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Custodial Single Fathers before and during the COVID-19 Crisis: Work, Care, and Well-Being

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Abstract: As both paid and unpaid work were disrupted during the COVID-19 crisis, the two roles that working custodial single fathers occupy—breadwinners and caregivers—have intensified significantly. Using two independent sets of interviews, this study examines how custodial single fathers navigated work and caregiving responsibilities prior to COVID-19 and compares them to the experiences of single fathers interviewed during the pandemic. The findings are organized into three key themes. First, men with white-collar jobs experienced less work-family conflict than men with blue-collar jobs. The COVID-19 crisis further widened this divide as lack of flexibility put men with blue-collar jobs in a precarious position in the labor market. Second, the way single fathers arranged childcare varied with the availability of extended family and the coparenting relationship with the child(ren)’s mother. The pandemic significantly complicated these arrangements by removing men’s access to extended family and intensifying already conflicted coparenting relationships. Finally, prior to the pandemic, many single fathers struggled with lack of leisure time and diminished social support networks that shrunk with their initial break from their child(ren)’s mother. The resulting feelings of fatigue and loneliness seeped into men’s psychological well-being. COVID-19 and related social distancing measures further exacerbated single fathers’ isolation.



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1. Introduction

Custodial single fathers with full-time jobs are uniquely positioned at the intersection of traditional gender norms. Cultural beliefs about gender, breadwinning and caregiving influence the way men navigate work and care demands, and how they experience single fatherhood. On the one hand, it is likely that single fathers’ gender continuously produces male privilege and a “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 1987) that results in greater employability and higher wages (Budig 2014; Hodges and Budig 2010; Killewald 2013). This dividend is usually derived from the ideal worker norm which highly values stereotypical masculine traits: individualistic, aggressive, authoritative, competitive, powerful, and rational (Kalev and Deutsch 2018, p. 262). On the other hand, caregiver status, particularly salient for single fathers who have full custody, can lead to a negative experience similar to working mothers (Budig et al. 2016; Correll et al. 2007). At work, mothers receive extra scrutiny of their performance (Correll 2017) and are more likely to be perceived as not committed enough to their job, which affects their employability, possibility of promotion, and wages (Correll et al. 2007). It is possible that a similar treatment applies to single fathers who demonstrate an ongoing commitment to caregiving. As both paid and unpaid work were disrupted during the COVID-19 crisis, the two roles that working single fathers occupy—breadwinners and caregivers—have intensified significantly.

In March of 2020, COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic and a worldwide health crisis (World Health Organization 2020a). As of September 2020, over 32.7 million cases and 991,000 deaths have been reported to the World Health Organization (World Health Organization 2020b).

(2020b) with over seven million of those cases and over 200,000 deaths reported in the US (Center for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). In an attempt to slow down the spread of the virus, many US state and local governments introduced stay-at-home orders and distancing measures, cancelled sporting events, and shut down bars, gyms, restaurants and other non-essential businesses (Courtemanche et al. 2020). Over 30 million Americans filed for unemployment between 11 March and 30 April; the unemployment rate more than quintupled to 19.2 percent compared to around 3.5 percent before the pandemic (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). Even workers who retained jobs were furloughed or had their hours cut (Fouad 2020). The US entered the sharpest contraction in economic activity since the Great Depression (Alon et al. 2020a).

The pandemic brought not only financial crisis but also a severe shock to the care economy (Power 2020). The closure of schools and childcare facilities as well as constrained access to care through extended family and friends put tremendous pressure on parents to provide childcare at home and without help. Given gender norms regarding the traditional division of labor, this care crisis has had a disproportionate effect on mothers who responded by reducing their work hours or becoming unemployed altogether (Alon et al. 2020a, 2020b; Carlson et al. 2020; Del Boca et al. 2020). The 15 million single mothers in the US have been the most severely affected, Alon et al. (2020b) argue, and “supporting these women and their children during the crisis is among the most immediate and important policy challenges” (p. 16).

Such an outlook, while important, ignores single fathers who have shared or full custody of a child. Fathers have become more likely to be custodial parents over the past several decades, with the percentage increasing from 16 percent of all custodial parents in 1994 to 20.1 in 2018 (Grall 2020), and more than three million children live in father-only households (Alon et al. 2020b). However, since the number of single fathers is still relatively small compared to the number of single mothers, the experience of single fathers is frequently overlooked. Moreover, because single fathers tend to fare better than single mothers in terms of income (Grall 2020; Livingston 2013), they often do not qualify for public assistance available to single parents and are at risk of falling through gaps in the safety net, including COVID-19 related support. In 2015, the poverty rate for custodial-father families was 16.7 percent (Grall 2020). Finally, emphasizing that it is single mothers—not single parents—who need the most support during the COVID-19 crisis effectively reinforces the idea of mothers’ essential capacity and responsibility for caregiving. If this perception persists, caregiving will remain devalued as “women’s work” and gender equality will not be attained (Folbre 2018). Thus, this study contributes to the existing literature in three ways. First, it draws attention to the growing, yet understudied, population of single fathers. Second, it highlights the vulnerabilities of single fathers—like those well-documented for single mothers—during the COVID-19 pandemic. Third, it demands that the discourse of caregiving broaden to include single fathers, thereby opening routes to gender equality.

Using rich, qualitative data from 30 in-depth interviews with employed custodial single fathers, this study unpacks men’s experience of single fatherhood through their own narratives as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded. Using two independent sets of interviews¹, the article compares how custodial single fathers navigate work and care obligations before and during the pandemic. This comparison reveals the challenges that custodial single fatherhood poses, and policy implications needed to address these challenges are discussed in detail. Custodial single fathers, particularly those in the low-wage labor market, were precariously positioned to navigate the COVID-19 economic and care crisis, and policy responses to the pandemic need to account for such men’s financial and psychological well-being.

¹ The first set of participants was interviewed before the pandemic and the second set of participants was interviewed in March–April 2020 during the early stages of the COVID-19 quarantine.

2. Background

Caregiving and breadwinning come with gendered cultural connotations. Irrespective of the caregiver status, fatherhood is associated with breadwinning, which in turn constrains caregiving (Townsend 2002) as men are commonly associated with the “ideal worker” norm with little time for family commitment (Acker 1990; Williams 2001). This association frequently produces a “fatherhood bonus” in work compensation. That is, married, highly educated fathers who have a traditional gender division of labor with their wives (Budig 2014; Killewald 2013) are perceived as stable and committed workers who deserve enough income to provide for their families.

On the other hand, the standard of care is affected by the ideology of intensive mothering that emphasizes extensive and more time-consuming childcare (Hays 1996). This ideology exists alongside the intensification of childrearing where “successful” and “good” parenting now requires significant time-intensive investments into “concerted cultivation” of children (Lareau 2003). At the same time, most families nowadays need both parents to be employed outside the home to maintain a living wage. As a result, motherhood is perceived as incompatible with the “ideal worker” norm, and mothers are penalized due the commonly shared assumption that they are distracted by their caregiving responsibilities (Budig et al. 2016; Correll et al. 2007).

Advocates argue that family-friendly accommodations like flexible work schedules, paid leave, and subsidized childcare promote work-family balance because they allow mothers to combine their work and family responsibilities (Blair-Loy 2010; Correll et al. 2014; Gerstel and Clawson 2018). Importantly, the motherhood penalty is smaller in occupations that enable autonomy and have less competitive environments (Yu and Kuo 2017) and in countries with well-developed welfare state interventions such as moderate-length parental leaves, paternity leaves, public childcare, and lower marginal tax rates on second earners (Budig et al. 2016).

