

Fathering in the “Other America”: A Qualitative Analysis of Father Identity in Appalachia

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Abstract

Though research on fathering and fatherhood has grown significantly over the past few decades, a persistent emphasis involves father involvement and its relationship to child outcomes. Far fewer studies have explored the intrapersonal processes of fatherhood, such as what it means to be a father in diverse contexts. Rural contexts, specifically within Appalachia, remain understudied and may present specific challenges or strengths that influence the development of fathering identities. The current study employed interpretive phenomenological analysis to explore the lived experiences of fathers who live and parent in rural Appalachia, an area and identity that is often stereotyped and marginalized, and to highlight these fathers’ strengths despite challenges. Informed by symbolic interactionism, this study sought to examine the social and cultural symbols that shape the meanings Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood and explore how those meanings shape their own perceptions of themselves as fathers. Fathers residing in Appalachia were interviewed to gain insights into the lived experiences, meaning making processes, and strengths of Appalachian fathers. Findings show that Appalachian fathers seek to embody and preserve multigenerational values such as work ethic, community, and providing and protecting, while grappling with tensions between preserving traditions and adapting to change. Appalachian fathers negotiated identities against the backdrop of historical hardship and exploitation, which threatened their internal sense of agency and contributed to their feeling left behind in a changing world. Nonetheless, fathers actively negotiated their sense of self and found creative ways to (re)create Appalachian fathering to fit their unique context and lived experiences.

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General Audience Abstract

Fathering research has largely followed societal trends in ideal fatherhood, as defined based off white, suburban, middle-class norms. Less emphasis has been placed on intrapersonal processes of fatherhood, such as what it means to be a father in diverse contexts. Rural contexts, specifically within Appalachia, remain understudied and may present specific challenges or strengths that influence the development of fathering identities. The current study employed explored the experiences of fathers who live and parent in rural Appalachia, an area and identity that is often stereotyped and marginalized, and to highlight these fathers’ strengths despite challenges. This study sought to examine the social and cultural symbols that shape the meanings Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood and explore how those meanings shape their own perceptions of themselves as fathers. Fathers residing in Appalachia were interviewed to gain insights into the lived experiences and strengths of Appalachian fathers. Findings show that Appalachian fathers seek to embody and preserve multigenerational values such as work ethic, community, and providing and protecting, while grappling with tensions between preserving traditions and adapting to change. Appalachian fathers negotiated identities against the backdrop of historical hardship and exploitation, which contributed to their feeling left behind in a changing world. Nonetheless, fathers actively negotiated their sense of self and found creative ways to (re)create Appalachian fathering to fit their unique context and lived experiences.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Background and Significance

Research on fathering and fatherhood has grown considerably over the last several decades (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Despite notable advancements in this literature, a persistent emphasis centers on father involvement (i.e., time spent with children in the context of care or play), often studied alongside children's well-being or father-child relationship quality (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Far fewer studies have explored the intrapersonal processes of fatherhood, such as the development and enactment of fathering identities, particularly in diverse contexts.

One group of fathers has remained consistently overlooked in fatherhood research: Appalachian fathers. Appalachia, both as a geographic region and as a social identity, remains largely understudied, especially in relation to family roles such as fatherhood. Since much work on fathering is conducted from mothers' perspectives (e.g., mother reports of fathering behavior), scholars have called for more research that explores fathering from the perspectives of fathers themselves (Molloy, 2017; Charles, Spielfogel, Gorman-Smith, Schoeny, Henry, & Tolen, 2016; Flouri & Malmberg, 2012). In addition to studying fatherhood from the perspectives of fathers, there is a need for research that situates fatherhood and explores *meanings* of fatherhood within specific contexts (Marsiglio et al., 2005). This study will be a part of a growing body of work seeking to understand fathers' own concepts of fathering from diverse perspectives (Molloy, 2017; Marsiglio et al., 2005).

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to examine the lived experiences of Appalachian fathers, paying particular attention to the *meanings* that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fathering and fatherhood. Phenomenology is well positioned for exploring created meanings

of lived experiences in the context of individuals' social and personal worlds (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In this study, the lived experience of interest is how Appalachian fathers experience fatherhood, including their relationships with their children, their perceptions of self as father, and the processes through which they create fathering identities.

This study is guided by symbolic interactionism and the lifeworld of Appalachian men, including cultural and contextual norms of masculinity and fatherhood. Symbolic interactionism recognizes both the power of culture/society (e.g., norms, messaging) *and* the agentic role of individuals in developing meanings of their social experience, which in turn shape identity and behavior (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). For instance, symbolic interactionism can be used to examine how dominant cultural discourses about fathering are replicated, interrupted, challenged, or discarded by minoritized individuals or groups and their experiences (Stryker, 2008). By understanding the symbols through which Appalachian fathers interpret and make meaning of their fathering roles, and examining the extent to which they feel pressure to conform to certain narratives, this study will shed light on how Appalachian men feel in their roles as fathers and how their self-perceptions shape fathering behavior. This study seeks to uncover meaningful aspects of the experiences of diverse Appalachian fathers by providing these fathers with a platform upon which to share their story.

Research Questions

The research questions reflect the symbolic interactionist principles that (a) the meanings humans ascribe to their roles and relationships shape how they interact in those roles and relationships, and (b) those ascribed meanings derived from, and arise out of, our social interactions with others and with society (Blumer, 1969). Thus, the following theoretically informed research questions will be used to investigate the experiences of Appalachian fathers:

1. What does fathering and fatherhood mean to Appalachian fathers?
2. What social and cultural symbols shape the meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood?
3. How do the meanings Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood shape their perceptions of themselves as fathers?

Overview of Important Terms

Below is a list of commonly used terms in this research study. Definitions are provided to ensure understanding of the language throughout.

1. **Appalachia:** A 205,000 square mile region in the Eastern United States that includes parts of 12 states and the entirety of West Virginia. Appalachia is a geographic region, political designation, and social identity (McGregor, 2018).
2. **Central Appalachia:** The middle section of the Appalachian region that includes parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and West Virginia. The region of Appalachia historically defined by coal production is the basis for a substantial share of Appalachian stereotyping in popular narratives (Catté, 2018; ARC, 2018; Batteau 1990).
3. **Essentialism:** The idea that members of certain groups have deep, hidden, and unchanging properties that make their members what they are. Gender, ethnicity, race, and physical disability are the most strongly and frequently essentialized groups. Essentialist ideas are often utilized to create and reinforce hierarchy (Prentice & Miller, 2007)
4. **Essential Father:** A strong cultural narrative that fathers are essential for children's cognitive and emotional development. Fathers are important to children's

development, but no substantial evidence within the literature supports fathering as a unique parental construct that serves a purpose different from mothers (Fagan et al., 2014; Paquette, 2004).

5. **Familism:** A view held by many Appalachians that family groups and family elders are central aspects of society and socialization. Familism is an aspect of collectivism that is often identified as a strength of Appalachian families (The Rural and Appalachian Youth and Families Consortium, 1996; Jones, 1975).

6. **Hegemonic Masculinity:** A domain of masculinity defined by domination over women and other subordinated masculinities. Hegemonic masculinity is not normal in that most men enact it, but it is normative and placed as the standard against which men must position themselves. Hegemonic masculinity means hierarchical domination through culture, institutions, and persuasion (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

7. **Identity:** Self-made meanings in a role that are hierarchically organized (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009).

8. **Masculinity:** A collection of social and cultural constructions that prescribe how men should exist within their identity or identities. A performative and ever-changing set of meanings dependent on experiences of personal and institutional power (Berger, Wallis, & Watson, 2012).

9. **Phenomenology:** A philosophical idea created by Edmund Husserl that focuses on how meaning is created and understood across different identities and contexts (Smith, 2008). Phenomenology seeks to understand the everyday, lived experiences of individuals as they are actually experienced (Moran, 1999; Smith, 2008).

10. Situated Fathering: A proposed framework that places fathers' identity development and involvement within physical, personal, and social contexts (Marsiglio et al., 2005).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter synthesizes key developments and limitations of existing literature on (a) fathering and (b) Appalachia. Dominant conceptualizations of fathering in North America have evolved over time, both in popular narratives and in scholarly literature. Societal expectations of ideal fatherhood have shifted from colonial emphases on moral guidance, to industrial-capitalist emphases on masculinity and breadwinning, to postmodern emphases on nurturance and engagement. Fathering scholarship has largely followed and reflected these broader societal expectations of fathers' roles in families, with a particular emphasis on the implications of paternal absence (Freeman, 2008). Indeed, fathers' presence and/or involvement in children's lives has been a focal point of this literature (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Far fewer studies have examined the experience of fatherhood itself, such as the development and complexity of fathers' identities in diverse geographic settings (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020; Marsiglio et al., 2005).

Appalachian studies scholarship also has changed over time, with a recent shift to combatting negative stereotypes of the region that are prevalent within popular narratives of Appalachia (Catte, 2018). Scholarship about Appalachia from other disciplines has contributed to negative stereotypes of Appalachia and Appalachian families. Appalachian men, especially fathers, remain largely absent from literature on Appalachian families or are portrayed as hyper-masculine and dominant within family systems.

This chapter will review literature on fathers and Appalachia, providing an overview of past and current literature that was used to inform the current study. First, I discuss fathering research and narratives across the 20th and 21st centuries, including recent literature that examines fathering in diverse situated contexts. Second, I examine existing literature on fathering involvement and identity. Third, I provide an overview of the Appalachian region and the characteristics that make it distinctive. Fourth, I examine the history of Appalachian “othering” and Appalachian men to outline the context within which this study takes place. Finally, I present the literature that informs the theoretical framework of this study.

Fathering Research Across Decades

Fathers’ roles in family life have long been of interest to researchers. As cultural expectations and beliefs about fathers’ roles have changed over time, the ways in which scholars define fathering have shifted (Lamb, 2000). Indeed, scholarly approaches to conceptualizing fatherhood are largely a reflection of sociocultural changes in family and father ideals. In this section, I trace historical evolutions in how researchers conceptualize fatherhood, paying attention how changes in the scholarly understandings of fathers reflect changes in the American zeitgeist. I outline four prototypes of fatherhood that have permeated the American consciousness at different points in history: the colonial father, the distant breadwinner, the new nurturant father, and the absent father.

The Colonial Father. In colonial America, a predominant role of fathers in families was that of the moral authority. Prior to the 1900s, fathers were expected to be responsible for their children growing up with strong morals and literacy to ensure that children could read religious scripture (Pleck, 1984). During this time, fathers assumed responsibility for the education of children so that children would be able to read the Bible. The father’s role as an educator was

secondary to that of a moral teacher (Lamb, 2008). During this era, a “good father” was defined by his ability to model “good Christian living” and teach his children morality.

Importantly, the authoritarian colonial father broadly reflected White, European-settler conceptualizations of family, gender, and fatherhood. Colonizers of North America organized their families according to the patriarchal tradition, which (a) defined family roles by gender, and (b) established men as heads of household (Ruggles, 2016). Such traditions contrasted with those of many native Indigenous communities of North America who did not divide familial and community roles strictly along gendered lines (Coontz, 2016). In fact, over the course of the nineteenth century, there was a concerted effort on behalf of the federal government to force Indigenous communities off their collective property and onto single-family plots, pressing them to conform to the patriarchal norm of a family headed by a man who was the public representative and moral authority of his wife and children (Coontz, 2016).

The colonial standard of “good” fathering also was inaccessible to many marginalized men, namely enslaved fathers who were forcibly separated from their children and denied these essential attributes of American masculinity and fatherhood (e.g., authority, autonomy, literacy) (Connor, 2011; Hilde, 2020). Nonetheless, many enslaved fathers found ways to remain an influential presence in the lives of their children, even if they saw them infrequently, thus reconstructing the paternal role in a system designed to disempower them (Hilde, 2020). Despite diverse embodiments of fatherhood across history, our historical and contemporary understandings of fathering have been, and continue to be, filtered through a Eurocentric, patriarchal, heterosexist lens. Thus, much of the literature reviewed in this section reflects the empirical trend of focusing on White, heterosexual fathers.

Notably, in the colonial era of fatherhood, one domain where roles were not so strictly divided along gendered lines involved labor on family farms. Because most settler families made their living through agricultural work, and family farms could not operate without family labor, all family members who were old enough – regardless of gender – were generally expected to contribute to farm production (Ruggles, 2016). Thus, although fatherhood was defined by moral governance, it was not yet defined by sole breadwinning responsibility. This changed with the Industrial Revolution, which created a schism between domestic and employment spheres and gave rise to the breadwinner-homemaker model.

The Distant Breadwinner. As the United States industrialized, definitions of fatherhood shifted towards breadwinning (Pleck, 1984). With the increase in industrialization in the early 1900s, young men moved away from family farms into the cities in search of wage labor. For the first time, fathers were primarily working outside of the family economy (e.g., the family farm or family business) (Ruggles, 2016). With this new fissure along gendered lines between breadwinning and homemaking, wage labor became a central attribute of fatherhood, and father's physical involvement with children decreased tremendously. This gave rise to the *distant breadwinner* father who worked outside of the home, was relatively uninvolved in day-to-day childrearing, but remained the moral authority and disciplinarian of the household.

By the 1950s and 60, television and radio reflected and actively reinforced cultural images of fathers as breadwinners and moral teachers (Leibman, 1995). Shows such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* and *Leave it to Beaver* emphasized white suburban parenthood as the standard to which all families should strive towards. Ward Cleaver, the briefcase-toting patriarch of *Leave it to Beaver*, departed to his office job every morning and returned home every evening just in time to impart a moral lesson upon his sons at the end of each episode.

Notably, shows that depicted the suburban breadwinner/homemaker nuclear family contrasted with sitcoms like *The Beverly Hillbillies* (1962-1971), which showed a rural family in a large, multigenerational kin structure who happen upon wealth and do not know how to function in “civilized” society.

In addition to an emphasis on breadwinning, increases in gendered segregation between work and family meant that fathers also served as *gender role models* for children (Coontz, 2014; Lamb, 2000). Gendered role modeling was ideally achieved by hyper-masculine men who were able to show that they were in control of their family unit. Media during this time characterized children of fathers who were weak gender role models (e.g., fathers who were not appropriately masculine and authoritative) as delinquents and unable to regulate themselves emotionally. A popular movie at the time, *Rebel without a Cause* (1955), followed the stories of teenagers whose fathers were not strong gender-role models. The assumption in this movie was that, since the fathers in these homes were emasculated, absent, or otherwise unavailable to their children, the children turned to lives of crime and general discontent.

Not surprisingly, these cultural images of fatherhood were reflected in, and reproduced by, family science scholarship. In the 1950s, structural functionalism as a theoretical framework rose to prominence, which emphasized the importance of families for social stability and argued that the most stable and well-functioning family structure was that of a nuclear family with clearly defined gender roles (e.g., fathers, the instrumental superior; mothers, the expressive superior; and sons and daughters, the instrumental inferior and expressive inferior, respectively) (Parsons & Shils, 1951). Indeed, scholarly understandings of fatherhood during this time reflected the structural-functionalist assumptions that fathers were instrumental in modeling how sons should behave and upholding standards of femininity that wives and daughters should

adhere to (Lynn, 1976). Reflecting the zeitgeist of this era, social scientists largely believed that boys become masculine by observing masculine fathers, and girls becomes feminine by observing feminine mothers, who are influenced by the father in the household (Parsons & Shils, 1951).

The New Nurturant Father. The idealization of the hyper-masculine, emotionally distant breadwinning father relaxed across the 1960s and 70s. As women began to enter the workforce in greater numbers, caretaking arrangements necessarily shifted in mother-father households, and cultural narratives reflected a growing belief that fathers could and should be more involved in day-to-day childrearing (Lamb, 2008). In the 1970s, scholars began to examine father involvement in more depth, following the emergence of the *new nurturant father* ideal, whereby fathers were increasingly expected to be active co-parents (Diniz et al., 2021; Lamb, 2000).

The “new father” ideal has been recreated in a number of ways since the 1970s, but generally, nurturing fatherhood seeks to redefine the traditional masculinity of the distant patriarch/breadwinner father by embodying more egalitarian, caring, and vulnerable characteristics of fatherhood. Arguably, new fatherhood adds attributes to “good fathering” (e.g., involvement, tenderness) to already existing attributes of fatherhood throughout history (e.g., moral guidance, breadwinning/providing), thus amending constructs of masculinity rather than radically deconstructing them (Jordan, 2019). What is clear in this “new father” era is that fathers are indeed spending more quality time with children today than in the past, even when they do not live with their children (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). For instance, since 2000, the number of nonresidential fathers has leveled, and the number of stay-at-home fathers has increased (U.S. Census Bureau, n.d.; Livingston, 2014)). Additionally, more states are trending

towards defaulting to joint custody in divorce cases, instead of defaulting to maternal care (Nielson, 2018).

The Absent Father. One theme that has remained constant across all eras of fathering has been a narrative of fear and shame around the absent father (Lamb, 2000). Messaging about the “absent father” can be found in popular discourse (think “deadbeat dad” or “daddy issues” narratives) as well as in academic approaches to studying fatherhood. The first great surge in concern about the implications of fathers’ absence came during the Second World War (Lamb, 2000). Fathering scholars began to explicitly examine father absence and posit that the absence of a father within the home lead to irreversible developmental damage for children (Lamb, 2000; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). This work on father absence oversimplified the relationship between trauma and developmental outcomes and encouraged ideas of father uniqueness, or the argument that fathers are essential for children’s cognitive and emotional development.

