

**"FUTURES PITILESSLY BLOCKED AND PASSIONS VIOLENTLY  
CHOKED:" NARRATING FATALISM IN NON-RESIDENT FATHERHOOD**

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## **DEDICATION**

First, this thesis, specifically its main topic, is dedicated to mom, Wendy. Second, to my wife Alisa, for introducing me to the academic world. Both people offering unwavering support to finish this thesis as an example of perseverance for the kids.

## ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I use the Durkheimian concept of fatalism, a condition of excessive social regulation, to reinterpret the published personal journal of a non-resident father who constructs himself as a victim of unjust circumstances in relation to his non-resident status. This reinterpretation is undertaken through a reflexive narrative analysis to demonstrate that his story, written as if an expression of personal experience, is socially situated as a narrative construction. I also examine my own subject-formation and positionality to reflect on my implication in the text as a sympathetic, “preferred” reader. I show how this process of reflection also affected my conceptualization of fatalism and its application to the document in question. I explain how the act of writing this thesis became a reflexive journey toward a non-positivist approach to understanding and applying a Durkheimian concept and to assessing the narrative construction of “experiential” truth-claims by writers and readers.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## CHAPTER 1: THESIS FRAMEWORK AND INTRODUCTIONS

*The greatest challenges in my life center on the logistical hurdles and limited rights I have experienced as a noncustodial father... it's as though dads don't matter.*

- Cornel West, *The War Against Parents*<sup>1</sup>

This thesis explores the applicability of Émile Durkheim's (1951) concept of fatalism, a condition of excessive social regulation that goes against individual or group wishes concerning a particular set of circumstances. Durkheim notes that social situations such as slavery, childlessness, forced domestic labour, or prison can be experienced as hopeless and can result in impaired or repressed agency. More specifically, Durkheim's study of suicide posited a specific type of suicide by individuals or groups—fatalistic suicide—due to excessive regulation (Durkheim, 1951). Durkheim's description of fatalism implies that a social-structural barrier, an “oppressive discipline” (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276), can produce negative responses by those individuals or groups who suffer blocked agency, and that this combination of blockage and negative response represents a socially pathological condition. I develop a definition of fatalism that builds on, but extends and adds nuance to the Durkheimian definition, which emphasized social-structural conditions more than experience or expression. I also argue that Durkheim paid insufficient attention to the social construction of blockage, and to forms of agency still available to those who are denied agency.

In this thesis, I examine an online manuscript that provides a narrative of separation, divorce and loss of custody written by “Todd,”<sup>2</sup> a non-resident father who

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<sup>1</sup> Quote from Hewlett & West, 1998, p.21-22.

<sup>2</sup> “Todd” is Todd Bottom, the author of *Confessions of a Deadbeat Dad*, a published version of a personal journal (Bottom, 2013). *Confessions of a Deadbeat Dad* [Kindle



chronicles his experiences over a two-year span in a nine-hundred-page, handwritten personal journal (subsequently released as a typed 300-page ebook through a major online bookseller) while going through a divorce and custody battle.<sup>3</sup> I examine Todd's journal utilizing a reflexive form of narrative analysis. A narrative analysis generally involves the study of how people interpret, construct, and explain their experiences to others. Narratives are stories that construct an image (Crepeau, 2000). This image can be created on purpose or by accident, and such images often relate to a project of identity-construction maintenance or defense. Narratives also construct time and space, and the agency of narrators and others, in particular ways and do so in terms of themes, genres, and categories within a set of cultural conventions. In short, they are stories that act as motivated vehicles to reproduce, and to be reproduced by, other stories with similar messages and agendas concerning social action. A *reflexive* narrative analysis includes attention to how the researcher interprets a narrative, and how the researcher may rely on or construct their own narratives in the course of research.

Todd's journal can be interpreted as a narrative of blocked or diverted agency and an expression of the emotions and rationalizations that accompany the experience of such a blockage. In this thesis, I examine how Todd constructed himself as a victim, and how

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DX version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com. Todd's first name is used for brevity. My writing in this thesis about Todd's journal and anything related to it represents my interpretation of that journal as a social artifact, and is not intended as constituting statements of fact about its author or any persons mentioned in his journal.

<sup>3</sup> Even though I sympathize with and understand Todd's many heart-felt expressions, I am interested primarily in its expressive content, and how it is written so as to construct a particular meaningful reality. I discuss only Todd by name out of respect for the other parties that may not wish to be named in Todd's public document. I also give Todd's former partner, and the mother of his children, the pseudonym of "Tess" as it is a similar short name.

that active self-construction through narrative could be described in terms of fatalism. I also suggest that Todd is taking up a sensed frustration and giving it meaning by producing a narrative about loss of agency and influence over the upbringing and well-being of his children. Instead of accepting Todd's journal uncritically as a true representation of his actual circumstances, I became interested in Todd's account as a form of narrative agency, and how that narrative related to my own experiences of the social world and to my own socially-located (re)construction of Todd's narrative.

I argue that Todd's writing of a journal could be seen as a response to and an articulation of blocked agency which serves a number of purposes, including a personal guilt for "giving up" on his custody battle (Bottom, 2013, May 2012). While Durkheim related the concept of fatalism to a particular type of actual suicide, I treat Todd's journal as expressive of a metaphorical "suicide" of parental agency in narrative form. Todd claims to feel tremendous pressure from others to relinquish his personal involvement as a father (explained further in Chapter Four). He self-assigns the label of "deadbeat dad" after apparently giving up his legal fight for shared custody (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). This expression of submission can be considered fatalistic and his narrative versions of the realities that led him to that point can be explored in that light. Such responses to an experienced or perceived lack of agency can give clues to how Todd's thinking and his story are co-implicated in each other, but also how narratives are experientially and structurally connected to the social world.

Non-resident fathers are defined for the purposes of this thesis as fathers who are not living full time with their children due to permanent or long-term familial (usually marital) separation. Todd goes from being a primary caregiver of his three daughters to a

non-resident father (and noncustodial one, defined more narrowly as a father without physical or legal custody), who describes himself as blocked from providing care for his children in the way he had before marital separation. In recent literature on non-resident fathers, certain situations and experiences are described in ways that suggest the possible usefulness of fatalism as a way to conceptualize instances of non-resident fathers being blocked from personally meaningful interaction with their children (Marsiglio & Day, 2012; Mincy, Jethwani, & Klempin, 2015). Todd's journal is a useful starting point to conceptualize his life as a non-resident father because he recounts many of the same victimological experiences as do non-resident fathers mentioned in the academic literature (Kruk, 2012; Millar, 2009). Moreover, a personal journal diary can provide detailed examples in terms of which to explore how fatalism works and unfolds in a narrated subjective experience of a real or perceived blockage of agency. Whereas in interviews, participants may feel put-on-the-spot to answer semi-standardized interview questions, Todd has recounted events and emotions during the time he experienced them, rather than in a hasty or distant recollection with an interviewer.

However, Todd's journal was produced *intentionally* to make sense of his thoughts, feelings, and identity in particular and motivated ways, and also to construct a meaningful account of the social context he finds himself in. Todd focuses on his own gendered victimization as a non-resident father, producing a narrative that is similar to other narratives recounted in the literature on non-resident father experiences. Instead of either ignoring this victimization narrative, or taking it for granted as direct evidence of his actual situation, I am interested examining how Todd constructs a story of his blocked agency as oppressive and implicitly gendered, and how he responds to that blockage in a

way that could be called fatalistic; more specifically, a narrative construction of fatalism as a form of justification.

Through reflection on my own positionality during the process of writing this reflexive narrative analysis, I was able to use Todd's journal as a starting point to address fatalism as a sense of powerlessness that does not simply reflect blocked agency but can reproduce it in another form. Initially, I intended mainly to read Todd's journal as a social artifact of actual lived experiences of non-resident fathers, using fatalism as a lens to socially situate and explain his expression of victimization in relation to actual institutional blockages. But the "fatalism" I extracted from Todd's journal turned out to be not only about Todd; it also indicated something about my own work as author of this thesis, constructing Todd's narrative as fatalistic.

In other words, this thesis initially used fatalism as a predetermined conceptual lens to explore Todd's victim narrative as reflective of actual social conditions. My original intent was to explore that narrative inductively, seeking evidence from it of how Todd navigated fatalism in the process of his separation and divorce. However, as the writing process went on, I navigated and negotiated my way through a substantial, and slow, epistemological shift. I originally wanted to explain Todd's lived experience as something real, explainable in terms of Durkheim's concepts of social facts and social pathologies (as I will explain in Chapters Four and Five). I saw truth in Todd's lived experience because I had seen similar things in my own life which I had interpreted similarly. However, I began to realize I was (re)writing my own narrative by taking from the narratives Todd used, and thus constructing Todd's life as a reflection of my own

experiences, which I wanted to make sense of by re-describing them sociologically as fatalistic.

### **FATALISM AS A CONCEPTUAL EXPERIENCE**

My epistemological and ontological approach was originally positivistic, but largely now follows a constructivist paradigm. Referring to the ideas of Lincoln, Lynham & Guba (2011), my reading of Todd's victim narrative has come to be shaped not only by the use of the concept of fatalism as a definitional lens, but also by an awareness of how my interpretation of my own lived and witnessed experience has affected my appropriation of the term and of its conceptual development. As with the approach modelled by Frank Pearce (2001), my use of the term still honours the Durkheimian definition but engages with it critically in order to expand its possible uses.

I use narrative analysis to examine how Todd's account of his circumstances is written so as to be expressive; that is, to appear to be a straight forward expression of a pre-existing reality influenced by other narratives. Narrative analysis is about interpreting an informant's story (Riessman, 1993, p. 4-5). Todd's narrative supplies a story, in a particular sociocultural context, and in the way Todd wants readers to hear it (Ahmed, 2012; Riessman, 1993). I point out how his account constructs his (lack of) agency in a fatalistic way. At the same time, I also point out *how my own account* co-constructs the realities Todd refers to. As a youth, and still today, I have felt ripple-effects from events in my early life when non-resident fathers close to me lost a sense of connection with their children and a loss of a sense of agency in their parenting (more in Chapter's Three and Four).

As a part of the narrative analysis, I explain how Todd's narration positions him

in terms of a particular status and subject-position; that of a heterosexual, white, working-class male. I conceptualize how the situations Todd constructs can be called fatalistic in terms of the narrative construction of a particular agent-type:<sup>4</sup> a non-resident father, estranged from both ex-spouse and children. I discuss Todd's subject-position as a non-resident father based on the social situation he describes himself in and how his own actions (further discussed in Chapter Four). I discuss in Chapter Three how Todd has constructed himself as a victim (as a non-resident father) in a way that gives little room for a narrative awareness of intersections between his gender and other identities such as race, sexual orientation, ablebodiedness, and the like. However, intersectionalities of class and gender identity have become central to my unpacking and sociological discussion of Todd's journal. Taking the construction of Todd's narrative at face value can be problematic. For example, Todd does not consider how his sexual orientation or race may have affected his agency or his sense of loss. I can hypothesize that he has the privilege not to see that privilege, and can resort to the normative identity of a white heterosexual man without seeing issues in doing so.

