhood had to accept unexpected

timelines. For instance, Chris and Thomas went from having no kids to two at once. Then, years later, they became foster parents for a third child within the year that Chris' dad moved in, nearly doubling their family size again. Izzy and Tito experienced something similar, unexpectedly becoming long-term foster parents for two siblings, weeks before they adopted their baby—essentially going from child free to parenting three young kids in the span of two months. Adding multiple family members simultaneously required flexibility in allocating space, adjusting to large increases in direct and indirect care work tasks (e.g., cooking and cleaning), and negotiating complex interpersonal dynamics that come from these family adjustments. In the case of Tharen and Jake, divorce required flexibility as well. With this transition, both negotiated new ways of co-parenting with their ex-wives, as well as supporting their kids through new family arrangements. Tharen and Ethan described coming out to their children, and later, introducing their new partners to their kids, a delicate and rewarding process that increasingly involved shared time between their new partners and children.

Regarding work transitions, participant narratives demonstrate how these can be unpredictable and interrelated with family life. Multiple participants described being laid off, both during the 2008 crash and more recently due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants also left jobs because they felt miserable, moved, or needed to stay home with their kids. These transitions sometimes led to more time with their kids, but also sometimes contributed to financial stress. Taking new jobs, going back to school, and increasing hours also impacted families, as participants navigated the adjustment to these new environments and found ways to meet their families' needs on tighter schedules.

Participants described work transitions as significant events, often connected to moving or big adjustments in their family.

Taken together, participant narratives highlighted the flexibility required to navigate the ever-changing spheres of family and work. With working-class career trajectories more likely to be nonlinear (Duffy et al., 2016), and queer timelines often differing from those of heterosexual people (Brinamen and Mitchell, 2008), these dads' stories demonstrate to the ways that participants met their needs for survival, social contribution, and self-determination in different ways over time, sometimes through a combination of parenting and paid work, consistent with the PWT model (Blustein et al., 2019a). These stories also problematize the dominant career narrative, which suggests that careers are linear and move up a ladder (Blustein, 2001). Instead, participant stories demonstrate often circuitous paths, with interruptions and unexpected turns. Participant emphasis on flexibility in their gender roles and transmission of cultural values demonstrates the malleability of taken-for-granted practices, particularly as they relate to fatherhood. do not have to solely focus on being providers; they can be providers and nurturers at the same time.

Summary

In this chapter, I provided a context for the study results, using a narrative inquiry framework of the three-dimension inquiry space. Then, I presented participant stories organized into four parts: history, becoming dads, work-family interface, and identity. Drawing from these stories, extant literature, and participant feedback, I provided seven themes that span the narratives of all study participants. The themes are not exhaustive or necessarily generalizable to all working-class gay dads. Rather, based on the study data,

they are my attempt to answer the research question: How do working-class gay dads' family-work stories challenge grand narratives and provide new ways of thinking about parenting and decent work? Together, the stories and themes aim to shift thinking about parenting and decent work (Rosiek & Snyder, 2020). Again, the purpose of narrative inquiry is to co-create outcomes that are accurate and, more importantly, useful.

Thinking about usefulness leads back to the second research question: By living and telling these stories, what possible futures are created for the participants, the researcher, and their communities? Participant narratives shed light on where participants are coming from and where they are now. Though there are many ways to write a story about someone's experience, I tried to highlight the strengths and struggles, with an emphasis on the material conditions of day-to-day experience (e.g., place, resources, daily tasks) and the inner worlds of each dad (e.g., reactions, emotions, values). Where these stories go next is yet to be seen, but they are going somewhere (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The narratives and themes are useful in framing ways that changes now could improve the conditions of working-class gay dads tomorrow. This will be a primary focus of the discussion section.

CHAPTER IV

DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, I first highlight how the outcomes from this study replicate previous research findings and generate new considerations to be further explored in future studies. Then, I use the PWT model to frame the dads' work-family experiences and suggest ways that this study advances the PWT research agenda. Based on the PWT model, as well as direct feedback from participants, other study data, and extant research and policy, I provide four structural recommendations, followed by recommendations from participants for other dads like them. Finally, I end by inviting the reader to imagine next steps for research, practice, and policy.

This study replicates findings from previous studies. As described in the themes, the experiences of the dads in this study aligned with previous findings with heterosexual working-class dads in several ways, including the stress of parenting in a context of economic precarity (Kalleberg & Vallas, 2018), the value of flexible work conditions for reducing parenting stress (Nomaguchi & Johnson, 2016), nonlinear work paths that don't fit "career climbing" models put forth by many vocational psychologists (Blustein, 2006), a tendency to rely on extended family and friend networks for parenting help (Gerstel, 2011), and a desire to be more emotionally present for their kids than their own dads had been for them (Edin et al., 2019). The experiences of the dads in the current study also replicated previous research with gay dads, such as experiencing attention and frequent boundary crossings while in public (Carroll, 2018a), engaging in long-term efforts to become parents and forming families in diverse ways (Carneiro et al., 2017), finding a strong sense of meaningfulness in fathering roles (Shenkman & Shmotkin, 2016),

reaching traditional life milestones on varied timelines (Brinamen & Mitchell, 2008), and experiencing themselves as different (from an identity perspective) from heterosexual dads and childfree gay men (Brinamen & Mitchell, 2008).

In addition to replicating previous findings, the dads' narratives also highlight some unique considerations for working-class gay dads that warrant future research. The dads' experiences at the intersection of gender, sexuality, and class interact cannot be fully explained by adding together separate research with working-class dads and gay dads (Collins, 2019). For example, while all gay men who hope to become parents face barriers to fatherhood, the financial barriers in particular limited options for the dads in this study. While gay men generally do not take parenting for granted (Shenkman & Schmotkin, 2016), dads in the present study seemed particularly aware of the privilege of gay parenting due to the effort and resources required. Perhaps as a result, these dads consistently prioritized parenting over paid work, further challenging nonlinear career paths and dominant culture ideals of success. Participants also demonstrated a magnitude of flexibility in their work and family lives beyond what would likely be needed for partnered, heterosexual, working-class dads or gay dads who pay for full-time daycare. The dads in this study often navigated these experiences with social support but found it difficult to access support from other parents who could fully relate to their experience. Furthermore, stories from trans dads and gay dads of color demonstrate how gender identity and race further shape experiences in how working-class gay dads interact with others, particularly in terms of boundary-crossing and others initiating invasive conversations. These experiences highlight why it is critical to conceptualize marginalization from an intersectional perspective in this study and in future research

with gay dads (Collins, 2019). Considering how heterosexism, capitalism, classism, and white supremacy (as well as other systems of oppression) interlock to produce distinct experiences at structural and interpersonal levels, and taking concrete steps to address systemic inequities, is necessary for vocational psychologists seeking to generate more just and useful research (Brewster & Molina, 2021). Finally, single/divorced dads demonstrate the importance of family structure as a key variable in shaping the experience of working-class dads, as structure impacts availability for parenting, how family and work time are structured, etc. Some of the distinct considerations from these dads' stories provide directions for strengthening LGBTQ and economic support for parents and families at a structural level, explained further under "Policy Recommendations".

Study Results and PWT Model

To conceptualize the study results theoretically, I will return to PWT. In the Results chapter, I included various PWT constructs when discussing themes and here, I pull together these findings using the full PWT model. Again, the central variable in the model is decent work, which includes working conditions that are safe, adequate time off, consideration for family and social life, and adequate pay and healthcare. According to PWT theorists, decent work is important because it offers a pathway to meet needs for survival, social contribution, and self-determination (Duffy et al., 2016). Within PWT, decent work includes paid and unpaid work. Unlike most other vocational psychology theories, PWT considers paid market work (e.g., a traditional job) and unpaid care work (e.g., parenting, elder care) together, since both types of work involve daily contributions that require skills and responsibilities.

The focus of the present study included paid work, unpaid care work, and situations in which the two overlapped (e.g., bringing children to work). Based on the dads' stories, many—if not all—dads met their needs for social contribution and self-determination through a combination of paid work and parenting. The dads described appreciating opportunities to help others and feel a sense of belonging in the workplace, such as being a mentor to students (Izzy) or establishing long-term relationships with salon clients (Sam and Will). Self-determination needs were also met through paid work, such as scheduling gigs around parenting time (Jake) and bringing gay identity into church settings (Chris, Tharen). The dads' stories also demonstrate how their parenting was connected to social contribution and self-determination needs. As men, they defied expectations based on their gender to engage in daily, nurturing parenting. Prioritizing the well-being of their children, the dads seemed to experience parenting as an important dimension of social contribution in their lives. In addition, the barriers to becoming parents and lack of available role models required the dads to exert agency, advocating for their families and carving their own paths. In doing so, parenting offered a way to experience self-determination. Additionally, parenting as a form of social contribution and self-determination during periods of unemployment, underemployment, or difficult work transitions offered a more stable sense of connection and purpose, potentially buffering the impacts of work precarity (Blustein, 2019a).