Interest in the effects of father absence increased again during the 1980s and early 1990s due to increased divorce rates, mass incarceration, growing wealth inequality, and a host of other factors that contributed to family instability (Marsiglio et al., 2000; Lamb, 2000; Diniz et al., 2021). Public debates over various issues such as “deadbeat dads,” welfare reform, nonmarital childbearing, divorce, “emasculated” fathers, fathers’ rights and responsibilities, and divorce shaped disagreements within the literature about the necessity of having a father in the home (Marsiglio et al., 2000). While some scholars were committed to moving away from the idea of an “essential” father, some continued to emphasize that fathers were essential for development (e.g. Burgner, 1985; Burton & Whiting, 1961; Van Ijzendoorn & Wolff, 1997).

The empirical focus on father absence was not without criticism. Some critiques focused on methodological weaknesses within the father absence literature and criticized the

oversimplification of the *absent v. present* dichotomy (Lamb, 1975). As such, the focus on *father absence* shifted to a focus on *father involvement*, which was viewed as a more objective measure of fathering and led to increased interest in time-use methodologies (Lamb, 2000). Father involvement studies of the 1970s and early 1980s helped to increase general interest in the roles fathers play in families, but they also reduced fathering to *time spent* with children, without capturing dimensions such as *quality* of shared time. Scholars who sought to complicate the narrative of nonresidential fathers focused on aspects of fatherhood such as financial support and visitation patterns (Marsiglio et al., 2000). Additionally, they focused on the content and quality of time spent with children, rather than solely on quantity of time (Lamb, 2000). One-on-one engagement tasks such as helping with homework, sharing a leisure activity, and participating in instructional talks were a focus of the literature that served to complicate widely accepted narratives of fatherhood (Marsiglio et al., 2000).

Here, we pause to make an important point regarding fathers' roles in families. Informed by the work of scholars who have problematized essential father frameworks, we caution against using claims of "father uniqueness" and the "essential father" when conducting fathering research (Pleck, 2010). Fathers are, in fact, consequential to children's development, but they are not essential. Many children experience positive development and full childhood experiences without the involvement of a father or father figure. There is no substantial evidence within the literature that supports the notion that fathering and mothering are unique constructs that serve different functions as parents (Fagan et al., 2014). Claims that fathers contribute something unique that no other caregiver can contribute persist within the parenting literature and contribute to claims that there are unique and evolved differences between people of different sexes (Paquette, 2004). Though parents of any gender are not uniquely essential to positive child

development, fathers are studied in the current study because they are important and deserve to have research dedicated to sharing their experiences.

In sum, cultural expectations and beliefs about fathers' roles have changed over time, as have the ways in which scholars define fathering have shifted (Lamb, 2000). The colonial father, the distant breadwinner, the new nurturant father, and the absent father have all guided how researchers conceptualize fatherhood. With an understanding of how fatherhood has been conceptualized over time, I turn now to an overview of current literature on fathering involvement and identity.

Father Involvement and Identity

Father involvement and identity are the two most studied constructs in current fathering literature. Studies of father involvement, especially those from the early days of fathering research, largely explore the amount of time fathers spend with children through the lens of resource theory (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Day 1996). More current scholarship on father involvement has shifted to expand the definition of father involvement from one focused on physical time spent with children towards a definition that encompasses multiple forms of involvement (e.g., play, financial support, emotional support, indirect care; Diniz et al., 2021). These more recent conceptualizations of father involvement have evolved alongside increased attention to father identity, or the ways in which fathers think about themselves as fathers and perform tasks that align with their role as a father (Stryker, 1986).

In the following sections, I outline a brief overview of existing father involvement literature, including both determinants and outcomes of positive father involvement. I then move to describing basic tenets of identity theory and how they have been applied in fathering literature. I close by exploring the scholarship that describes how men initially construct their

fathering identities as they transition to fatherhood and argue for the importance of examining context (i.e., *situatedness*) when considering fathering involvement and identity.

Father Involvement

To date, most research on fatherhood has focused on father involvement. Father involvement is a broad concept that includes multiple dimensions (Diniz et al., 2021). Moving beyond classical distinctions between father presence and father absence, contemporary family scientists have explored differing forms of involvement and emphasized the importance of *quality* of father involvement over quantity (Parke, 2000). Lamb et al. (1985, 1987) proposed a conceptualization of father involvement that captured the variability inherent within fathering and included three components: engagement, accessibility, and responsibility. *Engagement* refers to the direct interactions that fathers have with children. This could be engagement in care tasks (e.g., diapering, feeding), emotional support, or play. *Accessibility* is a father's availability to respond to child needs and requests. Finally, *responsibility* refers to a father's involvement in tasks that are not direct interactions with his child but impact his child. This could be making doctor's appointments, registering a child for summer camp, or deciding where to send a child for school (Lamb, 2000).

Later, Pleck (2010) reviewed and refined Lamb's (1985, 1987) model by adding qualitative dimensions and operationalization for father involvement. In addition to engagement, accessibility, and responsibility, Pleck (2010) proposed that fathers have *positive engagement* when they interact with their children in ways that promote child development. Underlying this positive engagement is *warmth and responsiveness*. Additionally, fathers exhibit *control* when they monitor child activities and participate in decision making. Finally, two dimensions were added to the original component of *responsibility*: indirect care and process responsibility.

Indirect care refers to how fathers are involved with child related tasks that do not include direct interaction (e.g., managing children's social connections, purchasing goods/services for children). *Process responsibility* refers to involvement with monitoring what is needed for child well-being. This includes scheduling doctor's appointments and deciding where a child will attend school. Even with these two expanded conceptualizations of father involvement, much of the fathering literature has focused on direct interactions between fathers and children, neglecting more managerial aspects of father involvement and how involvement can evolve across diverse contexts (Cabrera et al., 2000; Parke, 2000; Pleck, 2010). The following two subsections will briefly review psychosocial determinants of father involvement in research and examine the consequences of father involvement.

Determinants. Father involvement can be influenced by a wide variety of psychosocial factors. In fathering literature, there are four main dimensions of psychosocial determinants of father involvement: *individual influences* (e.g., social background, father personality, individual behaviors and attitudes), *familial influences* (e.g., family relationships and behaviors), *extra-familial influences and support systems* (e.g., social network, work environments), and *cultural influences* (e.g., cultural conditions, political conditions) (Diniz et al., 2021).

Researchers have reported inconsistent findings about the relationship between individual factors and involvement. In some studies, paternal income and education were positively related to father involvement (Castillo et al., 2013; Laughlin et al., 2009; Maroto-Navarro et al., 2013; Monteiro et al., 2017), especially direct and indirect care. In others, lower paternal income and educational attainment were related to higher father involvement in caregiving and play (Izci & Jones, 2018; Kato-Wallace et al., 2014). A similar discrepancy was found with regard to paternal age, with some studies finding older fathers to be more involved in

caring for infants (Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Kwok et al., 2013) and some finding that young fathers were more involved in play, indirect care, and teaching (Castillo et al., 2013; Monteiro et al., 2017; Monteiro et al., 2010; Perry et al., 2012). Childhood experiences were a more consistent determinant of father involvement with positive childhood experiences generally predicting increased paternal involvement (Bouchard, 2012; Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Kulik & Sadeh, 2015). Finally, factors such as prenatal involvement and self-efficacy were positively associated with paternal involvement (Bouchard, 2012; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2014; Tikotzky et al., 2011; Tremblay & Pierce, 2011). These findings exhibit the complexity of determining father involvement at the individual level.

Interpersonal relationships within families also served as determinants of father involvement (Diniz et al., 2021). Most frequently, scholars explore the relationship between marital satisfaction, positive coparenting, and father involvement, with marital satisfaction and positive coparenting being positively related to father involvement over time (Mehall et al., 2009; Pudasainee-Kapri & Razza, 2015; Yeh et al., 2019). Maternal support and gate opening behaviors encouraged father involvement, as did living with children (Kulik & Sadeh, 2015; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010; Murphy et al., 2017; Pekel-Uludagli, 2019; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2009). Even when fathers were nonresidential, a better parental relationship led to increased father involvement (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2011; McClain & DeMaris, 2011; Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2009; Waller, 2012). Father involvement is also associated with the quality of father-child relationship and individual level child characteristics. Father involvement is generally higher in smaller families (Halme, Åstedt-Kurki, & Tarkka, 2009; Izci & Jones, 2018; Yeh et al., 2019) and is positively associated with attachment quality (Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2012; Pikernik & Ahnert, 2019).

Similar to fathers' individual characteristics, findings on child characteristics and father involvement are relatively inconsistent (Diniz et al., 2021). Some literature suggests that fathers are more involved as children get older (Halme, Åstedt-Kurki, & Tarkka, 2009) and some suggests that fathers are less involved (Montiero et al., 2017). Generally, child sex has not been found to be a determinant for paternal involvement (Montiero et al., 2010; Planalp & Braungart-Rieker, 2016) but fathers do generally spend more time with firstborn children (Kuo et al., 2018; Montiero et al., 2010). Finally, maternal perceptions of father involvement and positive encouragement generally resulted in increased paternal involvement (Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Gallegos et al., 2019); however, maternal distress during pregnancy was often related to less paternal involvement post-birth (Jia et al., 2016).

Outside of individual and family-level determinants, extra-familial determinants were frequently explored in the literature, with most emphasis placed on the work-family relationship (Diniz et al., 2021). Paternal leave taking was positively associated with father involvement (Hoskin et al., 2010; Meil, 2013; Petts, 2018; Petts & Knoester, 2018). Especially among nonresidential fathers, paternity leave taking is significantly positively associated with father engagement and responsibility (Knoester, Petts, & Pragg, 2019). For residential and nonresidential fathers, maternal engagement in paid work was positively associated with higher father involvement over time, especially when parents worked opposite shifts (Kuo et al., 2018; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010; Shorey et al., 2019). When fathers work fewer hours, have less work distress, and greater work stability and flexibility, they are more likely to be involved with their children (Castillo, Welch, & Sarver, 2013; Ishii-Kuntz, 2013; Izci & Jones, 2018).

Finally, the least explored influence on father involvement is cultural determinants (Diniz et al., 2021). Fathering scholarship on cultural determinants has, thus far, examined only the

influence of gender-role beliefs and religiosity on father involvement. Generally, egalitarian gender-role beliefs predicted increased father involvement over time (Kato-Wallace et al., 2014; Kennedy et al., 2014; Kwok & Li, 2015; Meteyer & Perry-Jenkins, 2010; Pekel-Uludagli, 2019). Fathers with egalitarian gender-role beliefs were also more likely to engage in indirect care tasks (Keizer, 2015). Religiosity is a less linear and well-defined influence on father involvement. Overall, increased religiosity was associated with higher general involvement (Perry et al., 2012; Petts, 2018) but less involvement in ‘messy’ direct care (e.g., changing diapers) (DeMaris et al., 2011).

Outcomes. In addition to determinants of father involvement, researchers have also explored outcomes of father involvement, both at the individual and interpersonal levels. Most research on father involvement examined children’s socioemotional and behavioral outcomes (Diniz et al., 2021). For boys, paternal involvement was generally associated with lower externalizing behaviors in preschool (Homes et al., 2013; Jia & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2012; Keizer et al., 2014; Kroll et al., 2016; Levant et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2014). Additionally, positive father involvement has been connected to increased cognitive ability in children (Nordahl et al., 2016; Weinshenker, 2018), socio-emotional competence (Afonso et al., 2011; Baker, 2017; Lang et al., 2014; Torres et al., 2014), and math skills (Baker, 2013; 2017). In one study, positive father involvement was associated with children’s lower levels of anxiety, depression, and withdrawal (Levant et al., 2014).

In addition to providing positive individual outcomes for child development, father involvement was associated with coparenting, marital, and familial relationships (Diniz et al., 2021). Overall, father involvement was positively related to supportive coparenting, better family relationships, and positive marital relationships over time (Gallegos et al., 2019; Jia & Schoppe-

Sullivan, 2011; Levant et al., 2014; Murphy et al., 2017). Increased father involvement was related to decreased negative coparent behaviors in dual-earner families, but it was associated with less supportive co-parenting in single earning families (Buckley & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2010). One study also found that paternal physical involvement was related to increased coparenting conflict (Fagan & Cabrera, 2012). Positive father involvement can also be associated with increased maternal well-being. One study found that lower paternal involvement in direct care was often associated with increased maternal depression after birth (Lin et al., 2017).

Father Identity

New conceptualizations of father involvement that include dimensions such as emotional care, indirect care, and marital satisfaction evolved in conjunction with explorations into fathering identity (Diniz et al., 2021). This section provides an overview of identity theory and the ways in which identity theory has contributed to fathering scholarship, with special attention paid to the transition to fatherhood as that is usually when fathers most actively engage with their identity as fathers. Additionally, an overview of *situated fathering* is provided, as the context within which fathers are enacting their identities plays a large role in how fathers feel about their identities and the roles that they fulfill as fathers.

Identity, as defined by identity theory (Stryker, 1968), refers to the ways in which individuals assign meaning to the positions they occupy socially (e.g., husband, father, son) and the roles that are performed within these positions (e.g., nurturant father, breadwinning father). When examining father identity, the position is defined as *father* but the ways that different fathers perform roles within their position as father differs between individuals and contexts. Three principles of identity theory are particularly relevant to the current study. First, the ways that fathers modify and interpret societal expectations to create their unique ideas about what it

means to be a father shape the ways that they enact those roles in the situated contexts and how they are perceived by others (Burke & Tully, 1977). Second, the motivation to enact the role of father in situated contexts is influenced by an individual's identity hierarchy: when the status of *father* is seen as more important than other statuses by men (e.g., husband, worker, son), it is more valued and more likely to be enacted (Perry et al., 2012). Third, fathers actively construct their fathering identity; they do not only passively accept roles as they are enacted (Adamsons & Carter, 2022). Paternal self-efficacy and existing identity hierarchies shape fathering identity, as does the influence of relationships with their own fathers, role models, and coparents (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2022).

Past research has utilized identity theory to explain father involvement, using aspects of identity such as salience, centrality, and commitment to predict levels and forms of father involvement (Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993; Trolio & Coleman, 2012; Rane & McBride, 2000). *Identity salience* refers to the likelihood that an identity will be acted upon in certain situations (Stryker, 1968). Identities that are higher in the salience hierarchy are more likely to be enacted and, as a result, individuals will actively seek opportunities to enact more salient identities. For men who consider fatherhood a salient identity, they will subconsciously choose to enact their father identity over their other identities (e.g., worker, husband, son) (Adamsons & Pasley, 2016; Fox & Bruce, 2001; Ihinger-Tallman et al., 1993; Maurer et al., 2001). *Identity centrality* is related to salience and refers to the conscious importance assigned to an identity by an individual (Pasley et al., 2014; Rane & McBride, 2000). Identity centrality assumes that an individual is self-aware and intentionally chooses an identity that guides behavior and impacts their general sense of self. For fathers, this could be demonstrated as an active choice to enact father identity over other identities. For example, when given the choice between attending a child's sporting

event and a work dinner, a man with high fathering identity centrality will likely choose to attend the child's event over a work event.

Finally, a commonly studied construct in father identity research is *identity commitment*. Within identity theory, commitment refers to the importance of relationships made because someone holds a particular identity (Stryker, 1987; Trolie & Coleman, 2012). For example, a father who has high identity commitment may choose to remain highly involved in his child's life because he values his friendships with the parents of his child's friends, friendships that might be lost if he were less physically present with his child.

Salience, centrality, and commitment all work together in varying degrees to influence fathering identity. Generally, people with more relationships surrounding an identity are likely to consider those identities both salient and central. Research has shown that fathers change behaviors based on the expectations of their roles within fathering identity (McLaughlin & Muldoon, 2014). Fathers who place more importance on their role as a breadwinner spend less time with their children directly than fathers who place more importance on their role as a nurturer (Rane & McBride, 2000). Both fall within construction of fathering identity, but the actions that fathers perform align with their expectations and role importance within their identity. In constructing role identities, fathers often look to their own fathers or towards their peers (Trivedi & Bose, 2020). Some have positive examples of fatherhood that inform their own fathering identity, while others see what their own fathers did and want to distance themselves from that view of fatherhood (Henley & Pasley, 2005; Trivedi & Bose, 2020; Roy, 2006).

Masculinity and masculine ideals also influence father identity and involvement. Fathers can both adhere to and challenge masculine ideals of fatherhood in differing ways depending on the situation in which they are fathering (Lewington et al., 2021; Solberg et al., 2022). Men

navigate uncertainty in their roles as modern fathers and struggle to balance both traditional (i.e., breadwinner) and non-traditional (i.e., new nurturant) fathering identities. Hegemonic masculine norms relegate fathers to a supporting role, described with terms such as ‘helping out’ or ‘babysitting the kids’, rather than in a primary caregiver role as an equal parent (Lewington et al., 2021). Fathers in qualitative studies on father identity and involvement describe the tensions felt between ‘being a man’ and ‘being a father’, with the underlying message being that it is impossible to do both. Some men find themselves repressing nurturant behaviors (e.g., cuddling, kissing, praising) in public or around their peers, even though they regularly engage with them in their own homes with their children (Solberg et al., 2022). In public and around other men they do not know well, fathers will sometimes choose to enact their masculine identity over their fathering identity to conform with societal norms and expectations.