### **The Construction of Reality and the Reality of Constructivism**

Self-reflexivity is an indispensable device in a researcher's toolbox because it reminds them of their own positionality (Wong, 2009, p. 245). Moreover, even the premise that fatalism is *solely a lens* can be described as a problematic "positivist" claim in the context of this thesis. I suggest that a reflexive narrative analysis best allows for the incorporation of a mix of methodological techniques to help me examine how my own

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<sup>4</sup> This is a narrative construction produced by non-resident fathers, but also reproduced in some sociological literature on non-resident fatherhood.

response to the powerlessness expressed by non-resident fathers I knew factored into my attempt to account for fatalism as something that can be at once experiential, constructed, and in *some* sense objectively real in itself. In the process of developing this account, I was also led to see Durkheim's own epistemological realism as more nuanced than some of his positivistic interpreters have allowed.

Fatalism is "real" in the sense that it is a concept, an element of a shared discourse, with both a general dictionary definition and a more specialized theoretical one. It is an artifact of theoretical and sociological work. It can be used to name a structural condition and its outcomes, as Durkheim intended, or a situational predicament, or an experience, or a response to that experience (Hart & MacKinnon, 2010, p. 1045). I argue here that these more situational elements are important both to understanding the structural condition and responses to it. But they are also important to factor into how researchers and theoreticians (like me) use and apply the concept of fatalism. In applying and using it, the concept becomes not only a means to show how individuals or groups are positioned in social life but also part of *a situated construction of meaning* that is *itself* positioned. My social background, experience, present social location and purposes all feed into this process. For instance, powerlessness can be described as an outcome or product of a struggle between different individuals and groups based on class or other ascriptive traits. I try to show how that description can and should also take into account the specifics of situation and context; how people are socially-situated in ways that make them feel powerless and express that powerlessness. And further, how they express it, and how I make sense of that expression, are also situated and contextualized acts of constructing accounts.

I explore narrative elements in Todd's journal that eventually helped me understand how I came to see the concept of fatalism as applicable to my own life. Non-resident fathers can express a felt lack of agency in ways that appear to concur with a Durkheimian definition of fatalism, seeing their blocked agency as something real and inevitable. But their identification of this blockage may or may not be consistent with their self-identification as non-resident fathers, or my identification of their situations as fatalistic, and even if it is, other interpretations are possible.

My use of the term "fatalism" in this thesis cannot be equated simply with what Durkheim referred to as an "oppressive discipline" because my epistemological orientation entails an exploration of how this "oppressive discipline" comes to be articulated and taken for granted as factual. However, the narrative construction and expression of enforced compliance can result in a range of actions and non-actions which *produce* "lack of agency" both narratively and in social action. In that sense, a narrative gains two kinds of actuality. First, it exists as an artifact, in that I encounter it, and *its particular existence and availability to me* enables and constrains my interpretation of it. Second, Todd's writing of it enables a justification for his own action or lack of action, and may well serve a similar purpose for many of its readers. Thus, in the ways it is encountered, and in its consequences as it is taken up into interpretation and action, it can be thought of as a social fact (Pearce, 2001, p. 20).

### **THESIS SUMMARY**

In Chapter Two, I examine the theoretical literature on fatalism and develop a definition to accompany a reading of the sociological and social-psychological literature on the historical, intersectional and legal aspects of non-resident fatherhood; a definition



that would incorporate not only legal status and social position, but also situational experience, and narrative expression. From this, I identify how a modified and extended concept of fatalism could be applied to a discussion of Todd's narrative, in order to shed light on how Todd interprets both the structural constraints that shape non-resident fatherhood and the situational predicaments in which he found himself.

In Chapter Three, I discuss my methodological and epistemological approach to a reflexive narrative analysis of Todd's journal, but also how I have interpreted Todd's journal to reconstruct a definition of fatalism. I sketch out a modified Durkheimian "epistemological middle-ground" conceptualization is used to make sense of fatalism by playing off both constructivism and realism. I treat narrative as an exercise in reality-construction but at the same time retain the idea that the narration works from and expresses a lived experience that was experientially-real to its author and was made sense of in terms that reflect the author's commitment to identifying and expressing his experience of loss and blockage *as* real. Just because Todd saw his experience as real and his narrative as a direct account of that reality does not, of course, make his experience, as narrated, "real" in any realist sense at all. It is still a construction of meaning from subjective experience. However, that work of construction actually took place, as evidenced by its published result. Further, constructing it actualized Todd's self positioning as a blocked agent. The "real" here does not lie behind the text, nor in Todd's subjectivity, nor in my own, but in the way meaning is *made actual* in work that produces texts, identities, and actions. The reported details of his loss of agency become less important to my discussion in Chapter Four than his need to express it convincingly in a particular way.

In Chapter Four, I discuss how I came to realize that I had constructed a particular approach to gender and class in analyzing Todd's journal in connection to other narratives about the victimization of non-resident fathers. Instead of "finding" fatalism through the window of Todd's journal, I came to address my own interpretation as related to the resistance and resentment I had developed based on my own personal experience of a felt lack of agency to help non-resident fathers I knew and know. However, my treatment of gender and class often involved a kind of oversight or a way of how I constructed Todd's journal as possessing narratives. Thus, I address how Todd's journal was constructed in terms of particular narrative tropes that display similar oversights. I conclude with an assessment that fatalism can be connected to the social world in a way similar to how narrative tropes can be related to larger master narratives.

In Chapter Five, I discuss new ways of examining my own work in Chapter Four. I unpack Chapter Four's move away from positivism by addressing how my initial subject-position as a reader fitted the way Todd's journal constructed its ideal reader. Todd may have constructed a subject-position for himself and an empathetic reader, and constructed characters in his narrative as subjects or objects in ways that fitted an overall narrative intent. The concepts I introduce in this chapter connect to a further unpacking of the narrative construction of subject-positions as a political process. I conclude by describing how the concept of fatalism can still be a useful tool for a critical and discursive approach to social analysis, not just a relic of positivism or functionalism. I suggest that a Durkheimian perspective focused on social facts might be reconcilable epistemologically with constructivism and methodologically with a reflexive approach to narrative and discourse analysis. The Durkheimian epistemological middle ground

promoted in this thesis is not intended as conclusion to a problem, but as a starting-point in developing the idea that analysis of “discursive social facts” might serve to reconcile realism and constructivism as complimentary ways to point out the actualities at work in the production and reception of narrative.

## **CHAPTER 2: CONSTRUCTED AS A FATALISTIC NON-RESIDENT FATHER: SOCIAL AND HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

This chapter reviews the theoretical and practical literature that I use to define Todd's self-described lack of agency as fatalistic, and to place it in social and historical contexts. I begin the chapter by discussing theoretical literature on the Durkheimian concept of fatalism and develop my own definition as a lens to explore Todd's personal journal. I treat Todd's situation, status, and identity as a non-resident father as central to this discussion, but I also compare his self-description to the reported situations of other non-resident parents to demonstrate the importance of taking into account intersectional issues in Chapter Four. I then explore the historical evolution of patriarchal norms as they affect the development of modern North American family law. This chapter thus gives a theoretical and contextual prologue to subsequent chapters before I address my own positionality in this thesis.

### **FATALISM AS A CONCEPT**

To better examine dimensions of fatalism beyond its simple definition as an over-regulation of individuals by society, it is first important to explore the reception of Durkheim's definition of fatalistic suicide. According to Durkheim, fatalistic suicide:

deriv[es] from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline... all suicides attributable to excessive physical or moral despotism [are fatalistic, as is]... the ineluctable and inflexible nature of a rule against which there is no appeal (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276).<sup>5</sup>

Durkheim (1951) characterized fatalistic suicide as the suicide of slaves, very young husbands (presumably put in new familial roles that constricted their sexual and

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<sup>5</sup> Part of this quote is the beginning quote in this thesis title.

domestic lives with overbearing moral regulation), and childless married women who presumably wished to have children in accordance with prevailing norms, but were unable to do so (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276). Pearce (2001) and Besnard (1993) claim on Durkheimian grounds that the suicide of prisoners could also be called fatalistic, as could those of members of caste or status systems who are restricted in their actions by other groups (Both Shakespearean characters Romeo and Juliet could be said to have committed fatalistic suicide). Besnard (1993) argues that the suicide of prisoners and the mass suicide of Jews upon the capture of Jerusalem by the Romans could be characterized as fatalistic (p. 171). The suicide of neglected elderly people in institutional settings could also be said to fit this categorization. The claim is that when individuals are blocked by regulative circumstances from important activities, accomplishments, or experiences, they lose agency and hope, and may no longer feel like going on with their lives, to the point at which suicide comes to be seen as the only remedial option. From this definition, the suicide of fathers who cannot have access to their children, and who consider that such access has become impossible, could also be defined as fatalistic. Such a definition was the genesis of this project.

Durkheim treated fatalistic suicide as the converse of anomic suicide, in a four-fold typological categorization of suicide types (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276): fatalistic, altruistic, anomic and egoistic (Durkheim, 1951). He related these to pathological developments in two basic mechanisms ensuring social solidarity: regulation and integration. Whereas fatalism involves social over-regulation in social life, anomie stems from endemic under-regulation. As Lockwood (1992) explains, anomie and fatalism represent opposite ends of the disciplining of wants (p. 41). The concept of anomie has

been far more popular than that of fatalism in sociological theory and research since it was first advanced as a sociological term in Durkheim's doctoral dissertation, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984). Robert Merton's (1996) functionalist discussion of the causes of criminal behavior, situated in the concept of anomic strain, has been one of the most important developments of the Durkheimian concept of anomie. Merton and others evolved a definition of anomie that moved away from Durkheim's emphasis on a pathological lack of social regulation at an institutional level toward a concern for ways in which "normlessness" was expressed in *individual* social action. Durkheim related the idea of anomie to the rapid development of an industrial and urbanized Europe in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (Lukes, 1972). Market economies grew at a rapid pace and outgrew old regulatory frameworks, causing an "absence of 'a body of rules' governing 'the relations...between social functions'" (Lukes, 1972, p. 172). Durkheim illustrated this institutional or structural view of anomie by way of an analogy to the effects of fatigue on a nervous system no longer able to adequately regulate the body (Durkheim, 1984).

Durkheim originally explained the consequences of anomie in *The Division of Labor in Society* (1984) as a pathology of social solidarity. He continued this discussion of social pathologies in his next work, *Suicide* (1951), arguing that suicide rates reflect social pathologies and do not exclusively result from psychological factors. Together, the concepts of anomie and fatalism encompass polarized pathologies of regulation. Durkheim suggested that people need a certain amount of regulation in their lives, not too much, not too little. If regulation becomes too intense, fatalistic suicide rates may increase. If regulation becomes chaotic and uncertain, then anomic suicide may increase.

Altruism and egoism, on the other hand, are polarized extremes of social integration. Altruistic suicide is a consequence of over-integration; egoistic suicide, of under-integration. Durkheim (1951) was particularly interested in discussing anomie in relation to regulative breakdown accompanying modern economic expansion and individualism, and only briefly acknowledges, in a short discussion of the “suicidogenic” potential of marriage, that excessive regulation can also be damaging (p. 169).

Partly because Durkheim himself did not see much use in looking at fatalistic suicide (Durkheim, 1951, p.276), fatalistic suicide has been sparsely studied or discussed since he pioneered the term in 1897, and even the literature that does exist on fatalistic suicide is neglected (Aliverdina & Pridemore, 2009; Besnard, 1993; Lockwood, 1982; Pearce, 2001). Most discussion of fatalistic suicide ends with the suggestion it needs to be researched further (ibid). The same goes for fatalism in general. Davies and Neal (2000) describe Durkheim’s own treatment of the concept as a footnoted “ragbag of slaves, young husbands, and childless wives” (p. 37). Only a few research studies have focused mainly on fatalistic suicide. One examined the fatalistic suicide of African Americans in New Orleans during the late 1950s and early 1960s due to segregation and racism (Breed, 1970). Another examined fatalistic suicide among post-revolution Iranian women due to the new restrictive social and religious pressures on them (Aliverdina & Pridemore, 2009). A third study looked at fatalistic suicide among rural women in China because of their inability to work for a wage in the same capacity as men to provide for their families, and a consequent inability to leave bad domestic situations (Davies & Neal, 2000). These studies tell us that social factors are potentially influencing individuals’

ability to participate in something that is valued in society or valuable to the individual, most often connected to the division of labour in that given society.