Yet, the US context in which parents perform their caregiving duty is hardly parenting-friendly: “The US has no national work-family policy to support caregiving, no universal health care, no universal social insurance entitlement, no guaranteed income, no paid parental leave, no universal childcare, and no minimum standard for vacation and sick days” (Collins 2019, p. 200). This lack of universal support means that parents have differentiated access to resources—such as family therapy and counselling—that help to deal with parenting stress and fatigue. The US has the largest subjective well-being penalty for parents among 22 OECD countries and the largest “happiness gap” between parents and non-parents (Glass et al. 2016). In other words, the very limited availability of family-friendly policies creates a particularly taxing and stressful context for American parents compared to countries with better parental support (Collins 2019).

This lack of flexible work policies makes it difficult for men to reinvent their parent identity. Some men do embrace the “new fatherhood ideal”: the expectation that men should be highly involved in parenting and domestic labor and emphasizing the emotional bond with a child (Gerson 2011; Marsiglio and Roy 2012). Men who adhere to this new ideal are known to drastically change their careers, jobs, and schedules to be “better dads” (Kaufman 2013, p. 171). However, the grip of traditional norms of masculinity that envisions men as providers and breadwinners remains strong (Williams 2010; Thébaud and Pedulla 2016). Fathers’ propensity to use family-friendly policies is undermined by “flexibility stigma”—the fear of negative repercussions for using these policies (Coltrane et al. 2013; Milkman and Appelbaum 2013). Munsch et al. (2014, p. 42) find that although most people hold positive opinions of flexible work arrangements, they tend to stigmatize workers who take advantage of such arrangements because they believe the majority of their peers view flexible work pejoratively.

Moreover, the tension between a “providing” father and a “nurturing” father comes with different expectations: the provider role intensifies commitment to the job, while the nurturing father role envisions spending more time with children. In response to this tension, it appears that fathers who adhere to the “new fatherhood ideal” spend more

time with children but do so by cutting back on or incorporating children into their leisure time, not through reducing work hours (McGill 2014). While fathers seek to spend more time with their children (Gregory and Milner 2012), “their efforts inevitably encounter institutional resistances that place men’s egalitarian ideals out of reach” (Kaufman and Gerson 2012, p. 83).

The vision of fathers’ greater involvement in childcare is reflected in public discourse under the label of “responsible fatherhood”. Promoting and supporting responsible fatherhood became a federal priority in the 1990s (Child & Family Research Partnership 2017). Since then, fatherhood programs have evolved from a narrow focus on financial care and provision to a more balanced outlook that emphasizes healthy relationships, parenting skills, and father involvement (Child & Family Research Partnership 2017). The Administration for Administration for Children and Families (2020) defined fatherhood as “Family-focused, Interconnected, Resilient, and Essential”. Fatherhood programs under this definition particularly emphasize efforts that promote marriage and reduce divorce through counselling, mediation, and coparenting classes. However, there is mixed evidence about the effectiveness of these measures. Recent reports on the outcomes of responsible fatherhood programs find that many divorced and/or separated fathers continue to struggle with conflicted or disengaged relationships with their children’s mothers, and frequently report being frustrated by “maternal gatekeeping”—mothers’ ability to restrict fathers’ involvement with children (Friend et al. 2016).

How has COVID-19 affected parents’ work and family lives? Multiple scholars (Alon et al. 2020a, 2020b; Carlson et al. 2020; Collins et al. 2020; Kalenkoski and Pabilonia 2020) find evidence that among married dual-earner different-gender couples, mothers have taken on a larger share of the additional childcare responsibilities than men during the pandemic. Importantly, working mothers were more likely to reduce work hours during the initial COVID-19 peak between March and April 2020: their work hours fell over five times as much as fathers’ (Collins et al. 2020, p. 2).

Women’s work hour reduction occurred not only due to the powerful grip of gender norms, but also because the social distancing measures predominantly affected high-contact service sectors such as dining and hospitality, where women represent a large share of the workforce. Consequentially, women’s unemployment increased by 12.8 percentage points between February and April 2020 compared to only 9.9 percentage point increase for men (Alon et al. 2020a, p. 1). Prior to the pandemic, women were less likely to have the ability to telecommute as it is married men who have jobs that are best suited to telecommuting though they spend fewer days actually doing so (Alon et al. 2020b, p. 15).

Single parents with school age or younger children, who represent 17 percent of all households (Alon et al. 2020b, p. 12), are among those most severely affected by the pandemic given their limited ability to secure childcare arrangements in the COVID-19 crisis. Single parents are more likely to be in low-wage or low-skilled positions, and thus are much less able to work remotely, even while their weekly childcare hours increased by 23 hours due to school and childcare closures (Alon et al. 2020a, p. 36). Single fathers have experienced a much greater decline in work hours from February through April than single mothers or married men (Alon et al. 2020a). Among self-employed men, single fathers worked 13 fewer hours per week compared to 5.5 fewer hours for coupled fathers (Kalenkoski and Pabilonia 2020).

This early research on the gendered impact of the COVID-19 crisis documents how the pandemic has dramatically affected families by increasing childcare hours and, in some instances, reducing working hours. It is safe to say that previously established family routines were disrupted, and new strategies were needed to reinvent work-family balance. This is where qualitative research can be most illuminating as it sheds light on *how* parents actually experience this disruption. By looking at custodial single fathers’ narratives, this study identifies how the pandemic affected their caregiving and work practices, and the implications for their emotional well-being.

3. Data and Methods

This study originated in a larger, mixed-method research project that examined employment discrimination against custodial single fathers and was framed by status characteristic theory (Berger et al. 1977; Wagner and Berger 1997). Status characteristic theory is frequently invoked in the literature to explain the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus (e.g., Correll et al. 2007; Ridgeway and Correll 2004). The theory argues that individual characteristics (e.g., gender, race) become status characteristics that carry different levels of social worthiness (Berger et al. 1977). In a work setting, male gender is traditionally assigned a higher status, which explains the fatherhood bonus for married men. Caregiving, on the other hand, has a devalued status and is perceived as “women’s work”, which explains the motherhood penalty. The project’s aim, therefore, was to understand whether the fatherhood bonus extends to custodial single fathers or if they suffer from a penalty similar to working mothers. Research related to this aim relied on both a survey experiment with hiring managers and qualitative interviews with custodial single fathers.

The project’s qualitative component focused on how custodial single fathers experienced their roles as primary breadwinners and primary caregivers. Essentially a global natural experiment, the COVID-19 crisis interrupted the data collection process and yielded two sets of the interview data, one with fathers interviewed before COVID-19 and a separate set of interviews during the early months of COVID-19. The study leveraged the disruption and gained important insight into custodial single fathers’ experiences of reconciling work and caregiving demands before and during the pandemic. These interview data are used for the present analysis.

The sample for the interview study was recruited through advertisements on social media, meetup and support groups for single fathers and referrals from already recruited participants. The recruitment materials invited custodial single fathers with a full-time job to reach out to the research team for an hour-long interview in return for a \$30 Visa rewards card.