Transition to Fatherhood. Research suggests that identity is constructed at the time that a role is enacted (e.g., upon the birth of a child) or becomes eminent (e.g., learning that you are going to be a father) (Kuscul & Adamsons, 2022). Thus, men often begin to construct a fathering identity either when their partner becomes pregnant (or an adoption is approved or a surrogate is established, etc.) or when they meet their child for the first time, a process that is not always as easy as fathers thought it would be. Past research has found that the perinatal period (pregnancy, childbirth, and the first year of childhood) can bring both positive and negative emotional changes for fathers (Chin, Hall, & Daiches, 2011). Fathers in different-gender partnerships often describe feeling detached during the pregnancy period, which some scholars have attributed to essentialized ideals of parenting (e.g., mothers are emotionally closer to babies because their bodies gestated them). Even when they were able to attend prenatal classes or doctor’s appointments, fathers reported leaving these appointments feeling forgotten or confused about

what to expect, as these classes are often created with women in mind and healthcare providers mainly engaged with mothers (Baldwin et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2011).

During and shortly after the birth of their child, fathers often felt overwhelmed by positive emotions and love directed towards their newborn (Baldwin et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2011; Solberg et al., 2022). In one study, a father described the process of becoming a father as “opening up a well of emotions” (Solberg et al., 2022, pg. 2286). Some fathers describe these feelings of love and affection happening the moment they met their child for the first time, and some describe it as a gradual process that was most felt once children started reciprocating emotions. Some fathers were disappointed that bonding with their baby did not happen as immediately as they expected it to (Baldwin et al., 2018).

Some men also grappled with taking on the identity of ‘father’, especially when it displaced some of the other identities they felt strongly connected to (Baldwin et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2011). Fathers had to actively reconstruct their identity hierarchies, which left some feeling depressed, uncomfortable, and restricted in their lives. Often, they lost support structures or felt that their relationships had faded because other people could not relate to what they were experiencing (Solberg et al., 2022). Fathers felt like there was pressure coming from all sides to enact their fathering identities more or less or in different ways and they felt unable to keep up with the competing expectations (Chin et al., 2011).

Overall, the transition to fatherhood is a difficult time for fathers. They create a new identity that competes with existing identity hierarchies, they feel disconnected from the process of becoming a parent, and they renegotiate existing relationships, all while learning to care for and bond with their child. Though it is challenging, this period of identity creation and

negotiation sets the stage for later father involvement, an area of research that is well explored and lays a foundation for more in-depth studies of father identity and experiences.

Situated Fathering. Finally, one particularly promising development in the fatherhood identity literature is increased utilization of a *situated fathering* framework. Situated fathering is a concept that places fathers' identity development and involvement within physical, personal, and social contexts (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). There are five primary components of fathering that are associated with situatedness: physical conditions, temporal dynamics, symbolic/perpetual, social structural, and public/private. There also are five secondary components within situated fathering: institutional conditions, transitional elements, personal power and control, gender attributes, and fatherhood discourses. Ethnographers (Anderson, 1990; Anderson, 1999) have traditionally paid more attention to physical space than sociologists and family scientists. When men "do fathering," there is an intersection between physical and social spaces that define the unique situated contexts that fathers operate within (Marsiglio et al., 2005). Past research has centered primarily on white, upper-middle class, suburban fathers. There is a need for fathering to be examined in places such as rural farms, prisons, and urban communities; everyday places that are each associated with power hierarchies and unique identities (Roy, 2014a). When examining diverse situated contexts within which fathers operate, there is a potential to gain increased knowledge about how public and private behaviors in response to inequality are at the heart of fathering roles. Situated fathering will be used as a guiding framework for the current study, so I now transition to grounding this study of fathering in its geographical space: Appalachia.

Appalachia

Appalachia is a 205,000 square mile region that runs along the length of the Appalachian Mountain range (Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC), 2018). Appalachia includes parts of 12 states and the entirety of West Virginia. Roughly 25.7 million people live in Appalachia, or 8% of the U.S. population. About 81% of Appalachians self-identify as white, 9.8% self-identify as Black, 5.3% self-identify as Hispanic or Latino, and 3.8% self-identify as other. The Appalachian region, especially Central Appalachia, has often been characterized by chronic underemployment, poverty, and low educational attainment (ARC, 2015). Appalachia also is characterized by high marriage rates, high homeownership rates, and retention of close-knit social and familial ties (McGregor, 2018).

It is important to recognize that Appalachia is not only a geographic region, but a social identity and a political designation (Rural and Appalachian Youth and Families Consortium, 1996). The word Appalachia comes from an Indigenous American tribal name “Apalachen” and was adapted in the 19th century to “Appalachian” in order to describe the mountain range and then the region (Stewart, 1945; Walls 1997). Before European settlers came to the region, various Indigenous peoples lived in the mountains, including the Yesah (more commonly known as the Monacan) the Cherokee who still live in Western North Carolina (Hantman, 2018; Raitz, 2019). As westward expansion of European settlers began and Indigenous peoples were forced off their land, Appalachia came to be settled predominantly by English, Scotch-Irish, and German immigrants, as well as by Black Americans (Elliot & Ripley, 2021; Webb, 2019). Appalachia also is home to the Melungeon ethnic group, who were one of the first self-identified tri-racial groups in the United States (Raitz, 2019). Melungeon people identify racial heritage from white immigrants, Black Americans, and Indigenous peoples.

The current study is situated in central Appalachia, sometimes referred to as “real” Appalachia (Raitz, 2019). Central Appalachia includes eastern Kentucky, southwest Virginia, West Virginia, western North Carolina, and east Tennessee. This Appalachian region has an economy based on coal and has the highest rates of economic depression and unemployment, and lowest educational achievement. The land and resources of central Appalachia have been exploited for decades by absentee capitalists and exported by sources outside of the region with minimum gain and maximum cost to the region and communities within the region (Billings, 2016). This exploitation has contributed to Appalachian marginalization by larger United States culture. Absentee capitalists who own mines and control land and resources in central Appalachia have historically disregarded reciprocal responsibility of supporting social, educational, and health services in the region. With decimation of the natural resources and lack of social supports, central Appalachia has come to be considered largely in terms of a culture of poverty (Fisher & Smith, 2016). Much of the theorizing about central Appalachia is done with the *internal colony* model, which was created in the 1960s and determined that “persistent poverty in the Appalachian was the result of a defective folk culture that ill-equipped its population for participation in the modern world” (Fisher & Smith, 2016, p. 46).

Understanding the cultural and economic background of Appalachia, especially central Appalachia, will help to situate fathering within geographic place and set the stage for a more comprehensive examination of Appalachian fathering. A second piece that is important when seeking to understand Appalachia is widespread Appalachian othering that occurs within scholarship, popular narratives, and within Appalachian communities.

Appalachian Othering

Before being able to situate fathering within rural Appalachia, it is important to position Appalachia in the context of both academic and popular writing. Until 2002, the Library of Congress labelled the people of Appalachia as “mountain Whites,” only to be changed to “Appalachians (people)” when Appalachian State University successfully petitioned the change (Barber, 2012; Hay, 2003). As recently as 2003, academic texts have used the term “mountain Whites” to describe Appalachian people (Wells, 2003), effectively erasing the racial and ethnic diversity of the region (Hay, 2003). Not only did the use of “mountain Whites” erase the region’s diversity, but it also presented all people of Appalachia as *other*, enabling people outside of Appalachia to point to it as a source of many cultural problems (Catte, 2018).

Within the sphere of Appalachian studies, scholarly work is beginning to broaden its view of what it means to be an Appalachian person with many intersecting identities. Experiences and intersections of Black Appalachians (Turner, 2021; Turner & Cabell, 2014; Hay, 2003; Hay, 2018; Wilkinson, 1999; Brown, 2018), queer Appalachians (Avashia, 2022; Mann & Watts, 2019; McNeill, 2022; Ross, 2019), and Indigenous Appalachians (Ray, 2018; Cook, 2000; Hood & Williamson, 2021; Wies, 2014) have become more central in the discussion on what it means to be Appalachian.

Though Appalachian scholars are working hard to counter popular narratives of a monolithic Appalachia, popular narratives often perpetuate the history of “Appalachian othering” (Catte, 2018). J. D. Vance’s *Hillbilly Elegy* confirmed stereotypes and essentialist views of Appalachia for many that had never even visited the region (Catte, 2018). Vance made himself a spokesperson for the white working class only when he pulled himself “up by his bootstraps” and left the region and culture he described as “in crisis” (Catte, 2018; Vance, 2015). Fueled

partially by *Hillbilly Elegy* and partially by historic views of Appalachia as the “other America,” popular media used Appalachia as a scapegoat for why the 2016 election resulted in Trump’s presidency. There was significant support for the candidate within Appalachia, but even more prevalent was a sense of discontent with federal government (Catte, 2018). One resident of a West Virginia county credited as helping Trump win the election said, “I didn’t vote in this election. I see no meaning of this. Whoever goes to the White House will do whatever he/she wants to do and won’t give a damn about us” (Catte, 2018, p. 52).

The region of Appalachia has been pathologized and othered for over one hundred years. Narratives that distill Appalachian identity to that of poor, white, unemployed and addicted people are narratives that are still prevalent and widespread. Chimamanda Adichie cautions against a single story being used to characterize an entire culture, but works such as *Hillbilly Elegy* serve to uphold a monolithic view of what it means to be an Appalachian person (Adichie, 2009). These narratives erase diverse stories such as those of Black life in Appalachia (Turner, 2021) or trans life in Appalachia (West Virginia has the highest percentage of trans teenagers in the United States; Catte, 2018). Prolific Appalachian historian, Ronald Eller, encapsulates American’s fascination with pathologizing Appalachia with his quote: “We *know* Appalachia exists because we need it to define what we are not. It is the ‘other America’ because the very idea of Appalachia convinces us of the righteousness of our own lives.” (Catte, 2018, p. 35).

Appalachian Families

Family is an extremely important part of Appalachian life. In past research with Appalachian families, familism has consistently emerged as a central theme (Elliot & Ripley, 2021). Familism refers to a social pattern in which the family is prioritized over individual

interests. Loyalty to the family is also highly valued in Appalachian families and children are often expected to remain close to the family when they move out of the parent's house.

Often cited as a strength of Appalachian families, Appalachia's marriage rate is higher than the national average. It is difficult to confirm this statistic, however, because the last data on Appalachian family structure are from 2000 (ARC, 2004). In 2000, 55% of Appalachian households consisted of married couples, 11% of households had single moms as family head, and 4% of families were father headed (ARC, 2004). The Appalachian regional commission has not published family data since 2004, and the U.S. Census does not list Appalachia as a region, so it is impossible to examine only Appalachian family demographics.

While marital status is one way to examine family ties, other family factors also point to high levels of connectedness among families in Appalachia. For instance, Appalachian families generally have expansive kin networks that provide strength and social support (Elliot & Ripley, 2021). Family groups are very common and are made up of extended family living very close together. Because of the history of exploitation in the central Appalachian region, there is heightened distrust of organized and governmental supports for families and so most family support occurs within family systems.

In the past, scholars have tried to show the deficits of Appalachian families through numerous studies of parenting and family life (Rural and Appalachian Youth and Families Consortium, 1996). Despite these efforts, studies of violence within Appalachian families, specifically related to child abuse and spanking, have failed to reach any statistical significance or show that Appalachian families are more violent than other U.S. regions (Fish, Amerikaner, & Lucas, 2016).

Appalachian Men and Masculinity

Fathers often use societal norms of masculinity to shape their fathering identity, either by adhering to masculine norms or actively rejecting these norms. Masculinity is not a fixed concept; there are multiple masculinities that all serve certain purposes. Additionally, these multiple masculinities are arranged hierarchically in relation to a dominant masculinity (Stough-Hunter, 2015). For example, hegemonic masculinity is relational and is maintained through viewing difference as inferior. Additionally, in social settings, activities and characteristics that are considered masculine are highly valued, but only if all or most men perform these activities and retain the characteristics (Saugeres, 2002). Similarly to fatherhood, masculinity is a relational identity and hegemonic masculinity, the dominant masculinity, is defined through other non-male groups being inferior. Hegemonic masculinity is an identity that men achieve through active negotiation of gender via practices and discourse that address assumptions about what men and women should be like.

For many Appalachian men, masculinity is arranged based around labor and resisting exploitation of mine owners and bosses (Smith, 2015). Coal miners were “valorous men” in union efforts and breadwinners for the family. During union fights, periods of collective militancy allowed men to enact hegemonic masculinity as well as class solidarity. As mining jobs have decreased and businesses have left the region, Appalachian men have not been able to uphold masculine standards of breadwinning in the same way that suburban middle-class fathers are able to.

Theoretical Framework: Symbolic Interactionism

The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of how Appalachian fathers create meaning through social and cultural symbols and to seek to understand how these meanings

shape perceptions of themselves as fathers. Fatherhood is an inherently interactive identity, meaning that it is an identity that rests upon relationships with others and is not created in a singular, isolated setting. It is therefore important to examine fathering in context and seek to understand how fathers themselves create meaning and mold their identities (Marsiglio, Roy, & Fox, 2005). Meaning-making is a core aspect of symbolic interactionism (Collett et al., 2015; LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009), so symbolic interactionism will be used to frame this study.

History of Symbolic Interactionism. Symbolic interactionism has a robust history of application within family science as a discipline. The first use of symbolic interactionism dates back to the early 20th century with Thomas and Znaniecki's (1920) *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America* (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). George Herbert Mead is largely credited with the creation of symbolic interactionism and with making it widely popular within social sciences (Aksan et al., 2009). Mead was a pragmatist, meaning that he believed that the interpretation of experiences is a major source of understanding lived reality (Molloy, 2017; Stryker, 2008). Mead emphasized that realities are created by individuals doing things, interpreting, and responding to their lived environment, rather than purely reacting to their lived environment. Other early symbolic interactionists include W. E. B. Dubois (*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903) who created the concept of "double consciousness," Jane Addams who founded Chicago's Hull House, and William Isaac Thomas who was one of the first scholars to link family studies and symbolic interactionism (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009).

In the 1950s and 1960s, two schools of thought emerged from symbolic interactionism, with a third school of thought emerging in the 1980s (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009; Carter & Fuller, 2015). The main school of thought in symbolic interactionism is the Chicago school which was developed by Herbert Blumer (1969) and emphasized how the self emerges from an interactive

process of joint action (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). Blumer focused on processes that people use to create and recreate experiences from one interaction to the next and held that individuals and society cannot be separated for study, since society is a continuing process determined by agency and interconnectedness of individuals (Carter & Fuller, 2015). Blumer believed that human interactions and meaning making can only be understood through qualitative analysis and emphasized that understanding comes from intimate understanding rather than agreement between investigators.

In contrast to the Chicago school of thought, Manfred Kuhn's Iowa school was influenced by his positivist connections and sought to frame Mead's symbolic interactionism framework with rigorous, quantitative testing (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). Blumer and Kuhn generally agreed on the ideas within Mead's symbolic interactionist framework, but Kuhn believed strongly that social interactions needed to be tested systematically to uphold its validity. Throughout his career, Kuhn developed several measures to empirically evaluate individual self-attitudes and organization of identities such as the "Twenty Statements Test" and laboratory observations (Carter & Fuller, 2015).

The final school, the Indiana school, emerged in the 1980s with Sheldon Stryker's work. Stryker's work closely aligns with Kuhn's in that he believed in relatively stable patterns that meanings and interactions influence. Stryker also believed that Mead's work should only be used to frame research, instead of being upheld as a coherent theory. Stryker defined roles as expectations attached to social positions and posited that roles can serve as symbolic categories that cue behavior. Similarly to Kuhn, Stryker was influenced heavily by positivist thought, but he advocated for both qualitative and quantitative examination of interactions and meaning (Carter & Fuller, 2015).

Because the current study is a qualitative and interpretive analysis of Appalachian fathering and identity, analyses will largely be guided by Blumer's Chicago school of symbolic interactionism. Family scholars are often more influenced by the Iowa school, so the current study's use of the Chicago school orientation will offer a nuanced view of family meaning and identity (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009).

Core Themes and Assumptions. Symbolic interactionism is founded around three themes: human behavior relies on meanings, individuals actively develop self-concept, and social processes rely on the interaction between individual freedom and societal constraint (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). Within these three themes are seven assumptions that frame symbolic interactionism: (a) meaning informs action; (b) meaning is developed through interaction; (c) meanings are created and changed based on the perception of certain interactions; (d) social and cultural interactions shape self-concepts; (e) self-concepts are a primary motive for behavior; (f) small groups are influenced by both societal and cultural processes; and (g) social structure is created from everyday social interactions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009; Molloy, 2017).