It is possible to make a link between fatalism and what Durkheim (1984) called the *forced division of labour* (Besnard, 1993, p. 172). Durkheim himself did not make this link explicit, but it would not be difficult to make. Durkheim describes the forced division of labour as a situation in which rules governing work in modern organic solidarity negatively limit the spontaneous organization of tasks in terms of human capacity and potential (Durkheim, 1984, p. 310). Although Durkheim discusses the “forced” division of labour as a special type of economic anomie, Pearce (2001) suggests it could equally well be argued that a forced division of labour pushes individuals into an economic location, form of despotism, or a caste that promotes fatalism (p. 126). The forced division of labour strips away or crushes an individual’s spontaneous ambitions, making organic solidarity in industrial societies something enforced and imprisoning (ibid). A forced division of labour could be said to exist in a modern context when workers experience frustrating forms of social constraint in the allocation of tasks and careers due to factors such as inheritance, ascribed status, a lack of meritocratic life chances, or an unequal balance of power between labour and capital.

Durkheim argued that, as the division of labour in a society becomes more complex and individualized, an organic form of solidarity would develop that would embody and support a sense of meritocratic spontaneity in the economy (Durkheim, 1974; Durkheim, 1984; Thompson, 1982). Organic solidarity is the social solidarity of complex modern (post-)industrial societies that find cohesion through the complex interrelation of different and specialized social tasks and the interconnected social



organizations and institutions which house them (Durkheim, 1984). Think of organic solidarity as different working parts of an engine that can only function properly if all parts are in good working order. This is a Durkheimian metaphor for the value of interrelated social institutions, regulation protective of individual rights, duties, and responsibilities, and forms of cohesion that support rather than detract from individual equality and individual freedoms. In *Division of Labour in Society* (1984) and *Individualism and the Intellectuals* (1973), Durkheim quite clearly argued that both individual rights and social justice (in the interests of equality) were necessary to the proper function of modern societies. Organic solidarity is in contrast to Durkheim's conceptualization of mechanical solidarity, which is described as the cohesion of small groups based on similarities among members (Durkheim, 1984).

Thus, it is possible to make suggestive connections between fatalism and anomie, as impairments of organic solidarity, as well as to distinguish between them conceptually. Acevedo (2005) argues that Durkheim's theory of regulation (anomie and fatalism) could offer a better alternative to a Marxian theory of alienation if the notion of anomie, a lack of regulation, were to be interpreted in terms of a search for an "optimal" human experience. Marx offered a critique of industrialization that could be described (in Durkheim's words) as workers being "over regulated" by the owners of the means of production in a way that robs workers of their autonomy and divides them from their human capacities. Moreover, Dew and Taupo (2009) suggest that workers become trapped between fatalism and anomie by inequalities in employer/employee power relations. For example, workers whose jobs are precarious may accept dangerous work conditions, giving in to workplace policies that create the possibility of injury (p.1004).

Being forced to work in such circumstances could be interpreted as fatalistic while the fact that workplace injustices persist because of weak regulation protecting worker safety could be interpreted as anomic (p. 1004). Besnard (1993) claims that fatalism and anomie need not be thought of as either completely complementary or as completely opposed. Fatalism can fit with a “regressive” type of anomie that no longer adapts to social conditions (172). This suggests that anomie and fatalism, even if they are definitional opposites in terms of the concept of regulation, can be features of the same pathological social system. A good example is how the prison system creates fatalism when one is sentenced to a term and anomie when one is released into a world of choices without supports. This issue is discussed further in Chapter Five.

Beyond general complaints about *Suicide*'s ecological fallacies (Pearce, 2001), and Durkheim's lack of attention to power relations (Lehmann, 1994), there are also some critiques of how fatalism fits within Durkheim's thinking about suicide. Taylor (1982) suggests that Durkheim underestimated the influence of fatalism in suicide (p. 172; Taylor qtd. in Pearce, 2001, p. 122). One might also suggest that Durkheim's work on divorce might actually have looked different if its fatalistic consequences were considered more carefully. For example, some post-divorce suicides could be considered not only as anomic, but also, potentially, as fatalistic to the extent that divorces involving legal restrictions on custody of or access to children could frustrate an individual's wish to be a meaningful part of a child's life. I will discuss this in more detail in Chapter Four. By not discussing fatalism at any length, Durkheim may also have misrepresented his own data on anomic suicide (Besnard, 1993, p. 169). Moreover, Durkheim's claim that modern industrial societies would feature both meritocracy in the workplace and familial

bonds outside it, poses a series of interesting questions about how clashes between familial and meritocratic obligations might play out in fatalistic as well as anomic forms. For example, Durkheim himself noted that family inheritance undercut economic meritocracy (Durkheim, 1984). For another example, in relation to my discussion in this thesis, if meritocracy encompasses women's equality with men in the workplace, this could lead to challenges to traditional patriarchal family structures (Gane, 1992). Durkheim himself (1984) suggested that meritocracy could lead to increasing rates of divorce if it undermined the regulative effects of marriage. Lehmann (1994) notes that Durkheim connected divorce to the interests of women and suggested that divorce could spare women from suicide more than men (p. 68). In this light, it could be suggested that some kinds of divorce, depending on the situation, are not as pathological as Durkheim was tempted to represent them at the time. Different people experience marriage and divorce differently depending on their social and situational locations and gender ascriptions. Durkheim largely ignored the micro-situational aspects of regulation in familial and work life as they related to gender.

Durkheim's work has often been considered in terms of consensus theory, as functionalist, positivistic, conservative, and neglectful of power relations in ways that render it outdated for contemporary use (Gane, 2010; Gane, 1992; Pearce, 2001; Strenski, 2006). Durkheim's discussions of gender issues have been considered to resemble "the misogynist patriarchalism of the socialist Proudhon" (Lehmann, 1994, p. 9). This characterization, especially of *The Division of Labor in Society* and *Suicide*, has limited the application of Durkheimian insights outside of conservative or structural-functionalist

theoretical outlooks, constraining the development of more critical applications of Durkheimian concepts, including that of fatalism (Pearce, 2001).

This limitation is reinforced by Durkheim's own critique of first-wave European feminist claims about the oppression of women. In his review of Marianne Weber's book on gender, *Ehefrau un Mutter in der Rechtsentwicklung*, he stated that Weber's theory "rests on the principle that the patriarchal family has brought about a complete enslavement of women. In its absolute form, the proposition is most disputable" (Durkheim, 1978, p. 143). Durkheim saw the development of patriarchal institutions as neither inevitable nor necessarily always oppressive, but as contingent on particular social developments such as the "representative" function of the male role in Roman paterfamilias which he saw as lying at the origin of European property systems but not necessarily determining their subsequent development (Ramp, 2001, p. 98). However, he did not develop this claim about the social contingency of patriarchy into a thorough critique of its consequences for modern social life. He also argued that women could benefit from differential treatment by the criminal justice system where women received lenient sentencing and were less likely to be accused of and punished for crimes (Durkheim, 1951, pg. 341-2 qtd in DiChristina, 2005, p.218). This is similar to the "chivalry thesis" discussed by contemporary scholars (Embry & Lyons, Jr., 2012; Shatz & Shatz, 2012). Moreover, Durkheim claimed that feminism could contribute to anomie if it advocated changes in the gender status of women too quickly. To avoid anomie, Durkheim supported a "go-slow approach" to changes in the status quo (Ramp, 2001, p. 99).

Durkheim implied that power relations are inherited through the continuity of institutions and collective representations and cannot be overturned quickly without anomie consequences (Ramp, 2001). If society changes overnight, many norms will remain though cut off from their cultural roots, causing collective confusion. Edmund Burke (1987) had the same idea when he described the French revolution as run by a secular intelligentsia who foolishly wanted to tear down the entire existing social order and did not respect long standing, and long built-up, social orders and customs. It is perhaps a classic “throw the baby out with the bath water” scenario.

While Durkheim himself was not a champion of Weber’s feminism, it is possible to develop a neo-Durkheimian argument in support of women’s rights, as a form of modern moral individualism and part of the universalization of human rights (Gane, 1992). Further, Gane (1992) notes that from a Durkheimian point of view, women can be said to be disadvantaged and “set apart” from mainstream society in the following ways:

- Men and women do not share equality in social life. Men are more involved in public society while women are more likely to look on from a distance, enclosed in familial life. This is based on socialization (p. 118). Higher suicide rates by men suggest that men are more involved in society than women and thus react more negatively to social reversals or problems (p. 117). Women’s roles in the home have led them to “withdraw” from society in ways that impair their social agency (p. 102). Totemic religions eventually place women on the outside of religious and social life, especially as religions became more evolved (p. 107-111).
- Durkheim explains in *The Division of Labor in Society* that divorce is somewhat beneficial for women (p.115-118) and marriage is somewhat beneficial for men (p. 118).

- Durkheim saw rape and sexual violation as socially and emotionally controlling acts (p. 101).
- Durkheim saw the family, and women's place in it, as a social construction linked to the organization of the division of labour (p. 102).
- Inequality between the sexes (as with any form of ascribed inequality) compromises organic solidarity (p. 105). We can see this in Durkheim's discussion of the forced division of labour (Durkheim, 1984).

Lehmann (1994) suggests that Durkheim's view of divorce can be appropriated by feminists partly because he saw moral individualism as a major component of organic solidarity (Durkheim, 1973), and a part of a spontaneous and meritocratic division of labour (Durkheim, 1984). It could be suggested on Durkheimian lines that if women benefit more than men from divorce, it is because they are involved in a particular type of marriage caste that is socially detrimental to them more than it is to men. The principle of meritocracy, as it is understood today, includes women's rights to work outside the home, for equal pay, and to be free of harassment.

Conversely, it is also possible to argue on Durkheimian grounds that differential gender regulation could have fatalistic or anomic consequences. Durkheim stated that young newly-married men could experience fatalism in marriage, feeling trapped in new role responsibilities. Ultimately, Durkheim did not necessarily compare the experiences of men versus women in terms of what some would call a "competing fatalism syndrome" but he did imply that fatalism is a social fact that affects different groups at different times and in different ways. Men are generally implicated structurally in a privileged status relative to women, but I argue in this thesis that non-resident fathers

may experience and express fatalism situationally (due to restrictive local applications of institutional regulation) despite this wider structural privilege, and that they may also experience restricted agency because of that wider structural privilege (or at least because of its historical or cultural legacy).