Although the study’s primary interest was in uncovering work-family conflict for single fathers who were primary caregivers, any man who identified as a custodial single father was interviewed. Some studies on single fatherhood exclude men who cohabit or live with extended family as if such men are not “truly single fathers, as if they were cheating some idealized type of single fatherhood” (Coles 2015, p. 146, emphasis in the original). The majority of definitions share a common pattern of insisting upon co-residence with a child for at least four nights a week (Goldscheider et al. 2015). Such a perception ignores the multiple ways in which parents can participate in their child’s life without sharing a residential space (Doucet 2016) and essentially deprives men of their father identity. Therefore, the sampling criteria allowed participants the necessary freedom to self-select without imposing a strict definition of who is a single father. The study design sought to avoid the preconceived assumptions in order to gain a better understanding of the joys and challenges of custodial single fatherhood.

All participants were geographically located in the Midwest, United States. On average, the duration of single parenthood was 5 years. The average participant age was 42 and the mean number of children was two. The average age of the youngest child was nine. Four participants resided with an extended family. Three participants were in a romantic relationship but did not cohabit with the new partner. Two-thirds of the interviews were conducted before the pandemic. In this subsample, 11 men had full custody of their child(ren), one man had more than 50 percent custody and three men had less. The remaining seven men in the sample equally split custody with their child’s mother. A majority of participants (14 men) arrived at single fatherhood through divorce or separation. Five participants were never married, two were widowed, and one participant adopted his children. Most interviewees were white (14 men), but the subsample included three Black participants, one Asian American and one Native American. Importantly, 15 participants had a college degree or higher, and 16 participants had a high-skill or a

white-collar job. The remaining men in this subsample were less educated and employed in blue-collar, low-wage jobs.

One-third of the interviews were conducted in April during the early stages of quarantine in the region. In this subsample, four men had full custody of their children, two men had more than 50 percent custody, and two men equally split custody with their child's mother. Five participants arrived at single fatherhood through divorce or separation. Three interviewees were never married, and one was widowed. Five participants were white, two were Black, one was Asian, and one was Jewish. Six participants had a college degree or higher, and five had a high-skill or a white-collar job. Three interviewees were less educated, and four men were employed in blue-collar, low-wage jobs.

It should be noted that given the small number of custodial single fathers in the population, the recruitment for this study was a challenge. As the sample size is small and nonrandom, the findings should not be read as statistically significant but rather viewed as giving voice to an understudied population group. Nonetheless, the final sample size was guided by the principle of data saturation (Roy et al. 2015). Data saturation was reached with both sets of participants—those interviewed before COVID-19 and those interviewed after its onset.

Prior to COVID-19, interviews took place in person at coffee shops and cafes, although on two occasions the interview was conducted at a person's home. During the quarantine, interviews were conducted via Zoom. Using different interview modes within the same study is not ideal and was a choice necessitated by the pandemic. The interviewer had their camera on at all times during the interview. In only one case did the participant choose to have the camera off, which may have influenced rapport. The interview duration ranged from 45 min to 1.5 h and lasted one hour on average. The interviews were semi-structured meaning participants had some control over the flow of the conversation.

The interview protocol consisted of mostly open-ended questions and was designed drawing on life course theory (Elder et al. 2003), status characteristic theory (Berger et al. 1977; Correll and Ridgeway 2003), and work–life balance framework. The sensitizing concepts of the transition to and the timing of single fatherhood were informed by life course theory to make sense of whether different paths that led men to single fatherhood carried differential impact. The interview protocol also included questions about the child's biological mother, his relationship with her and their coparenting arrangement if there was any. The status characteristic theory informed the use of caregiver penalty and fatherhood bonus as sensitizing concepts to capture whether the status of a single father is valued within a work setting and in the society. Finally, the interview protocol contained detailed questions about work schedule, flexibility, childcare arrangement, and time-use to understand how single fathers reconciled work and family demands and how this reconciliation changed with COVID-19.

The interview questions were continuously reviewed and revisited as the study progressed to ensure the interview protocol adequately captured the broad range of custodial single fathers' work and family experiences. Findings from earlier interviews were corroborated at later stages of data collection to maintain credibility and clarify initial codes and categories emerging in the data analysis. Elaborate field notes were taken after each interview to capture the setting and tone of the interaction as well as an observation of the participant's body language and demeanor. Interviews were audio recorded with participants' permission and transcribed by the author ensuring participants' anonymity and confidentiality. Zoom interviews were also video recorded. The videos were deleted once the audio file had been downloaded. Real names were replaced with pseudonyms and all identifying information was removed to protect participants' anonymity. Interview data were coded using NVivo 12 software.

The data analysis followed the grounded theory approach (Glaser and Strauss 1967; LaRossa 2005). The analysis began with open coding by breaking down the interview data into discrete categories or codes. The first set of codes was created deductively based on the interview guide. It was then substantially expanded through inductive coding

as transcripts were carefully read and re-read while utilizing the method of constant comparison (Glaser 1978). This allowed for the identification of emerging themes that were shared or contrasted among participants. Additional sensitizing concepts of low-skill and high-skill jobs were brought in to interpret how single fathers experienced work. Axial coding involved identifying relationships between emerging categories (LaRossa 2005) and ensuring that each concept was developed to an adequate level of theoretical saturation (Roy et al. 2015). This stage of coding focused upon examining the key factors that shaped the experience of custodial single fatherhood. Some examples of these factors are: type of single fatherhood (e.g., divorced or widowed), type of custody, coparenting relationships, number of children and their age and gender, type of work and relationship with colleagues and supervisors.

Working through all 30 cases, the analysis first explored the patterns and connections between codes to offer a detailed framework of different ways men approach work-family reconciliation. The next step involved separate analyses of the data collected before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Here, the analysis identified the specific areas of tension between breadwinning and caregiving roles performed by participants. The final stage of analysis examined how these areas of tension experienced by the pre-pandemic set of participants compared to the experiences of single fathers interviewed during the pandemic and vice versa. Importantly, some of this comparison emerged from the narratives of single fathers interviewed during the pandemic who frequently reflected on how much their lives changed with the quarantine.

The findings presented in this article were based upon selective coding that focused on three core themes: work, caregiving and well-being. The work theme consists of codes that captured flexible work arrangements, different types of work, any job penalty that occurred due to caregiving including the loss of employment, and the difficulty of working from and outside of home during the pandemic. The caregiving theme presents findings from the analysis of codes on official and unofficial childcare arrangements, disruption to these arrangements due to COVID-19, coparenting relationships with the child(ren)'s mother, maternal gatekeeping, pandemic-induced strain to the coparenting relationship, and solution strategies. The well-being theme discusses interview data coded as identity loss, diminished social networks, loneliness and isolation, new romantic relationships, leisure time, and the added stress of the pandemic-related social distancing measures. By utilizing the method of constant comparison of the codes within each theme, the analysis constructed coherent narratives of how custodial single fathers navigated work and care demands and how these demands seeped into men's psychological well-being before and during the pandemic.

4. Results

How did single fathers reconcile work and caregiving before COVID-19 and how does this reconciliation compare to single fathers' experiences during the pandemic? In their retrospective outlook upon the transition to single fatherhood, the interview participants described difficulties reconciling their work and career ambitions with fatherhood. Many have let go of the idea of career growth in order to ensure consistent availability to caregiving and some radically switched careers to find jobs that offered flexibility. None, however, described such experience as negative. Becoming a single father helped men realize their desire for being physically present in their child's life, especially if previously they assumed the traditional role of a breadwinner with limited childcare involvement. Drawing on participants' reflection upon their father role before and after the transition to single parenthood, it appears that becoming a single father was a shock in and of itself. Divorced, separated or widowed, none of these men planned on being a single parent. To address the challenges brought by single fatherhood, the interview participants spoke of creative solutions and demonstrated a good degree of resilience. They leveraged this creativity and resilience to navigate the COVID-19 crisis.