Within these assumptions are four grounding concepts of symbolic interactionism: identities, roles, interactions, and contexts. *Identities* refer to self-made meanings in a role and are hierarchically organized (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). For instance, within a father-child relationship, one father may view himself primarily in terms of being a provider for his family and another may view himself primarily as a nurturer of his children. Identity salience refers to the hierarchical organization of identities: specifically, the likelihood of identities and related behaviors being enacted across various situations (Stryker, 2008; Pasley, Petren, & Fish, 2014). For example, a father who mostly identifies as a provider for his children is expected to spend more time in activities such as working more hours for pay than a father who primarily identifies

as a nurturer. A father who identifies as a nurturer might turn down extra work to spend more time engaging in nurturing activities.

Roles refer to shared norms that are applied to individuals in certain social positions (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). Roles enable individuals who occupy identities to anticipate future behaviors and maintain regularity in social interactions. For example, the fathering role in the United States includes expectations that fathers will provide financially for their families, be excited about parenthood, and contribute emotionally to the work of parenting. Roles such as fathering can only be understood in relation to other roles such as child and partner. Roles are not static and often change over time as individuals encounter new roles, new people are introduced to their lives, or past experiences change in meaning.

Social interactions are the processes through which individuals apply shared symbols and create meanings that contribute to identity, roles, and behaviors (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009; Molloy, 2017). Individuals present their roles and identities when moving through everyday life and simultaneously make inferences about others and the ways in which they respond to the presentation. Some interactions such as those within marriage between partners occupy a privileged status in that when someone becomes a spouse, they do not just change their social location in society based on interaction, they redefine themselves and dramatically change how an individual thinks and feels about themselves (Stryker, 2008; Berger & Kellner, 1964).

The most macro level aspect of symbolic interactionism is that of *context*. Context refers broadly to societal and cultural settings within which individuals interact with other roles and identities (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). Symbolic interactionism seeks to understand how behavior is shaped by culture and how culture is shaped by behavior. The role of context, community, and social location of an individual are vital when examining the connection between shared

meanings and actions. Shared meanings, or symbols, relate to the interactions of an individual and serve to influence context, while symbols are also shaped by context (Molloy, 2017).

Symbolic Interactionism and Appalachian Fathers. Symbolic interactionism offers a lens through which we can examine meaning-making processes for diversely positioned fathers in Appalachia. For instance, symbolic interactionism can be used to consider how dominant cultural discourses about what fathering should look like are replicated, interrupted, challenged, or discarded by minoritized experiences and discourses (Stryker, 2008). Meaning-making by fathers is likely shaped by dominant cultural messages of what it means to be a father and unachievable roles are often prescribed to fathers universally with little consideration of their unique social and cultural positions. Additionally, symbolic interactionism serves to examine how the way that individuals feel about their roles impacts their ability to fulfill their roles (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). If Appalachian fathers feel pressure to conform to societal narratives that are unachievable, they may feel dissatisfied in their ability to fulfill what they feel they must.

Situated fathering (Marsiglio et al., 2005) proposes that fathering identity and behaviors result from interactions within a family's physical space and the meanings that are gained from enacting roles within this space. Appalachia is both a social identity and geographical region, so it is well suited for examination with symbolic interactionism and incorporation of situated fathering (Appalachian Regional Commission; ARC, 2015; Marsiglio et al., 2005; LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009).

Through this frame, the current study will be able to examine what social and cultural symbols shape the meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood. The current study

also will examine how those meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood shape their perceptions of themselves as fathers.

Summary and Rationale

The current study is informed by symbolic interactionism and explores social and cultural symbols that shape Appalachian fathering as well as the meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood. Fathers still are underrepresented in general research on parenting, and despite cautioning, narratives of essential fathers continue to dominate fathering literature and broader societal conversations about fatherhood. Existing literature on the experiences of fathers largely focuses on the transition to fatherhood (e.g., Chin et al., 2011; Lewington et al., 2021; Solberg et al., 2022) and the first year of fatherhood. To our knowledge, no studies have explored the specific contexts that influence Appalachian fatherhood. The current study fills a gap in the literature by exploring the experiences of Appalachian fathers from a symbolic interactionist perspective. This study interrogates the historical and current context within which Appalachian fathers construct their fathering identity and explores their lived experiences to better understand how Appalachian men construct their fathering identity.

Symbolic interactionism will serve to explore perspectives of meaning making, individual roles, and identity development. These domains of symbolic interactionism serve as guiding concepts for the proposed research and align with the conceptual and methodological approach of the study. The research questions for the current study were derived from the assumptions and domains presented in symbolic interactionism (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009).

1. What does fathering and fatherhood mean to Appalachian fathers?
2. What social and cultural symbols shape the meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood?

3. How do the meanings Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood shape their perceptions of themselves as fathers?

CHAPTER 3: METHOD

Qualitative methodology allows for in-depth understandings of social experience (Roy, Zvonkovic, Goldberg, Sharp, & LaRossa, 2015). The current study utilizes interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) to explore what fathering and fatherhood mean to Appalachian men and the social and cultural symbols that shape meanings of fatherhood (Smith & Nizza, 2021; Smith et al., 2009). By allowing fathers to tell their own stories, the current study amplifies marginalized voices, as they are the experts of their experience.

In this section, I will provide an overview of the study context that situates the current study within the central Appalachian region and provide current understandings of the strengths and challenges of the region. Next, I will review interpretive phenomenological analysis and demonstrate why it was chosen to guide the current study. I will then provide an overview of sample inclusion, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis. Finally, I will present the rationale for the study and provide my personal reflexive statement for review.

Study Context

Central Appalachia includes parts of Kentucky, Tennessee, North Carolina, Virginia, and all of West Virginia (ARC, 2015). A majority of this region is classified as rural (42%), compared to the national rural composition (22%). Poverty rates in the region are greater than in more urban areas. In the Appalachian region of Virginia, the poverty rate was 18.8% from 2010-2014 compared to the national average of 15.6% and the average for non-Appalachian Virginia of 11.5% (ARC, 2017). There is great economic diversity within the 25 Appalachian Virginian

counties. One is considered distressed (26% poverty rate), 8 are at risk, 11 are transitional, and three are competitive (7.2% poverty rate).

Overall, the Appalachian region and Appalachian people are considered a marginalized population (Abramson & Haskell, 2006). Low educational attainment, unemployment, and chronic poverty have contributed to high psychological and physiological stressors for people in Appalachia (Bornstein et al., 2012). Substance use disorders are also incredibly prevalent within central Appalachia. According to the National Association of Counties (NACo) and the ARC, both opioid deaths and nonmedical prescription drug use in Appalachian counties were significantly higher than non-Appalachian counties (NACo & ARC, 2019), leading researchers to examine the association between coal mining jobs, mountaintop removal, and increased risk of developing substance use disorders (Moody et al., 2018). Due to limited employment opportunities, childcare, and transportation limits, federal and state policies that have targeted welfare recipients in the area have not been as effective as in rural areas, further increasing unique pressures upon Appalachian men (Anglin, 2002).

Though Appalachian regions face unique stressors, there are strengths that also are associated with Appalachian individuals. Grassroots activism in central Appalachia has a strong history from forming unions in the mid 20th century to fighting pipeline construction today (Anglin, 2002; Paparo, 2021). Mutual aid networks have been developed across the region to improve health outcomes (Hoogland et al., 2019), reduce overdose deaths (VA Harm Reduction Coalition), and reduce coal dependence (Eldridge, 2015). Additionally, Appalachia has higher rates of family stability than the United States as a whole, with 13.5% of marriages ending in divorce, contrasted to 41% of national marriages, an identified strength of the region (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006; U.S. Census Bureau, 2021).

Both strengths and challenges to the region have far-reaching impacts on how fathers in Appalachia are able to make meaning and shape their fatherhood identities. Restrictions such as underemployment and lack of educational attainment could affect the degree to which fathers feel they are able to uphold masculine standards of breadwinner and head of the house (Smith, 2015; Elliot & Ripley, 2021; Hennon & Photiadis, 1979). However, scholars have also pointed out the connection between economic hardship and Appalachian family resiliency (Hennon & Photiadis, 1979; Elliot & Ripley, 2021). Strong intergenerational ties and close-knit kin groups can serve as supports to families and fathers when there is economic or other hardship, serving as a protective factor. In an Appalachian sample of mothers, both father involvement and marital status were associated with improved outcomes for mothers; father involvement and marriage are associated with stress reducing in Appalachian environments (Bornstein et al., 2012). The current study explores aspects of father identity that could encourage increased father involvement, exploring a different side of existing research on father involvement.

Interpretive Phenomenology

Interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA) is an experiential methodology that is used to explore human experience from the point of view of the individual having the experience (Smith & Nizza, 2021). IPA was developed for close examination of individual experience and draws on philosophy to establish a set of procedures and techniques to enable this examination. A founding tenet of phenomenology is that experience should be examined in the way it occurs and on its own terms, instead of according to predefined categories.

Phenomenology is rooted in phenomenological philosophy, specifically the philosophy of Edmund Husserl, which grew in response to critiques of positivist, fixed reality research (Cohen, 1987; Larkin et al., 2006; McGregor, 2018). Husserl believed that everyday life should serve as

the grounding for scientific work, exploring subjective experience before scientific inquiry (Smith & Nizza, 2021). A student of Husserl, Martin Heidegger, further advanced phenomenology by articulating the importance of phenomenology as an interpretive endeavor. He emphasized that being phenomenological involves detective work, digging below the surface and closely engaging with what is seen or said by individuals. Today, phenomenology is primarily used to uncover the essence, meanings, and common features of an experience or event (Starks & Trinidad, 2007). Phenomenology seeks to explore the “taken for granted” and illuminates what we think we already know.

Interpretive phenomenological analysis bridges theoretical underpinnings of phenomenology and symbolic interactionism (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009) and advances the analyses of phenomenological research. Symbolic interactionism emphasizes the meanings that individuals ascribe to experiences and that those meanings are established through interpretation by individuals and interactions with others. IPA has two prominent aims: to understand the participant’s world and describe it accurately, and to interpret participant experience and provide a critical commentary on the meanings of their experience (Smith & Nizza, 2021). Through case-by-case analysis, an IPA researcher seeks to show convergence and differentiation in participant experience of similar phenomena.

IPA methodology was chosen for the current study for several reasons. IPA gives power and voice to participants, making it well suited for working with marginalized populations such as rural Appalachian fathers. IPA also aligns theoretically with the current study’s research questions and theoretical framework.

Recruitment and Sample Description

The population for the current study is fathers who reside in Central Appalachia. Phenomenological studies aim for thick description (Starks & Trinidad, 2007; Smith & Nizza, 2021) and in-depth evaluations of data, so it is appropriate to have a relatively small group of study participants who can give a thorough account of the topic of interest. Purposive sampling, such as snowballing and criterion sampling, was utilized to ensure that participants can provide insight on the specific research questions (McGregor, 2018). Recruitment of fathers was focused in Central Appalachian counties. Recruitment began in Bland County, VA, and Mercer County, WV, and was expanded to all Central Appalachian counties due to recruitment challenges. Recruitment efforts included flyer distribution to public places in Bland County, VA, and Mercer County, WV, in addition to word-of-mouth recruitment through trusted community members. Additional recruitment was conducted via social media and word of mouth.

The final sample included white Appalachian fathers ($n = 8$), Black Appalachian fathers ($n = 2$), and a Native American Appalachian father ($n = 1$) (see Appendix C). Two fathers were also grandfathers. The sample inclusion was not limited by residential status, partner status, grandparent status, or first-time fatherhood (see Appendix D for participant bios).

Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews designed to elicit information-rich responses from fathers about their identity and meaning making within the context of fathering were utilized. Qualitative methods were employed with the current sample to allow Appalachian fathers to tell their own stories and explore their identities (Abramson & Haskell, 2006; Molloy, 2017). Qualitative methods are especially important to use when examining marginalized voices, since these voices often lack social, economic, and political power to tell their stories in broader

settings. Qualitative methods hand power back to marginalized populations and enable them to tell their story in their own words and define what specific experiences mean to them.

Using past qualitative inquiry of rural fathering (Molloy, 2017) and diverse fathering identities (Roy, 2014), a preliminary interview protocol (Appendix A) and a demographic questionnaire (Appendix B) were developed. Interview questions were informed by the research questions and emphasized the following domains: identity processes, social and cultural messaging about fathering, meanings of fathering. Demographic information elicited included socioeconomic status, current living arrangements, race, incarceration history, and employment. Because semi-structured interviews were utilized, the interview process was structured but left room for additional exploration of themes brought up by participants or observed by the interviewer. Participants were interviewed either in their homes or in a public space that they choose. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed following the interview. Participants were assigned a pseudonym and ID number to ensure confidentiality. All participants were compensated with a \$40.00 Visa gift card following interviews. Funds for providing these gift cards were obtained from the Graduate Research Development Program at Virginia Tech, a small grant that the author applied to and won that funds degree contingent projects for graduate students at Virginia Tech.

Data Analysis

Analyses for the current study followed IPA methodology by maintaining an idiographic and inductive approach and analyzing data for each participant individually before comparing cross-participant (Smith & Nizza, 2021). In line with symbolic interactionism, particular attention was given to symbols and meaning making of participant identity, but each story was

first read and analyzed as a whole. An audit trail was maintained so that steps of data analysis could be revisited throughout the analysis process (Appendix E).

The first step of coding involved reading through the interview transcript while listening to the interview audio to rekindle memories of the interview and place the experience in context. Initial reactions to the text were noted on the transcript during this first read and recorded as descriptive codes. These codes included descriptive codes such as *advice for new dads*, *ideal dad*, *community care*, and *(re)constructing masculinity*. Forty-nine initial codes were generated for these data. Once exploratory notes for an interview were made, the author re-read the transcript and created experiential statements: a concise summary of what emerges as important in a particular portion of the transcript (Smith & Nizza, 2021). An example of an experiential statement is *trying to do the best he can* or *negotiating changing standards of fatherhood*. Once experiential statements were generated for an interview, similar experiential statements were clustered with similar statements across the interview. Clustering experiences in a single interview led to experiential codes that can be compiled into a table for the specific interview.

Once clustering and coding was completed for single interviews, codes were compared across interviews. Group codes focused both on convergence and divergence of experiences. Group codes evolved into semantic and latent themes used to frame the results section. Throughout the process of developing codes, experiential statements, and clustering, my graduate advisor and I engaged in discursive analysis. We met weekly and she provided feedback on my coding, raised questions about codes, gave feedback on developing ideas, reviewed reflexive memos, and provided guidance on theme development. Additional theme refinement took place throughout the analysis stage as well as the writing stage. As I wrote drafts of the results section for this manuscript, my advisor would ask iterative clarifying questions to

identify the dimensions of themes as they were generated and distill the unique essence of each theme. I would then refine the themes accordingly, ensuring that theme dimensions were grounded in the data and exhibited unique constructs. This process was repeated over several months, until the three final themes and their dimensions were clear and robust.

To further enhance the rigor of analyses, I also engaged in reflexivity, memo-writing, peer review, and maintaining an audit trail. Reflexivity involves the process of critical reflection of the researcher's position in the interview process, the researcher's position on the topic being studied, and all other aspects of the study (Allen, 2022; Daly, 2007; Merriam, 2002). Feminist reflexivity encourages a certain degree of openness with participants to establish trust when discussing potentially sensitive content (Furman, 2004). Memo-writing was used to assist in examining themes across and within interviews, as well as to help with processing events after interviews (Charmaz, 2014). Memo-writing can be a tool to record thoughts during analysis as it is related to the data as well. An audit trail was maintained and included a detailed description of how data were collected, how codes were created, how decisions were made, reflections upon the project, and challenges encountered throughout the research process (Lincoln & Guba, 1982).

Reflexivity

Reflexivity refers to the process through which a researcher critically examines, reflects upon, and understands the role of the self in their scholarship; in other words, assessing how the personal histories and private commitments we bring to our research shape the research process (Daly, 2007). Allen (2022) describes reflexivity as “critical storytelling” and the soul work that inspires critical theorizing about the role of my story in my research (Allen, 2022; Daly, 2007). Reflexive practice invites readers to break from dualistic thinking of science versus art and aims

to engage readers both intellectually and emotionally, thus challenging postpositivist expectations of objectivity by demonstrating that inclusion of self in work does not diminish the validity or worth of qualitative research (Daly, 2007). Feminist reflexive practice also provides a space for deconstructing binary and oppositional thinking in our lives and in our research by unwrapping constant contradictions of privilege and oppression that we all experience (Allen, 2022).

Reflexivity is especially important in interpretive phenomenological analysis because it is a critical component in creating and interpreting meanings within qualitative research (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The researcher is not objective or separate from the participants and data collection process in qualitative research (Daly, 2007), so reflexivity is a practice that can help the researcher consider their role in the research process and outcomes. Engaging in both memo-writing and writing a personal reflexive statement, both of which will be utilized in this study, can help researchers to engage with reflexive practice and critically evaluate their role in their research (Daly, 2007).