Importantly, without adequate welfare programs, unpaid care work cannot meet survival needs. Twenty-three nations recognize the social and economic contributions of parents by providing a universal child benefit (UCB), a cash transfer or tax benefit paid to all households with children on a regular basis. UCBs reduce childhood poverty and have

other long-term benefits for children and their families (Bastagli et al., 2020). Expanded unemployment and child tax credit benefits during the pandemic offered a glimpse of UCB implementation in the U.S.— parents could focus on care work at home and still meet their survival needs; however, the dads' stories show that paid work is generally necessary for survival under capitalism. In sum, both paid work and unpaid care work roles together contributed to the dads' experience of decent work and meeting social contribution and self-determination needs, with survival needs predominantly met through paid work.

Decent work does not exist in a vacuum; PWT emphasizes the role of contextual factors in shaping and constraining access to decent work (Duffy et al., 2016). Specifically, the PWT model proposes that economic constraints and marginalization negatively predict decent work. This positions contextual factors as impactful for the work-family lives of the dads in this study. For example, multiple dads were impacted by layoffs and decreased pay during economic recessions, and other dads stayed in jobs they disliked out of financial necessity. In these examples, broader economic contexts— characterized by inequity— influenced the dads' access to decent work. Conversely, dads with access to benefits (e.g., paid family leave) and incomes that allowed them to rent or buy sufficient living space, seemed to experience their work as more decent. Economic constraints also shaped dads' unpaid care work experiences, such as limiting the types of activities they could afford to do with their kids. Though most dads expressed a high degree of satisfaction with the quality time they shared with their families, some worried that their children would negatively compare themselves to more affluent peers. In addition, dads experiencing economic precarity described worrying about how this would

impact their families. Even when dads currently felt financially stable, many described how previous precarious experiences influenced their views of the world of work, such as the notion that short-term stability does not guarantee long-term stability (in the face of recessions, job loss, retirement, etc.).

Regarding marginalization, PWT suggests that systems of oppression (e.g., structural racism) and interpersonal experiences of discrimination (e.g., homophobic comments in the workplace) reduce decent work in conjunction with economic constraints (Duffy et al., 2016). The dads in this study did not discuss specific experiences of marginalization in the workplace; however, this may have been because I did not directly ask about this. All dads described varying degrees of marginalization in their family roles, coming to bear on unpaid care work. For example, the dads described experiences of invasive questioning, boundary crossings, and judgmental assumptions—seemingly based in homophobia and gendered expectations—while engaging in daily parenting tasks in public. These experiences were heightened for trans dads in the study, who experienced more invasive questioning from strangers. Race is another important dimension in considering marginalization and work. Notably, the majority if participants were White, and therefore had certain privileges as they navigated public spaces with their children. Izzy described the unique ways he and his family experienced attention in Latino spaces, and Jimmy compared his numerous experiences of boundary crossings to the relatively few experienced by his White partner. Finally, Ethan noted some of the unique forms of judgment and barriers that single parents face, a dimension of marginalization often ignored (Coles, 2015). Although the dads found various ways to navigate and buffer the impacts of marginalization, engaging in parenting under these

pressures likely had some level of impact on the dads' experience of daily parenting, which may spillover into paid work as well (Whiston & Cinamon, 2015) though the extent to which this is the case is not captured in this study.

According to the PWT model, the relationship between contextual factors (i.e., economic constrains and marginalization) and decent work is mediated by career adaptability and work volition, though studies testing the model have found more support for work volition as a mediator (Duffy et al., 2019). This means that some personal characteristics and coping strategies can help mitigate the negative impacts of contextual stressors and constraints. In this study, the dads demonstrated a high degree of career adaptability in how they navigated their work-family arrangements. This involved the four problem-solving/coping strategies associated with career adaptability, including concern (e.g., planning strategically to start a family), control (e.g., shifting work schedules and arrangements when possible to accommodate parenting roles), curiosity (e.g., continuing to explore work-related interests and nontraditional parenting approaches as working dads), and confidence (e.g., taking steps forward in work and family life despite precarity, loss, ambiguity and other challenges; Savickas, 2013). Some job-related factors, such as quota-driven work (Tharen), high-caseload care work (Ethan), and having salon work temporarily discontinued due to COVID-19 (Sam and Will), placed high levels of stress on these dads, making adaptation difficult. However, all dads described finding ways to manage or grow accustomed to work-related challenges and changes, sometimes ultimately seeking new work, accessing education to facilitate new work opportunities, or changing their hours. In their unpaid care work, the dads also demonstrated high degrees of adaptability. From supporting children healing from trauma

to navigating shared custody arrangements, the dads leaned into parenting-related challenges. This connects with work volition as well; as Jimmy and Francis described, there were many points when it would have been easy to give up on becoming dads at all. Persistence to become dads demonstrates a high degree of volition, which the dads also brought into their intentional parenting practices and approaches. At their jobs, many dads described finding ways to exert work volition as well, from dressing comfortably (Jake) to structuring the workday around quality time with one's children (many of the dads). The dads' adaptability and volition, despite structural barriers and constraints, helped them to cultivate more decent work. It should be noted, however, that these personal factors did not fully diminish the burden of systemic inequality and economic stress.

A final construct of PWT is meaningful work, which extends beyond the baseline of decent work and promotes a sense of engagement, satisfaction, and overall well-being (Allan et al., 2019). All dads in this study emphasized the meaningfulness of their roles as parents, consistent with previous research with gay dads (Shenkman & Schmotkin, 2016) Although they tended to prioritize their unpaid care work at home, their paid work lives were also important to them. The dads described feeling proud of contributing to just housing practices (Jimmy), teaching values through karate (Francis), mentoring kids at school in a trauma-informed way (Izzy), seeking ways to make a living doing art (Ethan), providing a queer-affirming place of worship (Tharen), doing work on his own terms (Jake), creating an environment for beauty and good conversation (Sam and Will), supporting the healthcare of others (Thomas), and mentoring youth (Chris). Although

their work lives fluctuated over time, they described a process of seeking balance with work and family and drawing meaning from both domains.

PWT offers a helpful way of conceptualizing the work and family experiences of the dads in this study, and the dads' stories also provide helpful ways to extend the PWT research agenda. For example, PWT researchers consistently assert that unpaid care work is just as important to the social and economic functioning of society as paid market work (Blustein et al., 2019a), yet PWT studies continue to focus almost exclusively on paid work. This bias in the research literature reinforces the notion that monetized labor is more valued than caring for children and older adults in one's family and community. The pattern of dads in this study choosing to prioritize family over paid work advancement, even in the face of economic constraints, demonstrates why we need to place more emphasis on unpaid care work and family life in PWT research. Doing so offers a fuller picture of how many parents prioritize their time, and allows researchers to learn how work and family domains impact one another within a specific context. Additionally, this study has something to say about the PWT goal to create a more equitable distribution of decent work (Blustein et al., 2019a) and the ILO aim to reduce gendered disparities in paid and unpaid work (ILO, 2018). By learning from working-class gay dads about how they navigate work and family roles, we can challenge notions about gender and caregiving, and consider ways to encourage other men to increase their engagement in parenting. Additionally, highlighting some of the contextual factors impacting working-class gay dads underscores the importance of continuing to advance a more equitable work agenda for parents, considering how unequal distribution of economic resources in our society and other forms of marginalization are interconnected.

These areas offer starting points for future PWT research, as well as structural recommendations which will be discussed next.

Recommendations

The following four structural recommendations are based on participant input and study results. I shared these recommendations in the follow-up survey, and those who responded (70%) expressed strong agreement that these would be beneficial. Notably, participants expressed stronger agreement that some recommendations would be beneficial at a *societal* level when compared with benefit for *themselves and their families*. For example, dads indicated that universal paid family leave would have been helpful when they first became parents but was now less relevant because their children are older. The first three recommendation address economic policy, inclusion, and legal protection for LGBTQ+ families. The final recommendation advocates for more flexible narratives about family, and though less concrete, is foundational for supporting working-class gay dads and advancing the other three recommendations.

1) Increase economic support for working-class LGBTQ+ families.

LGBTQ+ people face unique financial barriers to becoming parents (Carneiro et al., 2017); therefore, working-class gay men who could become excellent parents may never do so due to economic constraints. Whether or not parenting is a human right (Russell, 2018), parenting fills a great societal need to care for children (Schultheiss, 2006). Providing financial support to parents allows them to meet that need (Cooper & Stewart, 2021).

Given the high number of children in the U.S. foster care system without available caregivers (more than 100,000 waiting to be adopted and many more in need of

temporary homes; U.S. Children's Bureau, 2021), equipping LGBTQ+ people dedicated to parenting makes sense. For example, adoption assistance programs, which support families raising children adopted from foster care, could expand their support to cover third-party home visits and other pre-adoption expenses. Adoption credit programs, which are now available to LGBTQ+ couples (Internal Revenue Service [IRS], 2022), can also help offset the financial barriers to becoming parents. These types of assistance benefit all adoptive parents; however, due to the disproportionate barriers that prospective LGBTQ+ parents face, it could be beneficial to provide extra support to this population. For example, government assistance could be supplemented by funds from LGBTQ+ organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, who could provide money to queer and trans people seeking to become parents.