This section first reports on single fathers' work situation and how it compares to the work situation during COVID-19. Here, it is argued that the pandemic was especially challenging for participants employed in the blue-collar sector for whom working remotely was not an option. The caregiving theme discusses how single fathers arranged childcare. This was greatly affected by the coparenting relationship men had with their child's mother, which had gotten more complicated due to the virus. While all participants were successful in establishing a working care arrangement, fathers in low-skill jobs were far more restricted in their options and had to frequently and heavily rely on extended family for childcare. The final theme unpacks single fathers' well-being. Custodial single fathers lacked leisure time, which added to parenting stress and fatigue. The lack of personal time was even more evident in the interviews conducted during the pandemic. Many divorced single fathers also talked about a strong feeling of loneliness and isolation as a sizeable portion of their social network was lost in the separation from their partner. Social distancing measures further added to the emotional burden of isolation that many men struggled with, and the findings suggest that more awareness is necessary to improve single fathers' psychological health. Discussion of the findings is accompanied by policy implications that should motivate action to alleviate challenges single fathers face due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

4.1. White-Collar Jobs vs. Blue-Collar Jobs

The findings from this study suggest that, overall, custodial single fathers were not "ideal workers". Although some divorced men indeed performed a traditional breadwinner role before their marriages ended, the arrival at single fatherhood led them to reconsider their parent role. For example, this single father acknowledged he prioritized his job as a stockbroker before his divorce. This job came with substantial pay in exchange for long hours and high level of stress:

David: There was a give and take, and at that time in my life, job was more important than family. And since the divorce, I've come to the realization that my kids are number one, not job. And I've tried to reflect that on the decision that I'm now making subsequent to my divorce [. . .] since the divorce, I've changed careers and tried to steer my employment to jobs where I have flexibility with time and that cost me monetarily. But at the same time, I think the kids, my kids need their father. And that's more important than money. Even though it hurts the pocketbook, that time that I have with them is more important. So that's the decision I've made.

To maintain this decision, custodial single fathers sought out flexible work arrangements, especially those that allowed remote work and telecommuting. Such flexibility was particularly important in the early stage of transition to single fatherhood as the emotional stress from their divorce or separation negatively affected men's productivity at work. One father described feeling "numb" and being in a "state of paralysis" and was very appreciative of his employer's support in this transition. Another father feared losing his job while he was going through a divorce because he had to continually change his schedule to accommodate parenting time and court hearings.

Scott: My management was very, very mad because they're like, like, "look, we understand everyone has personal life, but it's affecting your work, it is affecting your job". And it really was affecting my job, it was very difficult at that time. They got pretty upset. So, I started applying within the company to different teams and I was looking for remote positions so I can work either as a system admin working remotely and running systems like from here to Texas, or wherever I lived and then I can do this kind of thing. And I found this job. And ever since then it's been much easier. But it was very close to losing my job.

Nonetheless, men in white-collar jobs were able to negotiate flexible work arrangements and attain a healthy work-family balance, at least prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many gratefully acknowledged that their employers were very "understanding" of their

family situation and that they felt “fortunate” to enjoy flexible schedules that allowed them to fulfill their caregiving responsibilities. This observation demonstrates that single fathers still appear to enjoy the “patriarchal dividend” (Connell 1987) as it is widely known employers are rarely as accommodating of mothers’ care commitments. At the same time, this “dividend” disappeared in the case of men with blue-collar jobs.

Participants in blue-collar jobs reported that asking for a last-minute change in schedule was not welcomed, which made it difficult for single fathers to attend to child emergencies. In the example below, Kevin who had full custody of two infants struggled to reach an understanding with his warehouse supervisor:

Kevin: About a month ago, my son out of the blue woke up in the morning throwing up. Can't bring him to daycare that way. [laughs] So, I got to stay home [and] I informed them at work and . . . the lady [supervisor] was kinda irritated with me for not being able to be at work because of my children.

He further compared his experience to that of his female colleagues, and concluded that it is the gendered expectation of men’s uncompromised commitment to work that underlies this irritation:

Kevin: There's like, two or three other women on my team who have children who . . . for lack of a better response miss work pretty regularly because of their kids! [laughs] It's understandable when it's them. It wasn't understandable when it was me. So I had to explain this to HR as well. Like, I don't have help, I do it all myself . . . That lady understood, the other lady didn't, they worked it out amongst themselves.

This example illustrates that even though single fathers were not “ideal workers” and they had time-consuming family responsibilities, the employers expected an uninterrupted work commitment. Men in high-skill jobs were better positioned to negotiate a flexible work arrangement. Low-wage workers, however, were not, and in some cases, it led to a loss of employment:

Michael: He was very understanding [at first] because he had kids too, but he was in a dual parent relationship, so I think there's a lot of assumptions that people that have both parents make, and that there's always somebody else that can watch the kid, you know what I mean? [. . .] I mean, he was firing me or gave me . . . the notion that I was gonna get fired because I didn't have stable care for my son.

How has single fathers’ work situation changed due to COVID-19? Participants interviewed after the onset of COVID-19 and who had access to flexible schedules and an option to work remotely used this flexibility during the pandemic. However, having children at home at all times took a toll on men’s emotional health, as going to the office helped men to switch gears between work and caregiving more efficiently: “I’m working from home now. I’m here 24/7 now. You know, now I don’t even get a break to go into the office, so, last two-three weeks have been pretty tough” (Steven). Moreover, children can frequently interrupt work meetings with clients, although not necessarily in a detrimental way: “I can play it off, you know, like, “oh, it’s my kids”, I make something up that my customer likes [laughs]” (Brandon).

Men working in blue-collar jobs lacked flexible schedules and the option to work from home. In fact, many blue-collar participants’ jobs were deemed “essential” during the pandemic. Such jobs posed additional health threats and caregiving challenges. For example, the nature of a warehouse job implies a closed space where maintaining 6 feet of distance may not be possible. Multiple news outlets reported a surge in the virus among Amazon warehouse workers with nearly 20,000 testing positive country-wide (Lerman 2020; O’Brien 2020).

With regard to childcare, essential workers had to be creative. For example, if Greg needed to attend to a work emergency at night, he had to take his 11-year-old daughter with him. Jeremy, on the other hand, was not willing to sacrifice any time he had with his children for work:

Jeremy: So I'm leaving work at 7 o'clock at night and I'm picking up my kids at 7:01. And very often, there's been times mandatory overtime into our meetings. Either before or after work. On a workday, not on a workday. Different things where I've had to say I can't. You're gonna have to make accommodations for me. I have my kids. And generally, they have, so . . . reluctantly a lot of times, but . . .

Interviewer: Why do you think reluctantly?

Jeremy: Um, because they don't want to have to make accommodations . . . for one person, and it's the corporate entity kind of structure if they . . . If they schedule a training, say there's a new robot coming in or something, and they schedule a training for all the maintenance people to come in on a Thursday. They're going to have a guy from the company there. But it's not my Thursday to work, they pay me to come in and do the meeting, but I can't, I've got my children, and it's the only time I get my children and, and I've had to make it clear to them that my children come before they do, so.