Reflexive Statement. Growing up, my dad was one of my biggest role models and cheerleaders. According to my mom, he originally did not want kids but realized that it was a nonnegotiable for my mom and decided that he could be a father with her alongside him. I have not talked to him about how he felt about kids, but I have heard enough from my mom to understand his mindset. My dad's own dad, my grandpa Tom, was not a great dad, as far as I know. He was an alcoholic and the epitome of a distant breadwinner who mostly engaged with his kids through physical punishment. I think that my dad was afraid that he would be that kind of father as well.

When my mom was pregnant with me, all ultrasounds showed that I was going to be a boy. Apparently, this made my dad incredibly anxious because his only context of fatherhood was his dad's interactions with himself and his older brother. When, at the baby shower, it was discovered that I was a girl, my mom said he relaxed and was able to be excited about his new role as a father. When my brother was born two years later, my dad was a warm, nurturant, provider who found such joy in interacting with me and my brother.

My dad is not Appalachian, but I did grow up in an Appalachian family with many positive influences throughout my life. My mom's dad and men on her side of the Appalachian family were always talked about in the highest regard as being men who provided and cared deeply for their kids. I don't know how much of this is revisionist history and how much reflects lived reality, but I do know that the interactions I've had with Appalachian men in my family are overwhelmingly positive. When I started to hear stereotypical narratives about violent and lazy men and fathers in Appalachia, I was confused since these narratives did not reflect my lived experience.

Through my personal work, I strive to break down normative perceptions of what it means to be an Appalachian father. While the current narrative might be that an Appalachian father is a poor, White, uneducated addict, I want to showcase the diversity in fathering that is present in my Appalachia. One of my friends is an Appalachian father, and he is poor, nonresidential, sober, hardworking, and deeply dedicated to his family's wellbeing. Another Appalachian father I know is Black, highly educated, and passionate about bringing the region's music back to its roots of activism and diversity for his son to enjoy.

The Appalachia that I call home is home to many beautiful things that have made me who I am today. It's also home to ugly things that are the basis for much stereotyping and dismissal of

the region as a lost cause. It is my hope, through this paper and future work, to illuminate aspects of Appalachia that are beautiful and make it deserving of attention and grace.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

I fear that I'm one of the handful that's left that knows [the Appalachian way of life]. And that's why I want to instill as much of it in them as I can. Because ultimately, I've got limited time left. And I want to make sure they got as much of my mind in theirs as I can pour in. And if that involves me putting it into shooting, fishing, working, so be it. So being an Appalachian dad, I guess, is taking all of that and wrapping it up into one thing We're just different than most people. (Jack, 45-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of three)

Jack's description of Appalachian fatherhood as preserving a dying culture illustrates interconnected themes that emerged across fathers' stories. My analyses revealed three themes, mapping on to the three research questions, that characterized Appalachian fatherhood: (a) *embodying and preserving Appalachian values*, (b) *feeling a loss of agency*, and (c) *(re)shaping Appalachian fatherhood*. Together, these themes tell a story of how Appalachian fathers define their roles and identities as Appalachian men and fathers. Fathers sought to embody and preserve values such as work ethic, community, and providing and protecting, which they identified as Appalachian, while grappling with tensions between preserving traditions and adapting to change. Appalachian fathers negotiated identities against the backdrop of historical hardship and exploitation, which threatened their internal sense of agency and contributed to feeling left behind in a changing world. Nonetheless, fathers actively negotiated their sense of self and found creative ways to (re)create Appalachian fathering to fit their unique contexts and lived experiences.

Theme 1: Embodying and Preserving Appalachian Values

Foremost, this study set out to understand what fathering and fatherhood mean to Appalachian fathers. Findings revealed that Appalachian fatherhood is *values-driven*; to these men, fatherhood meant embodying specific values that they held in high regard. Although many of the values that fathers talked about during their interviews can be found across other examples of fathering research (e.g., financially providing, playing with their kids), other aspects of fathering were unique to the dads in this study, exemplifying the importance of considering *situatedness* (context) in explorations of fathering. Dads explicitly discussed values that they deemed “Appalachian values,” or those they viewed as unique to their region and culture. In addition to embodying these values themselves, fathers also described a commitment to *preserving* Appalachian values, or passing their traditions and values on to children – an act of resisting Appalachian erasure. In this section, I first describe the values that fathers cited as important to their sense of self as Appalachian fathers. I then discuss a tension that fathers described in their efforts to preserve Appalachian values: that of *balancing tradition and change*.

Work Ethic. When discussing distinctive aspects of Appalachia, work ethic was often cited as a value characteristic of the farmers and miners who make their homes in the hollers. There was a strong sense of pride that men had when discussing the importance of work ethic in the region. As Justin, a 33-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of three, said when talking about things that are unique to Appalachia, “It’s the work ethic. It is the work to the bone [mining] to provide, and to clear a way for your kids and for your wife to live a better life.” Wayne, a 23-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of one, echoed this sentiment when reflecting on his own upbringing on a dairy farm; when asked how this shaped the person he was

today, Wayne replied, “It taught me to work. You just work. It taught me patience and stuff. It taught me all my skills like how to work on stuff and how to make stuff.” Similarly, Will, a 36-year-old, married, Black Appalachian father of four, exuded a sense of pride in Appalachian work ethic when he said, “I think that in this part of Appalachia, there's this blue-collar work ethic that we have, this mindset that we have and we exhibit.” When Will was in college in the Midwest, he made sure to continually lift up Appalachian values and showcase the strengths of the region.

Community. Another value that fathers cited as a core Appalachian strength is the level of care that people in the community show each other. Henry, a 34-year-old, unmarried, White Appalachian father of one, discussed this when reflecting on what he sees as core to the Appalachian identity:

Honesty, integrity. I mean, neighbor needs your help, you do it. And in return, you need help, you get it. It's not every man for himself trying to make a dollar. Don't get me wrong, money's nice, but love thy neighbors.

Beyond valuing community and family connections in general, fathers also described how they personally supported their communities and worked to make them stronger. For example, fathers in this study worked for the volunteer fire department, served in church leadership, coached youth athletic teams, or engaged directly with those in need. Marty, a 63-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of two, discussed how he helps older adults in his community by taking them to church, filling their cars with gas, or helping them pay their bills:

People forget about the elderly. And the elderly people are the backbone of the community. I have-- I call them my girlfriends, but I have one I look out after, she's 96. Her daughter lives away from here, but she'll call me every once in a while and say, “Can

you drive me down to fill my vehicle up with gas?” And I take her down and fill it up with gas. One is 80-- 86. And I take her water bill to the courthouse, pay it, and everything like that. I was raised up to help people, so that’s what I’m going to do until I can’t.

Wayne, who grew up and still lived extremely rurally, summed up his childhood and current relationships with his community saying, “I love it. Most of the time you don’t ever see nobody or nothing, but when you do, it’s just your old neighbor you’ve known for 20 years. Nobody messes with nobody. We’re just a big community.”

Providing and Protecting. A value that on the surface seems to mirror traditional narratives of fathering is providing for and protecting family. When providing is traditionally discussed in relation to fathering, it is usually in the context of financial provision. When Appalachian fathers talked about providing, there was a financial aspect, but there was also a large part of provision that focused on using practical skills to improve their family’s lives, such as hunting, fishing, gardening, and providing emotional support. If a family doesn’t have enough money to buy food, fathers viewed it as their job to source that food from different avenues. Jack, a 45-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of three, talked about this explicitly in his interview; when asked to clarify if his definition of providing meant paid wage labor, Jack clarified, “Well, gardening, or killing food, or putting food together, we do that as a family thing.” Jack exuded a sense of pride in the self-sufficiency gained by sourcing his own food with his family. Randy, a 35-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of three, also expressed pride in self-sufficiency in his narrative:

...there’s a sense of pride, and it’s expected of you, to know how to hunt. It’s expected to know how to fish, how to make things, fix things, how to “be a man.” Because sometimes

the grid goes down. Let's be honest. Do you know how to start a fire? Because if there's a big ice storm or a blizzard and the power goes out, you better know how to start a fire. Let's say money's tight, you have a fishing license, at least you can catch fish. You have your hunting license, at least you can get something and you can clean it and butcher it. So it's self-sufficiency things to where it helps give you a leg up. And also, it helps you provide for those around you. "Yeah, man, here, have some deer. Do you have any extra whatever laying around, or can I borrow a tool or something?" It's that kind of thing.

When I asked about where this mindset comes from, Michael, a 63-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of two, reflected on his parents growing up during the Great Depression and experiencing the extreme poverty that remains prevalent throughout much of Appalachia. His definition of providing revolves around fixing things that are broken instead of buying new things, but it is still closely related to these ideas of self-sufficiency rooted in history:

My parents grew up during the Depression, and that has echoed, I think, through our culture, such that we don't throw things away, we fix them. And that saving mindset, I think, affects how we deal with the world and how we show our children to deal with the world. And you do not—you try to be thrifty, you don't spend money you don't have if you can avoid it, and I think that is pretty ingrained in Appalachia. I don't think it's necessarily ingrained in the rest of the country. The further away you get from cities, it's there, I think. But you know running down the spine of the Appalachian Mountains, I think it stays right there, that saving mindset and preparing for winter.

All of the values that dads discussed were rooted in self-sufficiency and the value of being able to take care of their families no matter what happens. Appalachian fathers saw

themselves as rugged men who can fend for themselves. Marshall, a 63-year-old, married, White Appalachian father of three, addressed this specifically when talking about Appalachian fathering identity and what distinguished Appalachian dads from other dads:

I think that as an identity, it carries with it certain props, but those props are basically only known to other Appalachians. But I think that most Appalachian dads are competent. I think they're a lot more self-sufficient than a lot of urban dads are. I don't think that Mr. Cleaver in *Leave it to Beaver* could have survived the way that Daniel Boone could.

Here, Marshall took a well-known representation of an 'ideal father,' Mr. Cleaver, and compared him to a cultural symbol of rugged individualism to illustrate the difference between Appalachian and urban fathers. In his example, Appalachian men are more capable of providing in ways that are more important to day-to-day survival.

A final aspect of providing that was salient to fathers was emotionally providing. Participants saw themselves as spiritual leaders for their children, responsible for nurturing their children and spouses emotionally and supporting them. Will, a 35 year old, married, Black Appalachian father of four, addressed this directly:

Sometimes, I think as men, we just think that [being a father] means being a protector from a standpoint of strength, of masculinity. But as I'm seeing it, sometimes it means taking a back seat, being a protector of peace, being a protector of mental health, and understanding that you have to overcome a situation in a different fashion... And also, [being a] provider. You want to provide encouragement, nourishment, right? So we're talking about food, [but] we're [also] talking about supporting your kids through their

trials and tribulations, through their peaks as well, and just making sure they know, “Hey, Dad got me.”

The idea of being an emotional protector and provider was especially present in the advice participants gave for fathers who were expecting children. At the end of my interviews, I asked for one piece of advice they would give to other dads. More than anything else, Appalachian fathers recommended patience and presence. They encouraged emotional expression and openness with kids so that they do not ever doubt their importance. Marty shared, “Just be there for your kids when you need them, when they need you, and show them love. Give them a hug and kiss every time you can. Every night, I love you.” Will echoed this sentiment when he shared, “Be present in as many moments as you can. It’s going to go faster than you think. Listening is your best tool to become better.”

Balancing tradition and change. Being an Appalachian father meant embodying certain values, but it also meant a commitment to *preserving* those values by passing them on to children. Fathers deeply valued the strengths of Appalachian culture that they were raised with, and they acknowledged that these values were not necessarily esteemed by those who live outside of the region. Dads felt a responsibility to pass on Appalachian values of work ethic, hands-on self-sufficiency, and community care to their children. For example, Marty described his intentional efforts to raise his children the way he was brought up, valuing the old folks in their community and being sure to care for others that cannot care for themselves:

That's the way I was brought up, and that is the way that I have brought my two girls up. I had them out when they were 9- and 10-years old mowing yards. And when it would snow, if we couldn't drive, we would walk down the road and shovel elderly people's driveways. And they still like to get out and do that now.

Similarly, Michael routinely took his kids outside and taught them how to fish, forage, and garden as well as repair things that were broken around the house. He shared, “I mean, the darker side of my personality says we never know when the technology is going to fail so we need to be able to live. Getting them outdoors was important.”

However, fathers described a real tension between wanting to preserve the Appalachia *they* were raised in, and needing to adapt to a changing world that their children are being raised in. Some fathers struggled with this change, nostalgically mourning an Appalachian way of life that they see as fading. As Jack said in the opening statement, “I fear that I’m one of the handful that’s left that knows [the Appalachian way of life]. And that’s why I want to instill as much of it in them as I can.” Jack was raised on a farm and worked on the farm before and after school while growing up, and while he valued his childhood and the work ethic it instilled in him, he also did not want his kids did not have to go through the same struggles he had to. Jack experienced the tension of wanting to preserve Appalachian traditions *and* wanting an easier way of life for his children. He explained:

At 7 or 8 years old, my granddad would get me out of bed at 4:30 every morning to go feed and get everything done prior to me going to school. And then once I came home from school, I did what I needed to do to help him finish out the daylight and then homework and ready for bed. I know that we don't have as much of that today versus back then, but that's partially my doing for making sure that I pushed well past that. Not in a bad way, but just-- that's a dying breed of people.

Jack acknowledged that the way he grew up will not prepare his kids for success in the world they live in, so he made the conscious choice to raise them differently. He attempts to

resolve this tension by still showing his children how to be self-sufficient, gardening, hunting, and repairing things with them while also encouraging success in school and at work.

Justin similarly described the tension between *preserving* and *adapting*. He acknowledged that the culture he knew and loved was changing, and he recognized the need to adapt for the sake of his children, to prepare them as much as possible to succeed in a changing world. Justin described:

I love this area. I love the culture. I love it. But just like every other nation, every other world, city, every other area in the continent or every geography, everything changes. So culture changes and you got to be adaptive and to provide for [your kids] because at the end of the day, they're what you are.

Fathers' narratives were often interwoven with nostalgia, an either acute or vague longing for a past that is gone and a childhood that feels distant. Their efforts to preserve Appalachian values and traditions were coupled with the knowing realization that, on some level, they *can't* preserve the Appalachian way of life that they grew up with. Nonetheless, instilling what they could was an important feature of what Appalachian fatherhood meant to them.

Theme 2: Feeling a Loss of Agency

Whereas Theme 1 is a semantic theme, meaning it captures explicit and surface meanings of the data, Theme 2 is a latent theme, meaning it captures implicit, underlying meanings in the data. Throughout interviews, there was a sense that Appalachian men felt as though their stories and lives were not fully in their own control. It was evident that the repercussions of absentee capitalism and historic disenfranchisement affected how Appalachian fathers told and understood their own stories. They were acutely aware of the history of exploitation in their communities, and this manifested in feeling a *loss of agency* that had likely accumulated and hardened over

generations. They felt *acted upon* by bad actors, and they carried pain and loss from these experiences. As Marshall shared, “One thing that Appalachian dads have...is that history of hardship. They have that history of their grandparents and their great-grandparents being cheated out their land.”

Marshall identifies the *history of hardship* as the primary context within which Appalachian fathers operate. His language of “being cheated out their land” placed the cause of hardship on external forces that came into the region and removed Appalachian people’s agency within their daily lives. Wayne also reflected on intergenerational hardship in his narrative; he had to make the difficult decision to sell his family’s dairy farm when it became impossible to compete with large-scale industrial farms. He discussed the external forces that influenced his familial success and his lack of power to change the family situation:

I had like 800 acres to myself that sat right in the middle of the farm. And when we lost the farm, I lost that. Some years, you’d be millionaires when the milk price is up.

Everything started good. And it just-- the milk price started bottoming out and going down and down and down. It just got to the point where we wasn’t making no money.

Eddy, a 63-year-old, widowed, Native American Appalachian father of three, also embodied the pain and loss of regional exploitation, sharing, “Living in West Virginia, you’re not dealt a fair hand to begin with. We don’t have no industry. We don’t have a lot of infrastructure. And it’s hard for people.” To Eddy, Appalachian people were never given the chance to have any agency over their own lives and were set up to fail. Appalachian people have long had their land and resources taken by coal companies and other large corporations without any reciprocal responsibility from these large industries. This lack of reciprocal responsibility has left behind an eroding physical landscape, a lack of resources (e.g., internet access,

healthcare, transportation), and an aging population due to young people's migration from the region. The way that Eddy discussed West Virginia and the disenfranchisement of Appalachians showcased lack of agency, evident especially in the language he used. By saying, "you're not dealt a fair hand to begin with," Eddy highlighted the idea that Appalachian men and families have been pushed into their situations against their will and are unable to meaningfully change their current situations. Justin uses similar language to discuss the legacy of coal in West Virginia and other parts of Appalachia:

For years, I mean, we've had coal mine companies that have practically enslaved people. But I would say over the years of people losing jobs, getting injured, and then the flood of opioids into the area was the worst possible thing happened in the, I mean, in this area, it made that [work ethic] go away.

To Justin, Appalachian values that he grew up valuing were disappearing because of the hardship faced by many Appalachians. He identified a vicious cycle of hardship that Appalachian men have been swept into: they go to work for a coal company that is the only industry in the area, they get injured, they become dependent on opioids, and lose their will. Justin framed this loss of agency as resulting from external forces coming into the region.