Regardless of path to fatherhood, a critical way to support working-class gay dads is by providing universal paid family leave. Most working-class people in the U.S. do not have access to paid family leave (Donovan, 2019), even as psychologists and other researchers document the myriad health benefits of paid leave for parents and their children (Saxbe et al., 2018; Lichtman-Sadot & Bell, 2017). It seems likely that working-class gay men, when compared with upper middle-class and wealthy gay men, are more likely to foster or adopt children through the foster care system than to adopt infants or have children through surrogacy—although more research is needed to confirm this. Attachment forming is critical for all parent-child relationships (Plotka & Busch-Rossnagel, 2018), and early attachment building with children adopted through foster care is particularly important, to mitigate the negative impacts of early childhood trauma (Fisher, 2015). A final consideration is that men tend to take fewer days of family leave

when compared with women—fewer than 5% of fathers take more than 2 weeks of paid leave (Petts et al., 2020). This could be due to not being "primary" caregivers in many families, though gendered pressures in the workplace likely play a role on dads' quick return to work (Petts et al., 2020). Making paid leave available and encouraging all parents to use it, regardless of gender, is part of a broader aim to increase men's engagement in care work, thereby reducing the disproportionate burden of care work placed on women. This recommendation involves not only access to paid leave, but also flexible workplaces that do not penalize using the leave (Petts et al., 2020). Psychologists can help facilitate these changes by researching and disseminating the evidence-based need for universal paid leave, and by working with gay dads and other men to destigmatize leave.

Access to ongoing economic support for working-class gay dads (e.g., UCBs) is also recommended. Government programs like the child tax credit during COVID-19 are beneficial but insufficient. Government assistance for working-class gay dads—and all working-class parents—would have tangible benefits for this population. Even a small income boost can have positive impacts for working-class families, including more stable housing, access to healthy food and learning materials, reducing parenting stress, and improving children's health and academic achievement (Cooper & Stewart, 2021). Policies that reduce economic constraints by ensuring affordable housing, childcare, and adult education would also benefit the wellbeing of working-class gay dads, other working-class parents, and their families (Sano et al., 2021). These efforts must be inclusive of queer and trans parents, who have often been excluded from family policy (MAP, 2022), and should be part of broader policy efforts to reduce racial wealth

disparities and promote economic justice for Black, Indigenous, and other families of color (see Chetty et al., 2020; Darity & Mullen, 2020). As one dad in the study pointed out, his kids always leave Pride with a pile of 'rainbow junk' from corporations. Getting these corporations to economically support LGBTQ+ people, rather than rainbow-washing their products to increase profits, would benefit working-class gay dads and restore Pride to its queer origins. Collectively, these recommendations help address working-class gay dads' survival needs (e.g., food, housing, etc.) so that they can focus on parenting and work without undue economic constraints.

2) Make family agencies and resources more accessible and queer-inclusive.

In addition to providing economic support, another recommendation is making agencies and resources for parents and families more accessible and queer-inclusive. Some dads in this study described having few options, even in progressive metro areas, for adoption agencies that presented themselves as LGBTQ+ affirming. Particularly with religiously affiliated agencies (which are common), the stance of the religious denomination on LGBTQ+ rights likely plays a role in queer people's sense of safety in pursuing adoption through that agency. Even if agencies technically work with prospective gay dads, failure to demonstrate a queer-affirming stance could make gay men feel hesitant to trust these organizations with an important and vulnerable life milestone (see McClain et al., 2016 for guidance on creating welcoming spaces for LGBTQ+ people). Additionally, numerous dads highlighted that informational barriers make it difficult to navigate paths to parenthood as gay men. Though some resources exist online, dads in this study described available resources as insufficient to guide them through the process. Psychologists and other mental health professionals can support

working-class gay dads through development of free and comprehensive online guides to becoming parents geared toward LGBTQ+ people, with practical guidance to families with fewer financial resources. Psychologists can also help prospective dads navigate informational barriers (e.g., providing workshops geared toward working-class queer and trans people wanting to learn about their options for becoming parents) and them in accessing the economic resources available to them (e.g., referrals to resources about adoption credits, etc.).

As mentioned in the first recommendation, affordable (or ideally free) childcare is a helpful way to support working-class parents. An additional recommendation for supporting working-class gay dads specifically is ensuring that childcare is not only affordable but also affirming of their family. Childcare agencies (as well as schools) can promote images of diverse family cultures and structures (e.g., through books, posters, conversations with children), use gender neutral language when describing parents (e.g., not assuming children have a mom), and taking a stance of affirming LGBTQ+ families when engaging with the public. Such considerations can be embedded into childcare worker certification programs and have the potential to reduce instances of structural homophobia and transphobia in these spaces, reduce stress for children of queer and trans parents, and help working-class gay dads feel more confident in utilizing childcare services.

Given that many dads in the study indicated a desire for more social support, the development of more inclusive support groups and programs is also recommended. As Carroll (2018b) highlighted, even gay dad-specific groups are not necessarily inclusive. BIPOC gay dads, working-class dads, and trans dads may feel marginalized in these

communities. Furthermore, as some dads highlighted in this study, gay dad support groups often meet at inconvenient times or distant locations that make them inaccessible. Transforming neighborhood parenting groups to be inclusive of all genders and sexual orientations could reduce barriers to finding peer support. Additional accessibility considerations for such groups include rotating roles of providing free childcare, hosting groups at times that working parents are typically available (e.g., evenings), and ensuring that families of all structures and ages are welcomed (e.g., childcare is set up in a way that accommodates children of varied ages). For parents who would like more structured support and skills training, psychologists can assist in facilitating LGBTQ+ affirming parenting skills groups through community agencies and local schools. In conjunction with in-person parenting groups, online communities can offer an even more accessible way to connect with other parents and offer mutual support. Moderators of these groups can strive to make the spaces inclusive of working-class LGBTQ+ parents by promoting resources that are queer-affirming and help meet the material and social needs of families. These recommendations help equip gay dads with the tools and social support systems to adapt and boost sense of volition in the face of parenting and work-related challenges.

3) Establish federal (and international) legal protections for LGBTQ+ families.

A third recommendation is to establish more robust federal and international legal protections for LGBTQ+ families. Although the West Coast, where this study took place, has particularly affirming LGBTQ+ policies, legal protections vary significantly by state, leaving LGBTQ+ families legally vulnerable in much of the country (MAP, 2022). Even for dads living on the West Coast, this study demonstrated how interstate surrogacy and

other paths to parenthood can be hindered by unanticipated legal barriers depending on state laws. Gaps in federal protections keep gay dads in political uncertainty, regardless of where they live, and contemporary debates about LGBTQ+ rights demonstrate that full citizenship for queer and trans people in the U.S. is still contested (Lavietes & Ramos, 2022). Working-class LGBTQ+ parents (and prospective parents) are politically vulnerable when compared with more privileged LGBTQ+ parents, as they tend to have less social and economic capital to access legal aid when facing discrimination (Gates & Viggiani, 2014).

The contemporary political landscape provide examples of helpful and harmful policy for LGBTQ+ families. Landmark cases in recent history have made important advances for national LGBTQ+ rights, including Obergefell et al. v. Hodges (2015; marriage equality, which includes adoption rights and child custody, support, and visitation rules) and Bostock v. Clayton County, GA (2020; ruling that workplace discrimination against LGBT people is banned under the Civil Rights Act). A proposed law, the John Lewis Every Child Deserves a Family (ECDF) Act, which has not yet passed, would federally prohibit discrimination against prospective foster and adoptive parents who are LGBTQIA+ and/or unmarried (U.S. Library of Congress, 2021). This would be an incredibly helpful policy for working-class gay dads, reducing legal barriers to parenthood nationwide. Unfortunately, in a related case, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously sided with the Catholic Social Services (CSS) in Fulton et al. v. City of Philadelphia Pennsylvania et al. (2021), arguing that CSS can legally refuse to place children in foster care with same-sex couples due based on religious beliefs, even though CSS receives public funding from the city. This case was part of a larger legal battle

between LGBTQ+ rights and religious freedom to discriminate against LGBTQ+ people (Kaufman & Compton, 2021).

In 2022, numerous states have passed and are in the process of passing anti-LGBTQ+ laws. Though all harmful, one of the most egregious is Alabama SB 184, which makes it a felony provide gender-affirming care to trans minors within the state. This goes against medical and psychology research demonstrating the deleterious mental health effects of delaying gender-affirming care (Rafferty, 2018). The now notorious "Don't Say Gay" bill passed in Florida and replicated in numerous other states, provides parents with control to ban discussion of LGBTQ+ topics based on the notion that they are not "age appropriate." This bill is based on old, problematic stereotypes—45 years ago, the national "Save Our Children" campaign, promoted the false narrative that gay men are sexual predators who turn kids gay (Niedwiecki, 2013). The dads in this study, like many other parents, are doing their best to provide and care for their kids. The contentious sociopolitical context, which threatens LGBTQ+ rights, creates a stressful environment for these families. Even if harmful bills are not passed, anti-trans and other anti-LGBTQ+ rhetoric communicated through the news, social media, and other channels creates a psychologically stressful context for working-class queer and trans dads to raise their kids (Horne et al., 2022).

