"WE'RE NOT 'BABY DADDIES' WE ARE FATHERS. DADS.": NONRESIDENTIAL
FATHERS' ONLINE STIGMA MANAGEMENT

by

Emma Grace Schambach

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Arts in
Communication Studies

Charlotte

2021

Approved by:

_____
Dr. Erin Basinger

_____
Dr. Margaret M. Quinlan

_____
Dr. Justin Grandinetti

Abstract

EMMA SCHAMBACH. "We're Not 'Baby Daddies' We Are Fathers. Dads.": Nonresidential Fathers' Online Stigma Management. (Under the direction of DR. ERIN BASINGER)

Family and stigma communication research have barely scratched the surface of the dynamic and diverse arrangements of stigma in the family context. Though some research has investigated the stigma surrounding nontraditional family structures (e.g., adoptive families, same-gender parents), some populations have been neglected. Specifically, the lack of focus on nonresidential fathers is a substantial oversight in academic research. This thesis examines how nonresidential fathers communicate online about the stigma they face. It sheds light on this population's stigma management strategies through a thematic analysis of public online forums written by nonresidential fathers. This study reveals that fathers participate in facework, stigma management, and community formation when communicating online about the stigma they face. The results of this study have implications for communication studies as a field and applications for the dissolution of stigma in social and legal contexts.

DEDICATION

For my family. For my dad, who showed me the strength in a father's love for his

children. For my mom, who taught me how to learn and how to love. For my brothers for being

great men and even greater brothers, fathers, and friends. For all of the fathers in my life who

show perseverance, passion, and the unceasing pursuit of justice for themselves and their

families.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my advisor Dr. Basinger whose patience and kindness allowed me to explore my passions and pursue this thesis wholeheartedly. Without Dr. Basinger's support and expertise, I would not have found such a fulfilling conclusion to this chapter of my educational journey. Thank you for taking a gamble on me and for not only betting on my ability, but encouraging my drive as I pursued this project. Thank you also for pushing me to produce the highest quality of work while recognizing the many mediating variables in this stage of my life and academic journey.

I would like to thank Dr. Quinlan for taking the time to advise me not only on this thesis, but also advising my independent study. She gave me the opportunity to develop as not only a student but as an independent scholar. She treated me with the respect of a colleague and provided me with the tools to make my research worthy of that respect.

I would also like to thank Dr. Grandinetti without whose input my graduate experience would have fallen short. Thank you for broadening my understanding of not only the field of communication, but also the technological world. Your classroom introduced me to new ideas and concepts and inspired me to continue to look at the world around me with curiosity.

Last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank my parents. To my mom, thank you for loving and encouraging me every day and encouraging me every day to grow my love of learning. Thank you for homeschooling me and providing me with the best possible individualized education, and for always encouraging me to work hard out of love for others. To my dad, thank you for giving me an example of hard work and love as you provided for our family so that mom could educate me and my brothers. Growing up and seeing your dedication to living life as a Renaissance man, all while loving and fighting to provide for your wife and

children, is an upbringing I will forever be grateful for. Without the foundation for learning and

love that my parents provided for me, I could not be the perpetual student and dedicated

advocate that I hope to be.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A large genre of communication theories focuses on stigma and how communication affects the lives of stigmatized populations (Goffman, 1959, 1963, 1967). Communication scholars have a unique responsibility to understand people from diverse communities. Scholars must learn how different populations communicate to identify what communicative practices induce positive or negative outcomes. Scholars concerned with understanding stigma, how it is experienced and perpetuated, and its consequences must ensure equity and justice for all marginalized populations and create representation for underrepresented groups.

One starkly underrepresented group in communication scholarship is nonresidential fathers who face social and legal stigma for their parental and custodial status. Over a quarter of American children have one parent living outside of the home, and 25% of all residential mothers do not share residency with the children's father, representing a substantial percentage of the population (Grall, 2020). Nonresidential fathers often face stigma because they are labeled as "absentee parents" or "deadbeat dads," though these stereotypes fail to stand up to even preliminary scrutiny (Grall, 2020). For example, national statistics on parenting and child support suggest that most nonresidential fathers provide child support, debunking the myth that most nonresidential fathers are absent or unsupportive (Kane et al., 2015). Moreover, statistics show that even nonresidential without litigated child support on record with the court system are making cash contributions directly to their children's mother (Kane et al., 2015). On average, nonresidential fathers make monthly contributions of about $60 per month per child to their children's upbringing (Kane et al., 2015). Taken together, this juxtaposition of stereotypes versus reality demonstrates how nonresidential fathers face unfair stigma and have not received enough research attention.

Nonresidential fathers' stigma experiences affect not only the fathers themselves but also their children and families. Research on the experience of stigma within nontraditional families suggests that the negative effects far surpass the impact on the parents and can result in a plethora of harms to their children (Cox & Paley, 2003). Research for this thesis examines how nonresidential fathers cope with and communicate about their stigma online. This study sheds light on this population's stigma management strategies through a thematic analysis of online forum posts written by nonresidential fathers about their experiences with stigma.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Communication Scholarship on Nontraditional Family Structures

Families are one of the most emotionally charged and socially significant structures in modern society, and they have been throughout history. With countless societal norms for how families should look and behave and what counts as "family," the academic focus on families has become as emotionally charged as it is crucial (Amato, 2000; Baxter, 2015; Gatrell et al., 2019). Family systems are made up of individual members who communicate with and about one another to co-construct meaning within the family unit and create a shared understanding (Cox & Paley, 2003). Also, families are among the smallest building blocks of social structures in modern western cultures, with individual families making up the larger system of the collective society (Galvin et al., 2015; Von Bertalanffy, 1956). From the western cultural positionality, the nuclear family is situated as the most traditional family structure (Gatrelll, 2019; Von Bertalanffy, 1956). This building block of western culture and social structure has attracted much academic attention.

Nontraditional families, or families that are not structured in the traditional nuclear model of a married man and woman with children, often face a wide range of unique challenges (Golombok, 2010). Families now increasingly come in different sizes and forms. Diverse family structures in the modern era include single parent, LGBTQ+-parent, step-parent, adoptive, and multiracial families, among many other diverse sets of parents, each posing interesting case studies into these families' communication. Familial bonds in specific family structures like step-families and families in which one parent does not live with the child often pose challenges that are not experienced within more traditional family units (Petronio & Bradford, 1993; Sharp & Thomas, 2016). The harms associated with social stigma and family communication, for

example, are related to childhood developmental issues, familial bonding issues between parents and children, and adverse mental health effects for both parents and children (Bullcroft et al., 1988; Solantus et al., 2004). These effects can harm children, who already face unique challenges during their adolescent development. These harms can lead to difficulties in school and other relationships, and even have lasting effect into adult life (Amato, 2000; DiVerniero, 2013; Golombok, 2010; Marloes et al., 2014). Furthermore, children in nontraditional families often face difficulties building relationships both within the family and with their peers (Usdansky, 2009). Research is only beginning to uncover the communication involved in navigating the unique circumstances, bonds, and challenges of nontraditional families.

One family structure, LGBTQ+-parental households, has received some academic attention. Research has found that these families often face significant social pressures which perpetuates the exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals from the societal standard for normalcy (Gatrell et al., 2019; Goldberg & Sayer, 2006; Golombok & Tasker, 1996). Research has found that although statistically, children in LGBTQ+ families fare as well or better than children in traditional households with straight parents, societal stigmas can harm the well-being of both the parents and the children within those families (Farr et al., 2017; Goldberg, 2010; Meyer, 2003). The effects of LGBTQ+ parents and families' stigmatization are far-reaching and devastating to all members of this nontraditional family structure.

Adoptive parents also have extensive societal pressures and norms to overcome when building and caring for their families (Baxter, 2015). Adoptive families often face stigmatizing language from their social circle concerning both their decisions to adopt and the day-to-day dynamics within their families (Suter & Ballard, 2009). Additionally, adoptive families conduct face management (strategizing their images) in crafting responses to negative language

surrounding their adoptive family structure (Meisenbach, 2010; Suter & Ballard, 2009). Adoptive children are more prone to self-esteem issues when they are preoccupied with their adopted status and have social reminders reinforcing their focus on that single aspect of their identities (Colaner et al., 2018). Family structures often have complex sets of characteristics, and adoptive parents often have other mediating identities that add to the complexity of how they face judgment and scrutiny from those around them.

Some adoptive parents who adopt transracially face additional stigma and judgment over their ability to care for and love their children. They have complex communication strategies for communicating with and about their family members (Nelson & Colaner, 2018; Tan & Liu, 2019). For instance, communication often revolves around negotiating parents' and children's identities as parents become more aware of their children's race and culture (Tan & Liu, 2019). The children also negotiate their identities as members of a transracial family and as members of their race (Nelson & Colaner, 2018). Moreover, children in transracial adoptive families face unique challenges relating to their parents and peers (Nelson & Colaner, 2018; Tan & Liu, 2019). Adoptive families are a relatively well-researched nontraditional family structure that is prone to stigma.

There is, additionally, substantial focus in family communication research related to the parental role in step-families (Golombok, 2015). Such research has primarily centered on discovering how bonds are formed between step-parents and step-children and how communication occurs in blended families (Braithwaite et al., 2018; Kellas et al., 2014). Some step-family research centers on step-families building understanding through communication about the dynamic between step-parents, nonresidential parents, and children (Schrodt, 2010, 2016). This research highlights the effects of this dynamic on children's developing perception

of their role within the nontraditional family structure (Schrodt, 2016). Other step-family research examines the ways step-family communication affects the romantic relationships of the step-parent and residential parent (Schrodt, 2010). This specific trend in family communication research focuses only on the children's experiences as they adapt to the new romantic relationships they see within their nontraditional family structures (Golombok, 2015). Communication research must now broaden the populations studied to include the perspectives and experiences of all members of nontraditional family structures' to create a more holistic understanding of family communication.

2.2 Overlooked Perspectives in Family Communication Research

Most research on family communication in the context of nontraditional families focuses on the effects on the children. However, some scholars have also begun to examine how parents experience their roles. This scholarship includes research on how single mothers cope with the challenges of solo parenting, how LGBTQ+ parents communicate about their status as marginalized parents, how stepmothers seek social support for the unique challenges they face, and how parents in all family forms use communication to parent and to cope with the stresses of parenting (Craig & Johnson, 2012; Gatrell et al., 2019; Golombok, 2015; Nelson & Colaner, 2018). This research has covered a wide range of populations but is far from exhaustive.

To grasp the full picture of nontraditional family structures, communication scholars must include the experiences and perspectives of all members of nontraditional families. Overwhelmingly, communication studies as a field of research and academia as a whole have overlooked nonresidential parents' experiences. Nonresidential parents do not live with their children all or some of the time (Kartch, 2013). Some research in the social sciences and humanities (e.g., sociology, psychology) has examined these family structures, but

communication studies as a field has lagged in this regard (Babcock, 1998; Baker & Bishop, 2005). Most family research, even outside of the field of communication, has examined how mothers experience nonresidential parenthood, with very little attention paid to the fathers experiencing this same dynamic.

What little research has been done on the experiences of nonresidential fathers has primarily been conducted in the field of psychology, focusing on nonresidential fathers' challenges and stressors. This research has found that single, nonresidential fathers experience significantly higher rates of psychological distress than married and residential parents and that their distress is comparable to the distress faced by single mothers (Yuan, 2016). Extensive research in academia on the importance of the father-child bond illustrates that fathers have impactful relationships with their children (Brotherson et al., 2003; Cooksey & Criag, 1998; Lamb & Lewis, 2013; Peters & Ehrenberg, 2008). Thus, the failure of many fields, including communication studies, to examine nonresidential fathers' experiences results in the marginalization of this population and a glaring gap in what is known about family communication holistically.

2.3 Stigma and Family Structures

The concept of stigma involves the social exclusion, isolation, or even chastisement of individuals who do not conform to often arbitrary standards that society treats as normal (Goffman, 1963). These standards are based on three social structures: physical, social, and moral (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Physical stigmas pertain to physical differences based on ability, bodily function, or perceived physical differences associated with gender, race, or ethnicity. Social stigma comes from socially constructed differences, like the perception of a lower standing, such as lower socioeconomic class, or identifying certain traits about individuals

with lower social status. Moral stigmas come from ethical conduct standards, such as religious standards or standards about promiscuity, honesty, and quality of character (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Meisenbach, 2010). Taken together, individuals are judged based on social comparisons that measure them against a set of physical, social, or moral norms (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Goffman, 1963; Meisenbach, 2010). The inability or refusal to conform to these norms and how stigma manifests itself in individuals' lives can lead to many social, physical, emotional, and psychological harms (Crocker et al., 1998; Meisenbach, 2010; Miller & Kaiser, 2000). The field of communication is defined by the desire for equality, demarginalization, and destigmatization, and this can be achieved through a deeper understanding of the ways stigma is experienced.

2.4 The Dangers of Stigma

Stigma is extremely damaging. At the individual level, stigma can lead to isolation, self-loathing, and other psychological harms, including low self-esteem (Meisenbach, 2010). However, the harms associated with stigma extend far beyond intrapersonal turmoil. For example, stigma can affect people's ability to work in a safe and stable environment, their ability to have a supportive social network, and in some extreme cases, their ability to access fundamental human rights (e.g., lack of policy protections; Crocker et al., 1998; Meisenbach, 2010). In some instances, stigma can cause a rift within family units, including between nonresidential fathers and their children (Crocker et al., 1998; Meisenbach, 2010; Miller & Kaiser, 2000). Stigma can also be experienced through interpersonal relationships. Individuals receive verbalized indicators of their identities' stigmatized status, such as being labeled with specific terms or names, or hearing negative talk about their identities (Fulford & Ford-Gilboe, 2004). Perceived and actual stigmatization can lead to self-isolation and reduce an individual's

willingness to seek support from those around them (Park & Park, 2014). Stigma can be profoundly harmful and have a lasting impact on people's lives.