Hopelessness. Twined together with acknowledging regional exploitation and historic contexts for causing loss of agency were deep feelings of hopelessness. Fathers reflected on feeling as though they would never be able to truly combat legacies of exploitation and modern narratives of Appalachia. They were acutely aware of the larger, deficit-framed narratives of Appalachia that shape outside perspectives on the region and felt powerless to change outsiders' narratives of their homes and lives, which contributed to feelings of regional isolation. Justin

provided insight on how attacks on Appalachia lead to feelings of isolation and hopelessness, sharing:

I mean, when someone talks bad about coal, it's not necessarily pollution, you're attacking... a rooted family tradition, and I know people don't see it like that, but that's it. You're attacking something bigger. I understand a lot of it can kill people, like lung disease. But it's grown to be more of a heritage than anything. And so, when they've been attacked for those beliefs, it's very secluded. And especially during that time period, the one election where everyone did feel like that, it wasn't like we like pollution, it's just **when that's all you have, what are you supposed to do?**

Justin's reflections on coal, isolation, and exploitation come together at the end of his quote to highlight the sense of hopelessness that was felt by Appalachian fathers. Appalachians, again, feel a lack of agency in their narratives to the point where they feel as though understanding only happens within their communities, further increasing isolation and resentment. This idea also came up in Marshall's narrative alongside discussions of Appalachian stereotyping:

It amazes me in this day and age how pervasive it still is to think of Appalachians as hillbillies, as ignorant, as isolated. And sure, there's some of that. But there's some of that in New York City too. It just amazes me how prevalent it is that that stereotype is still out there. I just don't understand. Maybe we don't have good press people or something. But there's still a lot of people who feel that way. And it's not fair and it's not accurate.

Marshall acknowledged the prevalence of stereotypes of Appalachian people, especially the narratives that frame Appalachia as isolated and ignorant. He felt frustrated that this narrative

continued to be applied to Appalachia as a whole, blurring the complexities of what it meant to be an Appalachian father and restricting men from having agency in their narratives.

Being unable to control their surroundings created feelings of hopelessness that were often brushed away when men felt unable to unwilling to process what they are experiencing.

For example, Wayne said:

You would just struggle through, then you'd get a good year, and you're kind of coming back up and kept going down. We just done with it. It was hard, but at the same time you're just like, "Whatever." **What can you do?**

Wayne was no longer able to keep up with the ups and downs of living on a farm while supporting a family. He rationalized this loss by saying, "what can you do?" and pushed the idea that this was something out of his control, something he had no agency over, something that was done to him, which influenced his future decision making.

Yearning for Past. Another way in which *loss of agency* manifested, in addition to potentially generating feelings of hopelessness, was in generating feelings of nostalgia – a subtheme that was also prevalent in Theme 1. Feeling like one did not have control over their life outcomes spurred some to long for a past in which fathers purportedly could achieve all their goals for their families without feeling as though they were fighting every day to make ends meet. For example, Henry, who experienced financial insecurity that spurred much of the resentment he felt daily, felt nostalgic for a childhood he remembered that now felt unachievable:

When I was a kid, there were a lot more farmers around. And there were a lot more stay-at-home moms because you could afford it. I mean, you could afford to raise a family as a single-income family. And there were mothers around here. I mean, whether their

husband was the only one working or a farmer who had a housewife and raising kids and you were able to have daycare. That was within 15, maybe 20 minutes. That didn't cost you half of a pay a weekly paycheck. I mean, now, I think some of them now or you're looking at \$500, \$600 a month. I mean, I make \$400 a week. I mean, you do the math.

Henry routinely struggled to afford basic care items for his family and his girlfriend cannot work because they cannot afford childcare. He was a farmer, a job that he remembered being much more prestigious in his childhood. He was nostalgic for a time when his girlfriend would be able to stay home and care for their daughter, instead of having to cut corners and live precariously. He felt constrained by unexpected challenges and powerless to change the situation he was in.

Distancing from an Appalachian Identity. Finally, two fathers distanced themselves from a 'traditional' Appalachian identity, one that they felt was constrained by historic and current contextual factors, in order to combat the loss of agency they felt. Eddy previously commented on West Virginians not being 'dealt a fair hand' and losing agency in their lives. However, his personal answer to losing agency was to leave the region and make a name for himself. He felt as though he could not find personal agency in Appalachia and combatted that by leaving, upholding myths of American meritocracy, and blaming those who stayed for not improving their lives:

It seems like people are satisfied with living in poverty, and they never want to better their self. They never want to—"Why should I go to school? Why should I go to school? I don't have to go to school. I just get on welfare. I'll live off of welfare. I don't need nothing else." And I have what I have because I worked for it. I worked hard for it. And there's none in my family that has ever achieved anywhere near what I have.

Eddy critiqued the culture of Appalachia, claiming that folks were content with not trying to better themselves. He granted himself agency and set himself apart from those he saw as deficient. He set aside his comments about West Virginians being oppressed by larger systemic forces. He went on to share:

And now when I do go back [home], they know I'm not one of them. But they want to claim me as one of their own. I go home and all my buddies that I grew up, with went to school with, take my hand, shake my hand. "Man, we're so proud of you. We're so proud of you." And I'm thinking, "Dear Lord, but you're living in this garbage dump of a place and you don't never want to do no better. Step outside the box. Step outside the boundaries man has put you in and say, 'I will not be part of a dying worthless useless generation.'" And I won't be.

He worked to distance himself from those that raised him or surrounded him when he was less successful to prove that he was different from other Appalachians who have been continually framed in a deficit way. For Eddy, who spent much of his professional life outside of Appalachia, it was beneficial to explicitly name the ways he was different from 'other Appalachians', an idea he internalized and continued to uphold to grant himself agency that he felt had been lost to other Appalachians. Michael spent his adult life working in academia and felt pressure to similarly distance himself from his heritage:

In my 20s, I did not want to be associated with [Appalachia] at all. In college I was taking a voice diction class, and they said, "You got to get rid of your accent if you're going to work the radio and TV."

Before he went to college, Michael did not realize he had an accent or lived experience that was incongruous with what other Americans felt was 'normal' or 'professional'. When he entered

academic and reporting spaces, he was reminded of his differences and asked to change them, stripping him of the ability to purely exist as himself in a space. Michael felt isolated and had to grapple with where his Appalachian identity fit into his life.

Appalachian fathers deal with pressures stemming from historic disenfranchisement and from feeling left behind in a constantly changing world. These all can contribute to feelings of inadequacy, anger, and hopelessness that men are able to address or process to varying degrees. Importantly, however, Appalachian fathers were not merely acted upon by constraining forces. Their narratives also illustrated the many ways in which fathers *actively* negotiated their sense of self in the context of both constraining and enabling forces – the focus of Theme 3.

Theme 3: (Re)Shaping Appalachian Fatherhood

The final theme of Appalachian fatherhood focuses on how men actively engage with their cultural and familial messages around fatherhood to create their own definitions about what it means to be a dad. This happened on multiple levels across participants' lives. First, fathers described how they engaged with and created unique responses to Appalachian stereotypes, reclaiming and reshaping Appalachian identity in a way that fostered pride. Second, fathers took the messages they had internalized about fathering in their own families and actively constructed their own fathering identities, rejecting and accepting things they have seen modeled as it suited their ideal identity. Finally, fathers offered glimmers of hope, hope that their children will succeed, hope that they will live up to their expectations as fathers, and hope for the future of Appalachia. Fathers were agent actors in their stories, creating narratives for themselves that celebrate their lived experiences.

More than Rednecks. During our interviews, I asked dads to share some common stereotypes of Appalachian people and families of which they were aware. They shared

stereotypes that were common and have been shared widely beyond Appalachia: everyone is related to each other, we are poor people addicted to opiates, uneducated, etc. After sharing stereotypes, fathers were asked to share how they would want to respond to those stereotypes if they could. These responses provided valuable insight into the pride men hold regarding their Appalachian identity and how it shapes their views of the world.

When asked about how broader society views Appalachia, Marshall shared, “I think there may be an expectation of more of a monolithic family in Appalachia that’s not exactly true. Because we’ve been painted as clans and clannish, and that’s just not the case.” A recent example of this monolithic narrative being widely accepted is JD Vance and his popular book, *Hillbilly Elegy*, which painted Appalachian culture and families as poor, violent, and uneducated. Michael used this book to frame his response to stereotypes about Appalachia:

My personal response to *Hillbilly Elegy* was that, yes, I’ve seen these families. I’ve seen these people. They aren’t the only people here. And you’re a damn carpet bagger...And people have taken JD Vance’s words as gospel about what the entire region is about. And I reject that. I have lived experience that says that’s not true.

Michael acknowledged that the type of family portrayed in the book is present within Appalachia but is nowhere near the only family present in the region. He pushed back against people who live outside of the region and try to paint it as one thing when they have never visited the mountains or spent time with people from Appalachia. Similarly, when asked about how he would respond to someone who viewed Appalachian families as clans or clannish, Marshall shared:

Spend some time with an Appalachian family. And don’t go to the worse place you can find. Go to the average place you can find. There’s stellar dads and there are bummer

dads, but most of the dads in the middle are just good, honest, hardworking people that just want to do the right thing. They want to take care of their family. They want to provide their children something better than they have. Just like everybody else does.

Marshall spent his life being good, honest, and hardworking, creating a fathering identity that mirrors what he was shown while growing up that exemplifies the central values of Appalachian fatherhood. Jack supported the ideas that Marshall introduced, expanding more on the distinctive strengths of being in an Appalachian family:

And people look at people who live [off the land] as being a drag on society. And I'll look at it as a richness of life. We live to the best of our abilities, and I think that the people who live like we do live a fuller life. A more fulfilled thing because of the richness, the happiness, the giving that everybody gives, it's not just a single person. It's not mom working all the time. Dad picking kids up from school or dad working all the time, mom doing whatever at home yeah. Everybody pitches in. And that's what the richness the fullness of us hillbillies.

Michael, Marshall, and Jack all push back against commonly held stereotypes and reclaim the positives of living in Appalachia. Randy also felt like it was important to push against stereotypes of the region, but took a different approach, serving as a personal counterexample to stereotypes:

I try not to be the stupid Appalachian, right? So if I meet one person that's never been around an Appalachian, they're like, "Oh, this dude's normal. Cool." Right? Then there you go. Yeah, it has its issues, but everywhere else has its issues. It doesn't matter. Drugs are everywhere, so whatever. People that complain about the drugs here need to go

somewhere else. They'll be like, "It's bad there" but it's bad everywhere, so, whatever.

But the people are really kind here.

He was aware that Appalachia is stereotyped outside of the region and tried his best to be a "normal" person when out in the world to push back against stereotypes in his own way. He also highlighted the problems that often define Appalachia in wider conversations and, instead of highlighting that there are positive things about Appalachia or that the problems are not the only part of Appalachian life, he reminded folks that everywhere has its drawbacks and that these struggles are not unique to Appalachia.

Another way that dads pushed back against negative narratives was by highlighting the diversity present within the region that is often overlooked or deliberately ignored. Will shared:

I mean, I'm going to tell you one question I got. People say, "Are there Black people in West Virginia?" And I'll be like, "What? Yeah. Yeah." It's just like anywhere else in the world, you got different people from ethnic and racial background. So that was always interesting, like what?

To Will, a Black man who grew up in Bluefield, West Virginia, diversity in Appalachia was never a question. It was something that he saw every day in his childhood and still sees with his children. Will took amplifying the diversity of Appalachia and changing the narrative about his home so seriously that he created a streetwear brand designed to uplift and empower the people of West Virginia.

I'm the co-founder or founder of a streetwear lifestyle brand. We [empower West Virginians]... by telling a different story, creating a different narrative for people in Appalachia, right? And we tried to include a wide range of different folks from different background, different ethnicities, as I'm sure you can tell.

Will used his skills as a marketer and business owner to amplify the voices of West Virginians, using a style that is widely popular outside of Appalachia to appeal to those who live elsewhere into visiting or listening to a different narrative. He emphasized diversity and the unique values that make Appalachia a special place.

Lastly, Shane, a 45-year-old, married, Black Appalachian father of two, whose family of origin still lives in Philadelphia, engaged directly with his family to showcase the beauty of Appalachia and why he chose to stay there after moving to the region more than twenty years ago. He was not directly pushing against stereotypes; instead, he passively showcased his success and happiness with his chosen home:

Every time I go home, family, friends, they always say, “Man, when are you coming back home?” I’m probably not. But they normally just-- I think they don't really ask the question why because they've seen the things that I've done with my life. They've seen my kids and how well they do in school and how they flourish in the sports. I get a lot of my nephews that come here with me over the summer... They’re like, “Man, we love it.”

Every time he hosted his nephews and they saw the benefits of where he lives, Shane pushed back against stereotypes and actively created an identity for himself separate from preconceived stereotypes and expectations.

“That’s not me”. In addition to highlighting the beauty and value of Appalachia while raising their children, dads actively molded their fathering identity within the context of how they were raised. Fathers who grew up without a strong father figure, as well as those who had positive relationships with their own fathers, reflected on the things they sought to change for their own children. Often, they were able to reflect on the things they liked about growing up as well as the shortcomings of their childhood. For example, Shane said:

Me and my father, we had our ups and downs. He passed away about four or five years ago. But I wanted to take some of the things that he'd done well. I wanted to take some of the things that he didn't do well and fix it for myself.

Similarly, Michael shared:

My dad and I went fishing, fishing a lot, did some hunting. But I also felt it was difficult to do things right for him, and he would say, look, you're doing it wrong, but not show me the right way. So I always thought I wanted to try and make sure I showed [my kids] what I wanted as opposed to just saying, no, that's wrong. And I think that's kind of the biggest difference between what I got from my dad and what I try to give to my sons... I want people in my family to know that I care about them. They're important to me.

Interviewer: Was that expressed to you when you were growing up, that you mattered?

Michael: Probably not as much as I needed. Whatever that means.

Though Michael's father was present and provided a model for Michael's own fathering, there were things that he knew he needed to change when he became a father himself, especially emotionally. There was a generational pattern of men in Michael's family not having supportive men to look up to, so his dad did not know how to model that for him, leaving Michael feeling lost and unsupported as a child. He was trying to reconcile this by being more supportive for his sons, but it still had a profound impact on his self-worth and ability to emotionally engage. He made sure to provide his sons with the emotional supports he lacked as a child, healing an inner wound he had not reflected on until he was a father himself.

Two fathers felt like they needed to remove their own fathers from their children's lives to give their children the best childhood experience. This was the case for Eddy who never facilitated a relationship between his father and son due to the trauma that he experienced

growing up. Eddy reflected on how small his father often made him feel, especially when he was trying to share an important emotional moment with his dad.

[At the birth of my son,] my dad looked at me and said, “What you all tore up about it?”

He said, “It's only a baby.” And so I made it my goal in life to give my son all the things that I never had. I wanted him to be able to make accomplishments that I could have never done.

His father met one of the most important moments of Eddy’s life with derision and contempt, not allowing for a connection that Eddy craved. With this as his fathering model, he felt ill-equipped to handle the challenges of parenting. However, Eddy used this as a motivation to construct a new fathering identity, separate from what his father had modeled. He constructed a fathering identity based in love, kindness, care, and guidance. Since he did not get this example as a child, he highly values teaching his son empathy, emotional support, and the importance of family. When recreating a conversation with his son to me he shared:

(As if speaking to his son:) Son, always remember that your family comes first. Above all you want. Above all that you desire. Love people regardless their nationality, their sexual orientation, regardless of your dislike in them, find something positive about somebody. Don't be critical. Don't be harsh. Do not be cruel towards people.

For some fathers, it felt unattainable to be the direct opposite of their fathers but, as Henry shared, “I try to be more than the man he was.” Henry grew up with his father present in the house and providing financially. However, Henry’s dad was deeply addicted to prescription pills, often mixing them with other substances. When he was high, Henry’s father would experience shifts in his personality and mistreat Henry’s mom, something that Henry remembers distinctly. He reflected on never knowing what version of his dad he would come home to: the

good father or the volatile husband. His dad passed away when Henry was 15, and Henry spent the next eight years following in his father's footsteps, drinking and doing drugs to keep from thinking about his life. When he quit drinking and drugs and found out his girlfriend was pregnant, he reflected on the positive aspects of his father that he wanted to pass along to his daughter: "I want to be there for her as much as my parents were. Dad was there when he was able to be there. As long as he wasn't working. I want to be there for my kids." Though he had some bad moments with his dad, Henry was able to take good aspects of his father's actions and push back against the negative examples he grew up with. He did not have a specific framework for fathering identity other than doing the best he can day to day and working to provide a better environment for his daughter than he had.

Some fathers also discussed the need to distance themselves from family members that were negative influences on their children. Randy commented on this, and how it was in tension with family being a central Appalachian value, from which he had diverged:

This is where I part ways from a lot of Appalachians because a lot of Appalachians, they're like, "Well, I'll let my family treat me like dogshit." No, yeah, you can be blood-related, but you don't have to be family. Family is a choice of who you want to be around and who you love and who you want to give your life with. And if somebody is just going to be abusive, you don't have to have anything to do with them whether it's a dad or mom or brother or sister, cousin. It doesn't matter, just get rid of them.