Although psychology as a field has often failed and actively harmed LGBTQ+ people and other marginalized communities (Dreschler, 2015), psychologists have also played active roles in advancing LGBTQ+ affirming laws and should continue to do so. For example, research comparing outcomes of children raised by queer and straight parents has been used in legal contexts to help advance LGBTQ+ family policy (Lamb,

2012). As psychologists and other healthcare providers understand the importance of gender-affirming environments for trans youth, they have taken more active stances in promoting access to gender-affirming care from a young age (Rafferty, 2018). Psychologists should continue to be active in conducting and dissemination research with queer and trans communities, and specifically considering research and policies that will benefit working-class and BIPOC LGBTQ+ people, who have been historically left out of LGBTQ+ psychology research (Carneiro et al., 2017). Collectively, these recommendations are important for reducing marginalization for LGBTQ+ workers and their families.

A final consideration to mention related to legal recommendations is that LGBTQ+ rights vary dramatically on an international scale. In conversations about LGBTQ+ family law, it is important to consider the global context of economic and political justice for LGBTQ+ people and their families. Though beyond scope of this study, an aim of PWT is to think about the world of work through a global lens, with people in poor countries most negatively impacted by precarious work and unequal distribution of resources (Blustein et al., 2019a). Topics such economic justice, LGBTQ+ and women's rights, international surrogacy and adoption, and imperialism/ imposition of U.S. value systems coalesce via complex questions regarding LGBTQ+ parenting and work on a global scale. Collaborations across international LGBTQ+ rights organizations run by local communities is a critical step in supporting queer and trans families globally while also recognizing the pitfalls of focusing on LGBTQ+ rights through an exclusively Western lens.

4) Promote flexibility and acceptance in cultural narratives about family.

A final recommendation is to promote flexibility and acceptance in cultural narratives about family. By living and telling their stories, the dads in the current study are already doing this. Listening to, reading, and amplifying these stories can further extend their reach, broadening perspectives on what family and work can look like to improve systems and support for working-class gay dads. The dads in this study demonstrated diverse timelines, family structures, and ways of prioritizing family over work. They also described varied parenting approaches and ways of doing gender. As these dads do the best they can as parents, they challenge the notion of a singular "right way" to be a dad. They problematize long-standing biases that men are ill-equipped to parent and by doing so, promote a more equitable division of paid and unpaid care work across genders. Contrary to media representations of gay fathering, participants also prove that you don't have to be rich to be a gay dad.

Promoting flexibility and acceptance can benefit working-class gay dads at an interpersonal level, reducing the burden on them to educate others and experience invasive questioning and voyeurism in public. Expanding family narratives can also have more systemic impacts, such as ensuring that policies include all families, regardless of the parent gender and sexuality or family structure. Finally, challenging dominant narratives and promoting acceptance of diverse families *within* gay fathering spaces can make these areas less exclusive and oppressive to "gay dads on the margins" (Carroll, 2018b).

Psychologists can help promote flexibility and self-acceptance across their various roles as clinicians, researchers, teachers, and advocates. In their work with

LGBTQ+ clients. This may involve supporting clients in healing from trauma, challenging internalized homophobia and transphobia, and developing a healthy sense of identity in the face of minority stress (Meyer, 2003). For psychologists who work with LGBTQ+ families, pursuing specialized training and understanding the unique factors impacting this population is critical (see Harvey et al., 2022). Another part of therapeutic work may include helping working-class gay dads and their children to navigate systems that weren't made for them, either because the system is structured around heterosexual families, biased toward an upper middle-class approach to parenting, and/or entrenched with racist assumptions that alienate parents who aren't White. Psychologists can also promote flexibility about families through research, teaching, and advocacy by working with community partners to conduct studies with diverse families, listening to the needs of working-class, LGBTQ+ parents in designing studies, and teaching psychologists-in-training to conceptualize families in broader and more flexible ways.

For Working-Gay Men who Want to Become Dads

Finally, the dads' stories send the message to queer and trans people that they can become parents too, and there is not a single right way to do so. At the end of our third interviews, I asked each dad what advice he had for other dads like him, who are earlier in their parenting journey. I organized responses from across interviews, then shared this back with the participants, who overall expressed strong agreement with the collective advice. Notably, some of this advice may not apply to gay dads who had biological children through a previous relationship. Also, men facing particularly challenging barriers to parenthood or struggling to care/provide for their kids may find it difficult to feel hopeful. However, the dads in this study worked through many barriers themselves,

and they wanted to instill a sense of realistic optimism for other prospective gay dads. These are their recommendations:

- Be flexible.
- Know what you're getting into.
- Share about your process with people you trust. Reach out for help.
- Expect barriers . . . but don't let them stop you.
- Stay hopeful.
- Be patient with yourself as a parent.

Psychologists and other professionals working with prospective gay dads can share this advice that comes directly from other working-class gay dads who have learned from personal experience.

Study Limitations and Strengths

Now that I discussed the outcomes of the study and related recommendations, I will describe some of the study limitations and strengths, as well as recommendations for future research.

One major limitation of this study was the lack of racial diversity among participants. This perpetuates the pattern of predominantly White samples in social science research generally, and gay fathering research specifically (Carneiro et al., 2017). Although I used purposeful sampling methods in my recruitment, I could have enhanced my methods by working more actively to partner with community agencies that serve working-class Black, Indigenous, and other gay dads of color (Vaughn et al., 2018). Including more working-class gay BIPOC dads would strengthen the study by making findings more widely representative and useful. In addition, the sample was relatively

privileged in terms of access to workplace benefits, education, and social support. This suggests that the dads in this study were generally part of a more privileged subset within the working-class, and by some metrics would also be considered lower-middle class. Working-class gay men in more economically precarious situations would likely have a harder time navigating the barriers to fatherhood. Other factors, such as high levels of financial stress, could have prevented some lower-income gay dads from deciding to participate. In addition, although I chose recruitment language intentionally, the terms "gay" and "working-class" may have played a role in excluding potential participants who do not use these terms to describe themselves (e.g., people who prefer the terms "queer" or "low-income"). Future studies seeking to recruit diverse samples of working-class gay dads will likely be most successful if working with community partnerships or community advisory boards (CABs). Such collaborations, when truly bidirectional, offer opportunities to enhance equity and inclusion of the recruitment process (Vaughn et al., 2018).

Community partnerships are also useful in ensuring that research questions are relevant to the communities they are about, study design is appropriate, and outcomes are shared in a useful way (Vaughn et al., 2018). The fact that I carried out this study as an individual graduate student, mostly in isolation, may limit the usefulness of the outcomes. Although the subjectivity of the researcher is a given part of narrative inquiry, and therefore not a limitation per se, this study could have been strengthened had I been in regular contact with response communities that included working-class LGBTQ+ people, to shape and guide my research process and challenge me to consider alternative methods, analytic approaches, etc. (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Other methodological

limitations related to the heavy reliance on interview data. Ideally, narrative inquiry involves immersion in a community, allowing for ongoing relationships with participants and multiple sources of data (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). While other researchers have taken the principles of narrative inquiry and applied them to interview-focused studies before, this brings limitations (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). For example, I did not include parent-child observations or child interviews, which could have strengthened the depth and detail of participant narratives for the study. Future research with working-class gay dads should examine the experiences of parent-child relationships through additional study methods (e.g., observation). Self-report interview data is limited by the questions I asked, the way the dads answered these questions, and how I interpreted that data (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015). Often, this can result in a process of narrative smoothing, or presenting events and circumstances into neatly packaged accounts that erase conflict, layers, and real-life messiness (Cirell & Sweet, 2020).

Related to narrative smoothing, my committee chair raised the concern that participant narratives did not seem to include descriptions of the daily struggles of parenting, such as discipline, navigating parent-child conflict, and limit-setting. I randomly selected two sets of interviews and re-listened for parenting struggles, to see if I had inadvertently omitted this information. I concluded that the dads had generally not discussed parenting-specific distress, and I believe there are three primary reasons for this: (1) I did not specifically ask about parent-child conflict or daily parenting struggles in my interview questions. I asked about daily parenting routines, division of labor, and what participants thought was the same and different about their parenting experience. I could have asked more follow-up questions to better understand the daily parenting

interactions, including struggles. (2) I did not want to make the study "damage centered" (Tuck, 2009) or focused on the difficulties of parenting. Many studies with LGBTQ+, working-class, and other marginalized populations focus on pain and struggle. While this lens could be useful when identifying a presenting concern in therapy, it can also perpetuate harm in a research setting. I wanted this study to provide a realistic, yet positive portrayal of working-class gay dads; however, by under-emphasizing parenting struggles, I also may have minimized the real and relatable difficulties of daily parenting that working-class gay dads—like all parents—face. (3) Participants, as gay dads, are under ongoing scrutiny as parents. It is likely that they are used to being somewhat guarded when discussing parenting difficulties, as a way of protecting their families against homophobic judgment. Previous research has shown that gay men may not disclose relationship issues because they do not want these problems to reflect poorly on their community (Kubiceck, 2018). Overall, the lack of data on struggles related to parenting is understandable but should be considered when critically evaluating this study and generating directions for future research.

Regarding study strengths, one is responding to critiques that gay fathering research has overly focused on dads with significant financial privilege (Carneiro et al., 2017). To my knowledge, this is the first study to specifically explore the work and family experiences of working-class gay dads. Relatedly, studying work and family experience during a distinct historical time (i.e., in the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic) adds to the significance of the study.