Stigma negatively affects individuals, as well as the larger family units of which they are members. It is essential to know how family members cope with the societal pressures they face from stigmatization (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Park & Park, 2014; Meisenbach, 2010). The connections among the lived experiences of different family members can be linked to general systems theory (Von Bertalanffy, 1956). Originally applied to psychiatry and biology, general systems theory assumes that bodies are comprised of individual pieces that function together, much like a machine, to form the human body's entire biological system. This theory was later adapted in communication studies to understand group communication and was applied to organizational communication, group communication, and even family communication (Galvin et al., 2015; Monge, 1982; Von Bertalanffy, 1956). In communication, general systems theory explains how the parts of a system, like a group, organization, or family, function as individual parts connected to the whole. In the context of family, family members' communicative experiences are linked to one another, which explains why stigma towards one family member can be harmful to other family system members (Galvin et al., 2015; Park & Park, 2014). The social and emotional distress and subsequent suffering of families is as disturbing as it is prevalent. Many individuals facing stigma find extremely limited options for seeking help and emotional support from those around them.

2.5 How is Stigma Managed?

Much of the research into stigma in communication studies has centered on the negative effects of stigma on individuals. However, the ways that individuals cope with that stigma has been a relatively neglected area of study (Meisenbach, 2010). Two theories in communication

serve as lenses for understanding the management of stigma: face negotiation theory and stigma management communication theory. Each suggests that stigma is not a static or constant trait and aims to explain how stigma is managed and reified. Face negotiation theory proposes that individuals engage in facework, or moderate their behavior to regulate how others perceive them (Ting-Toomey, 1988). Facework can come in the form of several face-saving responses, such as blushing and apologizing when embarrassed, feeling shame and expressing guilt when confronted with wrongdoing, or other maintenance behaviors aimed to protect social standing and perception. This behavior negotiates social standing and regulates people's internal perceptions of themselves while also controlling how they are perceived (Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). Significant face negotiation occurs through interpersonal interaction. Over time, the negotiation of stigma or the normalization of a trait or behavior can be negotiated between the stigmatized and the stigmatizer (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2003; Meisenbach, 2008; Ting-Toomey, 1988). Individuals who feel that aspects of their identities are misunderstood often internalize stigma, and their perception of self can be damaged (Ting-Toomey, 1988; Ting-Toomey & Kurogi, 1998). The internal perception and outward performance of the self are constructed through social interaction over time, and how people choose to do facework is an informed decision based on their understanding of their culture and their beliefs about the stigmatization of their identities (Goffman, 1967; Littlejohn et al., 2017; Olsen, 2004). Face negotiation theory focuses on how stigma is managed as individuals seek to protect their self-perception and manage their public image.

A second theory that represents communication stigma scholarship is stigma management communication theory (Meisenbach, 2008). This theory suggests that stigma is constructed between society and individuals. The socially constructed nature of stigma means that it must be

combated at both the individual and societal levels (Meisenbach, 2008). The theory builds on

past research of how stigma is created and moves the theoretical and intellectual needle forward

by advancing the communication field's understanding of how individuals manage the stigma

that they face. The theory also frames stigma as a co-constructed social phenomenon that is

created and maintained by (a) the stigmatized, who become hyper-aware of the aspects of their

identities that are being scrutinized and who internalize these external judgments, and (b) the

stigmatizer, who continues to perpetuate their biases and opinions regarding the (ab)normalcy of

those being stigmatized.

Stigma management communication theory scholars postulate that stigmatized

individuals manage their stigma through six strategies: accepting, avoiding, evading

responsibility, reducing offensiveness, denying, or ignoring/displaying (Meisenbach, 2010). The

choice of management strategy comes from the attitude of the stigmatized individuals as to

whether they believe the stigma is fair or accurate and whether or not they believe that the stigma

applies to them. With the accepting strategy, stigmatized individuals believe and identify with

the stigmatizing statements and internalize the stigma, incorporating that stigma into their own

internalized and externally performed identities. Avoidance comes in accepting that a trait is

stigmatized but denying that one possesses that trait. This may appear as a stigmatized individual

denying or hiding the piece of their identity that they view as stigmatized by others to push off

that stigma, such as an LGBTQ+ individual staying closeted. Evading responsibility and

reducing offensiveness may manifest in accepting that stigma applies to oneself but denies that

the stigma should exist or claiming that the public understanding of the stigmatized trait leads to

its negative perceptions. An example of this strategy might be an LGBTQ+ individual explaining

how stigma against their identity is unfair because it is misunderstood and not a choice. Denying

stigma occurs when an individual rejects that stigma should exist at all, perhaps through questioning the basis or perceived creators of the stigma. Finally, ignoring or displaying refers to when individuals ignore the existence of the stigma, or in some cases, perform or express themselves in such a way as to imply that they are ignoring the stigmatization (Meisenbach, 2010). An example of this might be an LGBTQ+ individual standing up against the stigmatization of their identities through protest or other concrete action.

According to stigma management communication theory, stigma also varies in degree depending on the context, management, and other factors (Meisenbach, 2010). How deeply individuals value or relate to the stigmatized aspect of their lives plays a role in the depth and breadth of the negative effects of stigma (Greene & Banerjee, 2006). When individuals view the aspect of themselves that is stigmatized as a definitional part of who they are, it can cause deep and long-lasting trauma (Goffman, 1963; Greene & Banerjee, 2006; Meisenbach, 2008, 2010; Ting-Toomey, 1988). The degree to which stigma threatens someone's identity is an important aspect of how they choose to manage stigma.

Of the studies focused on stigma management, almost none look at family stigma, with the majority of research focusing on health stigma or other widely recognized marginalized individuals such as people experiencing homelessness (Chesney & Smith, 1999; Meisenbach, 2010; Roschelle & Kaufman, 2004; Siegel et al., 1998). Family stigma studies mostly focus on the effects on families of individuals suffering from stigmatized health concerns such as mental illness or substance abuse, though some have started to focus on the stigma faced by nontraditional families in LGBTQ+ parents or step-parent households (O'Shay-Wallace, 2019; Prendergast, & MacPhee, 2018; Yu et al., 2017;). As previously mentioned, one overlooked member of nontraditional family structures is single fathers and nonresidential fathers. With the

research into how one individual facing stigma can affect the larger family, it is crucial to begin discussing fathers in communication studies.

2.6 How Stigma Relates to Nontraditional Family Structures and Communication

Beyond existing research into childhood experiences of stigma in families with a nonresidential parent, little research exists on nonresidential parents' experiences even though social judgment and stigma are aimed at them. When parents are nonresidential, they often face social criticism due to accusations and assumptions that they are parents or less involved in their children's lives (Babcock, 1998; Baker & Bishop, 2005; Kartch, 2013; Lange et al., 2014). The limited research into the effects of stigma on nonresidential parents' lives indicates that nonresidential parents face high levels of self-doubt and often have low self-esteem (Ciabattari, 2005). Stigma also results in a lack of social capital, which can lead parents to feel isolated and helpless and can result in challenges managing daily stresses like maintaining employment, having successful social relationships, and maintaining close familial bonds with their children (Ciabattari, 2005). Low self-esteem is correlated with a plethora of issues, so the effects of stigma resonate beyond the family life and into the broader aspects of those individuals' lives. Those harms, in turn, reverberate back into the family as children must also cope with their parents' stigma (Baumeister, 2002; Golombok, 2010).

2.7 Managing Stigma through Online Communication

Contemporary communication studies researchers examine the role of rapid technological change in a digital or "new media" era. New media refers to digitally-mediated communication, such as communication that occurs online or through other digital means, and was conceptually formalized in the 1990s by communication theorists (Holmes, 2009). Communication theorists have aimed to identify the purposes and repercussions of digitally-mediated communication. For

example, the ways that users contribute messaging and share their ideas online can be understood by using Noelle-Neumann's spiral of silence, a theory that postulates reasoning for community members to share, or choose not to share, their opinions (Noelle-Nuemann, 1993). With this framework, the field of communication has provided a baseline for understanding new media technologies as a unique communication method that impacts the significance and linear nature of sending and receiving messages in a simultaneous and continuous communicative environment.

As communication media evolve through new technology, the ecosystem of senders and receivers of messages also changes. Media ecology is a theoretical lens that can explain the co-constitutive nature of mediated communication (Bogaczyk, 2017). The mediation of messages changes how people co-construct their morals and norms as a culture and how they relate to each other through communication (Bogaczyk, 2017). The technology that is becoming so pervasive in this shift toward new media is co-constructing the communicative environment and affecting a new communicative environment. This environment is one that theorists are consistently striving to understand and keep up with due to technology's rapid changes (Bogaczyk, 2017).

As communication scholars attempt to understand the similarities and differences between old and new media, it is important to identify how media contribute to constructing a public sphere and shared cultural understandings (Noy, 2016). Communication constitutes the ways people understand and perpetuate norms and social standards. There are distinct differences in the ways analog messages are constructed and understood compared to mediated messaging of the online communication environment, but there are also similarities (Manovich, 2001; Noy, 2016). Though how people simultaneously send and receive messages is drastically different online compared to other communication forms, at the root, people still use communication as a

way to develop a public sphere and share understandings of their lived experiences, and this idea

is simply sped up through channels of new media (Noy, 2016). Even what compels individuals to

join online communities, such as factors of personality, need, and gratification-seeking can

influence online mediated communication (Noy, 2016).

2.8 Online Forums as a Tool for Social Support

Although some scholars are struggling to keep up with the rapidly evolving technology

that makes up new media, others seek to understand the simultaneous creation and consumption,

or "prosumption," and popularity of these systems and the motivation behind people's

interactions with new media (Katz et al., 1973). Researchers have applied this lens to explain a

variety of consumer habits when it comes to new media, from understanding why people watch

entertainment programs or follow or "friend" people online to how new media can serve

purposes that traditional communication mediums used to serve, such as the need for social

connection, information seeking, or support (Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Katz et al., 1973). Scholars

have found that people will use online communication strategies to create social support, find

information, build their sense of community, or simply interact online for entertainment (Ancu &

Cozma, 2009). Research has shown that social media and online forums can be effective

mediated messaging platforms for consumers to build a community and fulfill their social needs

(Ancu & Cozma, 2009; Rains & Wright, 2016). The more current consensus in academia points

to a prosumption model of uses for online tools such as forums and social media, which

recognizes most online actions as simultaneously producing and consuming online content

(Fuchs, 2014). The online forum format allows individuals to simultaneously produce and

consume support for a wide range of topics, including as a strategy for coping with stigma

stemming from physical, moral, or social stigma (Meisenbach, 2010).

The technology afforded to users in an increasingly mediated communication world rapidly changes how people communicate with one another (Bogaczyk, 2017; Katz et al., 1973; Rains & Wright, 2016). In particular, online communication forums are one tool for web-mediated communication that allows individuals to construct supportive social interactions surrounding specific topics ranging from health and wellness to personal and social concerns (Rains & Wright, 2016). Topics are as serious as medical diagnoses have dedicated spaces for discussion online. Research shows that one in five internet users in the United States has sought peer support relating to health concerns online (Fox, 2011; Rains & Wright, 2016).

Social support through online communication comes in two forms. The first is received support or the support that individuals receive through online communication (Rains & Wright, 2016). The second is perceived support, or the perception that an individual can seek community online to gain support or help (Rains & Wright, 2016). Each instance of social support seeking can be motivated by one or both of these factors simultaneously according to more prosumption-based models of new media theorizing (Ancu & Cozma, 2009). Some individuals seek social support online due to a lack of support offline, whether due to lack of face-to-face support resources or dissatisfaction with existing in-person resources (Tanis, 2008; Wright & Bell, 2003; Wright & Rains, 2016). Accessibility is a key factor in the pursuance of computer-mediated social support. Online formatting allows for all-day-every-day access to support that may otherwise not be accessible to users (Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright & Bell, 2003). One key motivator is controlling the interactions (Caplan & Turner, 2007). Individuals seeking text-based social support online via social media, forums, or other digitally-mediated communication can draft their responses and can control for extraneous variables that may otherwise intimidate them from seeking support (Caplan & Turner, 2007; Tanis, 2008; Walther & Boyd, 2002; Wright &

Rains, 2016). Ultimately, motivations for seeking social support online are numerous, and the support received via digitally-mediated communication can be helpful for several reasons.

The question of the actual benefits of online communication for social support is one that has received extensive attention in the field of communication studies. Though there may be some disadvantages, including a lack of certain non-verbal cues, which may result in a more shallow interpersonal relationship between senders and receivers of online messages. Other scholars argue that the removal of extraneous factors in the interactions may result in more deeply impactful interactions and relationships (Culnan & Marcus, 1987; Walther, 1997). In some contexts, digitally-mediated communication is even more helpful for social support seekers than other communication forms (Robinson & Turner, 2003; Wright & Rains, 2016). Despite some debate, empirical research has found that support seekers online feel that they have access to significantly more social support than individuals who do not use computer-mediated communication as a tool for social support in forms ranging from companionship to tangible and emotional support (Hampton et al., 2011). Forums and online communities generally create larger support networks for users and an increased sense of more accessible support (Wright, 2000). Online forums also provide users with increased levels of satisfaction with their ability to manage their issues through the help of emotional and tangible support (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005; Wright, 2000; Wright & Rains, 2016). Research has shown that digitally-mediated communication can be tangibly and emotionally beneficial to users thanks to increased accessibility to support and other motivating factors.

2.9 Online Stigma Management

Avoidance of stigma and its negative effects is a key motivation for individuals to pursue support online (Rossman, 2004; Tanis, 2008; Wright & Bell, 2003; Wright & Rains, 2016). The

benefits of web-mediated communication for those seeking social support lend this form of communication to the process of stigma management (Rossman, 2004; Tanis, 2008; Wright & Bell, 2003; Wright & Rains, 2016). For example, individuals facing stigma can turn to online forums and groups to build social support and seek tangible advice to manage stigma (Wright & Rains, 2016). Based on the type of stigma (e.g., social, physical, or moral), individuals may gain personalized and directed support for their stigma (Yeshua-Katz et al., 2019). Online stigma management support provides varying degrees of informational, network, emotional, and tangible support, which can help seekers manage their stigma and increase their self-esteem (Yeshua-Katz et al., 2019).