Such resilience, while laudable, creates tension in the worker-employer relationship. Moreover, the uncertainty and stress brought by the pandemic can, itself, lead to a loss of productivity, which men have already experienced once during the transition to single fatherhood. Work tension and suboptimal productivity are particularly problematic in an economic crisis because they jeopardize single fathers' job security and put them in a vulnerable position in their current jobs in a crumbling job market.

The findings discussed in this theme demonstrate that custodial single fathers prioritize caregiving and their role as a parent and caregiver in contrast to the traditional gendered assumption of a father's role as a breadwinner. As a result, numerous participants reported they had experienced work-family conflict because employers continued to expect an uninterrupted work commitment. This conflict was heightened during the arrival at single fatherhood (e.g., divorce) and was heightened again during the health and subsequent economic crisis caused by COVID-19. Drawing on the interviews conducted during the pandemic, it appears that fathers with high-skill, white-collar jobs were better positioned to weather this crisis than low-wage, blue-collar workers.

4.2. Caregiving and Coparenting

Becoming a single father led study participants to prioritize their role as a caregiver and a parent. As discussed above, some fathers substantially rearranged their work life to better attend to their responsibilities as a single parent. Interviews with both sets of participants suggest that flexible work conditions allowed men with white-collar jobs to combine breadwinning and caregiving while working from home. The main struggle for these fathers was their transportation schedule, which got complicated as the number of children increased. Brandon, for instance, shared his troubles to arrange drop off and pick up of his three children and reconcile it with a full-time job:

Brandon: My job is seasonal. So I'm gonna hit it very hard soon and there are three different schools: one's in daycare, one's in an elementary school, and one's in junior high. So they're all different times too, and I don't know how to do this and do a full time job.

In addition to daycare and schools, men's narratives invoked the intensive mothering ideology that requires significant investments into children's upbringing. Dance lessons, baseball, hockey training, cheerleading, ice-skating, karate—these are just a few examples of the extracurricular activities that participants' children engaged in prior to the pandemic. However, custodial single fathers were not always successful in managing these. Yet, they still felt the need to try and make sure their children could attend afterschool activities:

Eric: The other challenge is that I can't get them into extracurricular activities as often because of my schedule and trying to arrange work things around. I feel like they miss out on those opportunities. I guess as far as the kids' schedules, those are really the big things that they don't get to do that other kids might. I can't get them into extracurricular activities as much and they have less time because their schedule has to revolve around my schedule, which means I still have to work. And put in those hours.

The intensive mothering ideology can also affect single fathers indirectly through the child's mother. In the sample, 26 men became single fathers through divorce, separation or break up. Eighteen of them did not have a good relationship with the child's mother at the time of the interview. Many men described the ex-partner as "controlling" and a "gatekeeper", implying she attempted to dictate the parenting rules in the father's household: "So she wants to parent her way and tell me how I should parent in my home. And that's been problematic. And it's created anxiety for me, and it's creating anxiety for the kids with mixed messaging" (David). Other men spoke of the times the ex-partners would choose to not inform them of school activities meaning fathers often missed children's games and recitals. The relationship can get more intense if the single father enters a new romantic relationship. So much so, the ex-partner may decide to challenge the existing custody arrangement:

Interviewer: So when did you break up with your last girlfriend?

Greg: My daughter's 11 and she was 2. So about 10 years ago.

Interviewer: And did you have this kind of custody arrangement right away?

Greg: No. We had a mutual agreement for a while. Until I got my current girlfriend. Then things got ugly. We ended up having to go to court.

A good relationship with the ex-partner can significantly alleviate the burden of childcare as parents can substitute for one another in case of emergency or last-minute scheduling changes. In recognizing this, online sources available through The Fathers' Rights Movement and the National Fatherhood Initiative promote the benefits of shared parenting and educate single fathers on how to identify and resist maternal gatekeeping. The [National Fatherhood Initiative \(2017\)](#) also offers a learning source for mothers designed to help women understand the importance of children's father to their overall well-being.

In the absence of a good coparenting relationship, unofficial childcare through extended family can fill in the gaps. Nine participants indicated they tended to ask parents or former parents-in-law to look after children, and some had to do so more often than others. Four men, however, lived with their parents, usually mothers, in order to mitigate the caregiving challenges: "We rely on my mom a lot, so . . . She's like another parent right now" (Eric). Richard, a warehouse worker, approached the childcare issue by putting all of his work hours into two days while his mother and father took turns looking after his 2-year-old twins. Formal childcare was not an option for Richard:

Richard: I don't qualify for daycare. They, I make too much money, so I don't get daycare. Daycare is like, I think for both of them it's almost \$1400–1500 a month. I'm not paying that because that's more than my mortgage share for my house. I signed up for daycare assistance, but that's a two-year waiting list, I guess, my name is coming up September 2021.

Thus, prior to COVID-19, working single fathers utilized the following strategies for childcare arrangements: work from home, nanny services, and extended family. Official childcare was sought most by single fathers in low-skill jobs, but the high cost placed this solution beyond men's reach. A good coparenting relationship with the child(ren)'s mother is generally known to ease the burden of childcare, but an overwhelming majority of participants reported having conflicted coparenting relationships. As a result, coparenting brought stress, not relief, to single fathers' performance of caregiving.

Drawing on the interviews conducted during the pandemic, it is clear that COVID-19 brought significant disruptions to these strategies, leaving parents, alone, to provide supervision and care at home. Informal childcare through extended family suddenly posed a major health risk to all parties involved. For instance, Steven and his two children shared a duplex with Steven's mother (who owns the building) and her new husband. While the apartments were separate, the two households frequently shared meals together and, overall, Steven felt he had a good childcare arrangement that could fill the gaps while he was at work. The COVID-19 pandemic forced him to reconsider this solution:

Steven: So, I got my mom to help me out a little bit with things here and there, but now with this [pandemic] going on, and her working in a hospital, it's like—Now I don't have that support. I can't, I don't feel comfortable enough, even if she's not showing any symptoms of it [COVID-19], I don't feel comfortable enough even being around her or anything. Or my kids to be around her, it's just kind of a protecting kind of thing, obviously, you know.

Single fathers who share residential space with parents, on the other hand, continued to have access to care assistance, but had to introduce additional precautionary measures to ensure their older family members were safe from the virus because they were at a greater risk of mortality due to COVID-19. This often meant strictly ensuring children's social distancing from other children. The participants spoke of spending more time with their children outdoors. However, as the weather gets colder, single fathers need to be prepared to support their children in other ways to mitigate the negative impact the COVID-19 crisis can have on children's physical, emotional and mental health (Goldschmidt 2020; Teo and Griffiths 2020).

The pandemic also added stress to the coparenting arrangement because former spouses needed to communicate more in order to protect everyone's physical health as the number of positive cases accumulated. Before the pandemic, many participants chose to significantly limit communication. The relationships were not functioning, and men tried to keep it "refined" and "very business" to reduce the potential for conflict. In some cases, participants would settle high conflict coparenting issues through a parenting consultant. Such consultants perform a "hybrid legal-mental health role" that ensures a child-focused process to resolve disputes and facilitate the implementation of the parenting plan (Association of Family and Conciliation Courts' Task Force 2020). This solution, however, is generally expensive:

Scott: I'll get the parenting consultant and then guess what, I get to pay to make a deposit of \$2000 for the parenting consultant retainer. Right. And then each time I send her an email, it's \$300 an hour. They do it a 0.25 of an hour for each email. That's a lot of money.