Other study strengths related to recruitment and methods. Liu and Ali (2005) have critiqued vocational psychology research for focusing on "objective" measures of class

while ignoring subjective social status. I responded to this by asking participants to opt into the study based on their own assessment of their class background, rather than using an SES screening tool (e.g., income cutoff), as current income is not necessarily reflective of class identity. Including trans participants in the study was also valuable, offering more breadth of experience within gay/queer fathering. The study was also strengthened by the diversity of family structures (e.g., single, divorce, and married parents; children of a variety of ages; intergenerational homes) and the diversity of work-family arrangements (e.g., varied work schedules and jobs represented; some parents splitting care work evenly and others demonstrating more specialized division of labor). Although I did not work with a CAB, including participant feedback at multiple stages helped ground the study in participant perspectives and priorities. Similarly, the inclusion of narratives, rather than fragmented codes and quotes, resulted in more contextualized depictions of each participant's experience.

A final strength of the study was the high retention rate, with 100% of participants completing the third interviews. This attests to the dads' investment in the study and comfort level with the way the interviews were conducted. A high retention rate was beneficial from a methodological perspective, as I was able to complete the three-interview process across participating households.

Imagining Futures

As I conclude this dissertation, I want to return to the narrative inquiry understanding of experience: "There is always a history, it is always changing, and it is always going somewhere" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 2). I started this project excited to talk with working-class gay dads about their daily work and family

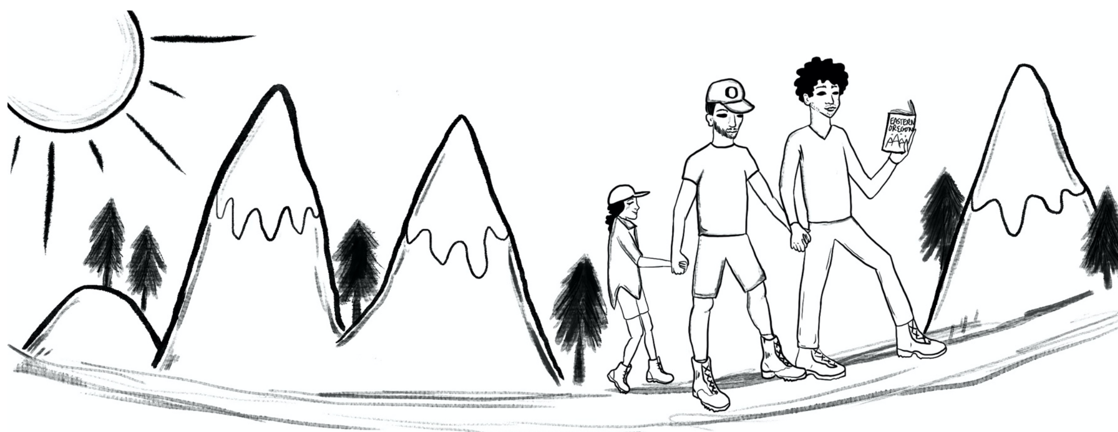
experiences. I am ending the study feeling hopeful. In academia, we learn to critique structural problems, and that is certainly an important dimension of scholarship, including this dissertation. At the same time, each dad in this study is finding daily ways to make parenting work, despite marginalization and economic constraints. Our conversations left me feeling like becoming a gay dad could be a possibility for me, and for many other queer men who hope to parent someday. This underscores the value of queer people being in community and sharing their stories to encourage one another. I hope that the dads in this study—and other working-class gay dads who happen to read this—will also feel encouraged as they read the stories of other dads like them, seeing their families represented. For prospective LGBTQ+ parents, I hope that this study leaves you feeling hopeful about the possibility of starting a family, and confident that there are many valid ways to navigate family and work.

I also hope that individual stories presented here, and the broader narrative of the study, help readers think differently about working-class gay dads, as well as family-work more broadly. The dads' stories and recommendations offer an entry point for thinking about societal improvements that would not only benefit this population, but other families who are working-class, have nontraditional structures, or have nonlinear work lives. For those who work with families in clinical or educational settings, these ideas can be incorporated into therapeutic work, tailoring interventions, and making curricula more inclusive of diverse families. Also, in addition to directions for future research already mentioned, other ideas for future studies include studying the experiences of working-class LGBTQ+ populations who want to become parents but do not due to barriers, exploring the experiences of children raised by working-class gay

dads, exploring how working-class gay dads navigate co-parenting arrangements and relationships with adopted children's biological families, examining the longitudinal impacts of LGBTQ+ climate and workplace policies on working-class gay dads' parenting stress and engagement, and continuing research with PWT that includes unpaid care work as a central variable. This study offers a starting point for understanding the work and family experiences of working-class gay dads, and future clinical, research, and political efforts can continue to advance an agenda that helps these dads and their families to thrive.

APPENDIX A

RECRUITMENT FLYER



Seeking Working-Class Gay Dads
for a Study about Family and Work

This study at the University of Oregon aims to learn from working-class gay dads to better support them and their families.

$200 for participation in 3 one-hour interviews via Zoom or phone. If interested, please fill out the brief survey at this link:

gaydadstudy.org

You are eligible to participate if:

- You are at least 18 years old
- You self-identify as a working-class gay man
- You are the father of at least one child (0-18 years old)
- You live in Oregon, Washington, or California
- You are willing to participate in 3, one-hour interviews

Questions? Contact Nathan Mather at:
541-952-2172 (Call/ Text) or nathan@gaydadstudy.org (Email)
Flyer image was created by Enyo Farabi

APPENDIX B

ELIGIBILITY SURVEY

Thank you for your interest in participating in this study! If you are at least 18 years old, identify as a working-class gay dad of a child (ages 0-18), and live in Oregon, Washington, or California, you are eligible to participate. You will receive $200 for participating in a series of three, 1-hour interviews via Zoom or phone. Payments will be through Cash App, Venmo, or an electronic gift card of your choice. The study is completely voluntary, and you can stop participating at any time.

Please complete this 2-minute survey to sign up:

First Name:
Last Name:

Phone Number:
Ok to text? [Yes] [No]

Email:

City/Town of Residence:
State of Residence: [Oregon] [Washington][California][Other: Write in]

Please write in your demographic information:

Gender:
Sexual Orientation:
Social Class:
Race/Ethnicity:
Age (Years):

Which best describes your parenting status?

[I am a full-time or part-time parent for at least one child (ages 0-18)]
[I am a full-time or part-time parent, but my child(ren) are older than 18 years old]
[I’ve never been in a parenting role]

Do you consent to being contacted about participating in this study?
[Yes, I consent to being contacted about this study.]

Submission Message:
Thank you for your interest! I will contact you soon.
-Nathan Mather, graduate student at the University of Oregon

APPENDIX C

INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

This protocol is for the first and second interviews (total of 2 hours). After one hour, I will end the initial interview. Before the second interview, I will review the recording and indicate places I'd like to follow up/ ask for more detail. At the end of first meeting, I will also schedule the 2nd and 3rd meetings (ideally 1 week and 3 weeks after first meeting, respectively). I will encourage participants to think about pseudonyms they'd like used for the study.

Sample Follow-up Prompts:
And how old were you when _____ happened?
Who were you living with at the time?
Where did that happen?
Could you give an example of what you mean by ___________?
How did you feel about that experience at the time? What about now?
What was it like (growing up in ____________, being closeted in _____________, working at __________)?
You mentioned that ___________ was ____________, but also ____________. Could you say more about that tension?

Introduction
Introduce self, study, thank participant for their time and interest
Review informed consent documents
Ask participant if they have any questions about the study
Confirm payment preference (Venmo, Cash App, or gift card)

Family structure
First, can you tell me about who you consider a part of your family? Who lives in the home? Kid(s) with you full-time or part-time? Did you grow up in [town] or did you move there? Family and friends nearby? Do your (partner, kids) have the same race/ethnicity as you, or different?

Becoming a dad
How did you become a dad?
What changed when you became a dad?
What does an average day of parenting look like in your home now? [Ask for details]
In addition to caring for your kid(s), do you ever take care of your parents? Your partner? Other people in your family/ community? Helping around the home, cooking, etc.

Unpaid and paid work
Are you currently working? What do you do for work?
How many hours of paid work per week? Typical schedule?
How does your role at [job] impact your role as a dad?
How does role as a dad impact your role at [job]?

Hours of caregiving each day (direct and indirect)?
Do you sometimes take time off for family responsibilities, and how does this go with your work? Benefits (family leave, flexible supervisor, etc.)?

Reflecting on fatherhood
Overall, how would you describe your experience as a parent?
Could you share with me some of the most memorable events in your experience as a father?
How has your caregiving experience changed over time? (Here, ask specific questions depending on life events such as birth of second child, caring for older parent, divorce, etc.) Could you give some examples?
What are your family's values? What do you all like to do for fun together?

Family of Origin
Could you tell me more about your family growing up? Who raised you? What was your family like? Did you have a lot of extended family and friends in your community?

Could you describe your family and community's culture? What were some of the values and traditions in your family and community growing up? How have these changed or stayed the same?