Randy was sure to emphasize that he would break from Appalachian tradition for the sake of his children and their well-being. He has witnessed family members going through difficult times with other members of their family and wanted his children to know that they do not have to put up with being mistreated just because of family relationships.

Eight of eleven dads in this study are religious and place a heavy emphasis on faith in their lives. Will credited the church as a main influence on who he is as a person and as a father, “Growing up in the church you had men that were leaders. You had your deacons, your ushers. You got your men's ministry, manpower... And I would see men that I want to model myself after.” These are models that he did not have access to at home, so he would go to places of worship and find guidance from the men that value faith to a similar degree. Even today, as a father of four young children, he made time to be a leader within his church and provide similar support to other young people. In his interview, he shared this reflection on father figures and the importance of having spaces outside of the home for men to interact with other men other than workplaces:

I think it's important for young men to look at the best example in their life. Because realistically, sometimes it's not our parents. It's not your dad. You hope it is, but sometimes in this regard, this person is not the best model of a father right?

He acknowledged that he wants young men to be able to look up to their fathers but sometimes it just is not the best example and support needs to be found elsewhere. As a boy who experienced this, he makes sure to provide a space for other boys to see the best examples of masculinity and fatherhood. Fathers actively construct fathering identity within the context of their culture and families, using and discarding examples that they have seen modeled to shape what fathering means to them.

“You do your best”. Between balancing stereotypes of Appalachia and reshaping the examples that they grew up with, it can be difficult for dads to articulate how they see themselves as fathers. All eleven of the dads knew that they were good fathers. They acknowledged that they had things they could have done better, but they knew that they did the

best they could with the resources they had. Some, such as Marshall and Justin, were more focused on what they could have improved upon. Marshall reflected on this at length:

I would say, first of all, I'm a thankful dad. I'm thankful for the way my kids are. And I'm proud of them, very, very proud of them...But I've always felt like there was one step more I could have taken or one more lesson I could have taught or one more this or one more that. Woulda coulda shoulda. I have no illusions about my abilities and my foibles. I know that I could have been better. I know that I did work a lot. And so I could have spent more time with them. I'm sure I could have. Sometimes I think they're good in spite of me. Sometimes I think they're good because of me, that I helped. So I have mixed feelings about it. I've never thought I was a-- **I never thought I was a great father.** I never thought I was a really good father. **But I felt like I was a father who tried. I tried to do good. I tried to do the best I could.**

Marshall was critical of himself throughout our interview and focused on the things he could have done better instead of the things he did well. However, he was also proud of his children and knew that he had at least something to do with the people they became. Justin echoed this sentiment when talking about the kind of dad he was:

Probably to be a dad would be a loving patient, spiritual, and even educational leader that puts them before him, and even his wife before him. And I know I failed at that lot. But I strive to educate the kids, be involved with them as much as possible. And even pouring out-- just pouring out onto them, knowledge, love. I want to be a part of them all the time.

He also reflected on feelings of failure in his fathering, with the main difference between him and Marshall being that he had no examples of positive fathering while growing up. He has

an idea of what being a good dad looks like, created based off what he did not receive as a child. Even though he reflected on feelings of failure related to his fathering, he also had a hopeful reflection on what he tried to do for his kids. By pouring love and knowledge into his kids whenever he can, he can start to repair the wounds left from his childhood.

A common theme across all the interviews was, even when dads felt like they were not the best, they felt that they tried their best to set a good example for their children. Wayne talked about this, comparing his idea of a good dad to what he is able to accomplish every day:

Well, I ain't gonna say, "I'm a good dad." I try at least. You've got to try, and you've got to want to. If you don't want to, what's the point? I try to be. But it doesn't always work out. You do your best.

Wayne acknowledged that fathering is something you get up and actively engage with every day, it is not something that is passive or easy to accomplish. Will echoed this in his interview when he shared, "What makes me a good dad is I get up everyday, in spite of the difficulties, just being real. So I think that that makes me a good dad and knowing that I have weaknesses." Will commented on the difficulties he faced in his role as father and how they made him a better father. He knew that he struggled with parenting sometimes and he still got up, ready to engage with his children and family and bring his best to the table. Randy also shared the importance of modeling for his children, even if it can be difficult:

I'd like to say that part of being a good dad is being real. I think you need to actually set a good example. You need to lead from the front at the door. It should not be a do as I say, not as I do, it should be a follow me, right? And then also I want them to know respect and to know what it means to actually love your spouse and to respect them and to

respect other people. There will not be a day, that the good Lord has air in my lungs, that my kids will not hear that I love them. That day will never come.

He reflected on leading his children and showing them what it means to be a good person as the basis for his fathering identity and role. He made it clear what he wanted his children to know while growing up. Pouring love and knowledge onto them, as Justin shared, and trying your best every day are what make these fathers the best they can be.

When asked to reflect on what an “ideal dad” looked like, Marty shared that there was no such thing as a perfect dad. Being a father, to Marty, meant showing his children that he loved, respected, and trusted them, which aligns with many of the other fathers’ views of fatherhood. He valued giving his children some leeway to make mistakes, being sure to be available if they failed and needed support. He further reflected on what it means to be a perfect dad:

I’d have to say, I don’t know if there is a such thing as a perfect dad. Somewhere along the line, the perfect dad, if he thinks he’s a perfect daddy, he’s going to mess up. You strive and want to be that perfect dad but somewhere along the lines, something will happen you’ll mess up. And I like to think I’m the perfect dad, but if someone ever done anything to my girls, I wouldn’t be the perfect dad.

He did not believe that such a dad existed and went so far as to speculate that if someone believes he is a perfect dad, something will mess up. At the end of this quote, there is an implicit message that he would do anything to protect his daughters if something happened to them, even if that made him less of a good dad. He valued protection and family so strongly, that he would jeopardize his idea of ideal fatherhood to defend his daughters.

Shane agreed with these aspects of what it means to be a father and shared that he felt these things were more achievable in Appalachia than they were in Philadelphia where he was

raised. He wanted to show his children the best of himself and model the things he wanted them to learn, “I love Appalachia, I think you really get a chance for your kids to be kids. They don’t have to grow up too fast. They don’t have to grow up wondering about anything.” To Shane, being an Appalachian dad meant being able to show his children a variety of options with the resources at their disposal. He felt more able to be a good dad in this setting that he chose to remain in than he would have in his home city.

Finally, within the reflections on ideal fatherhood and how they view themselves as fathers, participants actively created a fathering identity that provided them with the things they did not receive as children. These quotes and reflections hold hope: hope for their children, hope for themselves and what they lacked as children, and hope for healing. Eddy summed this up in his interview when asked about what he wants his son to remember about his childhood:

I don’t want to ever be a shadow of doubt in my son’s mind that I had some kind of hidden agenda, something that-- **I was so proud to be his father.** And to be able to teach him what I’ve been taught. All my kids had so much better [than I had]. And that was my goal for life.

These fathers were proud of their children and proud of the men that they were able to be throughout their fathering journeys. Those who had poor examples of fatherhood while growing up were proud that they were able to be different and show their children something better than they ever saw. Those who had positive examples of fatherhood while growing up were proud to follow in the footsteps of their own dads and make their identity their own in the process.

Appalachian fathers navigated complex forces when creating and defining fathering identity. They struggled with navigating fatherhood and balancing the lasting hardships that face the Appalachian region. They held values such as work ethic, providing and protecting,

community care, and self-sufficiency that are shaped by their context and culture. They also found joy in their families and children alongside actively shaping their fathering identities. After Marshall reflected on the history of hardship and exploitation that Appalachian fathers contend with, he added, “[Appalachian dads have a history of] overcoming, and pressing on, and having that perseverance that breaks through and says, **‘We’re still here and we’re still thriving.’**”

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

The goals of this study were to explore (a) what fathering and fatherhood mean to Appalachian fathers, (b) what social and cultural symbols shape the meanings of fatherhood for Appalachian men, and (c) how the meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood shape their perceptions of themselves as fathers. For Appalachian fathers, being a father and fulfilling the roles that come with that identity was a central part of who they were. Current fathering identity was informed both by dads’ own families of origin and the broader historical and situational Appalachian context. Men negotiated their fathering roles and identities within their situated context and actively shaped meaning around fatherhood.

Appalachian Fatherhood and Symbolic Interactionism

The current study of Appalachian fatherhood was theoretically grounded in symbolic interactionism (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009). In this study, symbolic interactionism was used to critically examine the meanings that Appalachian fathers ascribe to fatherhood and how those meanings shape perceptions of themselves as fathers. Men learned how to be fathers through interacting with their own fathers and other men in their lives as well as paying attention to societal messaging on what it means to be a father. Meaning was created in spaces where men were interacting with various individuals (e.g., their own fathers, grandfathers, and other role models), groups (e.g., their families, church spaces), and contexts (e.g., Appalachia, historical

influences), navigating the tensions of what was modeled and what they desired to be. Men often felt a tension between the father they wanted to be and the father they felt able to be in their situated contexts.

Agency. Appalachian fathers in the current study largely framed their narratives in the context of agency, or lack of agency. Agency broadly refers to the ability of individuals to act and operate independently of societal constraints (Campbell, 2009). Men felt both a lack of agency in their narratives around Appalachian fatherhood *and* empowered to be agents of change with their own children. A sense of hopelessness shaped much of the discussion about Appalachian history and how men operate within their current contexts. Eddy's language when speaking about West Virginians not being dealt a "fair hand" removes agency from his discussion on Appalachian hardship. By using language such as this, fathers framed the issues present in their everyday lives as something that is enacted by a larger force that they are powerless against. However, when Appalachian fathers discuss their own roles as fathers and the actions they take with their children, they exhibit having agency within their lives and actions, which is consistent with past theorizing on agency that discusses how individual narratives contain multiple facets and constructions of agency depending on situated context (Moore, 2017).

Also present within discussions of agency is the degree to which men do or do not conform with hegemonic masculine ideals that are societally defined. The ways in which men experience masculinity can both encourage and constrain feelings of agency (Williams, 2007). For example, in discussions of values (e.g., work ethic and providing and protecting), Appalachian fathers uphold traditionally masculine values of providing financially and prioritizing physical tasks over emotion work or care tasks (Cano & Hofmeister, 2022). In

valuing traditionally masculine tasks such as breadwinning, men exhibit limited agency within socially prescribed roles (Abrams, 1999; Davies, 1990). However, when men value and perform other Appalachian values (e.g., community care and emotional provision), they demonstrate that they do have agency within their situated contexts and that their experiences of fathering as an emotional undertaking challenge hegemonic ideals (Williams, 2007).

Appalachian men are situated at a unique intersection of privileged and minoritized identities (see Connidis & McMullin, 2002). As men, they hold socially defined privilege that allows access to resources that are not available to other socially minoritized identities (Collins, 2019). As Appalachians, they contend with a history of exploitation and hardship and those with additional minoritized identities further navigate the negative judgements enacted by social and cultural norms (Abrams, 1999; Catte, 2018). When viewing agency (or lack of agency) as a socially determined ability, it becomes apparent that even the privileged construction of masculinity can be used to constrain men in their situated contexts (Abrams, 1999; Campbell, 2009; Davies, 1990; Moore, 2017; Williams, 2007). The anger and hopelessness felt by Appalachian fathers could be a byproduct of their masculine socialization which does not equip them with the necessary tools for fully addressing the complex emotions that arise when considering their unique lived experiences and situatedness. These fathers have been excluded from the possibility of expressing their emotions in ways other than anger, creating feelings of hopelessness and perceived injustice.

Intergenerational Fathering. An often identified but seldom specifically explored idea within fathering research is how men operate and construct identities within their intergenerational contexts. Fathering is a relational identity, an identity that is based off of the existence of another person or people and is constructed through relationship interactions

between fathers, their fathers, their children, their community, and their larger societal context (Williams, 2007). For Appalachian men, their fathers provided positive, negative, or neutral models of what it looked like to be a father. Some men had extremely positive fathering role models and strove to replicate that with their own children. Some had overtly negative examples of fatherhood that they tried to reverse as much as possible with their own children. These men saw their own fathering journey as a chance to disrupt negative cycles in their families and provide examples of positive relationships for their children. Appalachian fathers that had negative experiences in their families of origin saw their children as an opportunity for growth and change. This intergenerational motivation for change challenges some of the existing fathering identity literature that largely credits fathering identity development to fathers' own fathers (Brown, Kogan, & Kim, 2018; Furstenberg & Weiss, 2000; Shears, Summers, Boller, & Barclay-McLaughlin, 2006). Additional past research has proposed that fathers with absent fathers themselves were much more likely to become absent fathers, though there were many counterexamples to this trend in the current sample (Pouget et al., 2012). When Appalachian fathers interviewed for this study did not have a positive example from their own fathers, they adopted a bottom-up approach to fathering identity development and became motivated towards change through interactions with their own children.

Alongside familial relationships and intergenerational transmission of fathering and masculinity, Appalachian fathers are continuously navigating the historical influences that shape Appalachia. Histories of exploitation shape how men view the world around them and how they situate themselves within fatherhood as an identity (Abrams, 1999; Campbell, 2009).

Imagining New Appalachian Fathering

Situated in unique time, space, and place, Appalachian fathers leverage social and cultural symbols to create meaning around what it means to be an Appalachian father (LaRossa & Reitzes, 2009; Stryker, 1986). They often feel constrained by the historical and societal contexts within which they actively develop and create identities, reflecting on a nostalgic past or blaming others for their situations. Additionally, they can feel hopeless to change their situations and become mired in past experiences that did not prepare them for the deeply emotional experience of parenting. However, it would be unfair to only emphasize the lack of agency and struggles of Appalachian fathers without acknowledging the possibility that men presented for imagining a new Appalachian fathering.

Feminist theory and thought encourages the deconstruction of ideas that are taken for granted, including broader narratives of fathers as breadwinners and unemotional men who uphold hegemony (Doucet & Lee, 2014; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Scholars do men a disservice by constraining them within the confines of masculinity and father involvement, restricting their ability to define fatherhood in ways that are important to fathers themselves (Aitken, 2009; Doucet, 2013). These constraints foster the lack of agency that was deeply felt by Appalachian fathers. But how can men and scholars jointly imagine the future of Appalachian fathering?

Appalachian fathers in this study begin their explorations of new Appalachian fathering by tapping into the deep emotionality that is present within their fathering journeys. Those who had positive parental figures look towards those figures and wonder how they can live up to the standards set by their parents. Those who had negative parental figures wonder how they can achieve an ideal of fatherhood that they never had the chance to experience. Nine of the fathers

interviewed for this manuscript refused to call themselves good fathers. I asked explicitly if they thought of themselves as good fathers and none of them would say yes. However, all of them told me they always tried their best to be the best father they knew how to be. The heartbreak and hope in these quotes provide a rich space where men balance the sorrow of their past with the hopeful imagining of a future for Appalachian fathering.

As fathering scholars, it is our job to amplify these tensions and name them so that men do not feel alone or hopeless, constrained by traditional narratives surrounding men in families. Appalachian fathers are expressing their deep desire for healing, asking others to understand that they are not perfect but that they do the best they can every day. Their imagined future contains celebrating Appalachian values and history with their children while gaining the ability to express themselves, free from both self-imposed and external constraints.

Limitations and Future Directions

Although the current study enhances knowledge of Appalachian fathering identity and experiences, there are limitations present. Due to challenges with recruitment, the original goal of recruiting only rural fathers in Bland and Mercer counties who were not grandparents became impossible. The perspectives of men who were also grandfathers ended up providing a unique lens into the historical situatedness that Appalachian fathers construct their identities within but was outside the original parameters for the study. Including grandfathers also introduced a retrospective aspect to the data which was not anticipated. Fathers who have just completed the transition to fatherhood have a different perspective on day-to-day fathering behaviors and constraints than grandfathers who are reflecting back to when their children were small, some 30-40 years in the past.

Additionally, the sample for this study did not reflect my original goal of having a sample that was six Black Appalachian fathers and six White Appalachian fathers. Though my sample was representative of the demographics of Appalachia (8% Black Residents; ARC, 2015), I was unable to oversample for the unique and intersectional lived experiences of Black Appalachian fathers. Misconstructions of Appalachia as a monolith persist in broader societal conversations about the region (Catte, 2018) and this study aimed to be a part of the growing scholarship seeking to expand the narrative of what it means to be an Appalachian, specifically an Appalachian dad. Scholars in Appalachian studies have called for increased attention to the racial and ethnic diversity of the region (Avashia, 2022; Turner, 2021) which this study attempted to accomplish.

Finally, all the fathers in this study lived with their children and were partnered to the mother of at least one of their children. They all saw their children on a regular basis and were highly involved in the daily tasks of child rearing. Past research has shown that fathers who do not physically live with their children construct fathering identity differently than those who do not physically live with their children (Letiecq & Koblinsky, 2004; Trolie & Coleman, 2012). Nonresidential fathers must navigate additional barriers for engaged fatherhood and nonresidential Appalachian fathers likely navigate the same stressors fathers in this study identified along with the challenges that come with being a nonresidential father. Additionally, the experience of queer Appalachian fathers would provide an additional intersecting identity that could alter the lived experiences of Appalachian fathers.