The messages exchanged in online support forums include two distinct categories: task and relational (Beck et al., 2017). Task messages seek specific tangible advice, opinions, or answers to direct questions. In contrast, relational messages focus on the group's social aspects, such as seeking emotional support, building up group members' self-esteem, and creating and maintaining relational bonds (Strijbos et al., 2004). Although there are some distinct differences in the motivation behind these two types of messages and the support received from these messages, the lines between these categories are often blurry, and some messages serve both relational and task purposes (Watzlawick et al., 2011). Understanding the different motivations behind messages offers greater insight into how and why online forums, otherwise known as discussion boards, where users post and reply to one another regarding a shared topic or theme, are being used.

The research into how stigma management is conducted online has primarily focused on stigmatized health contexts, including reproductive health, sexual health, and mental health (Beck et al., 2017; Quinlan & Johnson, 2020; Yeshua-Katz et al., 2019). Some research

has begun examining parenting stigma and support-seeking online, but it has primarily focused on motherhood and women's perspectives, overlooking fatherhood and men's experiences of stigma management (Quinlan & Johnson, 2020; Yeshua-Katz, 2016). The single study that does focus on the experience of fatherhood in nontraditional families as it relates to online communication structures focuses on the existence and effects of stigma, rather than on the management of that stigma (Yancura et al., 2020). Research in this topic area also overlooks the experiences of nonresidential fathers as one particularly stigmatized member of a nontraditional family form (Babcock, 1998; Baker & Bishop, 2005).

This thesis addresses this shortage in research by analyzing web-mediated communication by nonresidential fathers seeking social support. Specifically, how nonresidential fathers practice stigma management through social support in online forums. This research fills a gap in academic research in three areas: stigma management, web-mediated communication, and nontraditional family structures. The research also shines a light on how stigma is experienced and managed through online forums. Existing research has established the crucial need for understanding the experiences of nontraditional families, stigma, and web-mediated communication. This study will examine each of these processes, guided by the following research question: How do nonresidential fathers communicate online about the stigma they face?

CHAPTER 3: METHODS

3.1 Data Collection

The data for this thesis was collected from online forum communities. The communities included were online forums that the public could access without using a username, password, or another form of private sign-in. Using publicly accessible data precluded the need for IRB approval because public data are not considered human subjects research. The population for this study consisted of posts in online forums used by or created for individuals who are fathers and who are currently nonresidential parents to their children.

The data was collected through online searches for forums using keywords that cast a broad net, such as "nonresidential parent," "non-custodial parent," "separated parent," "parental alienation," "divorced parent," "divorce," "custody," and "child support." From there, I performed narrower searches, including only forums and posts that include nonresidential fathers' perspectives such as variations of "nonresidential father," "non-custodial father," "separated dads," and "dads' rights." Only posts about nonresidential fatherhood concerns were included in this study. Data from 20 forums with thousands of threads that included posts from nonresidential fathers was downloaded and filtered to remove any posts by outlier populations. The forums included only English speakers and were based in western cultures including the U.K. and the U.S. Though they are distinct, these two nations share substantial overlap due to their shared cultural values and the similarities between the U.S. and U.K. legal systems. For example, Juris Doctorates attained in the U.K. are recognized as comparable legal educations to the Juris Doctorates expected of lawyers seeking to take the Bar exam in the U.S. Individuals who pass the bar exam with Juris Doctorates from both the U.S. and the U.K. are recognized as legal attorneys. These similarities allow for the use of data from nonresidential fathers within the

U.S. and the U.K. to share experiences of stigma and legal proceedings, making both populations viable for the purposes of this research.

Next, a keyword search was conducted to locate posts about stigma and related challenges associated with nonresidential fatherhood to create the final data set. Preliminary searches for forum data showed that beginning searches too narrowly with an initial focus on fatherhood excludes the fathers' posts on more general parenting forums. By beginning broadly on parenting forums and then tightening the data collection net to only include the threads and posts made by nonresidential fathers, this study included a plethora of data for analysis. The resulting data consisted of 832 double-spaced pages shedding light on how nonresidential fathers communicate online about the stigma they face.

3.2 Data Analysis

I used thematic analysis to analyze the data. Thematic analysis is a tool for qualitative data analysis used across many academic disciplines that employ qualitative methods in social science and humanities research (Brown & Clarke, 2013; Hayfield et al., 2019). The qualitative nature of thematic analysis results in research that does not attempt to deny the impact of researchers' positionalities on the research. As such, it is necessary for me to address my personal perspectives and positionality to highlight the ways that my experiences impact this study. As an individual with legal work experience and future legal ambitions, I have witnessed firsthand the struggles of nonresidential fathers in legal contexts. In more personal contexts, individuals I have close ties to have faced stigma as they navigate nonresidential fatherhood. As a woman who identifies as a feminist, I support the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes. In order to promote that equality, I must speak up for inequalities faced by individuals of all genders. I have seen the turmoil that the legal system can cause for mothers, fathers, and

children embroiled in custody battles. Research on each of these populations is beneficial to ensure justice for mothers, fathers, and children. I specifically chose to focus on fathers as I saw the lack of research on that population as compared to the fairly well-researched populations of mothers and children. As such, my personal convictions have led to the selection of this research population, and through thematic analysis, I sought to show others the stories of nonresidential fathers, many of which mirror the experiences of the nonresidential fathers who I have worked with and known personally.

Generally, the goal of thematic analysis is to identify general patterns and commonalities in a data set. Specifically, I performed thematic analysis using the method designed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013). Thematic analysis is uniquely suited to flexible, emergent qualitative research because it allows the researcher to explore the data, create thick descriptions of experiences in the data, propose themes, and assess trends and patterns. However, Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step approach also provides the structure and uniformity required for rigorous data analysis. In the following paragraphs, I describe each of the six phases in the analysis process.

The first phase in Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2012, 2013) method is familiarization with data. Specifically, this phase calls for data transcription, reading and reviewing the data, and noting initial ideas emerging from the first round of reading and review. This phase consisted of reading the entries within the forums and threads collected in the data analysis phase for this thesis. Because the data for this thesis was collected via online forums, the text was already in written form, so transcription was unnecessary. While reading the forum data, I noted my thoughts on patterns and ideas emerging from the data. These notes were crucial as they were

used in each additional step of analysis as a way for me to see the collected data at the micro and macro levels, getting a holistic picture of how my ideas emerged and changed over time.

The second phase consisted of generating initial codes. In particular, Braun and Clarke (2006, 2012, 2013) call for creating codes uniformly across the data set. To complete this phase, I examined the notes I made in the first phase in which I familiarized myself with the data to determine and define initial codes for my data. These codes were developed in an emergent way as I examined the data and were created based on what I saw occurring in the forum posts and replies. This phase consisted of using step one's notes from the first review of the data to define an initial set of codes for understanding what the data says. At this stage I noted 27 trends in the data, some of which overlapped with one another. I chose to combine these trends, such as seeking legal advice and giving legal advice, into larger themes such as strategizing action. This allowed me to see how the initial trends in the data worked together to form themes.

The third phase involved searching for themes. Themes are the overarching ideas behind specific codes; the researcher combines several smaller codes into larger themes (Attride-Stirling, 2001). This process called for organizing the codes developed in phases one and two into overarching themes and subsequently organizing the coded data into these themes (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clarke, 2012). My initial codes highlighted recurring trends in the data, whereas I developed the codes into overarching themes as I reviewed and analyzed more data. This phase resulted in 10 themes: accusing opposing party, systemic bias, systemic inefficacy, coping with allegations, concern for children's well-being, expressing emotional harm, strategizing image, strategizing action, strategizing parenting, and forming community. These 10 codes were then recorded in the form of a final codebook (Appendix A) to be used in the remaining phases of thematic analysis.

Phase four involved reviewing the themes. This step calls for researchers to check their work in the first three phases by ensuring that the themes created in phase three fit with the data and the initial codes (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). In this step, researchers can break large themes into smaller, more in-depth themes or combine themes with less data into larger, more encompassing themes. At this phase, I combined the 10 smaller themes from the first three phases of thematic analysis into three overarching themes, with the initial 10 themes organized under each theme. Specifically, I found that accusing opposing parties, systemic bias, and systemic inefficacy were best organized as subthemes under the overarching theme of evidence of stigma. The rest of the subthemes were organized under themes of harms and management with a final supra-theme, forming community, emerging as a common thread throughout the entire data set. This phase culminated in a broad sense of thematic direction for this thesis and provided a big picture story the data tells.

Phase five calls for researchers defining and naming themes. Using the big picture story from the themes created in phase four, researchers make exact specifications on what does or does not fit within a certain theme. Researchers write a detailed analysis of the overall story that each theme tells and they explain what the data included under each theme have in common (Braun & Clark, 2006). In this phase, I clearly defined the parameters and specifications for inclusion or exclusion of data within each theme, sub-theme, and supra-theme. I also defined how each theme fits into the story that the data tell by identifying connections between themes.

The sixth and final phase of Braun and Clarke's (2006) method is for researchers to produce their report. This is when all of the themes fit together to create a story that the researcher is then tasked to write into a believable and coherent tale for their audience. This step is crucial for qualitative research as the organization, logical flow, and cohesion of this story is

the qualitative author's plea for credibility. In this phase, researchers present their themes and data, build an argument, weave it through their analysis to convince their readers of the merit and importance of the research findings (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012). In this step of my thematic analysis, I wrote up my findings regarding nonresidential fathers' experiences and strategies and made my claim about the importance of understanding this population thoroughly.

In summation, the methods for this thesis included data collection from public online forums. The forums were selected based on their inclusion of and focus on nonresidential fathers' perspectives. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step method for thematic analysis, I analyzed the data to assess the codes, themes, and overarching stories told by the men who use these forums. Overall, my goal was to understand how nonresidential fathers communicate online about the stigma they experience.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Ten sub-themes, three overarching themes, and one supra-theme emerged from the thematic analysis of this data. I created each overarching theme by analyzing how the data from the sub-themes related to and interacted. The first overarching theme, evidence of stigma, encompassed the three sub-themes: (a) accusing the opposing party, in which fathers shared their experiences of stigma caused or perpetuated by the other parent and their legal counsel in custody battles, (b) systemic bias, in which fathers shared stories of systemically perpetuated and intentional unfairness against nonresidential fathers, and (c) systemic inefficacy, in which fathers shared how the systems they had to navigate as nonresidential fathers were ineffective and inefficient, without claims of intentionality.

The second overarching theme was harm. This category encompassed three sub-themes: coping with allegations, concern for children's well-being, and expressing emotional harm. The first sub-theme, coping with allegations, involved fathers sharing stories of being lied about to the court by their co-parent or co-parent's supporters. Concern for children's well-being emerged in posts centered on the harms fathers feared would befall their children due to the stigmatized nature of their nontraditional family structure. Finally, expressing emotional harms demonstrated the emotional toll nonresidential fathers faced.

The third overarching theme was management strategies which entailed fathers taking active roles in alleviating stigma. Sub-themes included strategizing image, strategizing action, and strategizing parenting. Strategizing image involved fathers attempting to counter the stigma they faced by ensuring they behaved in a way contradictory to societal expectations and displayed positive parenting and behavioral traits. Strategizing action involved brainstorming future legal actions in the fight to stay active and involved in their children's lives. Strategizing

parenting encompassed fathers seeking advice and creating their own parenting design in hopes

of being the best possible fathers for their children despite the stigma they experienced.

Finally, one supra-theme, forming community, emerged that encompassed all three major

themes, serving as a common unifying factor. Community formed as fathers shared their stories

of stigma, aired their concerns about the harms of that stigma, and strategized ways to alleviate

the challenges they faced. As a population that faces unique challenges, fathers came together

with encouragement, responded to one another with advice, and reified their bonds within the

online forums as supportive and collaborative groups of friends and co-supporters.

4.1 Evidence of Stigma

The first overarching theme was stigma evidence. This category included posts in which

nonresidential fathers explained their plight and expressed that the treatment they faced by their

children's mothers and a biased and ineffective system was unfair and wrong. The three sub-

themes within this overarching theme were accusing the opposing party, systemic bias, and

systemic inefficacy. Each of the sub-themes demonstrates evidence of the judgement and

challenges fathers face as nonresidential parents.

Accusing the Opposing Party

Accusing the opposing party involved accusing the co-parent, or friends and family of the

co-parent, of taking harmful actions, saying hurtful words, breaking agreements or the law, or

being a bad parent. Additional posts which fit under this theme included claims that the mother's

actions were intentional and harmful to the father, the children, or the relationship between the

two. Fathers engaged online in discussions of the opposing party's behavior in custody

agreements and accused the mothers or other family and friends of harming their children or

themselves. One father accused the mother of his children and her family members of verbally

abusing him and harming his relationship with his children stating, "The level of abuse and degrading language and bullying towards me was unbelievable." Additionally, he accused the mother of limiting his time with his children: "She is threatening to go back to court. Also, stopping from me seeing or taking my child on holidays." Finally, he expressed how mistreatment from opposing parties extends beyond just two parents to the extended family by commenting, "(the) Grandparents blame me for their daughter's mental and physical illness, and that's why I don't get on with them." Taken together, this father's post is indicative of many of the concerns nonresidential fathers expressed about their co-parent and the accusations of mistreatment they have received.

Many of the fathers brought up the idea of alienation, directly accusing the mothers of interfering in the relationship between the father and his child by making the father appear cruel or making the child feel guilty for wanting to spend time with their father. One father accused his ex of interfering with his relationship with his daughter by painting him as untrustworthy:

> I have found several text message conversations between my daughter and her mother
> where my ex tells my daughter she isn't to trust me and is trying to interfere with contact
> by preventing my daughter from going.

He defended his accusation by claiming, "Ex keeps saying it's my daughter, she has 'nothing to do with it' but I know that isn't the case." Another father expressed the damage his ex was causing through alienation: "I always had a good relationship with my kids until the ex stopped me seeing them. Now I feel they have been brainwashed." He continued the accusation, "It's clear their mum has put them up to this." Fathers on the forums consistently brought up these concerns about alienation and accused mothers of manipulating the father-child relationship.