Thus, Durkheim's discussions of the division of labour, of marriage and of domestic life contain elements that could be mobilized in a feminist direction to treat all three as structurally or situationally oppressive of women and men, to different degrees and in different ways. But what about fatalism as an *expression of lived* experience? Durkheim does not explicitly venture into this area of inquiry in *Suicide*, but by examining how he develops the notion of anomie as a social force destructive of social solidarity which creates anomic suicide, one can suggest that a neglected or "hidden theory" of fatalistic experience (a "hidden theory" because it is hardly discussed) is available (Lockwood 1982). Although Lockwood (1992) suggests that Durkheim himself does not explore much beyond the dictionary definition of fatalism (p. 39), "the belief that all events are predetermined and therefore inevitable" (*The Oxford Dictionary*, "Fatalism," n.d.), the Durkheimian definition does lend itself to a more multifaceted examination of how individuals both experience and *respond* to social forces. This thesis explores the experiential and *expressive* dimensions of fatalism as a sense of frustrated agency developed in response to social situations or structures experienced or interpreted as unduly restrictive, and expressed in narratives or other forms. In other words, the focus of this thesis will be more on situated processes of fatalistic subject-formation than on the social-structural dimensions of fatalism in themselves, though these will be referred to contextually.

There are several interpretations of the Durkheimian conception of fatalism that can illustrate the manner in which it can encompass not only structural constraint but also the situated and subjective experience of blocked agency. Taylor (1982) suggests that fatalism is about submission. It indicates a world which has “constricting horizons and closed doors” (Taylor, 1982, p. 172; Taylor qtd. in Pearce, 2001, p. 122). Lockwood (1972) emphasizes the structural aspects of fatalism as “unavoidable facts of life, privations that are due to anonymous forces over which one has no control” (Lockwood, 1982, p. 103-4 qtd. in Pearce, 2001, p. 122). He adds that fatalism is an “external, inevitable, and impersonal condition” (Lockwood, 1992, p. 40); the reverse of which is anomie. However, in making this contrast, Lockwood, like Durkheim, also touches on the subjective features of fatalism. Rather than “horizons... abruptly widened so that aspirations know no bounds,” fatalism manifests in *hopes* that are “narrowed and diminished” (Lockwood, 1992, p. 38). Gane (1992) defines fatalism as “overarching control” over individuals (p. 117); however, Besnard (1993) defines it more as a quality of subjectivity; as “the impossibility of *interiorizing* [emphasis added] rules which are unjust and illegitimate because they are imposed from the... outside... [and are] pointless or ...excessive. (p. 171). Acevedo (2005) claims that the Durkheimian concept of fatalism has an affinity with Marx’s concept of alienation because both concepts convey a sense in which excessive social regulation can be psychologically damaging for individuals. Ritzer & Stepnisky (2018) describe fatalism as “[t]oo much regulation – oppression – [which] unleashes currents of melancholy that, in turn, cause a rise in the rate of fatalistic suicide” as more than a sum of individual decisions (p. 95). Steven Lukes’s (1972) describes fatalism as involving a type of *powerlessness* (p. 207). Lukes



re-translates the Spaulding & Simpson version of Durkheim's (1951) definition of fatalism as a "a rule in which there is no appeal" (Durkheim, 1951, p. 276) as "a rule in which one is powerless" (Lukes, 1972, p. 207). This implies that fatalism not only constitutes objective powerlessness due to a force that defines and structures a situation or event, but also that one feels powerless as an agent within (what they see as) a rule-bound context.

### A CONTEXT FOR FATALISM

My employment of the concept of fatalism, in regards to my interpretation of Todd's narrative, can be described as a *lens of analysis*, rather than a search for fatalism as a "thing" or an object of observation. I have actively reinterpreted Todd's narrative as fatalistic, but when I began this research, I tried to claim that I had "found" fatalism in Todd's narrative. However, to make that claim now would efface the theoretical work that went into my elaborated understanding of the concept in the course of reading Todd's journal and rethinking my approach to it. It would also be dishonest because I had already "found" fatalism, at least as an interpretive lens, before I read Todd's narrative. I had the concept in mind as I first read his journal, which led to a sense that "I need to study this as a document of fatalism."

Normally from a Durkheimian realist perspective, fatalism could be conceived of as social-structural features which act upon someone regardless of how they internalize it or experience them. Fatalism can be described as a social condition, or barrier, that blocks agency, and that may generate a situational response that unwillingly gives in to or even reinforces that blockage rather than resisting or defeating it. This process by which as social condition is linked to a response, can be described as what Durkheim called a

*social fact*. Social facts are “things” that cannot be wished away and resist our imaginative efforts to deny or to change them. As described by Thompson (1982), social facts are social constraints that are in their origin “external to any individual or the mind of an individual... norms backed by sanctions... imposed by language, the force of myths and symbols, and the pressures of public opinion...involving a lack of choice” (p. 59). These constraints shape social action.

This thesis breaks from a positivist tradition of Durkheimian interpretation and modifies a strictly realist interpretation of social facts. The social facts at play here, as I discuss them include not only the social details of social-structural forces, but also consideration of the reality of *expressions* of fatalism: both how they are subjectively experienced as real by individuals experiencing fatalism and how that subjective experience, and action following from it, is socially shaped. Durkheim would argue against the idea that a single narrative (e.g. a case study of a personal journal) could represent a social fact. However, he would likely argue that an entire narrative genre could be taken as evidence of a state of collective consciousness, and that those like Todd who contribute particular texts to that genre both reflect and contribute to its existence as a social fact (Pearce, 2001, p. 20). For Durkheim, social facts are real in that they exert a force that does not originate in individual imagination, and they are social when they cannot be explained fully by individual psychology or biology (Pearce, 2001, p. 16). Todd’s narrative shows evidence of a great deal of effort spent on articulating a sense of impaired agency in his relation to his children, and an inability to change this situation. I cannot directly verify the evidence Todd gives of the factors that seem to place him in a state of over-regulation, even though he names actors promoting that regulation. My

focus in this thesis is on making a case for the use of a modified concept of fatalism in interpreting Todd's narrative. As a concept with a broadly-accepted definition, fatalism is a linguistic and theoretical social fact. In this thesis I reconstruct it and re-use it, making apparent my own work in modifying it and applying it. But my narrative work in doing so is not merely individual; it is socially-situated, as is Todd's. Both of us construct narratives, and in doing so, modify or reproduce genres as social facts.

Todd's expression of and response to what he sees as his blocked agency can be described as fatalistic in that he represents his parental agency as blocked. Blocked not only by the specific actions of others but also by the current organization of the legal and court systems and of family law, as he encounters them. In the narrative he constructs, he represents himself as having no way to change or influence these circumstances, which he regards as unjust. He represents himself as caught in pathological, social, and situational circumstances that impose regulative barriers which are, in his telling, both excessive and inappropriate. He sees himself as reduced to a negative psychological state as a result. This thesis will argue that his self-construction along these lines constitutes a sort of resistive non-resistance; in other words, a response that is both fatalistic and politicized in its fatalism. Initially, I assumed that this response was simply and directly representative of the same kind of blocked agency experienced by non-resident fathers I knew in my own life and that I read about in sociological literature on non-resident fathers. However, as I developed and re-thought my approach in the course of writing this thesis, I shifted away from an effort to link Todd's *experience* directly to a structural reality, and began to focus more on his *narrative construction* of that experience.

Implicit in Durkheim's definition of fatalism is an experiential dimension. Fatalism produces a subjective sense of "hopelessness" in those whose agency is blocked. As I develop the definition further, I will suggest that there are elements of resistance and negotiation that are central to a more interpretive and constructivist approach to experience active and socially coded. One could argue that a social situation or structure is not actually fatalistic unless it is perceived and represented as a barrier to some form of agency. For an individual or group to experience and respond to blocked agency fatalistically, the inability to change a set of circumstances must be represented as manifesting a force or immutability external to the imagination. In this sense, the response of an over-regulated group parallels Durkheim's identification of fatalism as a social fact. Both refer to an experiential set of circumstances that cannot be wished away in order to make sense of what a group faces. What I am adding to Durkheim's definition is that the ability of the oppressed (or marginalized or disadvantaged) to conceive of and represent its experience as hopeless blockage must also be taken into account, because it encodes and shapes the response.

### **FATHERS AS PARENTS: A COMPARATIVE LITERATURE REVIEW OF NON-RESIDENT PARENTING**

To contextualize Todd's account of his self-described victimized status as a non-custodial parent, I undertook a literature review to find studies of how other non-resident parents respond to issues of being denied access and parental agency. Some of this literature is included in this chapter, while the bulk of it is referred to in Chapter Four alongside my narrative analysis of Todd's journal. My original approach to this literature was to use it to conceptualize, and in a sense legitimize (as additional empirical evidence)

what I took to be Todd's expression of fatalism as an existing social condition that shaped the lives of non-resident fathers in characteristic ways. While I would still argue that this literature indicates certain commonalities among non-resident fathers that reflect social factors, I now use the literature more to indicate how victimhood is *narrativized* in fatalistic ways.

The available research literature is somewhat uneven in its coverage. While both non-resident fathers and non-resident mothers may experience distress, including thoughts of suicide when they lose custody of or contact with their children (Kruk, 2010), the majority of research on the experiences of non-resident parents has been done on non-resident fathers (Sousa & Sorensen, 2006). This difference in coverage may result from statistical indications that fathers make up the majority of non-resident parents (Amato & Dorius, 2010).

It has been argued that, despite certain similarities, non-custodial mothers inhabit different gendered realities from those of non-resident fathers (Mincy et al., 2015; Millar, 2009; Sousa & Sorensen, 2006). For example, non-resident mothers are said to have more economic difficulties on average than non-resident fathers because there is often a post-divorce *economic well-being gap* that disadvantages mothers. (Sousa & Sorensen, 2006; Bianchi, Subaiya, & Khan, 1999). While the economic well-being gap decreased when the mother had fulltime work, it still existed to a smaller extent (Bianchi *et al.*, 1999). This likely can be explained by the narrative of a persistent income gap on average between women and men. Other data indicate that non-resident fathers, despite claims of economic well-being post-divorce, on average pay more child support than non-resident mothers (Sousa & Sorensen, 2006). Family court appears to be represented by many non-

custodial fathers as a setting heavily influenced by gendered norms, in a way quite different from the way it might be represented by mothers (Kruk, 2015; Kruk, 2012; Millar, 2009).

Much of the literature on non-resident fathers' experiences claim that gender plays an important role in fathers being disadvantaged in the wake of child custody decisions. The majority of child custody cases in Canada do not go in front of a court justice. Millar (2009) argues that when they do, fathers are not likely to gain an equal or greater extent of custody than mothers. As evidence, he points to findings that gender is *the* major statistical predictor of a parent losing custody in court (Millar, 2009). Troilo & Coleman (2013) claim that many fathers regard it as pointless to go to court because they feel they will not get custody. A "winner-takes-all" adversarial system is said to create legal barriers for fathers who wish to stay connected to their children (Millar 2009, Whitehead & Bala, 2012). According to Kruk (2013), even joint legal or physical custody decisions usually provide the mother with more day-to-day contact and decision-making authority with the child because children usually end up living with their mother. It is often claimed that the deck is stacked against fathers in family courts, partially because courts have been very slow in responding to the wishes of fathers to be more intimately and progressively involved with their children (Kimmel, 2013).

Doucet and Hawkins (2012) ask how feminists can give a voice to fathers' perspectives when structural conditions governing custody cases can still favour men as men. They argue that this question means feminists should "switch glasses" when addressing non-resident fathers. The grievances of fathers' rights advocates against the family court system can be seen as localized and situational "short-range views," while

putting on a feminist lens allows the identification of “long-range views” that men still have access to greater earning power over their careers. Short range views arguably were addressed in the introduction of the failed Bill C-560 to the Canadian House of Commons in 2014.<sup>6</sup>

However, Doucet and Hawkins (2012) expressed some political reluctance to see non-resident fathers as *disadvantaged* compared to resident or non-resident mothers. Giving legitimacy to short-range views regarding fathers’ issues may be used to justify going against feminist and women’s concerns and interests. It is argued that this view may ignore male violence against partners and children (p. 98), create claims that fathers are essential to parenting (p. 99), or reward neglectful fathers who were rarely present before divorce (p. 98). Many feminist scholars speak out more strongly than Doucet and Hawkins (2012) against fathers’ rights activism because they see this activism as a powerful lobby that seeks to undermine women’s equality, discredit accusations of male violence against women, and encourage opposition to changing gender norms more generally (Dragiewicz, 2011; Flood, 2004; Kimmel, 2013).

