

ABSTRACT

BAILEY, ALEXANDRA LINDSEY. *Fatherhood Under Fire: How Men of the Fathers' Rights Movement Establish Themselves as Creditable Men and Victims.* (Under the direction of Dr. Michael Schwalbe).

Models for parenting and the politics of fatherhood are constantly changing. The Fathers' Rights Movement (FRM) capitalizes on modern models of fatherhood that conceptualize fathers as active participants in their children's lives. The men of this social movement believe that mothers are unfairly awarded child custody in the majority of family court cases, and the courts, along with ex-partners, consistently devalue the role of men and fathers in larger society. These men resist their perceived oppression by commiserating with one another and in online forums. I examine the rhetorics the men use in these forums. I find that the men rely on the ideology of the Men's Rights Movement to claim identities as good men and good fathers, and as genuine victims, without discrediting themselves as weak men or whiners. My analysis examines how aggrieved men perform identity work and engage in the politics of manhood.

Keywords: moral identity, social movements, Fathers' Rights Movement, manhood

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Fatherhood Under Fire: How Men of the Father's Rights Movement Establish Themselves as
Creditable Men and Victims

by
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DEDICATION

A thesis about dads, for Dad.

BIOGRAPHY

Alex Bailey was born and raised in the mountains of upstate South Carolina. In 2016 she graduated from Furman University with her degree in Sociology, along with a minor in Poverty Studies. Her research continues to focus on inequalities pertaining to gender and family with an emphasis on qualitative methods. In her free time, Alex enjoys refurbishing furniture, running with her golden retriever, and exploring new places.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 1980s the Fathers' Rights Movement (FRM) grew out of the larger Men's Rights Movement and Divorce Reform Movement, responding to shifting gender relations (Crowley 2003, 2018). As women challenged the power of men in domestic life, these men pushed back. Fathers' rights activists argued that fathers should be involved in the social, emotional, and moral development of their children, and not just act as breadwinners. Fatherlessness, according to FRM activists, is a problem, and no matter how a romantic relationship ends, a father has a place in the life of his child.

Today, the Fathers' Rights Movement has one central aim: encourage 50:50 or equal parenting custody agreements in custodial family court cases. The movement also seeks "realistic child support payments," more visitation time with fathers, and societal awareness of the "imbalance and injustice that effects [sic] the rights of fathers" (FathersRightsMovement.US 2018). The men in this movement believe that family courts have infringed their rights to be fathers, which in turn is detrimental to children because fathers are important for a child's social, emotional, and moral development. Because of the prejudice that fathers allegedly face in family courts, dads are not gaining equal custody of children and are being forced to make unfairly large child-support payments.

Fathers' rights activists claim that children who have meaningful interaction with both a mother and father are less likely to end up in jail, experience drug or alcohol addiction, and commit crimes (FathersRightsMovement.US 2018). Children who have meaningful contact with both parents are more likely to have successful relationships, healthy sleeping and eating patterns, and perform better in school, according to proponents of fathers' rights. These claims are made to try to affect legislation, such as Kentucky HB528, passed in April 2018, that

supports a 50:50 presumption in all child custody cases (FathersRightsMovement.US 2018). Fathers' rights activists also make emotional appeals in the form of personal accounts. These accounts are put forward as further evidence that impeding their ability to be "good fathers" hurts them, their children, and society as a whole.

The emotionally charged accounts the men offer, to each other and to policy makers, defy traditional definitions of manhood that frame men as tough and focused on instrumental matters. The accounts also implicitly position men as victims of institutional bias, a claim that seems dubious given that most of the men in question are white and middle class. Of sociological interest is how these men fashion their personal accounts to express and evoke emotion, and to claim victim status, without undermining their status as men. In this thesis I examine the rhetorics and themes evident in the men's accounts and show how they work to uphold the men's identities as good men and good fathers, and as genuine victims, without discrediting them as weak men or whiners.

I begin by providing background on the evolving state of fatherhood politics in the United States. Next, I describe the methods of data collection and analysis. This is followed by discussion of five major themes in the accounts of the FRM members and the three specific goals the themes help these men achieve. Analysis of actors' accounts in this social movement add to our understanding of how identities are constructed at the intersections of family and gender performance.