Intersectionality
How do you think your experience of parenting is different from other dads? How is it the same? Do you spend time with other parents? Other gay parents?

How have experiences of discrimination (based on class, sexuality, race) impacted your experience as a parent? As a worker? Impacted your family?

Decent work
What are the things that make parenting easier?
What do you wish were different about your parenting experience?
What are the jobs you've had in your life? What have you most and least enjoyed about work?

Narrative Detail
[Specific follow-up questions, based on first interview]

Third Interview
Example script [Don't need to read verbatim]: *There are a lot of ways to try to make sense of interviews for a research study. Sometimes, researchers pull out words and phrases and group them into categories. I didn't want to do that, because I wanted to keep what you shared in context, thinking about the bigger picture of what we've talked about here. So, I've written a narrative based on our conversations, and I'd like to hear your feedback on it. As in, things that aren't quite right, or that you'd like me to leave out in the final version. And also, important parts that are missing. And, if there's a part*

you do really like, I can make sure it stays the same. Basically, just your overall reactions to it, since this is your story and I want to make sure that you approve of how it's written.

[Share screen and read narrative out loud so that participants can read/listen at the same time. Pause between paragraphs or at any point when participants offer a reaction in order to respond.]

Example prompts:

Here at the beginning, is there anything you'd like added, changed, or removed?

What about this part, does this seem accurate, or would it be better to say this in a different way?

When participants clarify details (e.g., that happened in 2006, not 2004), there shouldn't be much researcher input necessary. For other reactions, however, a dialogue could provide a deeper understanding of participant stories:

When we spoke before, you mentioned feeling ____________, and now you're saying it was more like ______________. Could you say more about the tension between those feelings?

I really appreciate how you worded that, and it's making me wonder about this part: _________. Do you think _____________ should be worded differently, too?

After the narrative has been discussed and the participant says they have no more input on it:

The last thing I want to talk with you about, since this is our last meeting, is to talk about the end results of this project:

What do you hope people who read your story will learn from it?

How would you like to see things improved (in terms of policy changes, cultural shifts)?

What advice do you have for other dads like you who are earlier in their parenting journey?

What questions do you have for me about the study?

One of the things I'll be doing next is looking for common themes and tensions throughout the different narratives. I will be in touch in the coming months with a brief, optional survey to shared your feedback on those themes.

[Thank participant(s), clarify anticipated timeline, encourage them to reach out if there are any follow-up questions/ concerns.]

APPENDIX D

PARTICIPANT FEEDBACK SURVEY

In addition to the stories that we discussed in our third interview, the study will include a section that summarizes key themes from what you shared, as well as your recommendations for structural changes and advice for other dads like you.

There are three pages to this survey:

1. Key Themes
2. Recommendations for Structural Changes
3. Advice for Other Dads Like You

Instructions: The 12 themes below are based on our interviews, my interpretations, and previous research on similar topics. **Please rate how much you agree with each of the themes based on your experience, from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree."** There are likely to be different opinions across participants, since each of you has a unique experience. You can also leave comments to help me understand your perspective (optional).

1) There are many valid ways to form families.

2) Working-class gay dads and their families—like all people—are complex and multidimensional.

3) Working-class gay dads have a lot in common with parents in general.

4) Working-class gay dads can make excellent parents.

5) Parenting is not something taken for granted—it often requires a lot time and effort to become a gay dad, and a lot of thoughtfulness goes into parenting itself.

6) Flexible gender roles can be beneficial at home and at work.

7) When possible, working-class gay dads often prioritize family/parenting over paid work.

8) Community support is valuable, but sometimes hard to come by, for working-class gay dads.

9) Nobody is entitled to seek personal information or to cross other boundaries with gay dads and their families, especially with working-class gay dads who are also trans and/or Black, Indigenous, and other people of color (BIPOC).

10) For working-class gay dads living on the West Coast, financial stress is often more pressing than lack of societal support for LGBTQ+ parents (though both are impactful and important).

11) Working-class gay dads often get creative to meet the needs of their families (sharing responsibilities, relying on support networks, bringing kids to work, piecing together multiple jobs and assistance programs, saving up money, etc.).

12) In both family and work, flexibility is needed. The path to parenthood is often unconventional, and work lives are often nonlinear.

Based on these themes and specific feedback from you all, I've also created five specific structural recommendations to increase economic/societal support for working-class gay dads. These recommendations will include more detail in the thesis, but these statements cover the main ideas.

Instructions: Please rate how much you agree that each recommended change would be beneficial at a societal level, and would benefit you and your family specifically. Feel free to leave comments and/or additional structural recommendations (optional).

1) Increase financial support for working-class LGBTQ+ parents.

2) Create more accessible, queer-inclusive resources and agencies (to help with becoming parents, childcare support, gender-inclusive support groups for parents, etc.)

3) Establish federal (and international) legal protections for LGBTQ+ families.

4) Promote flexibility/ acceptance in cultural narratives about family.

Instructions: Finally, I've summarized your feedback on what advice you'd like to give to men like you who are considering parenting or are earlier in their parenting journey. Based on your experience, please rate your agreement with each statement and leave comments/additional advice you would like to give (optional).

1) Be flexible.
2) Know what you're getting into.
3) Share about your process with people you trust/ reach out for help
4) Expect barriers . . . but don't let them stop you.
5) Stay hopeful.
6) Be patient with yourself as a parent.

APPENDIX E

ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANT NARRATIVES

Izzy

Izzy wakes up at 5:00am to the unwelcome sound of his morning alarm. Quietly, he rolls out of bed and gets ready for the day, careful not to wake his kids. By 6am, he arrives at the school where he works as a head custodian. A job he likes. He enjoys being around kids, the security of the job, supportive coworkers. He especially appreciated the flexibility to take time off when QB was born, something that would have been much harder in his previous jobs. The school even offered him a path to go back to school to become a teacher, but he enjoys custodial work and would rather continue with this. The days do start early, though. He could come in a bit later—sometimes he does in the summer—but during the school year, working earlier means more time at home with his kids. As he gets started with the day, he thinks of Tito making breakfast for the girls and taking them to school and daycare. Their family has a system down, a daily rhythm. Such a different rhythm from before parenting—everything changed! Izzy recalls the evening and weekend outings he and Tito used to do all the time: hiking in the mountains, going to the movies, hosting gatherings with friends. Now their lives revolve around their kids. But Izzy does not regret this, he feels grateful. More tired than before, but grateful.

During a break, Izzy checks his phone. No news. He's been waiting a while for an update about the adoption process, but COVID-19 slowed things down. And the system is so complicated. Nobody tells them how processes work unless they ask questions, so they usually end up taking things one step at a time. When they were asked if they would adopt Lala and Kiki, Izzy and Tito immediately said yes—this felt like a dream come true. But for now, they still have no parental rights. The extended uncertainty takes a toll, not knowing if someone will claim their children. Of course, he wants his children's biological parents to have a relationship with their kids. Now that he is a dad, he can't imagine having that contact taken away. But their family is so connected now—Lala and Kiki present since the day QB was born. With some disappointment, Izzy puts his phone away and shifts his attention to other things.

At 2:30, Izzy picks the kids up from day care and school and brings them home. Now they live in their own house, a cozy place. He'd hoped to own a home before becoming a parent, but things happened in the reverse order. It seems to Izzy that nothing goes quite how he planned, but he feels ok with that, satisfied with the way life is unfolding. In the kitchen, Tito prepares a snack for the girls. Without being asked, Lala jumps in to help, carrying cheese and crackers to her younger sisters. Izzy sometimes worries that Lala helps too much, forced to grow up too fast in her previous home. He feels relief when she acts like a kid, a sign of healing. "Daddy, to do you want some of my drink?" Kiki asks, extending her cup in Izzy's direction. "That's very sweet, thank you for offering", Izzy responds smiling, continually surprised by the way Kiki shows empathy for others. QB leaves her snack and starts toddling away, off to play and explore. Izzy swells with pride, being with his girls. "Can we watch TV now?" Lala asks. Izzy reminds them of the

family rule: "If you read for 30 minutes first, then you can earn 30 minutes of TV for later."

While Lala and Kiki read and QB plays nearby, Izzy texts Tito, asking that he stop for some groceries on the way home. The two used to always shop together, but now, it's much easier for one to go. Tito arrives home around 4, and the family hangs out for the evening, like always. They go to a nearby park with a playground, which the girls love—climbing, laughing, running around. Then they return home together. Tito cooks while Izzy does some laundry. Izzy and Tito make a good team, each jumping in to help with housework before the other asks. When Tito announces that the enchiladas are ready, the family sits down to eat together, one of Izzy's favorite times in the day. At 8:30, Izzy and Tito say goodnight to the girls, now tucked in and sleepy after playing at the park. The two of them share the final hours of the day alone, relaxing and watching a show.