I do not claim that fatalism attaches to the lives of all non-resident fathers, nor do I argue that Todd’s journal is an exemplary representation of any “struggle” of non-resident fatherhood in general. At most, Todd’s narrative could be considered to be potentially exemplary only for a subset of the population that shares and expresses similar views in the form of what Durkheim would call collective-representations. My

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<sup>6</sup> In Canada, a Conservative Party private member’s Bill C-560, sought to amend the Divorce Act to grant an automatic shared parenting presumption in child custody disputes (unless the father is unfit or abusive). It failed to pass through the House of Commons, even though there was a Conservative majority government (Bill C-560, n.d.).

reason for examining Todd's journal in some depth is that, while non-resident fathers often occupy positions of gender privilege in the larger society, some of them are increasingly active in representing their gendered status as being connected to their non-resident parent situation, and I am interested in how these representations are constructed in narrative form.

Generally speaking, non-resident fathers, especially white non-resident fathers, seem to enjoy certain privileges compared to other non-resident parents, including non-resident mothers. As noted above, there is evidence of a post-divorce gendered economic gap disadvantaging mothers (Bianchi *et al.*, 1999). Also, though it is less common in aggregate numbers, non-resident mothers report similar experiences of thinking about suicide as do non-resident fathers (Kruk, 2010). It would be problematic to assume the actuality of Todd's claimed lack of agency as causally related to his situation as a non-resident father, or even as a man. However, it is important to situate Todd's ways of making sense of his experiences in relation to a wider literature, including academic literature, and as part of that contextualization, also to consider research that suggests men experience a particular and gendered lack of agency in court battles over parental custody. At the same time it is important to point out that other groups in North American society also are represented, or represent themselves, as suffering systemic inequalities in parental custody. Some of these groups suffer systemic inequalities. Two other groups may illustrate this point as examples:

- 1) Indigenous parents in Canada, especially mothers, have specific issues relating to child custody and access relating to the child welfare system. The "60s scoop" saw a hugely disproportionate removal of aboriginal children from their families and their (attempted)



assimilation into non-indigenous Canadian life by government policy (Sinclair, 2016). The expression, wishes, and perceptions of Indigenous parents were often ignored as their children were placed into white foster and adoptive care. This loss of parental agency was linked to the anomic displacement of entire societies and nations under a colonial system that then judged indigenous parents as “bad.” The result for such parents can be conceptualized as fatalistic in its truest form. Indigenous and other racialized parents in the North American context (especially African American fathers) have faced specific discriminatory barriers, reinforced by the negative and moralized evaluation of prison time, drug dependency, and gang affiliation, removing the legitimation needed to claim agency in raising one’s children (Ball, 2012; Edin & Nelson, 2013). Negative stereotypes about First Nation and Metis parents, especially single mothers and also fathers who are separated (whether resident or non-resident), are widespread because single-parent households not only violate more conservative middle-class norms, but are perceived to be much more common in First Nations than in the dominant culture (Ball, 2012). This in turn is blamed on the parents rather than on the structural conditions in which they parent. Todd implies his loss of agency came at the hands of Tess, the court system, his socio-economic status, and his gender rather than a racialized background. At least Todd could trust Tess to adequately care for his children, while the same cannot necessarily be said of government care of apprehended children.<sup>7</sup> If Todd were Indigenous Canadian during the “60s scoop,” and having to deal with a children’s services bureaucracy to

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<sup>7</sup> A psychologist I met (in a professional capacity), who assesses children in foster and adoptive care, claimed: “Mr. and Mrs. Government make really bad parents.” Here, I must add that, as explained in Chapter Four, my own class background predisposes me to be skeptical of direct government intervention in child custody matters.

regain custody of his children, he might well have likely situated his disputes with his ex-partner much lower on the custody priority list.

2) Same-sex parents face a specific challenge regarding custody. Because same-sex parents are asserting their rights as *real* parents in the face of opposition, custody disputes can add to the difficulties faced by gay parents in situating a legal standing for parentage presumption. The heteronormative assumptions of family court jurisprudence have been that parents are a couple, biologically related to the children, and of opposite sexes (Rosato, 2006). Historically, courts have revoked custody from homosexual parents when parents were open about their sexual orientation to their children. Non-biological parents in particular have been disadvantaged due to the custodial benchmark for good parenting including “moral fitness.” (Mason, 2012, p. 461). A Californian non-biological mother in 1991 was denied parental rights when her long-term relationship with the biological mother ended. The courts argued that they didn’t want to set a precedent in extending parental rights to “child-care providers” or “step-parents” (ibid). In similar cases, courts have required visitation of children with non-resident homosexual parents to be supervised, and have prohibited bringing children to gay events (Haney-Caron & Heilbrun, 2014, p. 22). Homophobic discrimination and anti-LGBT+ bias remain, though such restrictions have decreased substantially in the past decade (ibid). Todd was able to benefit within a heteronormative position that protected him from these specific issues, as it did also the non-resident fathers I knew while growing up. It is worth mentioning that the category “male non-resident parent” technically includes black, indigenous, and homosexual men. Such examples show how different systems of privilege and

disadvantage intersect, complicating the descriptions of the category. These examples show, along with the “non-resident father” category, that there is no such thing as privilege embodied in an essentialist sense. All men in society are privileged by gender as a general socially conceptualized category. Men are not privileged by their bodies per se, but their social placement within a patriarchal system. That social placement, however, is also affected by their ascription within other systems of privilege such as race or class.

The two examples given above demonstrate how parents of different ascribed backgrounds and lived experience can experience blocked agency with respect to non-resident parenthood and custody in different ways. While these two examples relate to oppressed groups in a larger social-structural context, and Todd is not necessarily a part of an ascriptively-relevant oppressed group (except, perhaps, for class in some ways), one can see the importance of discussing excessive regulation as affected by different forms of privilege. I am primarily interested in how Todd’s narrative construction of a particular kind of powerlessness may reflect, and respond to and seek to reconstruct his particular social place and context.

Todd is a heterosexual working-class white man, and while he may be happy to have a general readership to sympathize with his expressed plight, his writing evokes what are primarily divorced heterosexual (and in some ways, white) men’s concerns and implies shared sympathies with that readership. This is important to my analysis because Todd, as a working-class white male, sees the world through a particular lens that relates to his situation in the social world, and I have to realize that I interpret what he says through that lens with a predisposition to empathy, because it is a lens similar to the one I learned to apply in everyday life.

While I focus mainly on interpreting one document in this thesis, the foregoing discussion of privilege highlights the importance of placing my analysis in a historical context, including the history of jurisprudence dealing with parental custody.

### **History of Child Custody and Parental Rights**

As heads of household under common law, British fathers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries held almost absolute power over their households, as well as being under obligation to manage them. In consequence, they were accorded paramount custody over children (Kelly, 1994, p.121; Lowe, 1982, p. 26; Mason, 2012, p. 451). Ironically, this paternal presumption of paramount custody for fathers started to break down in both the British Commonwealth and the United States beginning with the development of industrial societies in which legislation began to force women and children out of employment in factories (with certain exceptions, such as textile production) and mines, promoting instead a family model in which women worked at domestic tasks in the home, dependent on a husband's or father's wage (Kelly, 1994, p. 122; Mason, 2012, p. 453). Children were channelled into comprehensive public education systems designed to train factory workers (Mason, 2012, p. 453). Children began to be thought of as "tender creatures" who required nurturing by mothers at home; hence the development of the "tender years" doctrine in child custody jurisprudence (ibid). This doctrine was part of a shift from a notion of child custody founded in paternal rights to one attentive to the perceived positive benefits on the child of maternal care (Lowe, 1982, p. 40). Child custody decisions began to favour mothers as child-development outcomes gained importance in legal argumentation, along with an

emphasis on the centrality of the mother, and of a purported motherly instinct, to the well-being of the child (Mandell, 2002, p. 35).

In Great Britain, such changes in jurisprudence were accompanied by political changes through parliamentary interventions in favour of mothers' rights. These changes began to challenge the automatic granting of custody to fathers because of their ability to provide financially for their offspring. Lowe (1982, p. 28-30) highlights a few key mothers' rights Acts in Britain:

- 1) The Infants Custody Act, 1839,<sup>8</sup> gave the courts discretionary powers over who received custody of children under seven years old. This change, which benefited the custody claims of women, became an established option, provided the woman in question had not committed adultery. This act was championed by Caroline Norton, whose "pamphlets arguing for the natural right of mothers to have custody of their children won much sympathy among parliamentarians" (UK Parliament, n.d.).
- 2) The Custody of Infants Act, 1873, extended discretionary powers of the court to children 16 years of age and younger, and dropped the embargo on the mother's adultery. The Act also allowed the mother to enforce an agreement to make the father give up his rights and duties if the court saw it as beneficial to the children.
- 3) The Guardianship of Infants Act, 1886, gave court discretion to provide custody of children at any age under 21 years.
- 4) The Guardianship of Infants Act, 1925, emphasized that all court decisions were to be based on child welfare. This Bill in particular laid the groundwork for maternal

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<sup>8</sup> This is also called the British Talford's Act or the British Act 1839 which was considered the start of legislated preferential treatment for mothers in child custody (Kelly, 1994, p. 121; Millar, 2009, p.4)

preference and eventually the “best interests” doctrine in British law, and paralleled developments in other jurisdictions as discussed below.

The “tender years” doctrine was similarly significant in the United States. New York’s highest court made a ground-breaking decision in 1840 to give a mother custody of her sickly daughter, referring to a “law of nature” that a mother could give the child better care than any other family member (Mason, 2012, p. 452). Mothers gradually came to be considered the “natural” or “psychological” parent (the parent the child is closest to) by family courts. By the 1920s, paternal preference was replaced by maternal preference in American courts, a shift which remained in place until the late 1960s (Kelly, 1994, p. 122). During the latter part of this era, after women had begun to re-enter the waged workforce in large numbers and in an increasing range of occupations, both father’s rights activists and feminists began to argue (often on different grounds) that fathers could, and should, share rights and responsibilities - and that mothers should not be seen as natural parents (Kelly, 1994, p. 122; Mason, 2012, p. 455). The National Organization for Women’s (n.d.) 1966 Statement of Purpose asserted that:

WE REJECT the current assumptions that a man must carry the sole burden of supporting himself, his wife, and family, and that a woman is automatically entitled to lifelong support by a man upon her marriage, or that marriage, home and family are primarily woman’s world and responsibility — hers, to dominate — his to support. We believe that a true partnership between the sexes demands a different concept of marriage, an equitable sharing of the responsibilities of home and children and of the economic burdens of their support. We believe that proper recognition should be given to the economic and social value of homemaking and child-care. To these ends, we will seek to open a re-examination of laws and mores governing marriage and divorce, for we believe that the current state of ‘half-equity’ between the sexes discriminates against both men and women, and is the cause of much unnecessary hostility between the sexes (par. 17).