In several posts under this sub-theme, fathers accused mothers of lying to and about their children. In many cases, the fathers expressed the emotional harm that those accusations caused and their fear that their bond with their child would be harmed. One father, for example, accused the opposing parent of intentionally keeping his daughter away from him and of lying, saying that their daughter doesn't miss him when she can't see him. This father expressed the ways the mother was intentionally limiting his contact with his child and using the pandemic as an excuse to keep the father and daughter separated, saying:

> Excuse after excuse ... can't do this, can't do that, making me feel like I'm not putting our child first, health and feelings…She now tells me that she is in part quarantine, this is probably because she is staying with our daughter at the grandmother with health issues.

Another father accused the mother of alienating his child and controlling their relationship:

> It's been 11 weeks now, she tells me our little girl is not missing me at all, the messages are cruel and I think not true, we have such a close bond. Facetime has been very rare and just a few phone calls which are monitored to what I can and cannot say it makes me so anxious as she threatens to disconnect if I say the wrong thing in her opinion.

These quotes exemplify repeated trends in the data of fathers accusing the mothers of intentionally harming their bond with their child and taking advantage of their nonresidential status to control the father-child relationship.

Systemic Bias

Systemic bias is the second sub-theme under evidence of stigma. It involved discussions about precedents of unfairness in courts or unfair treatment by court officials or child protective, family, or divorce systems, which favor one party systematically over another. This theme also included posts in which fathers insinuated that the court was

intentionally mistreating fathers. Some fathers explicitly accused the courts of systemic

bias. One father expressed, "As a systemic bias dads tend to start unfavorably on those

factors" in regards to the quality parenting factors such as who spends the most time

participating in the day-to-day care of a child, such as diaper changes, feedings, and bath

time. Many fathers echoed the sentiment that the court system was designed to protect

only the rights of mothers, with one forum participant saying:

> No one wants to hear that women can also lie about abuse as much as be victims
>
> of it, and until we address that… we will see many more men have their lives
>
> unfairly and wrongly ruined.

Thoughts about systemic bias often took the form of explicit accusations of mothers

getting away with bad behavior, like one father who said, "Your ex is starting to build up

a trail of false allegations. Unfortunately, they get away with it most of the time." This

assumption of systemic bias against fathers culminated in a general expression of distrust

for the court system, with nonresidential fathers expressing ideas such as, "You cannot

trust CAFCASS (Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services), they are a

waste of space." Lack of trust extended in the fathers' posts to the accusation that the

courts had reversed the philosophy of innocent until proven guilty when it came to

father's rights and nonresidential fatherhood. One father posted, "Innocent until proven

guilty, my @rse!... you will be considered guilty, and treated as if you were guilty so be

prepared to be made to feel that way…" Another post echoed this sentiment in regards to

a failure of the family legal system to automatically grant 50/50 custody to fathers and

mothers:

…of course children shouldn't be allowed to live 50% of the time with dangerous criminals but why assume that someone has a criminal record? It should be innocent until proven guilty. And both parties should be checked for criminal records at the time of divorce and if there are none then it is automatic shared care legally. No - it is still guilty until proven innocent and all one way.

These sentiments demonstrated a deep lack of trust indicating that fathers online saw bias as a structural issue within the family court and its surrounding systems.

Beyond abstractly insinuating that the courts are biased, fathers made specific accusations of systemic bias in which mothers always win. One father said, "We all know this is a lost battle as mothers are always the ones that win. She is the resident parent and has custody." Specifically, some fathers called out judges and attorneys, saying, "Many lawyers are biased. Towards Mothers... So they aren't going to be much help." The data showed fathers making broad assumptions of bias and pinpointing specific aspects of the family court system, which perpetuate that bias. These kinds of statements show the harm fathers face as they participate in a legal system in which they believe they are, and may factually be, set up for failure due to precedents favoring mothers.

The insinuation of systemic bias extended beyond fathers being mistreated, as fathers also claimed mothers were being outright favored. One father explained that not only are women favored and protected by family law courts but also that fathers are often seen as automatically guilty, saying, "there is an unfair bias that women/mothers are always right and us males/fathers are liars and perpetrators." Others went as far as calling the systemic bias they faced in the system "institutional terrorism against fathers," claiming the bias is hidden in plain view. One man defended fathers:

Absent fathers are all, in popular consciousness, 'deadbeat dads' because the

institutionalized terrorism faced by fathers in the months and years after

separation is hidden from public view. The eradication of male authority, the

shaming of men through domestic violence perpetrator programs and the forced

supervision of their 'contact' relationship with their children, force men along a

conveyor belt towards acceptance of their pointlessness in their child's life. At the

end of which a man is either grateful for the time he is 'allowed' with his child and

is obedient or he is deemed unworthy and rejected by the system.

Many fathers contemplated outright systemic biases, and nearly all disparaged the court

system, whether they made direct accusations of intentional bias or simply voiced general

complaints about the legal system.

System Inefficacy

System inefficacy is the final sub-theme under the evidence of stigma theme. It involves

participants discussing shortcomings or harms caused by the legal system or by existing court

precedents. System inefficacy also includes posts about the systems in place that are

unintentionally ineffective, unlike the systemic bias sub-theme, which encompassed accusations

of intentional bias. Posts within this sub-theme discuss the additional challenges nonresidential

fathers face because of the court's alleged inefficacies and officials.

One perceived inefficacy of the system was that the system is too slow to function in a

healthy way. One father explained his journey waiting to have contact with his child:

I applied in december 2019, had appt in april 2020 which got cancelled, nothing was set

even by May 2020, after logging an official complaint on gov website i got a remote first

hearing in June. That's 6 months.

Another father shared a similar experience lamenting the lengthy court process to set a hearing to clear false allegations:

> I had to wait 6 months just to get a date and now will have to wait even longer. It's been 10 months now due to false allegations I am having to see my children in a contact centre.

These fathers lamented the trials they faced as nonresidential fathers working in a slow and inefficient system to have rights to their children. Ultimately, many fathers felt they were losing precious time with their children because of inefficient or disinterested court officials and staff.

Another inefficacy fathers pointed to in the family law system was cost. Fathers repeatedly complained of the outrageous costs of maintaining their rights to their children in the court system and also expressed concerns about the monetary motivation for mothers in the system. Fathers indicated that expensive court costs were unfair:

> Unless you have the very deep pockets (your) evidence will not be cross examined. To me, that's just plain wrong as it takes it to a level of being able to afford substantial legal advice to achieve a fair hearing.

Fathers not only complained about the amount they paid into the system, but they also accused the system of ineffectively putting that money and taxpayer money to use. One father posted, "They are wasting taxpayers money by running (family court) like cowboys. How long do we have to put up with the system? It's a shambles." Overall, the fathers' posts regarding the costs of pursuing legal action to protect their paternal rights painted a picture of an unnecessarily costly and ineffective system.

Beyond expenses and inefficiencies, fathers bemoaned that the system and its officials were outdated and unqualified. Fathers argued that officials mishandled their cases and did more harm than good. One post told the story of unqualified officials:

They are utterly useless in my view. I've had two reports come through to me which had factual errors. I've twice emailed the 'case worker,' and she still hasn't even been bothered to reply to me, both times sending me reports just before the court date and completely ignoring my emails! Firstly it's just ignorant and secondly it shows to me that she's rushing the reports and isn't showing any interest in rectifying it.

The belief in unqualified workers led to fathers fearing they would not receive fair parental rights due to their residential status. One father argued the same against a mother's no-technology parenting policy, which was preventing him from contacting his children. He said, "Courts are in the stone age when it comes to dealing with anything to do with internet/phone stuff." This sentiment clearly showed that nonresidential fathers involved in the legal system view the system as outdated. Fathers also argued that nonexperts created unfair standards in the system. Some claimed to have non-experts running the system harmed their chances of specialized help. One father needed specific assistance against an alienating mother:

I was warned that if you say it's parental alienation, then Cafcass sometimes label you as the alienator - because they know F all about it. It is a highly specialised thing and needs psychologists reports (experts) to deal with through the courts - and that is very expensive.

The inefficiency of the court struck fathers deeply as they complained about the harms of an ineffective legal system. One father posted, "System is broken. I can't afford to keep coming here to be told sorry back again," a clear expression of the father's belief that he was stuck in a

broken system and felt defeated because he had to continue in that broken system to see his children.

Each of the sub-themes under the evidence of stigma theme blamed outside forces for the harms that fathers and their children faced. Specifically, accusing the opposing party, systemic bias, and systemic inefficacy showcased how fathers felt slighted by their nonresidential status.

4.2 Harms

The second overarching theme was harms, which is the culmination of fathers discussing the negative impacts of stigma that emerged in three sub-themes: coping with allegations, expressing concern for their children's well-being, and expressing emotional harms. Coping with allegations was a concrete harm, whereas concerns for children's well-being and the expression of emotional harms were more abstract harms associated with nonresidential status. Whereas coping with allegations could be defined as a direct threat to fathers, emotional harms and concern for children's well-being encompassed the anxiety for overarching harm, rather than a single concrete concern.

Coping with Allegations

Coping with allegations involved participants posting about the allegedly false allegations or accusations that the other parent was making against them in court or to family, friends, children, or the public. Fathers also discussed the challenges of overcoming allegations against them personally or in court. Additionally, participants stated they did not do or say what the other parent claimed they did and sometimes offered corroborating evidence of their innocence.

Some fathers posted about defending themselves against allegations of domestic violence and rape with the mother as the victim, among other serious allegations of harms to the children such as molestation or other forms of abuse. One father posted:

Ex made lots of false allegations from domestic abuse to rape in marriage. She told the

same lies to the police. Police investigated the matter and interviewed me as well. Having

read the police disclosures it came in my favour concluding the case.

His sentiments were shared by several other fathers, with a total of over 30 pages worth of posts

in the data about allegations against the nonresidential fathers of rape and domestic violence,

which investigators found to be baseless and false.

Some of the allegations described by the fathers featured the children as victims. One

father shared his story:

My daughter likes tickle fights, and we had one on Monday. She mentioned this to her

mum, who then rang social services and claimed that this tickle fight happened around

her genital area. After the police and social workers got involved, where they spoke to

my daughter, away from her mother, and my daughter confirmed that all the tickling was

around the neck and armpit area, the social worker confirmed to me that there was no

issues whatsoever and contact should continue!

Fathers in the online communities repeatedly corroborated one another's experiences using

language that indicated that false allegations were the rule, rather than the exception. Many

fathers went as far as to express that nonresidential fathers should simply "expect" these

allegations to occur at one time or another as mothers attempt to gain leverage in the

nontraditional family structure. Some fathers expressed the belief that mothers are coached by

their legal counsel to make these allegations to maintain sole custody and primary parental

control over their children.

Fathers also expressed the challenges they faced in fighting the allegations. One father

shared, "Her plan has been to demean me with lies which I can prove are not true. I don't feel as

though it's enough to just deny her allegations - I want the court to understand her motivations." Other fathers similarly expressed a concern with ensuring they fully exposed the motivations behind the allegations to protect their reputations and defend their rights as fathers. They posted on the forums about the harms caused by allegations even when they were dismissed and found to be false such as "delays in proceedings" and "strain on relationships during investigations." Fathers discussing allegations as "the usual" or "expected" shows that nonresidential fathers view themselves as especially vulnerable to stigma, which allows these allegations and the harms that come with them to be mainstream and expected in the family court process. By demonstrating an awareness of the normalcy of the harms they face, they recognized that these harms were a perpetuated trend of mistreatment, due to their identities.

Concern for Children's Well-being

Concern for children's well-being is the second sub-theme under the harms theme. It involved participants discussing the struggles their children faced due to their current family dynamic (e.g., custody battles, contention with ex, etc.) and expressing concern about harms to the children. Fathers demonstrated concerns for their children and concerns for the effects of the nontraditional family structure on their bonds with their children.

Many posts included concerns for the children as they lived separately from the fathers. Fathers voiced the unique struggles they faced with child-rearing from a distance and expressed concerns for the children's well-being when the children were not in their father's care. One father said:

A major concern to me is that my 6 year old son has disclosed to me that my ex is sleeping with this 'friend' and he has informed me on more than one occasion that he has walked into her room and seen them in bed together.

This father responded to replies on his post that he was not upset that the mother was engaging in a new romantic relationship but that he had concerns about what the child was being exposed to while in her care. Other fathers mentioned their children being emotionally harmed in the fight for parental control by mothers. One father said, "My daughter loves me so much but just wants an easy life (and I don't blame her). My daughter has said… she's absolutely petrified of her mother." Fathers also shared concerns about the physical safety of their children. One father explained allegations he had heard of the mother using excessive physical force:

> Just had a shocking call from social services saying that they had spoken to the mother and when the child is kicking off she uses forces to calm her down (this is lie as my child is always calm). She denied smacking and according to social services smashing is ok as long as it won't leave bruises.

Overall, the fathers expressed concerns that their nonresidential status would lead to an inability to ensure their children's well-being, especially in time spent apart from their children.

Many fathers were also concerned about how allegations against them were affecting their children. One father said, "I don't want my children being put through unnecessary stress because of my ex trying to destroy my character." Fathers demonstrated the desire to shield the children from court proceedings and personal attacks as they simultaneously navigated gaining fair access to build relationships with their children. Other fathers expressed the fear that their child was facing manipulation in their time with their mother: "The real truth is my ex manipulates my daughter and makes her feel guilty for attending contact with me." Fathers noted that manipulation puts unhealthy burdens on children, and many expressed a sense of helplessness to shield their children from those stresses. Overwhelmingly the data indicated a theme of fathers being concerned with how to ensure their children had happy and healthy

upbringings and expressed concern that the stigma and challenges faced by nonresidential fathers would hamper their ability to provide that for them.