Scott's relationship with his ex-wife had been difficult since the divorce, but COVID-19 only further complicated the situation. He and his ex-wife had a dispute about arranging childcare for their daughter, and hiring the parenting consultant helped to resolve this dispute:

Scott: We had to get the parenting consultant involved to make the decision that my daughter could home school at my home during the pandemic. Her mom wanted her to go to free daycare that the post office [ex-wife's work] offered. The parenting consultant agreed it wasn't safe for my daughter and it didn't make sense when I was available to care for her. Her mom is required to drop her off at 6:45 am on her way to work, and she picks her up like she would from school at the end of the day.

Parenting consultants are not the only option available for single fathers to improve communication with the child(ren)'s mother. Family mediation is another conflict resolution method, though it is most often utilized at the divorce stage and is, in fact, now mandatory in the majority of states in the US (Amato 2010). There is evidence that mediation improves post-divorce outcomes particularly with regard to better communication and less conflict between divorced parents (Emery et al. 2005). However, only one participant who was going through divorce at the time of the interview mentioned mediation but did not substantially reflect on its effectiveness.

To summarize, COVID-19 constrained participants' ability to arrange childcare as many of them relied on extended family. Their caregiving approach was also affected by coparenting relationships with the child's mother and her engagement in maternal gatekeeping. A good relationship with the ex-partner can potentially alleviate the burden of childcare. Unfortunately, many single fathers did not have such a relationship. Instead, already strained relationships were further challenged during the upheaval of the pandemic.

Some men managed to successfully navigate this tension through the services of a parenting consultant.

4.3. Social Isolation and Psychological Well-Being

The interview findings presented so far demonstrate that becoming a single father heightened participants' caregiving role and created a work-family conflict that many struggled to address. This conflict alone is capable of creating stress and affecting men's psychological well-being. However, for many fathers, the transition to single fatherhood—particularly through a divorce—presented an emotional shock in and of itself.

Gary: So, what people don't understand about divorce is that it's an identity crisis on steroids. When you think of somebody having an identity crisis at normal age, they still have their support network around them, they still have the marriage, they still have the partner, the kids. They still have the circle of friends around. You still associate yourself as a husband, as a father, as a worker. But when you get divorced, that gets shattered, that goes away. You're no longer a husband. You're no longer—what many people feel is that you're no longer a parent. Because parenting used to be that "I live with my kids a 100% of the time". Or parenting didn't depend on the piece of paper that told you what could and couldn't do. And. The divorced father is a . . . in my opinion, a very perplexing situation that one day I'm considered to be a competent parent, I live with my kids a 100% of the time. The next day because of outside influences, I'm considered to be less of a parent and need to have controls around when I see my kids and when I don't. And I think that's very hard for a lot of people.

Gary's powerful narrative came not just from his personal experience as a divorced single father with full custody of his son, but also as an organizer of a support group for single fathers. His perception of single fatherhood as correlating with the loss of the social support network was echoed in other interviews. Ben, for example, talked about feelings of loneliness or isolation because he lost many friendships that were part of the family circle. He also shared the impression that ex-wives were typically more successful in establishing closer friendships and explained it through the gender discourse:

Ben: Since the separation [I] felt kind of lonely or isolated, because most of my friends were kind of joined family friends . . . Well, I have professional relationships at work [but] I lost a lot of those friendships as far as people I hang out with. [. . .] It feels like [ex-wife] has a lot more support from friends and people that she knows. And that she's able to make friendships like closer personal friendships with people she works with whereas . . . myself and I think men in general . . . seem not to feel comfortable getting that close personal relationship to talk about things . . . At least here, that's the way it feels.

Indeed, it is known that men's gender can prevent them from establishing networks, especially with other parents, because their male body and adherence to masculine norms excludes them from social spaces that parents usually inhabit (Doucet 2018). At the same time, fathers in this study desired having a social network comprised of other single fathers. For example, for Eric, who had full custody of two children, it was important to create friendships with other single fathers with full custody. Unfortunately, he had little luck in this endeavor. Participants who managed to create such a network reported sharing a "common bond", not feeling "ostracized", having an outlet to vent and complain, and feeling more supported overall:

Brian: It does help too, when you can talk to people that can relate to the situation. Especially when it's, like, when the times are difficult. Somebody who can understand or at least has been through it. Because if you don't, it's either kind of a, you know, trying to explain it to somebody who doesn't understand, they can . . . it kinda go from either not really caring about it at all or just kinda be over-enthusiastic.

Another factor that was found to negatively affect single fathers' well-being was lack of leisure time. For fathers with full custody, caregiving became even more stressful given they now had to ensure their constant availability to attend to children's needs:

Nick: But even before that [becoming a single father with full custody], I'm kind of an introvert, so I need time to myself. And now there's no one else there to say, well, go bug your mom for a while. Have her read you a book, you know, talk to her about your video game, you know, something . . . so that I can have 20 min to myself is kind of part of it that I miss the most.

Leisure time is important because it offers time to restore and decompress, and the lack of leisure time is associated with parenting fatigue and stress (Meier et al. 2016). A hobby can greatly contribute to well-being, and single fathers who were successful in reserving some personal time, spoke about it in positive terms. However, when it came to discussing men's satisfaction with their time-use and their overall well-being, many single fathers would briefly acknowledge their dissatisfaction accompanied with a chuckle or laughter, but then quickly emphasized they were making things work:

Interviewer: Are you happy with how you spend your time?

Kevin: Yes! You've gotta be happy with it. [. . .] Nah, I'm just fine [laughs] I feel like it gets better later too. The more you get used to it, the more you're used to doing it . . . I just make it happen.

Thus, single fathers interviewed prior to the pandemic struggled with a loss of identity as a partnered father, lack of leisure time, and a diminished social support network. Given that the average duration of single parenthood for participants was five years, their unsuccessful attempts to create new friendships have important implications for men's psychological well-being in the long run.

The emotional burden facing single fathers was substantially more intense among fathers interviewed during the pandemic. COVID-19 has been a threat to more than just physical health. The blurred boundaries between work and family, social isolation, economic strain, fear of contracting the disease, and the overall uncertainty about the future affected men's mental health and emotional well-being. The state-imposed measures of social distancing and stay-at-home orders due to COVID-19 only further exacerbated the feeling of loneliness and isolation many single fathers experienced. Such measures limited men's ability to connect with other single fathers and constrained their ability to date, further eroding their social networks. Some single fathers had no desire for a new relationship. Many admitted that the dating scene was difficult, particularly in the COVID-19 context, but nonchalantly added they were not bothered and were not putting too much effort into dating regardless of the pandemic. Those currently in a romantic relationship struggled to maintain it:

Greg: That [dating] has been extremely difficult currently because of current conditions and COVID-19 but we've been doing a lot of Zoom meetings. We've been meeting a lot, like at a regional park and doing social distancing by walking.

With regard to leisure time, in the interviews with single fathers during the pandemic, participants acknowledged the lack of personal time but again did not elaborate on the issue. In the example below, the father emphasized his responsibility for children and expressed content with the COVID-19 reality:

Interviewer: Do you have any personal time?

Charles: Yeah, I do. I mean, there's not too much time for that at the moment but, you know, it's okay. I mean, I'm 37, I had a pretty good, I had a pretty crazy youth. I had my time to have fun. I did the adult thing and made the adult decisions to create the children. So, I'm reserved to the fact that my time pretty much belongs to them and I'm okay with that.