As during the nineteenth century era of industrialization, major social and cultural changes after the First and Second World Wars led to new questions about divorce and

custody norms. In the 1960's, the idea of parental and personal happiness began to take precedence over staying in "unproductive or unhappy" marriages (Mason, 2012, p. 453). The idea of no-fault divorce changed views on custody. The late 1960s saw an increase in single mothers, which brought increased attention to the supposed best interests of children living in these arrangements (Nathanson & Young, 2015). According to Nathanson and Young (2015) legislators initially saw a political opportunity to focus on (mostly white) single mothers' votes (especially after the Reagan administration, which is said to have promoted negative and moralistic attitudes towards black single women with children) by emphasizing the figure of the "deadbeat dad" and the financial responsibility of child support debtors rather than non-resident rights and duties to the child (p.127). Nathanson and Young (2015) argue that through activism and political maneuvering, white single motherhood went from being seen as an unwanted burden to raise children alone to an identity of "iconic heroes of autonomy" (p. 114). Such perceptions, although not universal, may have contributed to public indifference to the concerns of white as well as black non-resident fathers and a stronger public sympathy for resident mothers (p.129), and reinforced an idea that, in contested custody cases, children were safer and developmentally better-off in the custody of mothers.

With more women working outside the home, and less importance being given to traditional marital and domestic arrangements, activism reflecting these changes thus re-scripted and reinvigorated a "best interests of the child" doctrine that was mobilized to give custody rights to the parent who could "best" care for the child (Kelly, 1994; Mandell, 2002; Mason, 2012; Millar, 2009). In 1970, the Uniform Marriage and Divorce Act stated that the best interests of the child needed to be the utmost importance, rather

than the rights of parents. This was adopted in most American states in the 1970s (Kelly, 1994, p. 122). In the 1980s, joint custody and divorce mediation became a viable and often preferred option for custody in most American States (Kelly, 1994, p. 123; Mason, 2012, 456).

During the 1990s, some feminists began to resist joint custody advocacy and the way it was conceived and administered at the time (Kelly, 1994, p. 123; Mason, 2012, p. 455) and influenced courts to include pre-divorce primary care-giver standards to reflect women's pre-divorce social statuses and the equitable distribution of familial labour (Kelly, 1994, p. 123). This initiative was grounded in the economic circumstances of many single mothers post-divorce, and in an argument that joint custody could be used by abusive male partners as a way to maintain control over the mother, rather than to share the rights and responsibilities of parenting (Doucet & Hawkins, 2012; Kruk, 2013, p. 97, 103-4; Nathanson & Young, 2015, p. 127). Both the 1990s feminist resistance to joint custody advocacy, and the decades old legal standard of a best-interest presumption in the courts, was argued to be gender neutral, but were claimed by some researchers to reward the parent (most often female) who spent the most time physically caring for the child (Kruk, 2012; Mandell, 2002, p. 53).

More recently in Canada, the "best interests" doctrine has been used as a political talking-point to "strengthen and modernize" the family court system to "protect children," as reflected in Bill C78 (Department of Justice Canada; May 22, 2018). At first reading in the House of Commons (it was later passed to change Canada's Divorce Act), the Bill addressed issues related to poverty suffered by women as residential parents. As such, it focused on making it easier for parents with decision-making



authority/responsibility to relocate to other provinces or countries, letting family courts make more decisions regarding accusations of family violence, and providing more support to custodial parents in collecting child support from non-resident parents (ibid). The bill's focus on supports to custodial mothers has allowed it to be read by fathers' rights advocates as neglecting the concerns of non-custodial fathers. The Bill is also designed to promote more mediation between divorcing parents. But according to its critics, it fails to take into consideration a shared parenting presumption that would guarantee judges would ensure parental custody rights for nonviolent fit parents who can prove they are willing and able to undertake shared or sole custody.<sup>9</sup>

### **Patriarchy, Privilege, and Politics**

Aside from a tendency in current jurisprudence decisions to award custody more often to mothers based on gendered presumptions about parenting, fathers as men nonetheless enjoy other still-common forms of gender privilege compared to mothers (Boyd, 2003; Doucet & Hawkins, 2012). Some feminist literature thus puts recent developments in divorce and custody jurisprudence in a historical perspective, as part of a gradual unseating of male privilege which, in response to particular legal and other issues, generates a surge of complaints by a seeming monolith of “angry white men” or “fathers’ rights activists” (Boyd, 2003; Doucet, 2007; Doucet & Hawkins, 2012; Kimmel, 2013; Mandell 2002).

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<sup>9</sup> A study done in Arizona, which has had an equal parenting presumption since 2013, found that this divorce policy is evaluated favorably overall regarding the best interests of children and has a neutral impact on parental conflict. However, this policy has potentially led to small increases of family violence accusations in family court (Fabricius, Aaron, Atkins, Assini, & McElroy, 2018).

R.W. Connell (2005) describes patriarchy as a relatively new concept that came into widespread use during the 1970s feminist movement(s) to explain a general form of male domination over women (p. 41). In mainstream definitions of patriarchy, men are said to enjoy a “patriarchal dividend” (Connell, 2005), similar to public shareholders in a successful corporation that pays an analogous “dividend” to men, as “shareholders” of patriarchy. A traditional, and more literal, reading of patriarchy defines it hierarchally as the rule of the father, or more generally the rule of men as family heads over women as family servants. Neither conceptualization exactly fits the circumstances of custody jurisprudence today.

Modern patriarchy can be thought of as more about ideas, practices, and norms that work interpersonally and structurally to regulate women or to restrict their agency in ways that tend to disadvantage or subordinate them in relation to men. A distinction between traditional and modern patriarchy can be made in terms of nineteenth century thinker Alexis de Tocqueville’s (1831) differentiation between the direct physical tyranny of a monarchy versus a moral despotism of ideas (the tyranny of the majority). However, Gayle Rubin (1997) replaces the concept of patriarchy with that of a sex/gender system. She argues that the discursive use of the term “patriarchy” implies stasis: that patriarchy is somehow inevitable and biological without any intersectionality between gender and other forms of inequality and without a capacity to adjust to new socio-economic circumstances or to be resisted.

In this thesis while I continue to use the term “patriarchy” because it is well-established in social-scientific literature, I meant the term in Rubin’s sense of an adaptive sex/gender system which takes different forms depending on social and historical

contexts. This is apparent in the changes to custody arrangements and parental rights in divorce discussed in this chapter. Patriarchal norms may still be present in the adjudication of modern custody arrangements, but both the arrangements and the norms may take different forms today. Patriarchal norms and practices, at any given time, may involve collective representations and practices that affect men's and women's status, agency, and prospects in different ways. However, their evolution or application in specific circumstances means that non-resident fathers who want to be involved parents after divorce may have to contend with complexities that entail male privilege working *against* their wishes to be directly involved with their children because men have been "set up" historically to control the public sphere and left out (if often by themselves) of the nurturing "private" sphere.

Connell (2005) would suggest that fathers in such cases are experiencing a "local reversal" of patriarchy. In other words, a patriarchal division of labour in the household ends up disadvantaging individual men after separation (p. 248). Patriarchal assumptions about family and domestic arrangements persistent in the court system are losing ground as changing social norms come to be reflected in changing jurisprudence. I subscribe to what Doucet and Hawkins (2012) describe as a long-range view of an historical weakening of male privilege. However, this longer-term shift happens unevenly, such that, at particular historical moments, it may appear to aggrieved parties as arbitrary, or even as discriminatory. There is also research evidence, as I have noted, which suggests that, in recent years, fathers may have faced injustices in the family court system, regardless of, or even in some instances because of their perceived male privilege (Connell, 2005; Kruk, 2012; Millar, 2009).

In analyzing Todd's journal narrative and the circumstances of its production, it is important to keep in perspective both the historical longer term and the particular impact of changes occurring in the shorter term. Keeping both perspectives in mind can generate surprising insights. For example, the long shift away from father presumption in family case law during the early nineteenth century toward forms of mother presumption starting in the 1920's is not necessarily evidence of the erosion of patriarchal values in the legal system. Rather, it could be a twist on long-held patriarchal norms that *designate men as financial providers rather than nurturers*. In this light, for men to lose connection to a loved one based on gendered presumptions about financial provision and parenting could be seen as an injustice that is, ironically, reinforced a particular application of patriarchal norms in the legal system.

If children do not see nurturing and involved fathers, this could reproduce patriarchal gender roles that define women as more connected to, and responsible for children than men. In a gendered society, *male* children with fathers who leave<sup>10</sup> the home may grow up without knowing how to model fatherhood appropriately for their children, thus potentially reproducing a new generation of fathers who are emotionally disconnected from parental nurturing of their children (Allen et al., 2012; Amato & Dorius, 2010; Hewlett & West, 1998; Kruk, 2012; Whitehead & Bala, 2012). A lack of nurturing and hands-on fathering role models for children could also reproduce an

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<sup>10</sup> I am not suggesting fathers are essential, and that lesbian couples who have children together are doing a disservice by not having a father present. The idea here is to suggest pathologies that might happen after an under- or over-regulated *breakdown of an already established* familial situation. Fathering is not essential to child development, but fathers are essential to the children with whom they have *already established* a relationship, especially when said fathers have a role in identity formation.

“abusive, dumb, and lazy” father stereotype that still lingers in popular culture (Kaufman, 1999). In the context of this thesis, it could also be argued that such a lack of role models could contribute not only to the disconnection of fathers from children but also to conditions which encourage a particular kind of fatalistic response by some non-custodial fathers to their circumstances. This response involves a narrative reconstruction of custody issues which at once identifies those issues but obscures elements of their social causation and context; in particular, gender, race, and class.

## CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGIES AND EPISTEMOLOGIES

This chapter covers the methodological and epistemological considerations of the reflexive narrative analysis undertaken in Chapters Four and Five. I address how a Durkheimian epistemology occupying a middle ground between realism and constructivism can facilitate narrative analysis, especially given Durkheim's emphasis on the constructive role of language and concepts (as collective representations) in constituting the real in meaningful terms. The concept of fatalism is a collective representation that, in practical terms, articulates blocked agency as a form of social reality, but that reality becomes meaningful as the result of theoretical work. Thus, I begin this chapter with an explanation of my own subject position and placement within the analysis.

### METHODOLOGIES

I started the research component of this thesis with Todd's journal, which took the form of an ebook, self-published on a popular internet-based retail outlet. It is a revision of 900 pages of hand-written personal journal entries from September 2005 to December 2007, along with additional writing and reflections from September 2013, excerpts from emails, and photocopies of legal documents connected to his custody dispute.

My initial exploration of Todd's journal as a document was somewhat similar to a *case study*. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) define a case study as a "detailed examination of one setting, or a single subject, a single depository of documents, or one particular event" (p. 54; qtd. in Berg, 2009, p. 317). However, while case studies involve close examination of a single instance, this is often done to illustrate a more general phenomenon. I have instead focused more on interrogating the journal as a vehicle

through which to clarify my own interpretive reading of the concept of fatalism and my own social location in doing so. In short, I want to draw attention to narrative construction of blocked agency more than demonstrating an “objective reality” of representativeness attached to the particular series of events Todd describes in his journal.

Originally, I had intended to do a series of interviews with non-resident fathers, but ran into difficulty finding willing participants. Using one document meant giving up on the idea of a representative sample of a population of non-resident fathers, but for a narrative analysis and a study in theory construction, it has its benefits. It does not necessarily allow for better access to Todd’s actual life, even if composed of journal entries made at the time rather than retrospective answers to questions. But it does provide a sense of how Todd constructed his social situation and subjective agency over time; how he constructed a version of his “lived experience” that made sense to him in his years-long struggle both for access to his children and for self-validation. However, there is one disadvantage to analyzing a journal that one encounters as a finished document, compared to conducting, transcribing, and analyzing interviews. In an interview situation, if one suspects an interviewee is tailoring an answer, representing a situation or event in a particular way, or is failing to address something, one can probe or ask follow-up questions to unpack details or explore abnormalities. Clearly that option is not open to me.