SHIFTING DEFINITIONS OF GOOD FATHERHOOD

For decades, middle- and upper-middle-class women have experienced increasing pressure to devote exorbitant amounts of time, money, and emotional labor to raising their

children (Hays 1996). Women are encouraged and expected to sacrifice their needs in an effort to keep children innocent and pure, while turning them into highly successful adults. Fatherhood is undergoing a parallel modification, such that fathers are now expected to be as intensively invested in parenting as mothers. Some analysts (Kaufman 2013) have called this the “active fatherhood” model, which calls for men to strive to find new ways to balance work and caregiver responsibilities.

The active fatherhood model stands in contrast to the breadwinner-only model that dominated much of the twentieth century. Fatherhood, however, was not always focused on fathers simply providing financial support for their families. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, heavily influenced by Christian ideology, fathers were primary caregivers and tasked with the moral guidance of their offspring (Gavanas 2004; LaRossa 1997:24; Gillis 1996:186; Griswold 1993). In this pre-industrial era, fathers were more likely to be present in the home on a daily basis and to take a hand in raising children, especially as they got older.

Industrialization influenced fatherhood in new ways. Now, with work more likely to be done outside the home, fatherhood came to be associated with providing family support in the form of wages earned, while motherhood became associated more exclusively with domesticity and family life (Gavanas 2004). This arrangement gave fathers specific roles to play within the family unit, often relegating them to being playmates, disciplinarians, and protectors (Weiss 2000). Men also became wary of overstepping their roles in domestic affairs, lest they be seen as “feminized.”

The so-called marital bargain that prescribed these contrasting roles for men and women, fathers and mothers, was still thoroughly patriarchal. The man was the “master” of the house, who, according to law, had exclusive sexual access to his wife and her domestic unpaid labor, as

well as control over their offspring, while wives performed the majority of caregiver labor (Dinner 2016: 81). As the nineteenth century progressed, however, this marital bargain began to break down as women gained property rights and rights to autonomy within marriage, and as courts began to act on a maternal custody presumption. These changes threatened men's previously unchallenged patriarchal power.

Women's civil and political rights continued to expand throughout the twentieth century, further challenging men's dominance inside and outside the home. One of the most disruptive changes to family life and to previously accepted parental roles was women's movement into the labor force. This meant that men were increasingly less likely to be sole breadwinners and that there was more equal sharing of domestic labor, including child-rearing. While changes in the balance of domestic labor were not as great as some imagined (Coltrane 2000), the changes that occurred pushed and pulled many men into being more involved fathers. Current trends are toward less distinct parenting expectations for mothers and fathers.

It was against this background of greater male involvement in child-rearing, the second-wave feminist movement, and increasing rights for women that the Fathers' Rights Movement arose. Divorce reform activists and men's rights activists helped establish the modern Fathers' Rights Movement in the United States.

"Divorce Racket Busters," created by Ruben Kidd and Judge Partis in 1960s California, focused on rallying men to protest unfair divorce court proceedings. Inspired by Charles Metz's *Divorce and Custody for Men* (1968), they contended that men are submissive to women in order to ingratiate themselves and appear chivalrous (Crowley 2008). This behavior leads male-dominated courts to defer to women, with the result that men are forced to pay alimony and child support. Kidd and Partis were not successful in creating substantial reform, but their work

brought men together to assert their rights in the court system. Another activist, Richard Doyle, founded the Coalition of American Divorce Reform Elements (CADRE). In 1976, Doyle argued that men had been demasculinized by women and discriminated against in family courts (Dinner 2016). Together, Doyle, Kidd, and Partis provided the ideological foundation for what has become the Fathers' Rights Movement.

The parallel Men's Rights Movement provided further inspiration for the FRM. The Coalition of Free Men and the National Congress of Men, with leaders like Richard Haddad, Dennis Gilbert, Allan Scheib, Allen Forceman, and James Cook, focused on men's rights more generally. Both groups drew on Herb Goldberg's (1976) thesis in *The Hazards of Being Male: Surviving the Myth of Masculine Privilege* (1976). Goldberg argued that men are in a double-bind of their own: they are expected to financially support themselves and their families and cannot pursue more fulfilling careers, while also being denied the ability to express their emotions (Crowley 2018). Together, men's rights and divorce activists spurred the emergence of the modern Fathers' Rights Movement.