Jake

They adopted Sailor a few years ago. Jake had done a statewide search on Petfinder, setting few parameters. *I'll know the right dog when I see it,* he'd thought. Sure enough, he found a seriously cute pup a few hours away, who seemed, based on his profile at least, like a great fit. Jake made sure to help manage Blake's expectations. *If he's the right dog for us, I'll bring him home. If he's not, I won't.* He didn't bring his son with him, knowing how difficult it would be for a 6-year-old to sit in a car for three hours, see an adorable dog, and not insist on adopting. As it turned out, Sailor was a great fit. Later, Jake laughed to himself, realizing that Sailor had everything he wanted in a man—masculine and athletic, but also super sweet, loving.

***

For Jake, transitioning meant freedom. He fully embraced his second adolescence that began in his 30s. Now he was like other men, not tied to a timeline like women often are. A teenager again, parenting hardly crossed his mind. Jake remembers the first time gay men started paying attention to him in a sexual way. Shortly after beginning his transition, looking young and corn-fed and donning a leather jacket, he parked his motorcycle and walked into a store. He noticed the gay store clerks salivating over him and felt blown away by this. These men, like the other cis gay men around, knew virtually nothing about trans maleness, but they found Jake very attractive. Jake flirted back with ease, deeply wanting to be a gay man among gay men. Over the years that followed, that's what he did, having a lot of fun but also struggling with the dating scene, internalizing harsh judgments of his body. Dating as a gay man in San Francisco was hard for everybody, but especially for trans men. The day when Jake felt the greatest sense of belonging with gay men wasn't on a date, but after he'd performed in a drag show. He knew his performance hadn't impressed—*those bitches let you know*—but afterward, laughing about the evening with a group of friends, he felt the experience validated his manhood, a validation of his queer maleness he'd been working for.

After living among queer men in San Francisco for many years, the topic of parenthood emerged again, unexpectedly. Jake had decided a little while ago that he could no longer live on the dessert that the San Francisco gay men's dating scene offered—he needed more substance. He also grew tired of the cruelness he'd encountered, the continuous validation-seeking, and just wanted to have his needs met. During this season, he met a woman who he eventually married. They moved to a smaller city and talked about having a child—something she wanted when they first met and continued wanting more. Jake knew a child would require a tremendous amount of attention and energy, changing their lives forever. Even knowing this, he opened up to the idea, and not too long after moving, they started family planning.

***

Jake did go to college, but not straight out of high school. He worked a variety of jobs in his 20s and 30s. He ran a small nontoxic cleaning business, painted houses for a while. When the dot com boom hit the Bay Area, the combination of low pay/no benefits in his current work and a huge increase in demand for office workers led Jake into a cubicle. He remembers trying to keep up with the work hard/play hard mentality of the corporate world, negating his own needs to make others happy. It felt awful. In his 40s, he decided to get his degree, working 90% time and attending school full-time on loans.

When he moved with his partner during the 2008 recession, he hoped to get a job in the area he'd studied-environmental science. He loved the outdoors and wanted to do work he found meaningful. Trying everything to get his foot in the door, he volunteered for multiple nonprofits, networked with whoever he could, and applied to job after job. After a year, in part because they were getting ready for their baby, he settled for a classified job at a large organization, which offered some security, if not fulfillment. On his first day, he called HR to ask for his ID number. *Are you classified or unclassified?* They'd asked him. When he told them classified, they informed him, *then you'll have to come to our main office to get your ID. If you were unclassified, we could give it to you over the phone.* This phone call made Jake feel like a second-class citizen, setting the stage for years of feeling like a lower member in a caste system. The clerical people, the food service people, the building maintenance people, the landscaping people—he felt they weren't trusted, consistently treated poorly. The union didn't help his experience much, as he felt it only benefited some members, limiting his growth. Eventually, he got an executive assistant position, but ended up hating it, feeling stressed out and depleted. Neither his union membership nor his degree had provided the secure pathway he'd been promised as a kid.

Chris & Thomas

Chris and Thomas weren't at home when they received the news they'd be adopting Aspen and Levi. Thomas, riding home on transit, smiled widely, making him stand out in a sea of expressionless commuters. Chris found out while chaperoning a youth mission trip two hours away. That night, on the floor of a church classroom full of snoring adolescent boys, Chris lay on his sleeping bag, scrolling through the case details on his

phone. Too excited to sleep, he didn't stop reading the stories about his soon-to-be adopted kids until 3am.

In retrospect, their adoption process went faster than expected. The previous year, Chris and Thomas started trainings with DHS, quickly realizing that the required home study for adoptive families could take years. They searched for a nonprofit agency who could do the home study sooner, discouraged that most were sponsored by churches that didn't support LGBTQ+ people. Once they connected with a queer-affirming agency, the process moved quickly. It helped that the kids' foster parents treated Chris and Thomas with respect. In fact, they seemed to advocate for the two of them to become the parents. Years later, Chris and Thomas decided to pay this kindness forward. They asked Aspen and Levi what they thought about bringing a foster child into their home. *Another kid to play with? Of course!* Both kids eagerly agreed, not aware of how a third sibling would change the family dynamic. They all adjusted though, and soon Kevin became a part of the family, too.

***

When Aspen was quite young, she threw a tantrum in a store. Chris waited calmly nearby, not wanting to get upset or reinforce the behavior. A woman approached Aspen with a sense of urgency, asking *Where is your mom?* Chris stepped in to introduce himself: *I'm the parent.* In response, she asked, *Ok, but where's the mom?* Disgruntled, Chris replied, *there is no mom.* In disbelief, the woman shook her head. *Everybody has a mom.* Chris hadn't been bothered by the tantrum, but this conversation bothered him a lot. *No, there is no mom*, he repeated with frustration, taking Aspen's hand and walking away.

***

A few years ago, scrolling through Facebook, Chris came across a targeted ad for surrogacy. Out of curiosity, he clicked on it. *Oh my god!* He'd known surrogacy cost a lot of money, but he could hardly believe the sky-high price.

Thomas is more familiar with expensive pathways to parenthood. He used to work in a fertility clinic. There, he interacted with many people—queer and straight—seeking medical support to have biological children. Thomas found this work interesting, already a dad. *You don't know what you're getting into!* He thought about new parents, mostly joking. It felt bizarre working at the front desk, handling the financial transactions for family planning. Sometimes, people paid in cash. Thomas remembers counting out $20,000 in hundred-dollar bills, his fingertips inky by the end. Then, storing all that money in the office safe.

Chris and Thomas don't judge different ways of forming families as good or bad. They do notice differences, though. Biology, family networks, money, early childhood development. Each path carries its own consequences for everyone involved. Wealthy gay dads have the privilege of choosing from all the available options. With

time, Chris and Thomas saved up money for a home study, making adoption from foster care possible. To them, this path made the most sense.

Ethan

A deep bass reverberates throughout the house, shaking the small room that Ethan shares with Beatrice and Remy. It's 1am. Ethan pulls his blanket over himself as he rolls over, trying unsuccessfully to fall asleep. He notices that Remy can't sleep either, with the sounds of music, laughter, and loud conversation floating under the door that separates them from the rest of the house. Seeing his kid awake, Ethan pulls himself out of bed and walks into the living room. *Hey, can y'all turn the music down? We're trying to sleep.* His roommates look surprised. *Ok fine, but it's Friday night!* They don't understand the responsibilities of parenting, practically still kids themselves. Ethan utters a tired *thanks,* and zig zags back to the room, stepping around a group of friends huddled around a bong.

Living in punk houses was hard. It's tough to share space as a single parent with two young kids. Ethan didn't necessarily want his kids to grow up around adults all the time, but the rent was affordable, so they made it work. And punk culture resonated with Ethan. It felt transformative, especially as he emerged from Christian fundamentalism. In punk spaces, Ethan learned about the problems with capitalism, dreaming of a world in which poor people had more access to resources. He brought his kids up with respect for civil disobedience and mistrust of authority. More than anything, he taught his kids to think critically, something he wished he'd learned as a kid.

Ethan didn't just talk about ideas; he showed up. Especially as a young adult, he went to a lot of protests with his punk community. Sometimes, he brought his kids along to tamer events. This felt exciting for them. However, when a close friend was detained for their political resistance, Ethan took a step back. His kids feared losing their dad.

Ethan slowly moved away from punk houses, wanting quieter and cleaner living spaces as he got older. At the same time, he continues to hold values from those earlier seasons. Recently, he attended Black Lives Matter protests. When he has capacity, he does online fundraising and educating—something that feels safer as a parent. When watching TV as a family, Ethan often pauses to get kids thinking more critically about media. *What was problematic about that scene? Who's not represented here?* Though his kids groan about this, Ethan feels proud that they've grown to care about social justice. He overhears Beatrice educating her friends when she talks on the phone. Remy challenges racism on gaming threads. As he watches his kids become increasingly politicized, he also tries to protect them from feeling too weighed down. They're not solely responsible for changing the future of the world. *I want to be honest with them,* Ethan explains, *but I don't want them to be super depressed either.*

***

Art really is Ethan's element. Yes, feeling like the poorest student in his art school made things hard sometimes. He winced hearing his wealthy classmates take their education for

granted, skipping classes their parents paid for. Ethan couldn't imagine missing a class—taking out loans to do what he loved, he put his heart and soul into every second. But even with these dynamics, Ethan had never felt more at home than with the queer artists he met in school. They were all weird, which made his own unusual circumstances feel less weird. And his class background didn't keep him from winning awards as a student or from having the time of his life, even as he juggled school and parenting.