Initially, however, I did struggle to decide whether or not Todd’s narrative was an objective description of “lived experience” or a “motivated narrative.” I had to contend with two main issues. I wanted to respect Todd’s self-assertion that he was disadvantaged

as a father, while at the same time, I was beginning to consider that this situational disadvantage existed in a context in which he was nonetheless privileged as a straight, white, abled-bodied male. I also had to contend with criticisms of a positivistic confirmation bias in earlier versions of the thesis, where I was tempted to “prove” the objective existence of fatalism as a social pathology worth exploring, with a sample size of one alleged “lived experience.” I realized that I needed to re-think the purpose of my whole project, as well as how I was trying to use narrative analysis, and to incorporate another methodological approach alongside it in a new chapter addressing these concerns. I incorporated an autoethnographic approach to my own investment in the topic, consciously analyzing my personal experience in retrospect. I did this in an effort to understand how my own history and social location affected my initial approach to, and formulation of, my topic. This autoethnographic component makes explicit how my adoption of narrative analysis has changed my view of the project, and my understanding of fatalism. It has allowed me to see myself more consciously through Todd’s narrative, and to write myself into my analysis of Todd’s voice. In other words, I have tried to use my own personal narrative to open up insight into how my own social position and my familial history formed and shaped the concerns I brought to the project. In the process, I point out how my “personal” narrative had a dimension beyond the personal. However, I do not do a full autoethnography here. I describe situations in my life not as a form of extended sociological fieldwork, but as a reflexive opportunity to understand and conceptualize my changing approach both to Todd’s narrative and to the way I conceptualize and apply the term fatalism. Thus, I describe the methodology I used in Chapter Four as a reflexive narrative analysis.



## **Reflexive Narrative Analysis**

There are differing definitions of and approaches to narrative analysis, but in sociological usage, it can be described in general terms as studying “talk loosely organized around consequential events” (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). That is, people write or speak about events in ways that showcase them as elements of a particular story told for a particular reason, often to create or reinforce an identity or to account for status or action. Narratives are stories that people tell (Ahmed, 2012; Riessman, 1993). Narrative analysis can be used exclusively to examine only the texts of particular narratives, but may also take into consideration how such narratives are constructed by a story teller in a particular sociocultural context (Crepeau, 2000) and thus how they are not simple mirrors of a *reality* of events (Ahmed, 2012). They both reflect and serve as interventions into specific contexts. Narrative analysis examines how stories are constructed and located in time and space in particular ways. They are structured in terms of themes, genres, categories, and situations within a set of circumstances. A narrative is a story told in the way the subject wants to tell it; but a story which also constructs the teller and the teller’s wants as communicatively meaningful. It also positions the teller as a subject. In other words, the teller constructs the story, but the story also constructs the teller as a teller – a particular kind of narrative agent. Moreover, narratives can indicate clues to the social life surrounding the story teller and also the social context of telling (Riessman, 1993). I also describe my own subject position as being influential in my analysis of Todd’s narrative as fatalistic. Thus, the work of the analyst must also be taken into account in narrative analysis. What the analyst sees as “indicators” and what the analyst wants to indicate relates not just to the analyst’s “personality” but to their history and social place,

which in turn shapes their analytic agenda. I initially made gendered assumptions about Todd's "fatalism" without fully understanding how or why I was making them. I was mapping my own experience with non-resident fathers in my own family and acquaintances on to what I took to be Todd's lived experience. This narrative analysis cannot be separated from my own experiences. But at the same time, it is possible to better understand that linkage and to make it explicit, and available for reflection. This is why I have built a reflexive narrative analysis in Chapter Four. This is why it is a *reflexive* narrative analysis. The reflexivity adjective signals an important shift both in methodological approach and in topical focus, away from data collection for an objective analysis of Todd's actual experience and circumstances (though these remain of interest) to a careful reading of how Todd's journal "works" as an exercise in fatalistic subject-formation, and how my response to his documentary record is informed by my own social context and location.

Todd's narrative could be explained as expressing his perceived hardships as a non-resident father, and accounting for a breach between his ideal life and his real life (Riessman, 1993, p. 3). Narrative analysis involves "telling an informant's story" (Riessman, 1993, p. 4) and how a researcher interprets that story (p. 5). I interpret Todd's journal reflexively, exploring his own words and my response to them, but as a story that fits a definition of a victim narrative, and that can be interpreted using the concept of fatalism as a lens to re-conceive his perceived hardships as a narrative of blocked agency.

The reflexive aspect of this interpretation is foregrounded in Chapter Four, where I discuss how and in what context I constructed meaning from Todd's explanation of the world around him in which he participated (Crepeau, 2000), rather than treating that

explanation as an exact and accurate representation of individual experience (Ahmed, 2012). In a reflexive narrative analysis, it is not the place of the researcher to question or assign truth or assess the “validity” of a narrative as an objective representation of experiences or events. After all, this journal is *his* version of events and my reconstruction of these events is my motivated version of his account, though I attempt to be as transparent and self-critical as possible about how I undertake this reconstruction.

My approach thus raises questions about the extent to which I can remain faithful to Durkheim’s realist approach to the study of social facts. Knowledge is often co-created (Guba & Lincoln, 2004; Kvale, 1996; Lincoln et al., 2011) and my own experience has shaped how I saw Todd’s narrative, and Todd’s narrative may in turn have shaped my response to the issues it raises. Through interpretive reflexivity, I will address how my own socio-economic status, cultural capital, and gendered experience helped to re-shape the epistemological orientation of this thesis.

I am not a non-resident father, so the reflexive aspect of my thesis is about the ways in which I incorporated the narrated experiences of non-resident fathers close to me into my own representation of fatalism as a concept applicable to their circumstances.<sup>11</sup> Thus when I describe the circumstances of “individuals/fathers I know,” I do not mean this as a claim about the existence of objective realities, but as an indication of the context in which I developed my own approach to the interpretation of Todd’s journal

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<sup>11</sup> My own biological father and mother separated when I was seven years old, but the post-divorce relationship seemed positive to me. It was, ironically, nothing like what I describe in this thesis. The personal aspect of this thesis is grounded in events I have witnessed elsewhere in my life. In fact, the post-divorce peacefulness (or the perception of it) between my biological parents might have given me a point of view in which to see other post-divorce relationships as pathological.

initially, because an understanding of that context is key to narrative formation, and especially my own attempt to address narrative formation reflexively.

### **Master Narratives on Non-resident Fatherhood**

Specific narratives take shape in and through a wider discursive context, and in terms of cultural rules governing narrative form (including the rules of academic literature). These form what some call *master* narratives. Jean-Francois Lyotard (1979) has developed the concept of grand (or master) narratives, through which he suggests both religion and science reproduce forms of knowledge. Master narratives can be described as narratives that are “deeply embedded in a culture” such as the “American dream” (Halversom, Goodall, & Corman, 2011, p. 7). Master narratives can also be thought of on a slightly more meso-level. When one mentions a word such as “deadbeat” in a specific context, such as a set of representations of nonresident fatherhood for example, we may hear it in terms of a “basic pattern recognition” that is a “deeply embedded” cultural conceptualization of the term (Halverson, et al., 2011, p. 12) that more specifically implies deadbeat *dad* because of a common gendered use. For the purpose of this thesis, a master narrative is defined as a common narrative form or pattern that fits into, and reflects dominant norms, values, or perceptions of, a social context in which the story is told. In the case of Todd’s journal, this patterning and its contextual “fit” allows for particular and motivated connections to be made between academic literature on non-resident fathers and Todd’s narrative – motivated connections that I try to make transparent and to understand critically in the next chapter.

Ideological assumptions embedded within master narratives can influence individual or group understandings of their own particular narratives (Kuper &

Mustanski, 2014, p. 503). Specific narrators can pull on existing narrative tropes (Sandberg, 2016)<sup>12</sup> and genres (Hyvarinen, 2015),<sup>13</sup> and elaborated or restricted speech codes (Bernstein, 1971)<sup>14</sup> as well as other examples of stories of a similar type, to construct their own stories and their identities as narrators in ways that benefit their personal and political positioning as agents. Both Todd and I have done this, as I discuss in Chapter Four. Individuals are inclined to reproduce master narratives because the reproduction both saves effort and confirms one's place and identity in a collectively-meaningful context, especially when one is continuously exposed to examples of similar narratives. A narrative trope is a common element of a story's construction or a common way of framing a story. Narrative tropes also help to place stories in familiar genres or types.

Through my own witness of non-residential fathering situations, and exposure to narratives constructed by non-resident fathers I know, as well as my reading of Todd's journal and sociological literature on non-resident fathers, I exercised a form of pattern recognition that knit these narratives together in a way that appropriated master narrative

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<sup>12</sup> Sandberg (2016) describes tropes as being a formative element of narrative that uses single words or short phrases to ambiguously hint at familiar stories or narratives without actually saying it (p.12). For example, the trope of "deadbeat dad" can be combined with the tone or manner in which a master narrative is constructed to imply that "too many fathers are deadbeats for not fulfilling their (gendered) roles," or it can be used sarcastically to suggest there are "unfair gender stereotypes against fathers who have financial troubles."

<sup>13</sup> Hyvarinen (2015) describes genre as a type or class of narrative that aims to orient the teller and the reader. For instance, Hyvarinen might describe Todd's narrative as pulling from a "disadvantaged non-resident father" archetype, a quest narrative, or even an "illness" or "institutional" genre where Todd becomes careful to demonstrate authority regarding his described oppressive experience as a non-resident father (p. 188-189).

<sup>14</sup> Bernstein (1971) discusses codes as a narrated way to create special types of relationships in a given environment that will have significant meaning to individuals associated with each other in that environment. This will be discussed in Chapter Five.

elements and combined them with incorporated elements of experiences. Thus, any specific narrative is never a simple repeat of a master narrative, nor an isolated or completely autonomous achievement (Boudens, 2005; Oikkonen, 2013, p. 298). However, narratives of personal experience may exhibit a sort of un-authorized realism: the activity of narrative-construction disappears behind what is represented as “really real” as narrated. In Chapters Four and Five, I want to argue that this reality-constructing activity is an actuality worth exploring in its own right. However, one must keep in mind that this constructive activity is usually nuanced and complex, not a simple replication of master narratives (Alridge, 2006). The same is true of the agency and identity of narrators. As narrative agents and subjects, people are not simple effects of master narratives or discursive positioning (ibid). Individual persons engage in many different types of agency, occupying different social statuses, and take on different situational identities, and all these influence one another in ways that are not necessarily predictable.

Certain historical stereotypes of the “deadbeat,” “disappearing”, or “abusive” dad can still serve to inform mainstream media images of fathers (Whitehead and Bala, 2012, p. 149). But as dimensional individuals in concrete situations, fathers are not usually seen as mere representations of stereotypes. But such stereotypes can and do capture a “grain of salt” in the social realities of parenting: for example, contemporary mothers still tend to do the majority of unpaid daily child care (Wall, 2007). However, role expectations placed on, or promoted by, contemporary fathers with respect to interpersonal involvement with their children are changing (Marsiglio & Roy, 2012; Pleck, 2012). As hands-on fathering becomes an expected norm for fathers in general, academic research and popular narratives on non-custodial or non-resident fatherhood are starting to address

how an increasing number of fathers express that they grieve a lack of connection with their children *after* divorce or separation from the mother, not just when they are living with the mother (Kruk, 2013; Marsoglio & Roy, 2012; Millar, 2009).