Expressing Emotional Harms

Expressing emotional harms is the final sub-theme under the overarching theme of harms. This sub-theme embodies not only the emotional toll of the other harms faced by nonresidential fathers, but also encompasses the fathers' trials with the emotional strains of nonresidential fatherhood. Expressing emotional harms also involves participants sharing the negative emotions they have felt due to their experiences as a nonresidential father.

The fathers in the data examined the emotional harms they faced ranging from frustration to hopelessness. One father expressed the emotional toll he had endured: "I am frustrated and upset that the system is broken." Another father talked about his distaste for maintaining a relationship with his child's mother to ensure the child had a healthy bringing:

> Just want to vent. I am struggling today .... on a train to go and see my kid in a contact
> centre for two hours and we are going to spend that time wrapping a sodding mother's
> day present for someone I wish I had never had in my life...F*ck.

This father, like many others, sought out the forum as a place to vent his frustrations. Similarly, a father expressed his frustration with his child's mother:

> Thank you for reading my rant, I'm just fed up and done. My ex is disgusting and can
> obviously live with herself emotionally abusing my daughter. I've been going through
> hell on earth...

Fathers expressed their anger and frustration while venting about the strained relationships they had with their children's mothers and the emotional struggles of coping with their nonresidential fatherhood status.

Fathers frequently discussed hopelessness and giving up. One father explained the financial strain and emotional strain from juggling nonresidential fatherhood: "I didn't want it to end up like this, but it is what it is... I've got nothing!...People may criticize me for 'giving up' but would you blame a car for not working when it's out of gas?" Another father encouraged him:

> Hi mate, firstly no one on here will criticize you for giving up. People who would criticize you haven't experienced the family court system as a loving father. It's clear from your posts you're in a lot of pain and everyone's situation is different so don't even think about what anyone else thinks.

This emotional struggle was linked with the fathers' belief in the unfairness of the legal system and the endless struggle to be good parents and overcome stigma. Other fathers, however, acknowledged the desire to give up but also the need to keep on fighting for their children: "There are times when I think about giving up but my son keeps me going but I do take things like this personally when she is basically assassinating my character." Fathers considered giving up and expressed hopelessness and exhaustion but overwhelmingly demonstrated the intention to continue fighting to prioritize the needs of their children.

Other fathers expressed the negative emotions they experienced at not seeing their kids every day or even on special occasions. One father expressed sorrow at missing Christmas with his child due to his nonresidential status: "Well, I'm gutted (my ex) wouldn't let me see my kids over Xmas." Another outlined the unique added stress of the effects of a global pandemic on his ability to see his children, "This was a very distressing time with very few face times offered, and these were recorded by her, which was stressful... It's literally making me ill." Similar sentiments of being made ill from emotions were expressed as fathers explained the emotional

pain in other aspects of their lives. One father said, "It's a matter of riding out the storm and surviving and yet going to office with all this rubbish hanging over my head." Another explained he had been unable to attend work: "One of the reasons why I was off work was mainly to do with her preventing me seeing my family which impacted on my job and I ended up off work for 3 months with stress/anxiety as a result." These fathers expressed deeply impactful emotional harm due to their nonresidential parental experiences, and these emotions influenced other aspects of their lives.

The harms theme exemplifies the day-to-day, often lifelong struggles faced by stigmatized nonresidential fathers. Fathers were distressed by allegations, concerned for their children's well-being, and in emotional pain because of their parental experiences. Although fathers faced many harms due to their nonresidential status, they often did not stop at venting about their co-parents or blaming the system. The next category of themes showcases how fathers strategized how to improve their parental experiences and fight unfairness to manage stigma and prioritize their relationships with their children.

4.3 Management Strategies

The final overarching theme is management strategies, and it includes fathers strategizing ways to manage their role in their children's lives and the stigma they face due to their nonresidential fatherhood. The three sub-themes (strategizing image, strategizing action, and strategizing parenting) all include action plans for improving fathers' and children's circumstances

Strategizing Image

Strategizing image is the first sub-theme. It involves participants discussing how to improve their chances of success in gaining more access to their children and how they can make

themselves appear better to court officials, opposing parents, or any parties with decision-making power. Some of the fathers advised one another on how to strategically respond in court hearings regarding custody. One father said:

> Take deep breaths after every question they ask you and even ask them to repeat if you need more time to articulate your response the best you can. Don't respond straight away and don't slag off your ex at all. It will count against you and not her even if you're 100% right.

Clear consensus existed in the fathers' posts that their exact wording and demeanor in court would heavily impact their image and potentially even interfere with their parental rights. Another father concurred, "In these cases it comes down to who the Judge believes/his or her impression of both the parties." The data suggest that fathers heavily weigh their image in court and advise one another to behave calmly and carefully in order to protect that image.

Other fathers gave advice about strategizing their images as loving parents. One father suggested that when handling children and family services officials, "have plenty of things to say about the children - so it comes across how much you love them - some light hearted bits like what the 3 year old likes to say to you at the moment and how you are so keen to spend more time doing activities and homework with the 6 year old who is very close to you." Another father explained that being child-focused was the key to providing a positive parental image to court officials. He said:

> They can see if you're a caring Dad who just wants the best for his son and hopes that amicable communications will become easier over time. That's the kind of thing they want to hear so they can tick your box and recommend everything you've asked for.

Professional and level-headed demeanor and an aura of a doting father were key aspects in strategizing an image that would benefit their case for parental rights and respect as fathers.

Some fathers went beyond passive image management and suggested more active strategies for protecting nonresidential fathers' image. Fathers who consistently echoed the risk and harms of false allegations were keen to provide more concrete evidence of their parental talents. One father suggested that another father should consider filming his interactions with his children to have evidence of his good behavior: "Cameras in the house are a good idea - to protect you from any further allegations." The fathers spent copious time in the forums strategizing their image from court appearances to parenting skills to counter the existing biases they knew they faced as nonresidential fathers. Fathers recognized the importance of fighting stereotypes that would interfere with their family bonds. Generally, nonresidential fathers showed sincere concern for maintaining a positive image as loving fathers and as cooperative and reasonable co-parents.

Strategizing Action

Strategizing action involved forum participants discussing their plans for legal action. Specifically, fathers sought legal advice, talked about filing legal documents, and discussed court proceedings and legal action plans. As the fathers navigated their unique roles as nonresidential parents, many used the forums to strategize legal action to protect their parental rights.

Many fathers shared the stories of their court proceedings and outlined the documents and resources that other fathers would need to manage similar court proceedings. Some nonresidential fathers were seeking legal advice to save money on attorney fees. Using each other's stories and experiences, fathers were able to strategize their legal actions. One father gave advice on keeping these court costs low:

Be careful using solicitors as they can cost thousands, your ex is gunning for you and it maybe you could represent yourself for some of the court proceedings. Generally a solicitor/barrister can be more useful towards the end of proceedings.

Another father advised, "It can take a very long time to get through the process even if everyone plays ball, and it can be very expensive." Saving money was a key aspect for fathers using the forums to strategize their legal actions rather than seeking attorneys to answer basic questions.

As fathers strategized their legal action, some advised from their own experience to help others prepare for potential battles ahead. In some cases fathers would share stories of their exes' behavior (accusing the opposing party), and in response, would receive advice for strategically moving forward to gain legal protections. In one such instance, a father accused his child's mother of preventing his contact with the child. He mentioned her using COVID-19 as an excuse to skip his holiday visitation time. A father gave him this advice for strategizing his legal action, "…your ex has never self isolated or had any symptoms. It's a simple case as usual as a mum refusing father to see his kids over xmas with COVID a convenient excuse." He also suggested filing an order with the court stating that the mother was violating the court-ordered custody agreement. He recommended strategizing to best protect his parental rights. Throughout this sub-theme, fathers shared their experiences and brainstormed with each other to help create legal strategies that would benefit them.

Building on previously discussed themes of systematic bias, fathers strategized online about how these biases would play out in court and how they should be handled. One father said:

It's a case of playing the game and jumping through hoops until a final hearing. Then you get to present evidence in your statement, eg her not going to mediation and so on. But at

the end of the day, they don't care who is right or wrong. There are welfare matters that

need to be deemed to be ok.

Another father added depth to the first father's advice:

The trouble with showing evidence of things ex has done is the biased system then sees

you as aggressive towards ex! If you say anything negative about her (even if it's true) it

gets classed as conflict between parents as well as 'Dad possibly aggressive.'

These fathers strategized with one another about how to overcome the additional legal hurdles

they shared as nonresidential fathers in the family law system.

Strategizing action often included posts in which fathers reminded one another of their

end goals. They encouraged one another not to get too bogged down in legal strategy and stay

focused on their ultimate objectives: being the best and most present fathers possible. One father

said, "Just remember your end goal here, to see the kids, so anything outside of this is irrelevant

to you. Just remain child focused and you'll be fine." Another father caveated the legal advice he

was sharing:

We're just advising on the usual stuff but maybe your case is different. Go with your gut

feelings. But try and keep it child focused - and say you have always put the children's

interests first…

Fathers sought legal advice and brainstormed legal strategies online, demonstrating their

commitment to fight the biases and overcome the challenges they faced due to the stigma of

nonresidential fatherhood.

Strategizing Parenting

Strategizing parenting is the final sub-theme under the management strategies

overarching theme. This sub-theme included posts that discuss parenting questions or advice,

including questions of discipline, bonding, and communication. Fathers shared their experiences and gave and received parenting advice to maximize the positive impact of their parenting on their children.

Some fathers used the forum to strategize visitation and shared custody arrangements to gain more time with their children. One nonresidential dad strategized his plan for increasing contact with his son:

I refuse to back down on my 8 nights (over 4 I get now in 21 days) especially as son is saying he wants half, which is way more. Cafcass commented that regular contact with both parents is important and it's important to 'highlight' that a 'fair' split doesn't necessarily mean a straight 50/50 split.

Another shared his plan to maintain as much contact as possible with his son by making the heartbreaking decision to give up the fight for his stepdaughter. He said, "I think I'm going to focus on my son and see my step-daughter as a bonus if I get access, I just fear the damage has been done now by the ex with step-daughter." He continued, "I'm going to get some access mid-week at the final hearing, otherwise there clearly is no justice in this world. Having such big gaps between visits is just not good for my son. I'm resigned to thinking my step-daughter access won't happen" Many fathers echoed similar sentiments, strategizing more time with their children to protect and improve their relationships with their children.

Other fathers sought to improve the time they already had with their children. They acknowledged the fight associated with seeing their children:

 I don't worry about the odd day here or there that the ex will nibble away at. Every time it happens, I'm more resolved to make the time I do have with my son just the very best and to make it even more special for him. Quality over quantity wins every time.

To improve the quality of time spent together, fathers sought advice for activities to share with their children: "I am going to start another thread in the lounge to ask about child friendly fun holidays - I wouldn't know where to start looking, and what to look for!" One father shared his parenting plan, including spending special quality time together, having weekly family meetings to allow children to express their feelings, monthly pizza nights, and rewards for good behavior. He explained the special time: "I commit an hour to doing whatever it is the kids would like me to do with them, without any distractions." The data overwhelmingly supported the idea that dads' primary objectives were to overcome challenges of nonresidential fatherhood and ensure quality time with their kids.

Some dads strategized co-parenting to come to agreements with their children's mother about rules and boundaries for their kids. One dad explained his strategy for coming to an agreement about rules for their children using electronic devices:

> She allows them tv's and ipads in their room so it's the same thing. These are personal
> parenting choices to be honest - I'm always ultra cautious. And even at nearly 12 son isn't
> allowed any gadgets in the bedroom - not for safety but just because I think it's bad for
> him - so he does stuff in the living room and no internet allowed in the bedroom.

Other fathers asked for advice about what age children should have access to cell phones and how to limit screen time and achieve healthy electronic boundaries for their kids. Ultimately, while each parent faced difficult choices and navigated childrearing decisions, nonresidential fathers perceived added complexity when strategizing their role as parents and negotiating as co-parents.

Overall, many fathers sought more time and better quality time to improve the bonds they had with their children. Some fathers actively strategized how to counter alienation attempts by mothers:

2 years of alienation and not seeing my kids and battling through courts resulted in the ruling in January that I would be entitled to letter contact only to try and build a relationship with my kids. I've been writing to them once a month since then and sent cards for occasions but never had any response. Wouldn't be surprised if they don't even get them. I decided to write to my ex asking her thoughts on increasing contact to telephone calls.

Some dads lamented the pain of weakened bonds with their children and added strains to their relationships but came together to encourage one another to keep working on being good parents. One dad summed up this sentiment:

You must get on with your life the best you can, set some goals and improve yourself to show them what a good person you are and hopefully they'll work out themselves that they've been lied to.

The data demonstrated fathers' commitments to being the best dads they could be despite their expression of the many obstacles they faced due to their nonresidential status.

4.4 Forming Community

The supra-theme forming community included posts offering support, commiserating shared trials, and expressing gratitude for the support, advice, encouragement, or other benefits fathers received from the forums. This supra-theme also included expressions of the importance of fathers in children's lives and encouraging fathers to keep fighting for their children. Community forming posts gave support or validation to nonresidential fathers from

nonresidential fathers. In posts ranging from seeking legal advice to rants about the trials of single and nonresidential parenthood, fathers pursued the benefits of an online community. Thus, the forming community supra-theme exemplifies how stigma can be managed through social support. Indeed, fathers interacted in a way that suggested a need for and commitment to a helpful and supportive online community.

Fathers built community by responding to one another with advice, sympathy, and commiseration. One father responded to a post from a father who was overwhelmed by trying to gain more time with his daughter through the legal system and was confused by the amount of time, money, and paperwork necessary, "just take one step at a time." Repeatedly, throughout the stories and posts, other dads stepped in with encouragement to keep up the fight. Fathers recognized one another's urgency in their posts about fighting for their kids. One dad responded to a particularly heart-wrenching late-night post by a father who was feeling hopeless and emotionally distraught, "It's nearly 4 in the morning and I've got a full week but I needed to reply. You need a break, some head room, to gather your thoughts and figure a way to fight on." Other fathers took time within their stories, between seeking advice and lamenting the trials of nonresidential fatherhood, to comfort other dads suffering similar unfairness. One dad typed over four pages in a single post detailing each court proceeding and the frustration he had faced in hopes that sharing his stories could help other fathers in their journeys. He explained his detailed post:

> I wanted to share my key experiences with you and pass out a firm message to all fathers
> out there fighting for their kids that; do not ever contemplate on giving up, I agree the
> system and process is prehistoric and the odds are heavily stacked against the father from
> Day 1. However, patience and perseverance are the keys to success.