Today FRM activists insist that within the confines of parenting and family court, men and women are not equal. Women, family courts, and society are devaluing fatherhood, as well as alienating men from their natural parental rights. Activists focus on reforming child custody and child support laws to combat this alleged injustice. These men lay much of the blame on the women's liberation movement. The push for women's rights allegedly incited women to leave their husbands and their post in the home. As a result, the 1970s saw a skyrocketing divorce rate and many disenfranchised fathers (Crowley 2018). The legacy of the feminist movement, the FRM contends, is that eager and willing men face a multitude of barriers to being good fathers, especially family courts that are biased in favor of women.

While members of the movement sometimes convene in person, most of the movement's activities (education, mobilization) now take place online. This results in a vast number of personal accounts on various webpages in different forms: YouTube videos, blogs, and forum posts asking advice and seeking answers from other disenchanted fathers. These accounts are the central focus of my analysis. What they reveal are the rhetorical strategies and themes through which men sustain a social movement by claiming victim status, without discrediting themselves as men.

PERSONAL ACCOUNTS IN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Narratives, as a tool for identity construction and maintenance, are especially prevalent within the context of social movements and political groups (Jasper 1998). Francesca Polletta (2006) notes that activists use narratives as persuasive pieces of anecdotal evidence to promote their cause. Polletta explores how the emphasis on participatory democracy allows activists to use stories as a guiding focus for a movement, while simultaneously demonstrating personal knowledge, prioritizing their own agenda, and countering contradictory viewpoints. Activists, according to Polletta, use personal experience to make emotional and rational appeals to the public, and specifically use narratives of victimhood to construct identities that resonate with the audience. Davis (2005) further states that stories of victimhood serve as multifunctional tools within social movements. Stories help participants demonstrate that they have been harmed or experienced some kind of injustice. More specifically, these stories of victimhood help participants of social movements establish moral authority. My interest is in how these emotion-laden accounts intersect with the politics of manhood.

Narratives and stories of victimhood are prevalent in the online content of the Fathers' Rights Movement. However, narratives per se are not the primary focus of this study. This study

focuses on the different accounts that these men present online. These accounts are emotionally charged personal stories, or “retellings” by the men. They do not follow a script and are often incomplete, each account telling part of one man’s story. Nonetheless, they display similar properties and serve similar purposes as longer narratives in other social movements.

This content analysis adds to the literature on family, social movements, and gender by showing how the men of the Fathers’ Rights Movement position themselves as victims without discrediting themselves as men. Ultimately, my study adds to our understanding of how men maintain power, and the various techniques these men use to address loss of control.

METHODS

Data for this study are drawn from the websites of six major FRM groups: Americans for Equal or Shared Parenting; Fathers4Kids, Patriots for Parental Equality; Fathers’ Rights Movement (US branch); Dads Can Too; and Men’s Divorce. The websites of these groups include statements of philosophy and policy goals, suggested strategies for pursuing change, and forums in which men share their personal stories. My data consist mainly of men’s personal accounts posted on these forums.

The forum posts all come from the Men’s Divorce “Parenting: Child Custody and Divorce” forum. On this Men’s Divorce website there are 10 forums that focus on themes ranging from “Technology and Divorce” to “Before and During Divorce Forum.” The Parenting: Child Custody Divorce forum contains the most inquiries about family litigation, ex-partners, and children, and was therefore my focus of study. Like most forums, this online discussion space is open to the public and is a place where men come to ask advice of other men and vent frustrations. Despite being hosted on the website of a well-known FRM law firm, because of the

open nature of the forums, there is a possibility that forum posts are not from men who consider themselves to be FRM activists. The forums are highly interactive and men often share personal accounts in attempts to solicit legal, personal, and financial advice from other divorced fathers. One member will post his concern or question, and other members will offer answers, advice, or just support. My analysis is limited to original forum posts. Subsequent responses were not examined.

During the months of February and March 2019, there were 77 posts available on the site. I analyzed 41 of these posts. At the time, these were the most recent posts available on the site, and I was able to reach saturation with this specific resource. I also analyzed six YouTube videos of Patriots for Parental Equality members speaking at a political rally on the steps of the Texas State House. (From the Fathers' Rights Movement main webpage and the Fathers4Kids resource). Four blog posts are included in my analysis.