Participants' reticence on the subject of well-being precluded exploring strategies that single fathers employed to better their psychological health. Out of 30 participants, only one mentioned working with a therapist in the past. Men's willingness or unwillingness to talk about their well-being is consistent with the literature on masculinity. Prominent scholars in this area have long emphasized that emotional control and the denial of vulnerability

are important parts of the social construction of male gender and hegemonic masculinity (Courtenay 2000; Kimmel 2006). The pandemic led to an increase in psychological distress among adults in the US (McGinty et al. 2020), and more than 1 in 4 parents reported worsening mental health since March 2020 (Patrick et al. 2020). However, since men frequently refuse to acknowledge mental health problems to demonstrate masculinity (Courtenay 2000), the lack of social contact, personal time and worsening psychological well-being will have a long-lasting effect on men's health without appropriate attention from policy makers and healthcare professionals.

5. Discussion and Policy Implications

The experience of custodial single fatherhood is a complex, multifaceted and often understudied process that is shaped by a wide range of factors. This study contributes to the knowledge on custodial single fatherhood by focusing on three specific domains—work, caregiving, and well-being, and how men's experiences within each of these domains was shaped by COVID-19.

This study has found that custodial single fathers were not “ideal workers” and prioritized their family and caregiving responsibilities. On the other hand, employers continued to expect unlimited availability. Educated custodial single fathers with high-skill jobs reported more success in negotiating additional flexibility within the current job. Some of them had an option of switching to a different job and/or career path that allowed such flexibility. Men in low-skill jobs or blue-collar jobs were more restricted. They generally had little control over their schedules and their demonstrated ongoing commitment to childcare frequently led to conflicts and misunderstandings with their supervisors at work. These findings are consistent with the existing research. Demonstrating reduced productivity or requesting time off work is known to jeopardize parents' job security and cast them as “time deviants” and not committed to their jobs (Blair-Loy 2003; Williams et al. 2013). For highly supervised workers in low-wage jobs, asking for flexibility deems them “irresponsible”, and being late or missing work to attend to family needs frequently leads to harsh disciplinary actions (Williams et al. 2013, p. 217). Importantly, low-income custodial single fathers in this interview study felt employers were less likely to accommodate their caregiving responsibilities compared to similarly situated single mothers in their workplace. Working mothers in low-skill jobs enjoy additional flexibility because they fit the traditional gender expectation of women's primary caregiving responsibility. Custodial single fathers do not fit this norm and, hence, are penalized.

A more general policy implication here is that employee driven work flexibility will help single fathers best navigate single parenthood during its regular, daily challenges as well as during extraordinary times like the current pandemic (Gerstel and Clawson 2018, p. 95). Employee-driven job flexibility typically provides workers with an opportunity to take leaves and vacations and exert control over their working hours (Correll et al. 2014; Williams 2010). Employer-driven flexibility, on the other hand, is tied to organizational demands, leaves the power over designing work with the employer and provides fewer social protections for workers (Kalleberg 2011, 2012). Employers invoke the term “flexibility” to mean that workers should be available at whatever times and in whatever ways managers request thereby producing unpredictability and work precarity, particularly for low-wage workers (Gerstel and Clawson 2018; Williams et al. 2013).

The COVID-19 pandemic, however, poses different policy challenges. The negative impact of the closure of schools and daycare centers, in general, has disproportionately affected single parents, especially those who do not have flexible work arrangements. Therefore, supporting working single parents should be the most immediate policy response. Many single fathers in this study used to rely on extended family to fill in the childcare gaps. Again, this arrangement was most common for men in low-wage jobs because they cannot afford official childcare but also frequently did not qualify for state assistance due to high income. In the population, single fathers typically fare better than single mothers but worse than married fathers in terms of annual income (Grall 2020; Liv-

ington 2013). Single mothers are more likely to participate in at least one public assistance program than single fathers: 48.5 percent compared to 30.5 percent, respectively (Grall 2020). Here, it is unclear whether this difference is because many of them do not qualify for assistance as indicated by the study or if there are gendered norms and institutions that prevent them from participating in assistance programs to which they are entitled. Due to this, many single fathers are at risk of falling through gaps in the safety net. Thus, policy measures that aim to repair the economic and financial damage caused by the pandemic need to be aware that all working single parents—fathers included—struggle to meet childcare needs in pandemic times.

Bitler et al. (2020) further argue that on the eve of the COVID-19 crisis, the existing policy measures were providing uneven and incomplete protection. Therefore, it is recommended to boost support during the crisis by extending unemployment insurance to a larger share of disadvantaged unemployed workers, for example, self-employed and gig workers and those with limited work histories (Bitler et al. 2020, p. 18; Spurk and Straub 2020). This is important because the number of people with alternative work arrangements (e.g., co-employment, agency work, gig and contract work) has increased from 10.1 percent of all workers in 2005 to 15.8 percent in 2015 (Spreitzer et al. 2017, p. 475). Moreover, self-employed single fathers of school-age children were significantly less likely to be employed in April 2020 compared to self-employed single men without children (Kalenkoski and Pablonia 2020, p. 17).

The study findings also suggest that prior to the pandemic, custodial single fathers most frequently used unofficial childcare arrangements. Men in high-skill, flexible jobs did not require official childcare because they could work from home with the child(ren) present. Men with low-skill or blue-collar jobs would have preferred sending children to a daycare center, but the cost was found to be prohibitive. As a result, these men heavily relied on extended family. Either way, participants interviewed prior to COVID-19 felt they had a sustainable childcare arrangement that mitigated work-family conflict. What participants struggled with both before and during the pandemic was the coparenting relationship with their child(ren)'s mother.

In total, 69 percent of men who became custodial single fathers through divorce or separation reported having conflicted relationships with the ex-partner. This finding alone highlights the need to incorporate measures that promote cooperative relationships among coparents. Given that there is mixed evidence on the effectiveness of the measures currently in place (Friend et al. 2016), more research is needed to identify the best practices that improve post-divorce outcomes for both coparents and children.

Poor coparenting relationships can intensify maternal gatekeeping, which is known to already increase with divorce and separation (Fagan 2020; Puhlman and Pasley 2013). Mothers' negative beliefs of men's ability to parent demonstrated through discouragement and control significantly inhibit father's involvement (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Olsavsky et al. 2020), which has important implications for the father-child relationship. Unsupportive and antagonistic coparenting relationships can undermine father identity and commitment to fathering (Adamsons and Pasley 2013). Weak emotional ties and low-quality interactions with fathers are associated with deteriorating well-being of children who witnessed parental divorce (Adamsons 2018; Amato and Anthony 2014). These negative implications are known to persist into adulthood (Amato and Anthony 2014).

The pandemic and the related health danger created a different stumbling block for coparenting relationships. Commitment to social distancing measures and the fear of contracting the virus may differ depending on individual risk preferences. For instance, Fan et al. (2020, pp. 12–13) find that women are, on average, significantly less tolerant of risk and are more likely to stop seeing friends and extended family, wear masks, and wash hands more often. Between divorced coparents, establishing a shared understanding of appropriate safety measures requires communication, flexibility, and compromise, something that not all divorced and separated coparents have. For some coparents, differing

views on how to approach the health risk posed by COVID-19 can lead to a break down in cooperation (Lebow 2020).