Another father took a more aggressive approach to community support: "Fight fight fight, the

fxxxers, you hear me? Fight." The sense of community support and encouragement between

fathers demonstrated the deep emotional impact of fighting to stay active members of their

children's lives.

Fathers also encouraged each other by forming a community on a more personal and

individual level. Whereas some community formation was overarching and focused on big

picture encouragement to keep up the fight, others took a more personal approach. One dad

reached out about protecting the emotional bond between a father and his child by sharing his

personal experience:

> Just be yourself, be calm and think of your child always. I found looking at a pic of my
>
> boy wherever I got a chance, gave me the emotional lift I needed. His eyes and smile
>
> reminded me why I was there and that I would fight for him till my last breath.

Often, dads offered personal support by offering one-on-one contact to share advice and be a

friend. These fathers replied to each other's posts letting the other dads know that they could

reach out via personal message and discuss their experiences as nonresidential fathers. These

fathers posted messages such as, "PM if you need to dude" and "PM me if you need help finding

an attorney, I live in your state." Fathers expressed gratitude for the community they were

forming online, sharing that the forum community had impacted their experiences as

nonresidential fathers: "The advice I received from fellow dads on here was always

comprehensive and invaluable and really helped me achieve the right results for my children."

These fathers supported each other on the macro and micro levels as they reinforced the

importance of fathers in general and gave individual support for struggling fathers.

When forming community, fathers consistently reinforced the importance of dads and reified their positive identities. One poster stated, "We didn't give up our rights to fatherhood when we split from our exes. We're not 'baby daddies', 'baby fathers' or any one of a million ways people think to describe us. We're fathers. Dads." Building this positive identity helped form community as fathers worked together to protect each other from stigma and from the negativity creeping into their minds when fighting an uphill battle against the challenges of nonresidential fatherhood. As fathers shared their evidence of stigma, lamented the harms of the roadblocks facing nonresidential fathers, and strategized improvement, they formed a strong community in which support, friendship, and encouragement were the undercurrents of bonding and reinforcing positive identities.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This thesis aimed to explore nonresidential fathers' experiences with stigma by analyzing their communication in online forums. Thematic analysis revealed that nonresidential fathers communicate online about the stigma they face in three main ways. First, fathers shared evidence of stigma by accusing the opposing party, claiming systemic bias, and highlighting systemic inefficacies. Second, they shared the harms in their lives and the lives of their children. By sharing their stories of coping with allegations, expressing concern for their children's well-being, and communicating the emotional harms they experienced resulting from their identities as nonresidential fathers. Third, fathers engaged in three management strategies: strategizing image, action, and parenting. All of these experiences happened under the umbrella of forming community as fathers connected with and supported one another.

5.1 Implications for Stigma Management

These findings can be understood through the lens of stigma management communication (Meisenbach, 2010). Specifically, Meisenbach's (2010) theory of stigma management communication indicates that fathers sharing evidence of stigma are not only sharing their stories to seek community but also attempting to reduce offensiveness. Meisenbach (2010) discussed reducing offensiveness as a communication strategy for stigma management that involves denouncing stigma as unfair and wrong while accepting its existence and the fact that one's identity may fall prey to that stigma. The fathers may have been attempting to reduce offensiveness by explaining that the bad name they face as nonresidential fathers is due to the bad behavior of the custodial mothers of their children and the unfairness and inefficacy of the legal system. Other evidence of stigma may fall under Meisenbach's (2010) strategy of evading responsibility, which involves a stigmatized individual denying that they have a trait associated

with an identity against which prejudice would be fair. As the fathers explained their plight, the treatment they faced by their children's mothers, and a biased and ineffective system, they showed that they are not at fault for the many challenges they face.

The fathers also exemplified the management aspect of stigma management communication more concretely as they strategized legal action, image, and parenting decisions. Though Meisenbach (2010) discussed management strategies directly, other theories also address the communication tools fathers used. For example, fathers engaged in classic facework behaviors as defined by face negotiation theory (Ting Toomey, 1998). Facework involves taking action to communicate one's identity to improve one's image to others. For example, fathers expressed clear goals to put their best face forward, so to speak, and actively participated in the face-saving strategies theorized by Ting Toomey (1988). Within the management strategies theme, fathers negotiated others' perceptions of them while also forming a community that advised one another to negotiate the outside world's perception of the nonresidential father population. Facework and management strategies of Ting Toomey (1998) and Meisenbach (2010) provide the framework for understanding the deeper underpinnings of stigmatized fatherhood.

The supra-theme of forming community also echoes existing literature on stigma management. Specifically, fathers simultaneously sent and received messages to connect with others to manage their stigma. This theme can also be understood as a facework strategy because, while forming community, fathers strategically communicate to allow other fathers to see them in positive ways. Community formation also involved behaviors theorized to occur in stigma management communication theory, such as the co-construction of stigma (Meisenbach, 2010). As nonresidential fathers formed communities online to manage their stigma, they echoed

one another's sentiments. Meisenbach (2010) theorized that by commiserating with one another and corroborating each other's experiences of stigma, the fathers could be perpetuating a hyper-awareness of that stigma. However, the data showed these fathers, while sympathetic to one another's concerns, mostly spent their time in the forum strategizing productivity to better their situations and the well-being of their children, rather than simply using the anonymity online to complain.

Ultimately, the data demonstrated both a recognition of stigma and a commitment to countering that stigma. Giving evidence of the stigma they faced, fathers sought to form a community of support for one another and shed light on the unfairness they faced. Nonresidential fathers also highlighted the harm stigma caused to themselves and their children. The overwhelming majority of the data consisted of fathers taking active roles in face negotiation and stigma management by strategizing how to counter stigma through action, image, and parenting strategies, all the while providing other fathers with a supportive and productive online community. The story of unfairness faced by these fathers contains some hope as the data tells a story of loving fathers taking action to fight the stigma they face for their roles within nontraditional family structures.

The experiences of the fathers in this study are not new. Fathers have fought stigma and family separation throughout history. In the United States, the battle for fairness in child custody has evolved over time. Colonial America featured a male-dominated system in which land-owning men, excluding slaves and other disenfranchised populations, were automatically granted parental custody in the rare occurrence of divorce. Slaves often faced significant family fragmentation as they suffered a familial loss due to the slave trade. As the traditional structure of a family was interrupted by the Industrial Revolution, and fathers left their homes for more

industrial work, the Tender Years Doctrine was introduced in 1873 (Mason, 1994). This doctrine stipulated that custody of children, already more accustomed to child rearing by their mothers due to gender roles of women as caregivers in the Industrial Revolution, should be automatically granted to mothers. It was not until the 1970s when divorce rates in the United States spiked that this biased trend was replaced by a theoretically more flexible and vague expectation of the courts deciding on custody on a case-by-case basis (Kelly, 1994). Although this solution seems to be a better middle ground between automatically granting parental rights to one parent over another, its interpretive and vague nature leaves it highly vulnerable to cultural effects such as stigma. As fathers and mothers continue to fight for fair and amicable custody, fathers lament the cultural expectation that as men in nontraditional family structures, they are treated as if the expectation is for them to be deadbeat dads and absentee parents, despite the statistics showing otherwise. In this thesis, fathers discussed how the stigma they face harmed them and their children. Yet, they also exemplified strength and courage as they battled stigma and defended themselves against unfairness in hopes of improving the cultural opinion of nonresidential fathers.

This study broadens the scope of stigma management communication theory and face negotiation theory by applying their key components to the previously unstudied population of nonresidential fathers. This study examines a previously neglected population. By doing so, nonresidential fathers navigating the current legal system to form and protect their relationships with their children, and their experiences of stigma is brought to the forefront of the academic mind. The field of communication studies is expanded and the academy's goal of equality is brought nearer as we begin to examine a population underrepresented in scholarly research.

5.2 Implications for New Media Theorizing

This study expands the ideas of new media scholarship, prosumption, and online-mediated communication by applying these concepts to the new research population of nonresidential fathers. Existing research demonstrates that individuals are prosumers of new media thanks to technologies that enable communication mediums such as online forums. We had yet to understand how nonresidential fathers prosume this media and the implications of studying this form of communication as scholars seek to understand the plight of the stigmatized nonresidential fathers. Additionally, we can learn from the fathers' words what some of the best courses of action are for alleviating stigma.

The implications of online media intercede some of the facework strategies that fathers may use in more personal or face-to-face communication. Fathers online discussed the stigma they faced in a raw and anonymous way made possible by the digitally-mediated format that they used. Being anonymous online with access to a community of other fathers sharing the same nonresidential identity enabled the fathers to give a raw and intimate glimpse into their lives and experiences of stigma. Additionally, this research corroborates communication researchers' claims that online-mediated communication creates large support networks of both perceived and received support. This is made evident by the fathers within this study who are building a community within the forums for which they expressed immense gratitude. This study reaffirms the value of online-mediated communication and expands the scope of this communication research area by adding to it the aspects of stigma management within the new study population of nonresidential fathers.

5.3 Practical Implications

Although parenthood in nontraditional structures can be messy for mothers and fathers, fathers have been overlooked by most academic research. As academics begin to take an active role in fighting the stigma surrounding nonresidential fatherhood, findings of this thesis offer insight into how fathers experience stigma and what they are doing to fight it. One father's heart-wrenching claim about the current family law structure should be a call to action for academics and humanitarians in a fight against legal bias:

> I do believe there is still huge bias towards the mother in this process, but there is no appetite outside those personally affected to bear witness to sexism against men, it's not cool or fashionable so no one will champion the cause.

If academics can choose to focus on the difficult and emotionally taxing task of examining all people's lived experiences, they can fight biased court systems. U.S. census data clearly corroborates nonresidential fathers claims of bias in custody-granting court decisions. The most recent data on custody decisions shows that only 20% of custodial parents are fathers, indicating that 80% of court decisions on custody favor mothers over fathers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). Beyond simply custody granting, the data shows discrepancies in treatment of custodial mothers and fathers when it comes to child support enforcement. Mothers are also more likely to receive government assistance, with 44.7% of custodial mothers receiving aid, compared to only 26.2% of custodial fathers. Whereas fathers are accused of avoiding child support payments (despite statistics contradicting the idea), only 41.4% of custodial fathers are granted court-ordered child-support, while 51.4% of mothers receive the same. This statistic is even more glaring when it is considered that only half of all custodial parents have court-ordered child support agreements (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). These statistics make it clear that the U.S. legal system does, in fact, favor mothers over fathers in custodial and other parenting arrangements.

In practice, the results of this thesis can be used to inform concrete changes to the legal system. First, more abstractly, the individual merit of nonresidential fathers, as made clear by this study, is often overborne by courts and society's expectations that nonresidential fathers are automatically guilty of being absentee or deadbeat parents. This study's findings can encourage the courts to approach each family law case with an equal view of the value and capability of each parent. Statistics provide evidence that nonresidential fathers face a judicial system that approaches their cases with a guilty until proven innocent mindset (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). The results of this study serve to combat this mindset and realign the courts and societal understandings of nonresidential fathers to ensure that nontraditional familial roles are afforded the same protections of justice.

In a more concrete way, this research should work as a basis to inform future legal reform. Understanding the torrid history of child custody in the United States, it is clear that reform is far from a novel concept. Reform has claimed to continuously increase protections for fathers and mothers, although the pendulum of justice has swung back and forth between favoring mothers and favoring fathers. Until a genuinely neutral middle ground can be achieved in which fathers and mothers are viewed as equal in the court and afforded the same protections and rights, true justice cannot be achieved. Nonresidential fathers will continue to be discriminated against by the legal system. In applying the innocent until proven guilty philosophy to family law, fathers should be afforded automatic 50/50 custody of their children until the court receives reason to believe that the fathers' parenting skills are inadequate and equate these inadequacies to guilt in the custody battle. When a parent is found guilty of failing to provide the baseline requirements of childrearing, then, and only then, should the court adjust the custody agreement to favor the more qualified parent. Beginning with only fathers receiving

automatic custody and currently resting in a historic moment of mothers receiving automatic

precedent, the court system will not be in balance with the scales of justice until the court sees

two equal parents when comparing mothers and fathers.

5.4 Limitations and Directions for Future Research

The breadth and scope of this study had both benefits and limitations. The online format

allowed for anonymity and the collection of a large quantity of data, ensuring more vulnerable

responses guided by what fathers wanted to share as opposed to being guided by researcher-

written questions. Anonymity is a dual sided sword, as it can promote more raw and honest data

but is also hard to corroborate or fact check. Due to the anonymous nature of this data collection

method, the fathers' experiences cannot be objectively certified. As with much qualitative data,

researchers must rely on the personal narratives of the fathers without quantifiable data.

Additionally, like all qualitative data collected anonymously and online, there may be some

impact on the results due to selection bias. For example, some factors may be present in the

fathers who participate in the forums that are not present in fathers who do not use online forums

as a tool when navigating the nonresidential fatherhood experience. However, a more human

subjects-based approach with individual fathers could allow for a more in-depth understanding of

each father's experience in a way that broad online data collection could not. More quantitative

or interactive methods could provide insights, which fill the information gaps left by the

qualitative methods of this research.

Characteristics of the sample may also limit the generalizability of the conclusions I drew

here. Additional research using data from a single country could refine the results of this study.

Moreover, the population of this study was exclusively nonresidential fathers from western

cultures, as the westernized ideals of traditional family impact the likelihood of stigma for this

population. This study was designed to investigate how western cultures and legal systems impact the experiences of nonresidential fathers. However, other research could de-center western-ness in family research by expanding the ideas of nonresidential fatherhood, and even fatherhood and fathers' rights, to apply to non-western cultures that may have alternative views of what constitutes traditional family structures.