Because the Fathers' Rights Movement is focused primarily on issues related to family law and child custody, this was the main criterion for including posts in my analysis. All referenced a child, ex-partner, or the family justice system. All posts were also personal narratives. These criteria kept the main concern of the Fathers' Rights Movement at the center of my analysis.

The sampled accounts were compiled, printed, and subjected to line-by-line initial coding. This coding identified a wide range of topics and concerns, from views of family life to beliefs about gender to expressions of identity. Subsequent focused coding identified a number of themes that recurred in numerous posts across the websites, suggesting shared concerns on the part of men drawn to the FRM. My analysis, presented below, identifies these themes and offers

a sociological interpretation of how these themes establish the men's status as victims, without undermining their status as men.

COMMON THEMES

The five themes that recurred across FRM websites were: (1) I am a good man; (2) family courts are unfair; (3) women are emotional and manipulative; (4) being a good father entails more than providing child support; and (5) children suffer for lack of a father. Claims about these matters were put forward, explicitly or implicitly, in the accounts men offered of their personal experiences as fathers, as husbands, and as men who had gone through divorce. Below I consider each theme in turn, showing examples of the rhetoric by which the theme, or claim, was established. I also suggest how these themes implied that the men were victims, though without incurring the stigma of weakness.

I Am a Good Man

The FRM men felt beleaguered as men and indicted as failed fathers. One task they thus faced was to reestablish themselves as good men. They did this using a variety of rhetorics, all of which implied virtues conventionally associated with manhood. Here are several examples:

Then I went into a court and was told that my money was sufficient for my children, but me as a person, I am not...I was injured in Iraq. I've had 14 surgeries and the VA says I'm 80% disabled...I never worried about my rights because I stood up for them. I fought for my rights. I mean, after all I'm a marine. My rights are protected.

(Patriots for Parental Equality)

But what about my body? I make my living rushing into burning buildings. I put my life and my safety on the line every time I go to work, and now I'm on the hook for 18 years. With the child support demands on me, there's no way I'll ever be able to quit.

What about my choice? (Fathers 4 Kids)

I have always been known as a man to keep his calm, to not react to situations due to emotions or instinct. I've been a fire fighter and an EMT and I have always excelled in high stress situations. (Dads Divorce Forum)

In each case, we see men attempting to valorize their identities as men and as fathers by emphasizing the roles and occupations they occupy outside of the family. Members demonstrate how they perform manhood in other valuable ways, despite having effectively failed as a father. Identity and work are closely linked, therefore being a good worker helps a man establish a “credible” character by performing acceptable acts of manhood (Schwalbe 2014). References to occupation and military service were the most frequent character statements. Men also cited other manhood-affirming activities: dangerous and physically demanding jobs and volunteering, coaching children’s sports, and protecting or providing for children. The implicit claim is to successful performance as men and fathers.

The FRM members juxtapose their successful performances of manhood with their alleged mistreatment during divorce and child custody proceedings. The accounts convey feelings of frustration. These men believe their service to their country or community makes them good men. Therefore, they should have the same legal rights as other competent fathers. By claiming mistreatment — despite successfully performing manhood in other arenas — the FRM men are positioning themselves as victims.

In presenting themselves as good men, the FRM members posit that malicious ex-partners and a skewed family court system have unfairly persecuted them. This first theme helps the men position themselves as victims, without undermining their status as men. In fact, this theme elevates the men's status as men, making their alleged mistreatment by ex-wives and the courts all the more unfair. The men are also making claims to manly virtues of strength and reliability. So even though the men position themselves as victims, they simultaneously deflect the stigma of weakness that is often associated with victim status (Dunn 2010). Gendered ideas about victimhood and agency often put women in a double bind: if they are victims, they are penalized for being weak and vulnerable; if they refuse to be passive victims, they are penalized for being too aggressive. Men, too, can face a bind in that they are expected to be agentic, and claiming victimhood represents a failure to meet this expectation. Men's claims to victimhood, as we see with FRM participants, must therefore be prefaced by other claims that establish creditable manhood. Once this is done, the stigma of victimhood can be deflected and the unfairness of victimization firmly established.