The interview findings suggest that delegating decision-making to a parenting consultant can facilitate cooperation. Lebow (2020) and Zimmerman (2019) also note the benefits of couple and family therapy in navigating post-divorce conflicts. However, such solutions are expensive. The policy implication here is to consider making parenting consultation widely available through subsidies or publicly funded programs. It is also important to ensure widely and continuously available medical insurance that covers therapy costs even if the employment was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is known that children benefit most when coparenting is cooperative and supportive (Carlson et al. 2008; Palkovitz et al. 2013). The father-child relationship improves with a harmonious relationship between coparents yielding an increased sense of security in the child's relationship to the father (Brown et al. 2010).

The study also brings important attention to single fathers' well-being. The interview findings discussed in this theme depict how male gender and norms of masculinity pose a unique challenge to men who are navigating custodial single parenthood. Prior to the pandemic, the main stressors that affected single fathers' psychological health were work-family conflict, lack of leisure time, and diminished social networks. In general, men tend to have smaller social networks that provide less support and lack emotional depth in comparison to women's support networks (Carr and Pudrovska 2012; Haxton and Harknett 2009). Men also frequently rely on their romantic partners for social support (Carr and Pudrovska 2012; Crowley 2018). Indeed, they are more likely to seek out new relationships (Brown et al. 2018), in part to regain social support from a new partner (Carr 2004). However, even in the absence of a new partner, most single fathers in this study had effective strategies in place—most often through extended family—that allowed them to maintain their psychological well-being.

However, the COVID-19 pandemic intensified the already existing stressors, prohibited access to extended family, and limited the already small social networks available to custodial single fathers. It disrupted their efforts to establish new friendships with other single fathers and complicated their dating ability. The psychological health of many people has worsened since March 2020 (McGinty et al. 2020; Patrick et al. 2020). During COVID-19, the share of adults reporting mental health problems in the past week doubled compared with rates from 2017–18, suggesting serious distress (Bitler et al. 2020). For custodial single fathers, lack of social contact and social distancing measures have exacerbated their isolation.

Social support networks are important for mitigating loneliness and isolation (De Jong Gierveld et al. 2016; Hawkley and Cacioppo 2010). They are also associated with better physical and mental health (Luo et al. 2012), and material well-being (Henly et al. 2005). This can be particularly important for low-income single fathers who have fewer resources to navigate chronic stress (Hashima and Amato 1994). Yet, despite the importance of social support for single fathers' well-being, policy initiatives tend to ignore this aspect of single fatherhood. Instead, such initiatives tend to focus more on ensuring that nonresident fathers perform their financial care duties (Castillo and Sarver 2012). There is evidence, however, that interventions targeting adolescent fathers' social supports have positive effects on fathers' well-being and child involvement (Fagan and Lee 2011). It is therefore suggested that the policy scope needs to expand to include all types of single fatherhood and provide men with resources to establish supportive social networks.

The policy response also needs to acknowledge the fact that the attributes of hegemonic masculinity encourage men to deny or ignore their deteriorating psychological well-being (Courtenay 2000). There is evidence that depressive symptoms in men are often undiagnosed and untreated (Brown et al. 2019; Emslie et al. 2006). It is also known that divorce and separation are associated with an increase in fathers' and mothers' psychological distress (Kamp Dush 2013). Finally, policymakers should be aware that even in the absence of a worldwide health crisis, many parents experience stress specifically related

to their roles as parents. This stress often includes concerns about children's behavior, health issues, school performance, and even everyday tasks (Griffith 2020). These concerns together with lack of leisure time, low levels of social support, and job insecurity—which are found to be prevalent for single fathers in this study—have all been associated with an increased risk for parental burnout (Griffith 2020). Parental burnout goes beyond the typical parenting-related stress and is defined as “a prolonged response to chronic and overwhelming parental stress” (Mikolajczak et al. 2019, p. 1319). Parents experiencing parental burnout can become emotionally distant from their children and become doubtful of their capacity to be a good parent (Mikolajczak et al. 2019). Documenting the worsening mental health among parents is crucial as children in such families can be more vulnerable to child maltreatment and abuse (Brown et al. 2020).

Therefore, it is important to both encourage men to seek help for mental health concerns and ensure they do not drop out of treatment prematurely. There is evidence that public campaigns such as “HeadsUpGuys” (Ogrodniczuk et al. 2018) and “Real Men, Real Depression” (Rochlen et al. 2005) increase male uptake of psychological treatments (Seidler et al. 2018). It is also important to ensure uninterrupted medical insurance that facilitates men's access to therapy. The federal government should consider allocating additional support to state Medicaid programs and employer-sponsored insurance to maintain coverage (Patrick et al. 2020). Prevention and intervention programming that provide parental support and reduce stress during the COVID-19 pandemic needs to be put in place (Brown et al. 2020).

6. Conclusions

This qualitative study has demonstrated that custodial single fathers, particularly those in the low-wage labor market, were precariously positioned to navigate the COVID-19 crisis. They experienced a significant intensification of the work-family conflict, and their mental health and emotional well-being deteriorated. Additionally, even though these men managed to overcome the challenges posed by single parenthood and the pandemic, the study findings carry important implications for policymakers and practitioners. In some ways, single fathers face challenges similar to other parents and single mothers. In other ways, their experience is unique and deserves more recognition, investigation and support.

As with any research, this study has some limitations. First, the caregiving responsibility was conceptualized by emphasizing childcare, however, care may come in different shapes and sizes, including caring for parents and friends. Indeed, many single fathers in this study resided with their mothers, who may need more care attention in the future. Thus, further research needs to incorporate other forms of care performed by single fathers in addition to childcare.

It is also important to note that the second set of interviews was conducted at the height of stay-at-home orders and when the pandemic was still relatively “new”. It is therefore possible that the findings capture the challenges of single fatherhood at the peak of the pandemic crisis and at the time when men were still developing responses to these challenges. Subsequent research should continue to unpack single fathers' strategies in addressing the unique challenges posed by the pandemic.

Third, the findings were presented by emphasizing the job sector division as a proxy for social class. The study did not have power to consider other categories of exclusion such as race, sexuality, age, immigrant status, etc. Looking at custodial single fatherhood through the lens of intersectionality would provide important insights into the differences among single fathers depending on their social and structural location.

Fourth, this study used broad brush strokes to depict how single fathers navigated work and caregiving demands and how these demands seeped into their well-being. Undoubtedly, these experiences may vary depending on child(ren)'s demographic characteristics such as age and/or gender. Further research needs to consider how these

features affect single fathers' performance of parenting and how they shape the quality of relationships between single fathers and their children.

Lastly, the study utilized purposive, nonrandom sampling in a specific geographic region. The size of the sample was also relatively small. Therefore, the results should not be interpreted as generalizable to all custodial single fathers in the US. Instead, they should be read as giving voice to a growing but understudied population.

Yet, despite the numerous ongoing challenges brought by COVID-19, the pandemic also presented an opportunity to rethink the care economy. As many businesses have adopted work-from-home options on a large scale, it is very likely this additional flexibility will stay in place in the future (Alon et al. 2020b). This has potential to encourage men in dual-parent households to undertake a larger share of domestic and care labor. There is evidence they have already been doing so during the pandemic as the need for childcare is higher. Custodial single fathers, as this study demonstrated, have already been prioritizing their caregiving and family responsibilities. If married fathers would commit to caregiving in the same way single fathers in this study did, achieving gender equality would seem more realistic than it is now.

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