Although this study revealed trends across the narratives shared by nonresidential fathers online, the body of knowledge on this population could be further served by providing a more in-depth study on the experiences and communication of individual nonresidential fathers. The ability to probe fathers for more information in an interview or focus group setting would enable researchers to have more specific insight into the compounding factors of nonresidential fathers' identities, such as how class, income level, or race may impact the stigma experience. The anonymous nature of online forums resulted in a data set that provided limited context on race, class, or other compounding identities and is, therefore, better used as information for the broader population of nonresidential fathers, while keeping in mind the limited information this information can provide on the individual and case-by-case basis. U.S. Census (2020) statistics show that race and class (including income levels, poverty, and education, among other factors) impact the experiences of nonresidential fathers. In fact, Black communities are disproportionately impacted by issues of nonresidential fatherhood. For instance, whereas only 26.5% of all children in the United States live in a single parent residence, 48.8% of all Black children live in single-parent homes, meaning that issues of custody equality, parental rights, and nonresidential fatherhood disproportionately affect Black communities (U.S. Census, 2020). As race, class, and other mitigating identities intersect with nonresidential fatherhood, future

research should fill the demographic information gaps which anonymous data collection and

qualitative methods innately leave behind.

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

In conclusion, thematic analysis of nonresidential fathers' online communication about stigma provided insight into this overlooked population's experiences. This population is subjected to more than its fair share of stigma, causing harm to both the parents and the children within this nontraditional family structure. To understand and subsequently combat stigma, this thesis sought to answer the research question of how nonresidential fathers communicate online about the stigma they face. Results revealed three overarching themes (evidence of stigma, harms, and management strategies) and one supra-theme of forming community. The dangers of stigma can affect not only nonresidential fathers but also their children. Dissolving the stigma surrounding nonresidential fathers can begin when the academic community takes steps to bring to light the actual lived experiences of nonresidential fathers. By combating social and systemic biases, people can ensure that nonresidential fathers and their loved ones are protected from the stigma currently perpetuated by an uninformed society. This thesis serves as a first glimpse into a previously understudied group. Thus, it can inform research, policy action, and societal trends to grant grace, understanding, and ultimately, justice to nonresidential fathers and the nontraditional families of which they are members. Taken together, the findings of this study have implications for understanding how nonresidential fathers combat stigma and how the legal system can pursue justice on their behalf.

References

Amato, P. R. (2000). The consequences of divorce for adults and children. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 62*(4), 1269-1287. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2000.01269.x

Ancu, M., & Cozma, R. (2009). MySpace politics: Uses and gratifications of befriending candidates. *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media, 53*(4), 567-583. https://doi.org/10.1080/08838150903333064

Ashcraft, K., & Mumby, D. K. (2003). *Reworking gender: A feminist communicology of organization*. Sage.

Ashforth, B. E., Kreiner, G. E. (1999). "How can you do it?": Dirty work and the challenge of constructing a positive identity. *Academy of Management Review*, *24*(3), 413–434. https://doi.org/10.5465/amr.1999.2202129

Attride-Stirling, J. (2001). Thematic networks: An analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research, 1*(3), 385–405. https://doi.org/10.1177/ 146879410100100307

Babcock, G. M. (1998). Stigma, identity dissonance, and the nonresidential mother. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage, 28*(1-2), 139-156. https://doi.org/10.1002/anzf.1344

Baker, R., & Bishop, B. (2005). Nonresidential parents: nonresidential mothers, schools, and the reform process. *Journal of Family Studies*, *11*(2), 205-215. https://doi.org/10.5172/jfs.327.11.2.205

Baumeister, R. F. (2002). Ego depletion and self-control failure: An energy model of the self's executive function. *Self and Identity, 1*(2), 129–136. https://doi.org/10.1080/152988602317319302

Baxter, L. A. (2015). *Remaking family communicatively*. Peter Lang.

Baxter, L., Henauw, C., Huisman, D., Livesay, C., Norwood, K., Su, H., Wolf, B., & Young, B.

(2009). Lay conceptions of "family": A replication and extension. *Journal of Family

Communication, 9*(3), 170–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267430902963342

Beck, S. J., Paskewitz, E. A., Anderson, W. A., Bourdeaux, R., & Currie-Mueller, J. (2017). The

task and relational dimensions of online social support. *Health Communication*, *32*(3),

347–355. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2016.1138383

Bogaczyk, J. (2017). Intersubjective intentionality, moral consciousness, and media

ecology. *Review of Communication, 17*(4), 342-356.

https://doi.org/10.1080/15358593.2017.1367823

Braithwaite, D. O., Waldron, V. R., Allen, J., Oliver, B., Bergquist, G., Storck, K., Marsh, J.,

Swords, N., & Tschampl-Diesing, C. (2018). "Feeling warmth and close to her":

Communication and resilience reflected in turning points in positive adult stepchild-

stepparent relationships. *Journal of Family Communication*, *18*(2), 92–109.

https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2017.1415902

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in

Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2012). Thematic analysis. In H. Cooper, P. M. Camic, D. L. Long, A.

T. Panter, D. Rindskopf, & K. J. Sher (Eds.), *APA handbook of research methods in

psychology (Vol. 2): Research designs: Quantitative, qualitative, neuropsychological,

and biological* (pp. 57-71). American Psychological Association.

https://doi.org/10.1037/13620-004

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*.

Sage.

Brotherson, S. E., Yamamoto, T., & Acock, A. C. (2003). Connection and communication in

    father-child relationships and adolescent child well-being. *Fathering*, *1*(3), 191-214.

    https://doi.org/10.3149/fth.0103.191

Bulcroft, R. A., Carmody, D. C., & Bulcroft, K. A. (1998). Family structure and patterns of

    independence giving to adolescents: Variations by age, race, and gender of child. *Journal

    of Family Issues, 19*(4), 404–435. https://doi.org/10.1177/019251398019004003

Caplan, S. E., & Turner, J. S. (2007). Bringing theory to research on computer-mediated

    comforting communication. *Computers in Human Behavior*, *23*(2), 985-998.

    https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2005.08.003

Chesney, M. A., & Smith, A. W. (1999). Critical delays in HIV testing and care: The potential

    role of stigma. *American Behavioral Scientist*, *42*(7), 1162-1174.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/00027649921954822

Ciabattari, T. (2005). *Single mothers, social capital, and work-family conflict*. W.E. Upjohn

    Institute for Employment Research. https://doi.org/10.17848/wp05-118

Colaner, C. W., Horstman, H. K., & Rittenour, C. E. (2018). Negotiating adoptive and birth

    shared family identity: A social identity complexity approach. *Western Journal of

    Communication*, *82*(4), 393–415. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2017.1384564

Cooksey, E., & Craig, P. (1998). Parenting from a distance: The effects of paternal

    characteristics on contact between nonresidential fathers and their children. *Demography,

    35*(2), 187-200. https://doi.org/10.2307/3004051

Cox, M. J., & Paley, B. (2003). Understanding families as systems. *Current Directions in

    Psychological Science*, *12*(5), 193–196. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8721.01259

Craig, E. A., & Johnson, A. J. (2011). Role strain and online social support for childless

    stepmothers. *Journal of Social & Personal Relationships*, *28*(6), 868–887.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407510393055

Crocker, J., Major, B., & Steele, C. (1998). Social stigma. In D. Gilbert, S. T. Fiske, & G.

    Lindzey (Eds.), *The handbook of social psychology* (4th ed., pp. 504-553). McGraw Hill.

Culnan, M. J., & Markus, M. L. (1987). Information technologies. In F. M. Jablin, L. L. Putnam,

    K. H. Roberts, & L. W. Porter (Eds.), *Handbook of organizational communication: An*

    interdisciplinary perspective (pp. 420-443). Sage.

DiVerniero, R. (2013). Children of divorce and their nonresidential parent's family: Examining

    perceptions of communication accommodation. *Journal of Family Communication*,

    13(4), 301–320. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2013.823429

Evans, N. (2002). The family changes colour: Interracial families in contemporary Hollywood

    film. *Screen*, *43*(3), 271–292. https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/43.3.271

Falk, G. (2001). *Stigma: How we treat outsiders*. Prometheus Books.

Farr R. H., Tasker F., Goldberg A. E. (2017). Theory in highly cited studies of sexual minority

    parent families: Variations and implications. *Journal of Homosexuality, 64*(9), 1143–

    1179. https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2016.1242336

Fox, S. (2011). *PIP peer to peer healthcare Feb 28 2011*. Pew Research Center.

    https://www.pewinternet.org/wp-

    content/uploads/sites/9/media/Files/Reports/2011/Pew_P2PHealthcare_2011.pdf

Fuchs, C. (2014). Digital prosumption labour on social media in the context of the capitalist

    regime of time. *Time & Society*, *23*(1), 97–123.

    https://doi.org/10.1177/0961463X13502117

Fulford, A., & Ford-Gilboe, M. (2004). An exploration of the relationships between health promotion practices, health work, and felt stigma in families headed by adolescent mothers. *The Canadian Journal of Nursing Research*, *36*(4), 46–72. https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/15739937/

Galvin, K. M., Braithwaite, D. O., & Bylund, C. L. (2015). *Family communication: Cohesion and change*. Routledge.

Gartrell, N., Rothblum, E., Koh, A., van Beusekom, G., & Bos, H. (2019). "We were among the first nontraditional families": Thematic perceptions of lesbian parenting after 25 years. *Frontiers in Psychology*, *10*(2414). https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02414

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life.* Doubleday.

Goffman, E. (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Prentice Hall.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays on face-to-face behavior*. Aldine.

Goldberg, A. E. (2010). *Lesbian and gay parents and their children: Research on the family life cycle.* American Psychological Association.

Goldberg, A. E., & Sayer, A. (2006). Lesbian couples' relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, *68*(1), 87-100. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00235.x

Golombok, S. (2015). *Modern families: Parents and children in new family forms*. Cambridge University Press.

Golombok, S., & Tasker, F. (1996). Do parents influence the sexual orientation of their children? Findings from a longitudinal study of lesbian families. *Developmental Psychology*, *32*(1), 3-11. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-1649.32.1.3

Grall, T. (2020, May). *Custodial mothers and fathers and their child support.* United States

    Census Bureau.

    https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-

    269.pdf

Greene, K., & Banerjee, S. C. (2006). Disease-related stigma: Comparing predictors of AIDS

    and cancer stigma. *Journal of Homosexuality, 50*(4), 185-209.

    https://doi.org/10.1300/J082v50n04_08

Hampton, K. N., Goulet, L. S., Rainie, L., & Purcell, K. (2011). *Social networking sites and our*

    lives (Vol. 1). Pew Internet & American Life Project.

Hayfield, N., Terry, G., Clarke, V., & Ellis, S. (2019). "Never say never?" Heterosexual,

    bisexual, and lesbian women's accounts of being childfree. *Psychology of Women*

    Quarterly, *43*(4), 526-538. https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684319863414

Kane, J. B., Nelson, T. J., & Edin, K. (2015). How much in-kind support do low-income

    nonresident fathers provide? A mixed-method analysis. *Journal of Marriage and Family,*

    77(3), 591-611. https://doi.org/10.1111/jomf.12188

Kartch, F. (2013). *Nonresidential parenting: Parental roles and parent/child relationships*

    [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

Katz, E., Blumler, J. G., & Gurevitch, M. (1973). Uses and gratifications research. *The Public*

    Opinion Quarterly, *37*(4), 509-523. https://doi.org/10.1086/268109

Kellas, J., Baxter, L., LeClair-Underberg, C., Thatcher, M., Routsong, T., Normand, E., &

    Braithwaite, D. (2014). Telling the story of step-family beginnings: The relationship

    between young-adult stepchildren's step-family origin stories and their satisfaction with

the step-family. *Journal of Family Communication*, *14*(2), 149–166.

https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2013.864294

Kelly, J. B. (1994). The determination of child custody. *The Future of Children*, *4*(1), 121-142.

https://doi.org/10.2307/1602481

Lamb, M. E., & Lewis, C. (2013). Father-child relationships. In N. J. Cabrera & C. S. Tamis-

LeMonda (Eds.), *Handbook of father involvement: Multidisciplinary perspectives* (2nd

ed., pp. 119-135). Routledge.

Lange, M. D., Dronkers, J., & Wolbers, M. H. (2013). Single-parent family forms and children's

educational performance in a comparative perspective: Effects of school's share of

single-parent families. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement, 25*(3), 329-350.

https://doi.org/10.1080/09243453.2013.809773

Littlejohn, S. W., Foss, K. A., & Oetzel, J. G. (2017). *Theories of human communication*.

Waveland Press.

Manovich, L. (2001). *The language of new media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.

Mason, M. A. (1994). *From father's property to children's rights: the history of child custody in

the United States*. Columbia University Press.

Matthes, J., Morrison, K. R., & Schemer, C. (2010). A spiral of silence for some: Attitude

certainty and the expression of political minority opinions. *Communication Research,

37*(6), 774-800. https://doi.org/10.1177/0093650210362685

Meisenbach, R. J. (2008). Working with tensions: Materiality, discourse, and (dis)empowerment

in occupational identity negotiation among higher education fund-raisers. *Management

Communication Quarterly, 22*(2), 258-287. https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318908323150

Meisenbach, R. J. (2010). Stigma management communication: A theory and agenda for applied

    research on how individuals manage stigmatized identity moments. *Journal of Applied*

    Communication Research, 38(3), 268-292.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2010.490841

Meyer, I. H. (2003). Prejudice, social stress, and mental health in lesbian, gay, and bisexual

    populations: Conceptual issues and research evidence. *Psychological Bulletin, 129*(5),

    674–697. https://doi.org/10.1037/0033-2909.129.5.674

Miller, C. T., & Kaiser, C. R. (2001). A theoretical perspective on coping with stigma. *Journal of*

    Social Issues, 57(1), 73–92. https://doi.org/10.1111/0022-4537.00202

Monge, P. R. (1982). Systems theory and research in the study of organizational communication:

    The correspondence problem. *Human Communication Research*, *8*(3), 245-261.

    https://doi.org/10.1287/mnsc.31.9.1129

Nelson, L. R., & Colaner, C. W. (2018). Becoming a transracial family: Communicatively

    negotiating divergent identities in families formed through transracial adoption. *Journal*

    of Family Communication, *18*(1), 51–67.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2017.1396987

Noelle-Neumann, E. (1993). *The spiral of silence: public opinion, our social skin*. University of
    Chicago Press.