Family Courts as Pro-Mom

A second common theme in the accounts is injustice at the hands of the family court system. These first-hand accounts often focus on the perceived mistreatment of fathers and the tendency to side with mothers in court rulings. Here are several examples:

Rapist, pedophiles, murderers, drug dealers, just real criminals out there and family courts have decided that they get the same time and...just parenting basically, that rights and privileges that I have. The same rights that decorated veterans, doctors, and lawyers have... I have never been arrested, don't smoke, never had a parking ticket, do charity

work on the weekends, never raised a hand to my ex or my child, never been a threat or danger to anyone in my entire life. (Patriots for Parental Equality)

It only makes sense that we start with 50/50- there is large handful of men who aren't deserving and women who aren't deserving. That should be the exception, not the rule...I've never done the things bad dads and bad men do. It's just sad.

(Fathers' Rights Movement US Branch)

These are precious moments, milestones in her growth and development that Texas courts have decided that I'm not privy to. Because my relationship ended with my child's mother... (Patriots for Parental Equality)

These accounts imply that the justice system serves the interests of mothers by arbitrarily awarding them custody of children, and unfairly forcing fathers to pay exorbitant child support. For the FRM, the family court system is not only pro-mom but also anti-dad, actively working against fathers. Some accounts accused the family court system of treating men like criminals.

Many accounts offered advice about how to navigate the bureaucracy of family courts. The men see the courts not only as unfair but also as mysterious and unpredictable. Men thus claimed to feel at the mercy of a powerful, biased institution. In citing the bias of family court, activists could account for losing full custody of their children, while still being good fathers. By establishing the courts as prejudiced against fathers, the FRM members positioned themselves as blameless victims. If the men suffered from family dissolution and an inability to be active fathers, it was not their fault. These were good men who lost in family court due to biased judges and manipulative ex-partners.

Women are Excessively Emotional and Manipulative

FRM activists believe that moving family courts away from maternal custody assumption is aided by criticizing ex-partners. Accounts that do this describe the ex-partner as maliciously lying about the father, manipulating the justice system, and extorting men. Here are some examples:

One of the best-kept secrets in American society today is that two-thirds of divorces are now sought by wives, not husbands. The feminist movement has taught wives that they can seek "liberation" by walking out on the marriage contract and marital duties and still reap the benefits of marriage, i.e., their children and his money.

(Patriots for Parental Equality)

She does more to help her BF out than she does for my kids in my opinion. My ex is always in my debt and running a tab with me when it comes buying the kids clothes, swimming lessons, soccer, summer camps, etc. She's so broke... I know she puts it on a credit card but those CC's become payments and that money should go to the kids expenses. (Dads Divorce Forum)

Since then she has canceled repeatedly supervised visitations, or emailed me and blamed me for our child getting sick since she doesn't have a stable home, job and she's just "wondering around". She has also emailed me several times stating that she will send our child to daycare since she "will have to work". (Dads Divorce Forum)

Don't let pride or pain rob your child of someone in their lives that truly loves and supports them, put aside our own pain, hurt, and pride and do what is best for our children. It doesn't matter if you fell out of love, got cheated on, or cheated on someone.

This is not about attacking women, mothers or anythingggg [*sic*] like that. Fathers just want to spend time with their children the way they were meant to.

(Dads Divorce Forum)

In these examples, men criticize women, invoking gendered stereotypes. Men traditionally focus on criticisms of their ex-partners throughout the decoupling process, and often create homosocial spaces to voice grievances against women (Gavanas 2004; Schwalbe 1996). FRM activists frame ex-partners as morally indecent and unfit parents, and specifically link parenting failures to a woman's over-emotional nature, inability to handle money (a job fit for a man), and intentional sabotage of the child-father relationship.

The men sometimes invoked the rhetoric of the “deadbeat dad” to criticize their ex-partners (Applebaum 2001). Mothers are lambasted as unable to properly balance work and home, and not providing a stable environment for child development. In doing this, the men portray women as unreliable and incapable — in effect, as deadbeat moms. Women are also portrayed as manipulative and vengeful, keeping children from the father in retaliation for a broken romantic relationship. By implication, men are victims of women.