Now, though Ethan finished school, the apartment is still always full of art. Ethan sketches flash for future tattoos, hoping to get an apprenticeship soon. Remy draws anime, often horror manga. Though Ethan doesn't fully understand how the process works, he knows they do commissions for internet friends, getting paid in points for games. Beatrice loves animation and writing. She dreams of film school in LA, and of writing and animating a TV series, a project already underway. Ethan feels incredibly proud of his kids' creative talents. Unsure if he'll ever pay off his student loan debt, he also cautions them about focusing solely on art. *Remember, I do art, and we don't have any money.* For now, the family curse holds strong; art a path to fulfillment, even if a precarious one.

Sam & Will

Having their teenage nieces and nephews living with them felt both deeply rewarding and emotionally difficult. Sam and Will, stricter than the kids' parents, received pushback when they tried to set boundaries and keep the kids engaged in school. When the kids' parents came in and out of the picture, the unpredictability created confusion. Despite the love and stability that Sam and Will worked hard to build, many of their nieces and nephews started using drugs and developing addictions themselves. Sam and Will never gave up on them, even as the kids got into difficult situations and moved out. Whenever they could, they offered a hand up, hiring some of their nieces to work in their salon and ensuring that when one niece got pregnant, she could live next door to them.

***

Part of their plan was to create stability. Through a combination of planning and luck, Sam and Will found a house to rent within walking distance of all the local schools, so their kids could grow up with consistent friends. When they adopted their kids, Sam and Will also scaled back at work. Before, they had built a large and successful hairdressing business. After becoming dads, they downsized, now in a cozy salon with just three chairs. On the weekends, the family often goes camping at a recreation center, where the boys have many friends who they've grown up with—swimming, running around, and boating on the lake. All these decisions keep their family at the center.

In the early years, especially with Steve, their younger son, they focused their energy on helping their kids develop in a healthy way. Born three months early and with exposure to a variety of drugs, initial medical predictions for Steve weren't optimistic. Sam and Will had been open to children with any birth circumstances—likely why they were able to adopt two babies, something uncommon in foster care. The couple wasn't afraid of

complicated births. Many of Sam's nieces and nephews were exposed to drugs in utero; he quickly learned how to effectively respond to Steve's needs.

Now, Sam and Will continue to maintain the supportive environment they've built for their kids. They rent retail space from the same landlord who owns their home. A close friend of theirs, he gives them a great deal on rent for both their house and their salon. This allows their family to stay in their town as real estate prices skyrocket. A symbiotic relationship, Sam and Will fix up the properties, and Will keeps the gardens in their complex healthy and beautiful. Their next-door neighbor also happens to be the kids' longtime nanny, with two kids of the same ages as Steve and Greg, now 12 and 14. The four boys are like family, walking into each other's homes without knocking. Seeing their kids feel safe and free makes Sam and Will feel relieved, confirmation that they are doing a good job raising their kids.

Tharen

For his first post-pastoral job, Tharen worked at an alternative boarding school for teens. Starting his shifts at midnight, he chaperoned the dormitory until the boys went to class at 8am. Returning home, he always planned to rest while his own kids were at school. This proved difficult. His circadian rhythm disrupted, he struggled to fall asleep. While his wife worked, he took care of the kids in the afternoon and evening, helping them with homework and cooking dinner. After getting the kids tucked in, he would sneak in one more hour of sleep before heading to another shift.

Tharen's next job happened shortly after finishing an online degree in accountancy. He earned the degree through a for-profit university in hopes of transitioning to a more lucrative career path to provide for his family. Though he enjoyed the classes, he ultimately felt taken advantage of by the institution. The university never communicated the need for internships in his field, something that most programs include as part of their curriculum. Though he briefly took a job as a bookkeeper at a medical office, the job quickly turned out to be different from advertised, and he left on mutual terms. After that, Tharen never used his accountancy degree again, though continues to pay off the loans a decade later. After working at the school and the medical office, Tharen worked for several years at a cold-storage warehouse for frozen foods.

***

He found work as a teacher's assistant in a public school, providing classroom support to students with mental health challenges and other disabilities. What he hadn't realized was that Amber commuted nearly two hours to work and lived quite far away. As a result, he found himself employed in a place too far from his kids for evening visits. (Through the moving process and divorce, Amber became the custodial parent for all four kids). Tharen, now renting a room in a house, couldn't host his kids for overnight stays. He called and drove to see them whenever he could, usually during weekends. From many angles, Amber had the resources to better support their children—she made more money, had more social support, and more living space. At the same time, Tharen struggled to

adjust to this new arrangement, accustomed to being with his kids most of the time. For his kids, the adjustment was a challenge, too.

Jimmy & Francis

After Quinn's birth, the family drove north for three days to a small town in the Northeast where Francis grew up. Jimmy and Francis had planned to bring Quinn back to the West Coast, where the couple had been living for years. The pandemic changed their plans.

The couple contemplates different futures—maybe returning to the West Coast, or first heading south to stay near Jimmy's family so they can get to know Quinn. For now, they lean into the daily rhythm of parenting as the northeastern trees change colors, foreshadowing their first holiday season as a family. The couple focuses on creating a secure and loving space for Quinn, regardless of where they are.

***

With Quinn, every day feels exciting. Even when the family stays home, Quinn makes life adventurous. She grows quickly, her dads watching in awe and taking photos to remember. It seems to Jimmy and Francis like every week there is a new first, and with each first, Quinn becomes more engaged in the world, more attuned and present with her dads. Jimmy remembers fondly the first time Quinn smiled. Now, every morning, a toothless grin spreads across her face when she sees her dads.

As Quinn grows, Jimmy and Francis lay a foundation for the world they want for her. At home, they mostly speak to Quinn in Spanish, wanting her to grow up bilingual and connected to her Latinx roots. Having experienced upward mobility, Jimmy and Francis maintain many of the values from their working-class families. They don't want Quinn to grow up entitled—*someone who would touch a stranger's baby*—but as someone who knows where she comes from and appreciates what she has. They also strive to be more emotion-focused than their own parents, fostering an environment for Quinn based in security and warmth.

With these hopes in mind, Jimmy and Francis move through the first months of parenting, sometimes unsure what to do next, at other moments with assured confidence. At the end of the day, they care most about Quinn being healthy and happy. Based on how often she's smiling, Jimmy and Francis agree things are going well.

APPENDIX F

IRB APPROVAL DOCUMENTS

EXEMPT DETERMINATION

June 10, 2021

Nathan Mather

nmather@uoregon.edu

Dear Nathan Mather:

On 6/10/2021, the following research was reviewed and determined to qualify for exemption.

Type of Review:	Initial Study
Study Title:	Working-Class Gay Fathers' Experiences with Unpaid Care Work: A Narrative Inquiry
Principal Investigator:	Nathan Mather
Study ID:	STUDY00000158
Funding Source:	Name: University of Oregon
IND, IDE, or HDE:	None
Documents Reviewed:	• CSWS Grant Application, Category: Sponsor Attachment; • CSWS Grant Confirmation, Category: Sponsor Attachment; • Flyer Draft, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Mather_Informed Consent, Category: Consent Form; • Mather_RAP Funding and Sponsorship, Category: Sponsor Attachment; • Mather_RAP Initial Review, Category: IRB Protocol; • Mather_Research Plan, Category: IRB Protocol; • Recruitment Email, Category: Recruitment Materials; • Recruitment Plan, Category: Other; • Screening and Interview Protocol, Category: Survey Instrument;
Approval Date:	6/9/2021

Page 1 of 3

Expiration Date:	6/8/2022

For this research, the following determinations have been made:

- This study has been reviewed under **the 2018 Common Rule** and determined to qualify for exemption under **Title 45 CFR 46.104(d)(2)(ii) Tests, surveys, interviews, or observation (low risk).**

The research is approved to be conducted as described in the approved protocol using the approved materials. Approved materials can be accessed in the protocol workspace in the IRB module of the research administration portal (RAP).

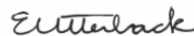
All changes to this research must be assessed to ensure the study continues to qualify for exemption. Research Compliance Services has developed specific guidance to help you understand when a modification is required before a change can be implemented. It is your responsibility to ensure modifications are submitted when required and approval secured before implementing changes to the protocol

Continuing Review is not required for this study. **An institutional approval period has been established based on your application materials.** If you anticipate the research will continue beyond the approval period, you must submit a **Continuing Review Application** at least 45-days days prior to the expiration date. A closure report must be submitted once human subject research activities are complete. Failure to maintain current approval or properly close the protocol constitutes non-compliance.

With the submission of your request, you agreed to uphold the responsibilities of the Principal Investigator and have agreed to follow the requirements listed in the Investigator Manual (HRP-103), which can be found by navigating to the IRB Library within the IRB module of the RAP.

If you have any questions regarding your protocol or the review process, please contact Research Compliance Services at ResearchCompliance@uoregon.edu or (541)346-2510. The University of Oregon and Research Compliance Services appreciate your commitment to the ethical and responsible conduct of research with human subjects.

Sincerely,



Lizzy Utterback

Research Compliance Administrator
on behalf of the Committee for Protection of Human Subjects

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