Noy, C. (2016). Participatory media new and old: Semiotics and affordances of

    museum media *Critical Studies in Media Communication, 33*(4), 308-323.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2016.1227865

Olson, L. (2004). The role of voice in the (re)construction of a battered woman's identity: An

    autoethnography of one woman's experiences of abuse. *Women's Studies in*

    Communication, *27*(1), 1-33. https://doi.org/10.1080/07491409.2004.10162464

O'Shay-Wallace, S. (2019). "We weren't raised that way": Using stigma management

communication theory to understand how families manage the stigma of substance abuse.

Health Communication, *35*(4), 1–10. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2019.1567443

Park, S., & Park, K. S. (2014). Family stigma: A concept analysis. *Asian Nursing Research, 8*(3),

165-171. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.anr.2014.02.006

Peters, B., & Ehrenberg, M. F. (2008). The influence of parental separation and divorce on

father–child relationships. *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, *49*(1-2), 78-109.

https://doi.org/10.1080/10502550801973005

Petronio, S., & Bradford, L. (1993). Issues interfering with the use of written communication as

a means of relational bonding between absentee, divorced fathers and their children.

Journal of Applied Communication Research, 21(2), 163-175.

https://doi.org/10.1080/00909889309365364

Prendergast, S., & MacPhee, D. (2018). Family resilience amid stigma and discrimination: a

conceptual model for families headed by same-sex parents. *Family Relations, 67*(1), 26–

40. https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12296

Quinlan, M. M., & Johnson, B. (2020). #Motherhoodishard: Narrating our research and

mothering in the postpartum stage through texting and social media. *Health

Communication*, *35*(6), 782-786. https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2019.1587694

Rains, S. A., Peterson, E. B., & Wright, K. B. (2015). Communicating social support in

computer-mediated contexts: A meta-analytic review of content analyses examining

support messages shared online among individuals coping with illness. *Communication

Monographs, 82*(4), 403-430. doi:10.1080/03637751.2015.1019530

Rains, S., & Wright, K. (2016). Social support and computer-mediated communication: A state-of-the-art review and agenda for future research. *Annals of the International Communication Association*, *40*(1), 175–211. https://doi.org/10.1080/23808985.2015.11735260

Robinson, J. D., & Turner, J. (2003). Impersonal, interpersonal, and hyperpersonal social support: Cancer and older adults. *Health Communication*, *15*(2), 227-234. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327027hc1502_10

Roschelle, A. R., & Kaufman, P. (2004). Fitting in and fighting back: Stigma management strategies among homeless kids. *Symbolic Interaction, 27*(1), 23-46. https://doi.org/10.1525/si.2004.27.1.23

Rosman, S. (2004). Cancer and stigma: Experience of patients with chemotherapy-induced alopecia. *Patient Education and Counseling*, *52*(3), 333-339. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0738-3991(03)00040-5

Sarkadi, A., & Bremberg, S. (2005). Socially unbiased parenting support on the Internet: A cross-sectional study of users of a large Swedish parenting website. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, *31*(1), 43-52. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1365-2214.2005.00475.x

Scharp, K. M., & Thomas, L. J. (2016). Family "bonds": Making meaning of parent–child relationships in estrangement narratives. *Journal of Family Communication, 16*(1), 32-50. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2015.1111215

Schrodt, P. (2010). Coparental communication with nonresidential parents as a predictor of couples' relational satisfaction and mental health in stepfamilies. *Western Journal of Communication*, *74*(5), 484–503. https://doi.org/10.1080/10570314.2010.512282

Schrodt, P. (2016). Coparental communication with nonresidential parents as a predictor of

 children's feelings of being caught in stepfamilies. *Communication Reports*, *29*(2), 63–

 74. https://doi.org/10.1080/08934215.2015.1020562

Siegel, K., Lune, H., & Meyer, I. H. (1998). Stigma management among gay/bisexual men with

 HIV/AIDS. *Qualitative Sociology, 21*(1), 3-24.

 https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1022102825016

Smith, D. S. (1993). The curious history of theorizing about the history of the Western nuclear

 family. *Social Science History*, *17*(3), 325-353. https://doi.org/10.2307/1171429

Solantaus, T., Leinonen, J., & Punamaki, R. L. (2004). Children's mental health in times of

 economic recession: replication and extension of the family economic stress model in

 Finland. *Developmental Psychology*, *40*(3), 412–429. https://doi.org/10.1037/0012-

 1649.40.3.412

Soukup, P. A. (2005). Looking is not enough: Reflections on Walter J. Ong and media ecology.

 Proceedings of the Media Ecology Association, 6, 1-9. https://media-

 ecology.org/resources/Documents/Proceedings/v6/v6-08-Soukup.pdf

Strijbos, J. W., Martens, R. L., Jochems, W. M., & Broers, N. J. (2004). The effect of functional

 roles on group efficiency: Using multilevel modeling and content analysis to investigate

 computer-supported collaboration in small groups. *Small Group Research*, *35*(2), 195-

 229. https://doi.org/10.1177/1046496403260843

Suter, E., & Ballard, R. (2009). "How much did you pay for her?": Decision-making criteria

 underlying adoptive parents' responses to inappropriate remarks. *Journal of Family

 Communication*, *9*(2), 107–125. https://doi.org/10.1080/15267430902773253

Tan, T. X., & Liu, Y. (2019). Identity development in an international transracial adoptive

    family: A 5-Year case study. *Journal of Family Communication*, *19*(4), 362–379.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/15267431.2019.1643351

Tanis, M. (2008). What makes the Internet a place to seek social support? In E. A. Konijin, S.

    Utz, M. Tanis, & S. B. Barnes (Eds.), *Mediated interpersonal communication* (pp. 290–

    308). Routledge.

Ting-Toomey, S. (1988). A face negotiation theory. In Y.Y. Kim & W.B. Gudykunst (Eds.),

    Theories in intercultural communication. (pp. 47-92). Sage.

Ting-Toomey, S., & Kurogi, A. (1998). Facework competence in intercultural conflict: An

    updated face-negotiation theory. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, *22*(2),

    187–225. https://doi.org/10.1016/s0147-1767(98)00004-2

U.S. Census Bureau (2020). *Custodial Mothers and Fathers and Their Child Support:*

    2017. Retrieved from

    [https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p60-

    269.pdf].

Usdansky, M. L. (2009). A weak embrace: Popular and scholarly depictions of single-parent

    families, 1900 - 1998. *Journal of Marriage and Family, 71*(2), 209-225.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2009.00592.x

Von Bertalanffy, L. (1956). General system theory. *Main Currents in Modern Thought, 11*(4),

    75-83.

Walther, J. B. (1997). Group and interpersonal effects in international computer-mediated

    collaboration. *Human Communication Research*, *23*(3), 342-369.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2958.1997.tb00400.x

Walther, J. B., & Boyd, S. (2002). Attraction to computer-mediated social support. In C.A. Lin
    & D.J. Atikin (Eds.), *Communication technology and society: Audience adoption and*
    uses (pp. 50-88). Hampton Press.

Watzlawick, P., Bavelas, J. B., & Jackson, D. D. (2011). *Pragmatics of human communication:*
    A study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes. WW Norton & Company.

Wright, K. (2000). Perceptions of on-line support providers: An examination of perceived
    homophily, source credibility, communication and social support within on-line support
    groups. *Communication Quarterly*, *48*(1), 44-59.
    https://doi.org/10.1080/01463370009385579

Wright, K. B. (2016). Communication in health-related online social support groups/
    communities: A review of research on predictors of participation, applications of social
    support theory, and health outcomes. *Review of Communication Research, 4*, 65-87.
    https://doi.org/10.12840/issn.2255-4165.2016.04.01.010

Wright, K. B., & Bell, S. B. (2003). Health-related support groups on the Internet: Linking
    empirical findings to social support and computer-mediated communication theory.
    Journal of Health Psychology, 8(1), 37–52.
    https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105303008001429

Wright, K. B., & Rains, S. A. (2013). Weak tie support preference and preferred coping styles as
    predictors of perceived credibility within health-related computer-mediated support
    groups. *Health Communication, 29*(3), 281-287.
    https://doi.org/10.1080/10410236.2012.751084

Yancura, L., Walsh, B., Barnett, M., & Hoover, M. (2020). Tri-parenting or try parenting?: Online posts about a potentially stigmatized family structure. *Journal of Family Issues*. Advance online publication. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X20942827

Yeshua-Katz, D. (2016). Online boundary work in stigmatized groups: The case of support groups for Israeli childless women. *International Journal of Communication*, *10*(1), 3442–3461. https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/5517

Yeshua-Katz, D., Rains, S. A., Peterson, E. B., & Wright, K. B. (2019). Digital stigma coping strategies: A meta-analytic review of the association between health-related stigma dimensions and social support messages shared online. *The Information Society, 36*(1), 19-29. https://doi.org/10.1080/01972243.2019.1685038

Yu, S., Kowitt, S., Fisher, E., & Li, G. (2017). Mental health in China: Stigma, family obligations, and the potential of peer support. *Community Mental Health Journal, 54*(6), 757–764. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10597-017-0182-z

Yuan, A. S. V. (2016). Father–child relationships and nonresident fathers' psychological distress: What helps and what hurts? *Journal of Family Issues, 37*(5), 603–621. https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14526394

Appendix A

Codebook

Code	Definition	Sample Quotes
1. Accusing Opposing Party	Accusing Other Parent involves nonresidential fathers making claims about the mother, or the mothers advocates (family, friends, or attorneys) taking harmful actions, saying hurtful words, breaking agreements, or the law, or being a bad parent and claiming that those actions are wrong or harmful.	"She's constantly texting and calling me to belittle or bully me", "My ex is such a *****", "My ex always ignores the court orders and won't let me see my kids", She's lying to the courts in order to stop me from seeing my kids", "She's Alienating, my children", "My child was saying things that sounded too grown-up, I think his mother told him to say them."
2. Systemic Bias	Systemic Bias involves participants discussing precedents of unfairness in courts, or unfair treatment by court officials, child protective, family, or divorce systems, which favor one party systematically over another. These posts denote intention of unfairness based on the biases in the system.	"We all know mother's always win in these things.", "The judges always take the mother's side", "Even my lawyer favors mothers over fathers", "Dad's always have to fight harder for their rights as parents"
3. Systemic Inefficacy	Systemic Inefficacy involves participants discussing shortcomings or harms caused by court officials, or other child protective, family, or divorce systems and their actions or behaviors, or by existing court precedents. These posts do not make accusations of intention, but simply highlight existing shortcomings which make the system unintentionally ineffective.	"The judge wasn't listening to our case at all, it seems like the system is broken", "Because CAFCASS is taking so long, I have to wait even longer to see my kids", "the system in place is slow and expensive.", "I have to drive 3 hours to a contact center because there aren't any closer ones."

4. Concern for Children's Well-Being	Concern for Children's Well-Being involves participants discussing the struggles their children are facing due to their current family dynamic (ie due to custody battle, contention with ex, etc), and expressing concern that children are being harmed.	"My child is suffering without access to both loving parents", "if we can't resolve this my children won't have a happy childhood", "My children are being hurt, and I can't help them because I'm not there"
5. Expressing Emotional Harm	Expressing Emotional Harms involves participants sharing the negative emotions they have experienced, or are experiencing, as a result of their experiences as a nonresidential father.	"I am just feeling so helpless", "It's so hard not to give up, "This is a heartbreaking experience"
6. Coping with Allegations	Coping with Allegations involves father's posting in the forums about the false allegations, or accusations that the other parent is making against them in court, or to family, friends, children, or to the public. This may also involve participants stating they did not do or say what the other parent is claiming they did, and potentially offering corroborating evidence of their innocence, or indicating that a witness or a judge found them to be innocent.	"She's telling people I yell at my kids", "She's telling the court I am a bad father", "She's even claiming I raped her," "I would never abuse my children", "I did not do what she says I did", "The judge knew she was lying and dismissed her claims", "when they investigated, they found her allegations about me were obvious lies"
7. Strategizing Image	Strategizing Image involves participants discussing how to improve their chances of success in gaining more access to their children. It also involves fighting stigma by strategizing how they can make themselves appear better to court officials, the opposing parent, or any parties with decision making power.	"I am always polite when I communicate with my ex, I want her to know I only want what's best for my children", "You need to avoid badmouthing the children's mother in court, so that the court knows you're not asking for custody just to hurt their mother"

8. Strategizing Action	Strategizing Action involves participants discussing their plans for action in the court and/or in their role as nonresidential father	"I will file X motion in court", "I will ask for an updated custody agreement", "I plan to ask my child's mother for more time with my child"
9. Strategizing Parenting	Strategizing Parenting includes posts that discuss parenting questions or advice, or that discuss the logistics of facing parenting challenges which come along with nonresidential fatherhood.	"Should I allow my children to have electronics in their bedroom?", "What are some good activities to do with young children during the holidays?", "How should I discipline my child?" "I recommend being firm but making sure your child knows you are disciplining them out of love and concern for their well-being"
10. Forming Community	Forming Community includes posts offering support, commiserating shared trials, and expressing gratitude for the support, advice, encouragement, or other benefits nonresidential fathers received through the forums. Also includes expressing the importance of fathers in children's lives and encouraging fathers to keep fighting for their children. These posts give support or validation for nonresidential fathers by nonresidential fathers and seek the same for the poster.	"We dad's play an important role in our children's lives", "Children need their dad's", "It's so good to know I am not alone", "I've dealt with the exact same situation", "Send me a message if I can help you at all!"