Exes are often described as irresponsible with finances. This criticism invokes the stereotype that women are unable to handle family finances and are prone to frivolous spending. It is this financial irresponsibility that allegedly fuels unreasonable demands for child support. Effectively, FRM activists claim that whereas men are typically successful financial leaders for the family, women fail when left to their own devices. Women, then, are financially irresponsible manipulators who deserve blame for splitting up families.

While the men try to show how they have been victimized by ex-partners, they also try to avoid the appearance of attacking women. They will often add brief prefatory disclaimers, such

as, “This is not about attacking women, mothers or anything [sic] like that.” This rhetoric deflects charges of misogyny and keeps the focus on the alleged failures of the ex. The complaint is thus legitimated, as is a limited form of victimhood. Vilifying women in this way allows the men to claim moral authority by highlighting their own level-headedness in comparison to the overreactions of manipulative women.

Fatherhood Is More than Financial

Men of the Fathers’ Rights Movement believe that women, family courts, and society in general “are so brazen in their disrespect for fathers” that fathers are forced to prove their worth (FathersRightsMovement.US. 2018). Historically, this worth was demonstrated financially. But FRM activists assert that fatherhood is deeply emotional and involves a wider range of contributions. Here are some examples of how FRM members describe fatherhood:

When it comes to the financial obligation and responsibility, the buck seems to literally stop at the father’s wallet, but when it comes to what really matters, holding them, consoling them, letting them benefit from your life and experiences...Texas Family Courts think a father’s contribution is material. (Patriots for Parental Equality)

As a man, the only thing I can contribute is money and not any kind of bonding or enrichment and yet only allowed 48 hours. I only get to see her 2 days a week and any day I’m not with her, I miss her...I don’t get to read her favorite book, comfort her when she is sad, meet her new friends. (Patriots for Parental Equality)

No matter what happened between me and their mother, I'm still their dad. It didn't matter when I was overseas, when I was in the hospital, two days before the divorce, and it shouldn't end now...why is the fundamental right of being a parent, not protected? I am just as much a part of their life as their mother is. (Patriots for Parental Equality)

They didn't ask how many softball games I've attended or coached. They didn't ask how many cheer competitions I've been to. They didn't ask what my daughters wanted. They said their mom is the most important person- not you. The first night I sat home and I said, how is this possible? That I can do everything that I have done to protect my children and to provide for my children, and yet now I have no rights. I have to pay to visit my children. (Fathers' Rights Movement US Branch)

The men believe family courts limit the role of a father in the lives of their children, based on an antiquated notion that equates fatherhood with financial support. The real injustice is that fathers are not allowed to do "what really matters" and invest in the emotional and social development of their children.

The activists go on to suggest that they are being denied basic rights to parent their children. These rights include being able to build loving, emotion-centered, and compassionate relationships with their children. Fatherhood is important precisely because this kind of relationship between fathers and children is natural and vital to proper development. As seen in social movements, the men try to revalorize father, an identity they feel has been under attack (Snow and Anderson 1993).

These men claim to want to be more than financial pillars. Accounts thus cite the ways dads dedicate their time and efforts to the betterment of their children. Family courts and ex-

partners prioritize mothers without considering how the father involves himself in the lives of his kids. In light of what the men profess to want to do as fathers, this pro-woman, pro-mother bias is all the more unfair. In this scene, the men are indeed victims, but because they are dedicated to high-quality fatherhood, they are also creditable men.

Children Face Consequences for Absent Fathers

The FRM men contend that children are hurt when alienated from their fathers. Every Fathers' Rights Movement organization in this study uses statistics and cites scientific studies to demonstrate that fathers need children. The men also weave this theme into their personal accounts. Here are some examples:

My son has always had issues with his mother since she was very hands off with him for most of the first 3 years of his life. Once we separated and he was stuck with her full time he started acting out a lot throughout our separation and divorce (it was long and messy 2 years and my ex was selling/destroying my stuff, wouldn't let me see the kids, playing mind games, the typical BPD Narcissts) and it got to a point where my ex-wife couldn't handle him. (Dads Divorce Forum)

Getting her ready to go is an hour long battle of tears, hugs, and tantrums. At the door she hits her mother and tries to cling on to me. (Dads Divorce Forum)

The bond between father and child is such that, for most of us, the heart is permanently wounded. There is no healing. (Fathers' Rights Movement US Branch)

In these accounts, the men situate themselves *and* their children as victims. Shifting the focus to child welfare, these men argue that the most innocent members of the population, children, are

damaged by the societal devaluation of fathers. Introducing children as victims helps men of the movement bring attention to their personal injustices and position themselves not merely as victims but as defenders of the powerless.