Future research can further expand understanding of the unique experiences of Appalachian fathers by focusing recruitment on additionally minoritized identities such as race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and residency status. Additionally, future research can

expand understandings of Appalachian families by recruiting grandfathers to speak on their experiences and reflect on their lived experiences. Future qualitative studies can recruit larger samples to explore the processes by which fathers construct their identities and interact with members of their families and communities. This study is a first step in understanding how Appalachian men feel agency within their role as a father and how they feel constrained or empowered by social and historical factors, exploring the interconnectedness between paternal agency and emotions (Stokkebekk et al., 2023). Future research should continue to explore the phenomena present in these findings and continuously revisit the communities in which data were collected, maintaining dialogue with men and families about the supports they need and narratives they want shared.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Fathering Identity in Appalachia
Aran Garnett-Deakin
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Interview Questions

1. Before we start our interview, I'd like to get know some words that you think of when you think of yourself as a dad. These can be whatever words you'd like. These words will eventually become a word cloud of all of the word's dads have given me.
 - a. If dads need help, have a list of words to bring and show them.
2. What is it like being a father?
 - a. Do you live with your kid(s)?
 - b. How often do you see or interact your children?
 - c. What activities do you do with your kid(s)?
 - d. Tell me what an average day looks like to you.
 - e. How do you feel about the nature of interactions with your children?
3. Growing up, who were your fathering role models?
 - a. What is/was your relationship with your father like?
 - b. What did you like or not like about how your father or other caregiver parented you?
 - c. Growing up, did you ever think you'd be a father?
4. Who taught you how to be a father?
 - a. Will you tell me a story about how they influenced you?
5. Tell me about the relationship between you and your child's other parent?
 - a. How do you solve disagreements?
 - b. How do you feel supported by your child's parent?
 - c. How do you not feel supported by your child's parent?
6. Tell me about your involvement with your community.
 - a. Do you consider yourself part of the Appalachian community?
 - b. What is unique about Appalachian fathers?
7. Do you have an image of what the ideal dad looks like? How would you describe him?
 - a. What has influenced this idea?
 - b. How do you feel about this ideal dad?
 - c. How do you view yourself within this image?
8. What makes you a good dad?
 - a. Do you have a favorite photo of your children?

- b. Tell me the story behind that photo.
 - c. What are aspects of being a dad that you like or don't like?
 - d. What do you want to improve on as a dad?
9. What advice would you give to a new father?

Appendix B

Fathering Identity in Appalachia
Aran Garnett-Deakin
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Demographic Information

1. What is your age?
2. What is your race?
 - a. Hispanic or Latino
 - b. White
 - c. Black/African American
 - d. Native American
 - e. Asian
 - f. Other
3. How many children do you have?
4. What are your children's ages?
5. Do you live with your children?
6. Gender of children
7. How many days a week do you see your child(ren)?
8. Highest year of schooling completed
 - a. 1st-8th
 - b. Some high school
 - c. High school (graduate or GED equivalent)
 - d. Vocational School
 - e. Some college
 - f. College
 - g. Graduate school
9. Are you currently:
 - a. Married
 - b. Divorced
 - c. Separated
 - d. Widowed
 - e. Cohabiting
 - f. Single
 - g. Other
10. Who else is living with you and what is your relationship to them?
11. Do you currently work?
12. What best describes your employment status?

- a. Full time employed
 - b. More than full-time employed
 - c. Part-time employed
 - d. Self-employed
 - e. Unemployed
 - f. Disabled
 - g. Other
13. Are you on public assistance? (WIC, TANF, Food Stamp)
14. What is your current income? (Monthly or Yearly)
15. Are you receiving child support?
- a. If yes, how much per month?

(Adapted from Dr. Sonia Molloy's Dissertation, 2017)

Appendix C

Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Race	Number of Children	Employment	Marital Status	Household Income
Wayne	23	White	1	Farm Hand	Married	\$52,000
Henry	34	White	1	Farm Hand	Cohabiting	\$20,000
Marshall	63	White	3	Postal Worker	Married	\$35,000
Michael	63	White	2	College Professor	Married	\$60,000-\$70,000
Justin	33	White	3	Military	Married	\$50,000-\$60,000
Eddy	63	Native American	3	Singer	Widowed	\$110,000
Will	36	Black	4	College Staff	Married	\$70,000
Shane	45	Black	2	College Athletics Coach	Married	\$70,000
Jack	45	White	3	Maintenance Worker	Married	\$80,000
Marty	63	White	2	Disability	Married	\$50,000
Randy	35	White	3	Insurance	Married	\$80,000

Appendix D

Participant Bios

Pseudonym	Bio
Wayne	<p>Wayne was a young father with one child. He was born in raised in rural Appalachian Virginia and grew up working on his family farm. When he was a teenager, his family had to sell the farm because they could not compete with larger industrial farms. He highly valued his upbringing and the example set by his own father as a hard worker. He married his wife very young and never expected to become a father himself. His wife became pregnant by accident and he recalled being very surprised and scared when he learned he was going to be a father. At the time of the interview, Wayne’s son was four years old and Wayne spent as much time as he could with his son. He wanted to set an example for his son like his father did for him and teach him the value of hard work as well as making time for family. Wayne had an incredible support system comprised of his parents and his wife’s parents who regularly babysat and provided support. Though it is not what he originally wanted, he loves being a father and making memories with his son.</p>
Henry	<p>Henry, similarly to Wayne, never expected to be a father. His own father had myriad issues including extensive drug and alcohol use that led to his early death. Henry shared that his father was good to his children but was a terrible husband, which Henry still resents. Henry’s father passed away when Henry was 15 years old, and he shared that he began heavy drug and alcohol use after the death of his father. It was not until his late 20s that Henry stopped using all drugs and decided to change his course. In his early 30s, his girlfriend became pregnant by accident and he decided to move her into his house so they could raise their child together. He recalled being surprised and excited when he found out he was going to be a father, as he thought he would never have the chance. His daughter was born 6 weeks premature and had to stay in a NICU two hours away from his home for 8 weeks to recover. He shared the financial hardship that this created for him since he was only making \$400 a week and spending weekends with his daughter in the NICU. Henry had a lot of resentment for the current political climate and expressed nostalgia for his childhood, mostly stemming from his struggles to make enough money to provide for himself, his daughter, and her mother. He also discussed his inner tensions when he found out his child was going to be a girl, as his father told him before he died that he needed to have a son to continue the family name. He cherished his daughter but wrestled with his feelings about legacy and masculinity. He prided himself on his goals to be different from his own father while wrestling with struggles of daily life.</p>

Marshall	Marshall was one of two grandfathers in the study. Two of his three children had children, some of whom he got to see regularly. Because of his age and amount of time spent as a dad, he was more able than some younger fathers to reflect on what he did well, his own experiences with his father, and the lessons he successfully taught his own children. His own positive relationship with his father was the thing he compared his relationship with his children to constantly. His fascination with history led him to critically reflect on the history of Appalachia and the impact of that history on the region today. He provided insights into Appalachian fatherhood and masculinity that I had not expected but welcomed. He was often critical of his own parenting, sharing that he felt he hadn't been the best father but that he'd tried to give his children the best he could.
Michael	Michael had two children who were in their mid-twenties. He was a highly educated father who classified himself as a 'liberal redneck' at the beginning of our interview. His relationship with his own father was not overly negative but he did describe generally feeling unsupported by his father, which he explicitly made sure to change with his own sons. He made efforts throughout his interview to distance himself from characteristics he saw as 'stereotypically Appalachian' such as not being close to his biological family, being college educated, and holding generally progressive social beliefs. However, he also spoke critically about monolithic portrayals of Appalachia in media and larger societal narratives. He positioned himself as an outsider <i>and</i> an insider in various ways that were not seen in other interviews. Overall, he loved his sons and wanted the best for them in ways he did not have access to as a child.
Justin	Justin, Marshall's son-in-law, had one of the most emotional interviews in this study. He was raised by his grandparents from the beginning of his life. His mom and dad were fourteen and sixteen years old, respectively, when he was born and were not emotionally capable of raising a child together or separately. He had a fairly good relationship with his grandparents growing up but was plagued by feelings of worthlessness since he could not understand why his parents 'didn't want him'. His mom was in and out of his life periodically and he would sometimes live with her until she got into a new relationship. His dad was barely in his life, only reaching out to ask for money when Justin got older. He described poor relationships with all of his biological family as he grew up and does not allow any of them near his wife and children now. He talked about becoming a father as one of the best things that has ever happened to him, motivating him to work on himself and improve every aspect of his life. He had a positive relationship with his in-laws as well, looking towards Marshall as an example of a good father. Justin was able to reflect on the ways he has changed and how his biological family, situated context, and chosen family had shaped him to be the man he is today.

Eddy	Eddy, the other grandfather (and great grandfather) in this study, had two stepdaughters and one biological son with his wife who passed away from COVID in 2020. Though he clearly thought of his stepdaughters as his own children, he largely discussed his son and the importance of bringing him up differently than how he was brought up. Eddy was a singer who traveled for most of his career, but he made sure to speak to how he supported his family as much as he could even while he was traveling. He was a man who put his family before everything else and sought to be generous with his time and money. He also took pride in his Cherokee heritage, speaking some parts of our interview in Cherokee and describing the influence of his Cherokee grandparents on his worldview. He shared that his number one goal in life was for his son to know that he tried to be the best father he could, even though Eddy's own father had never provided a positive example of fathering.
Will	Will became a father when he began dating his now-wife who had one daughter already. They now have four children, including their daughter from his wife's previous relationship. Will never described his oldest daughter as a stepdaughter, only sharing that he was not biologically related to her when I asked a question about fathering roles. Will never knew his own father and had several fathering role models including leaders in his church, his grandfather, and men his mother had romantic relationships with. As a father himself, Will shared that everything he does is for the benefit of his children and family. He cared deeply about improving the image of Black fatherhood and the image of Appalachia, using his position in marketing at a local university as a platform to share narratives of diverse Appalachians. He leveraged multiple connections to further amplify these narratives and is motivated towards positive change. He was an incredibly hopeful man who passed that hope to his children, family, and community.
Shane	Shane had two children, one was seventeen and the other was eight years old. Shane was originally from Philadelphia but moved to Appalachia over twenty years ago and chose to raise his family in Appalachia. He was the only participant who was not born and raised in the region, providing unique insights into the positives of Appalachia. Though he did not share the unique experience of growing up in the region, he fully identified as an Appalachian father and had sufficient knowledge of the historical context to warrant being classified as an Appalachian father. He held traditional constructions of masculine fathering closely to his identity and talked at length about the importance of legacy and passing down masculinity to his son. Shane had a very neutral relationship with his own father, sharing that he wanted to do some of the things his dad did well and change some of the things he did not do as well for his kids.
Jack	Jack, like Justin, was raised by his great grandparents when his parents had him at a young age. His father passed away when he was an infant, so he never had the

	<p>chance to know him. Jack’s great grandparents raised him on a farm and showed him many of the values he still holds close to his heart. He had three children, his two sons from his first marriage and his daughter from his second marriage. He described wanting his children to know the ‘Appalachian way of life’ even though he described Appalachian people as a ‘dying breed’. He balanced his feelings of sadness for Appalachian customs dying with the knowledge that his children needed new skills to thrive in the world as it is.</p>
Marty	<p>Marty was born and raised in rural Appalachia. The youngest of five children, he loved his family and was devastated by losing his father at age twelve. He centrally valued caring for community and others around him, so much so that he lived with his mom until he got married at 38. He was a sweet man who loved being a father to his two daughters and highly valued showing them the love he had for them and his wife. He valued masculine traditions such as financially providing for his family but made sure that those values never stood in the way of him being a father. When his first daughter was born, he was working as a long-haul trucker and realized that he wanted to be home every night to put his daughter to sleep. His identity as a father was more central than his value of participating in paid work so he shifted his actions to reflect his values.</p>
Randy	<p>Randy, father of two and expecting another, grew up in West Virginia with his brother and parents. He looked up to his father for a role model and loved his childhood. He found a lot of support from his church growing up and based much of his identity in his faith. He discussed his tension between masculinity and fathering identities, detailing his subpar reaction to learning that his wife was pregnant with a girl. He is ashamed of this reaction now but recalled reacting viscerally, not wanting to be in her life and feeling like a failure for not having a son. Now, with two daughters and another on the way, he cannot see his life any differently and he cherishes his children.</p>

Appendix E

Final Coding Grid

Themes	Subthemes	Definitions
Appalachian Values	Work Ethic	Valuing physical work (e.g., coal mining, farming) and intrinsic motivation to complete tasks. Applied both to work for money and work around the home. E.g., “There’s this blue-collar work ethic that we have and we exhibit”
	Community Care	Caring for individuals and the collective community. Community strength comes from the individuals that care. E.g., “People in this area are close-knit. They help one another.”
	Providing and Protecting	Providing for and protecting family, especially children. Not only financially but with food, housework, emotional support. E.g., “You want to provide encouragement, nourishment”
	Balancing Tradition and Change	Acknowledging that the world is changing and that traditional Appalachian values by themselves might not provide kids with the skills needed to thrive in today’s world. E.g., “We don’t have as much of that today versus back then. Not in a bad way, that’s just a dying breed of people”
Feeling a loss of Agency	Blaming Others	Looking outside of their direct sphere of influence for someone to blame for their situated context. E.g., “Country’s gone to shit since Biden became president”
	Longing for a Nostalgic Past	Reflecting on their childhood or on the past in a nostalgic light to identify something that changed and made things worse. E.g., “When I was a kid there were a lot more stay-at-home moms around because you could afford it.”
	Hopelessness	Feeling like there is no hope or ability to change their situation.

		E.g., “It was hard but at the same time you’re just like, “whatever.” What can you do?”
	Distancing from Appalachian Identity	Distancing from Appalachia to prove that they are different from those who are struggling. E.g., “I don’t think I’m a typical Appalachian father because I’m a college professor.”
(Re)negotiating Appalachian Fatherhood	More than Rednecks	Responding to societal narratives on Appalachia, using their voice for change. E.g., “We’re still here and we’re still thriving”
	“That’s not me”	Distancing themselves from their own fathers. Creating a better experience for their children than they had. E.g., “I took the negative from my dad and thought, I don’t like that”
	“You do your best”	Thinking of themselves as fathers. Creating self-conceptions within and outside of perceived boundaries. E.g., “Sometimes I think they’re good in spite of me. Sometimes I think they’re good because of me, that I helped.”

Appendix F

Research Flyer

Are you an Appalachian Dad? Want to talk about your experiences?

Researchers at Virginia Tech are conducting a research study to explore what its like being a Dad in Appalachia

- Must live in Appalachia
- Requires one interview (60-120 minutes)
 - recorded with participant permission
- \$40 Visa Gift Card for participation

**For more information, please contact
Aran Garnett-Deakin
acgarnet@vt.edu or 540-818-1740
IRB # 22-738**

Appendix G



Information Sheet for Participation in a Research Study

Principal Investigator: Aran Garnett-Deakin

IRB# and Title of Study: Fathering in the "Other America": Narratives of Appalachian Father Identity IRB #22-73

You are invited to participate in a research study. This form includes information about the study and contact information if you have any questions.

- **WHAT SHOULD I KNOW?**

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of rural Appalachian fathers (i.e., to explore father's narratives about their fathering). If you decide to participate in this study, you will be interviewed by the lead interviewer of this project for approximately 60-120 minutes. You will be asked a series of questions about your family, your fathering experiences, your fathering role models, your involvement with your community, and what aspects of your identity make you a good father. The interview will be audio recorded, which is a requirement for participation. When your interview is transcribed, or written down, all identifiable information will be removed from your transcript to protect your anonymity. Interviews will be scheduled at a mutually convenient time and location of your choosing.

The study methods have little known risks, but participation may cause you some discomfort due to the topics we will discuss. However, these risks are no greater than discussing sensitive issues with friends and family in an everyday setting. Potential benefits including making meaning of, or better understanding, one's experiences as an Appalachian father and the chance to contribute to knowledge about this topic

You can choose whether to be in this study or not. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind. You may also refuse to answer any questions you don't want to answer and remain in the study.

- **CONFIDENTIALITY**

We will do our best to protect the confidentiality of the information we gather from you, but we cannot guarantee 100% confidentiality.

Any data collected during this research study will be kept confidential by the researchers. Your interview will be audio-recorded using a digital recorder and then transcribed. A member of the research team will de-identify each transcript, blinding all names, dates, and locations. The audio file from your interview will be deleted. De-identified transcripts will be uploaded to a private Google Drive. Each transcript will be assigned a unique participant ID code. A separate document linking the ID code to your name and email address will be stored on a secured password-protected computer in a locked private office on campus, accessible only to the PI. This document will be destroyed upon completion of data analysis and publication (an estimated two years).

The one exception to our rule of strict confidentiality is that we are legally obligated to report allegations of child abuse and to intervene if any participant reports an intention to harm themselves or others.

- **WHO CAN I TALK TO?**

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact Aran Garnett-Deakin at acgarnet@vt.edu or 540-818-1740 or Dr. Caroline Sanner at csanner@vt.edu or 540-231-1419. You are not waiving any legal claims, rights or remedies because of your participation in this research study. If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, contact the Virginia Tech HRPP Office at 540-231-3732 (irb@vt.edu).