At one point, the men of the FRM lived different lives, in the same home with their partners and children. Now these men must negotiate with ex-partners about child visitation rights. Now the men must make sense of how their family unit transformed so quickly, and what this implosion means for their status as men and fathers. The rhetorics examined above suggest how men deal with loss of power and control, and how they try to repair the damaged identities that result. What they aim for, I propose, is to establish themselves as victims without discrediting themselves as men.

In their online accounts, the FRM men try to repair their damaged identities as fathers and providers by blaming women and the family court system for their plight. The men speak of messy splits with their partners, not being involved in their children's lives anymore, and losing the right to be a father. The men express sadness at not being able to be the good fathers they claim to be. Feeling like failures, the men seek to lay blame on others. To the extent that this works—and it seems to work in online FRM communities—they can continue to see themselves as good men, despite their current circumstances.

In their accounts, the men claim to feel “powerless” and “out of control.” FRM activists talk about facing invincible opponents, mothers, in family courts skewed against them, while also losing the freedom to build relationships with their children. In the face of these affronts, the men seek to demonstrate manly control of their emotions. Their feelings of sadness, anger, and grief may be intense but they do not undermine control. Nor are these emotions signs of weakness. They are a natural response to be denied one's rights as a father.

But even maintaining control does not keep the men from feeling like failures. Neoliberal ideology places individual responsibility, risk management, and self-management at the heart of parenting (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Moral identities, as they relate to parenting and neoliberalism, link the accomplishments, health, intelligence, and well-being of a child directly to a parent's individual investment in their child's life. Parenting is a process in which children are molded into responsible citizens through intensive time, effort, resources, and dedication on the part of the parent (Lister 2006). The men of the Fathers' Rights Movement, by virtue of not being the primary custodian of their child or living in the same residence, are failing to be good fathers. The rhetorics used in their personal accounts serve to assuage these feelings of failure.

The men use their online communities to repair their damaged moral identities as fathers. In these communities the men can share emotions and receive few sanctions in doing so. They can make sense of their altered family units, displace blame, and mutually affirm their commitment to fatherhood. In giving accounts of their troubles, the men give each other opportunities to affirm their goodness as men.

This study analyzes how Fathers' Rights groups use personal accounts to repair their moral identities. The themes in the men's accounts explore the idea of "parental equality," but do so to claim victimization. Establishing victimization is also accomplished by drawing on sexist stereotypes that reinforce gender inequity (Messner 1993). While the men's accounts invoke child welfare and parental equality, and embrace intensive parenting ideals, the accounts also uphold the systems of gender oppression and inequality from which men as a group benefit. It is not that the suffering the men report is disingenuous. The problem is that its expression remains patriarchal in content and consequence.

CONCLUSION

The men of the FRM are not conceptualizing fatherhood in new ways; they are recycling old models of manhood and domination in an effort to establish themselves as both creditable men and genuine victims. They use rhetorics of child welfare to resist women's assertion of power. They may actually be causing more harm to children. Statistics not found on the FRM websites show that higher rates of interparental hostility lead to less contact for fathers (Hawthorne 2005), while greater conflict with ex-partners leads to more problems for fathers concerning visitation, custody, and family courts (MacMillan 2001). Not only are men less likely to see their children if they encourage conflict with ex-partners, but children suffer from the stress of contentious family court proceedings.

The Fathers' Rights movement, while not demonstrating how to achieve substantive equality, does explore the question of what happens when powerful social actors find themselves feeling fragile, degraded, and out of control. What we see in this case is identity repair that ultimately reinforces inequality. The five rhetorical themes in the men's accounts serve this goal of identity repair. They also help the men make sense of the shifting family landscape in which they are no longer dominant.

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