### **DURKHEIM'S EPISTEMOLOGICAL MIDDLE GROUND**

Durkheim was an epistemological realist who believed the social world could be studied, theorized, and made meaningful through the conceptualization of social facts that resist imaginative efforts to deny their actuality, especially the actuality of their observed effects, indications, or consequences. However, Durkheim did not see observation as sufficient – he took seriously the process of conceptualization as essential to designations of the “real.” Early in his career, Durkheim relied on the conceptual analogy of the human body to explain the social world. In his ongoing explanation of social facts, Durkheim called certain pathological *conditions* (similar to an illness), such as fatalism, abnormal social facts; social things that are not a “product of the will” and do not fit with the normal functioning of some aspects of the social world (Thompson, 1982, p. 101-103). Social facts, normal or abnormal, are social ways of acting or thinking that are “external to the individual” (Thompson, 1985, p. 69). Social facts are social constraints “external to any individual or the mind of an individual... norms backed by sanctions... imposed by language, the force of myths and symbols, and the pressures of public opinion...involving a lack of choice” (Thompson, 1985, p. 59). Social facts force people to act a certain way (Pearce, 2001, p. 24). A social fact is a conceptual term one applies to something that happens *to* us. A social fact is something that is not easily changed; it puts up resistance to the imaginative or practical agency of particular individuals or groups.

However, Durkheim's later work on religion can be used to support the idea of an epistemological "middle ground" in regards to subjectivity and objectivity (Hart & McKinnon, 2010). Durkheim saw the importance of both the objective world and the subjective position. This middle ground locates the epistemological foundation for this thesis, and for future theory and research that I suggest in Chapter Five. A social fact is represented not as a pre-existing universal truth, but as a specifically existing set of identifiable events, actions, institutions, and forces including "collective representations" (Ramp, 1999). Pearce (2001) suggests that we re-read Durkheimian theory and accept that a radical Durkheim (along with Marx, Foucault, and Freud), is a "founder of discursivity" rather than a positivist and conservative functionalist concerned with objectively-existing order (p. 9). Durkheim challenged the discursive configuration of the sciences of his day (ibid).

Durkheim's epistemological thinking incorporates the idea that there is no knowledge prior to language. Narratives depend on some form of language. In his analysis of religion, Durkheim states that language is both necessarily collective and a necessary vehicle of individual thinking. Language allows one to make sense of the world, classify new things, compare them to pre-existing ideas, and incorporate them into pre-existing frameworks (Durkheim, 2001, p. 67). "Language does not just translate thought once it is formed; it creates it" (Durkheim, 2001, p. 66). For example, Durkheim claims it is impossible to objectively investigate the ultimate origin or significance of religions because they are "arbitrary constructions that cannot be tested" (p. 9). In other words, Durkheim thought there were no "false" religions in a sense that they are rooted in particular social circumstances and take form in socially constructed collective



representations and practices (p. 4). From a sociological point of view, religions symbolically interpret social needs and collective interests and identities, and are not reducible only to narratives that explain reality functionally in terms of a god-figure (Durkheim, 1972, p. 250). Durkheim argued that both language and religion produce meaning in the form of collective representations. Specifically, he saw both as symbolic activities, undertaken collectively. In his later work on collective representations, Durkheim is less concerned to identify social facts (such as social pathologies like fatalism) statistically than to understand how truths and knowledge(s) are *produced*. In short, Durkheim explains that knowledge comes into existence through language. He saw language as an institution that “makes the existence of other ‘institutions’ possible, and [...] thereby constitutes a precondition for human society” (Durkheim 1982, p. 248). Language, and narratives, are still “real” in the sense that they are still situated in the social world and not reducible to individual psychology. Narratives can be described as collective representations that contribute to, and also borrow from, the existence of discursive genres and tropes as social facts – as practical forms of speech that are familiar and constraining in particular social contexts. Todd’s narrative contains descriptions and themes that I will describe as “arbitrary constructions that cannot be tested,” but that nonetheless pull on narrative devices that *produce* a self-description of blocked agency that can be called fatalistic. Narratives can give clues to or indicators how collective representations and collective rules for representing work, and in terms of which a narrative about “blocked agency” or “fatalism” or a “social pathology” can be *produced* by writers and subsequently by readers/interpreters. Todd produced meaning through his personal journal, and I as a researcher, then produced a second level of meaning by

analyzing it, and then a third level of meaning by reflecting on my own narrative analysis and its context. All three levels of meaning involve some sort of analysis, but all also take narrative forms.

Researchers cannot directly quantify the subjectively-experienced world (except for surveys of attitudes, etc.) and cannot prove that narratives, such as personal histories, directly present data of experience without narrative construction. However, I do not suggest that Durkheim's (1951) study of suicide, based on differential analysis of suicide rates, or Ronald Inglehart's (1990 & 2018) theory that western societies are privileged to value self-fulfillment (over economic or physical security), are epistemologically flawed or "untrue" because they are based on analysis of statistical trends and correlations, which are in turn based on what is empirically observable. This research is valuable, but makes different kinds of truth claims from a reflexive narrative analysis. In working with narratives and personal stories, researchers conceptualize how the social world being narrated is constructed as meaningful by examining how narrators account for their experiences. To conceptualize means to identify ideas of sense-experience, subjectivity, or action in language. Individuals conceptualize things every day. For instance, everyone conceptualizes an image of an automobile when they are asked: "in your head, picture a car." But that picture is slightly different from one person to the next even though they are thinking about the "same thing." But this conceptualization can meet the criteria of qualitative truth if their image of an automobile is "correct" in the sense that it fits a shared (i.e. collective) conceptualized representation of an automobile, no matter the minor details differing from other peoples' perceptions. I may have pictured a blue Ford Focus because I just finished renting one, while another person pictured a silver Tesla

because they just had a conversation about Elon Musk. No conceptualizations are necessarily the same experientially, but shared language can make them similar through conceptual categorization. This car analogy can explain how individuals experience something as a version of their own truth and experience, while their oral, gestural, or written account of it becomes shared knowledge based on collectively held concepts. This is something Durkheim (2001) addresses in his discussion of science as a social phenomenon in the *Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.

Fatalism as a concept is brought to life through language. Language expresses meaning through shared concepts. Concepts are categories of understanding (McKinnon, 2014, p.210) that make things relevant to an audience. McKinnon (2014) states that the perception of infants amounts to confusion until they learn to conceptualize their world (a four-year-old may have a marginal understanding of a “car”). Although learning concepts may involve an element of mimicry, concepts are collective and social because they exist *outside* individual perceptions (McKinnon, 2014). They are social facts in discursive form. You cannot realistically claim a standard mass-produced car has 12 wheels because the basic categorical assumptions about cars having four are collective facts that act in a law-like manner to resist one’s imagination. Concepts are not only created and imposed through the common experience and use of language, but also through specialized methodological procedures that produce “scientific findings” (Durkheim, 2001). Concepts, for Durkheim, are categories of understanding that necessarily are collective, linguistic, and social (McKinnon, 2014). Durkheim used common language (to communicate with contemporaries who may not have totally understood his analysis) by using metaphors and analogies (like the human body or parts of a machine) to

conceptualize and explain the social world (McKinnon, 2014). Contrary to a popular belief about “functionalists,” Durkheim was not articulating the social world as a body with parts that function exactly as cogs in a machine (as he would say). He used metaphor and analogy to produce an explanation of a social world that had yet to be theorized as a level of reality with its own properties.

Another way of addressing the usefulness of a Durkheimian epistemological middle ground is to look at Kieran Bonner’s (1997) comparison between rural and urban parents’ perceptions of child safety. As Bonner carried out his research, he started with his own interpretation as a parent in a small town, agreeing with the rural parents in his study, that rural life was safer for children. He used an ethnomethodological approach to establish that parents in rural or “rurban,” communities account for themselves as safer and to establish *how* they developed accounts of this safety. Bonner found that the parents accounts conflicted with statistical data on the relative safety of children in urban and rural settings. Instead of seeing this contradiction as posing an either/or choice of truth claims, Bonner instead looked at how the parents’ truth claims were constructed in terms of other claims about rurality that addressed and expressed their investment in parenting and small-town life. Bonner (1997) reassessed how the dominant empiricist positivism of “knowledge by discovery” impacted his own work, suggesting that knowledge is never independent of the human mind, and the human mind is never independent of embodied social location. What he calls “knowledge by interpretation” is not “found” or “discovered” but it is mutually-constructed (p. 71). However, both empiricist and interpretive epistemologies have a common element: the researcher has to do “work” to bring a belief or concept into actual being (Bonner, 1997, p. 78). This

process of interpretation, in a Durkheimian light, necessarily involves conceptualization. These conceptualizations produce or articulate social facts that can be considered real if they name social things that individuals are embedded in (Ramp, 1999). My own approach has shifted to accept an epistemological constructivism, but I still take seriously Durkheim's realist ontology: that our encounters with that which *resists* our imaginations is "real," even if epistemologically we know it as real in any meaningful sense only through the work of conceptualizing it – work that is constructivist *and*, as Durkheim would say, social. Thus, I would argue that Todd encountered realities he could not wish away and he made them meaningful as experiential but communicable knowledge by means of a process of lay conceptualization and interpretation. Similarly, Todd's journal is a really-existing text that I encountered on a public and verifiable website. I do not have access through it to Todd's direct experience, but the text exists as a lens that encourages some forms of conceptualization and resists others.

Like Bonner (1997), I have reassessed my own taken-for-granted epistemological assumptions about fatalism as a social fact by acknowledging that my own interpretation of Todd's narrative (and for that matter social researchers' interpretation of any narrative or concept) cannot be separated from the effects of my own background, social experience, and social location, which made fatalism an attractive concept that I was inclined at first to use in a positivist manner. To acknowledge this meant measuring a critical distance from, and becoming more reflexively aware of, my own conceptualized experience of family life and class, and my own relations to men who were non-resident fathers. It also meant becoming more aware of how that experience and those relations, along with my own initial academic introduction to Durkheim, had shaped my thesis

topic choice and initial approach. I needed to become more aware of how my background, social locations, and inclinations formed a personal and social matrix that shaped where I was inclined to look (and not to look) for narratives (by women as well as men) about non-resident parenthood; a matrix in terms of which I developed an initial orientation to and an account of Todd's narrative.

### **USING TODD'S VICTIM NARRATIVE**

According to Amato & Dorius (2010), fathers make up the majority of non-resident parents. Because of assertions like this, I assumed initially that it would be easy to find ten to twenty non-resident fathers interested in doing semi-standardized in-person interviews. After receiving university ethics approval, I conducted an extensive two-month advertising process in two different cities, and was contacted by several fathers, all of whom subsequently backed out of meeting me for interviews. I failed to arrange even one interview – either in person or over the phone. Were fathers just uninterested? Was my invitation badly worded? Should I have offered a cash benefit or gift card for their time? Were they afraid to talk to an “academic” who might twist their words for a social justice cause? The answers I got were “I had to respond to other issues” or “I forgot” while they declined to agree to a follow up. One possible answer to the question of why non-resident fathers might not have answered my invitation: Men are often said to be less likely than women talk about their feelings and emotions beyond “superficial characterizations of their internal states” partially because they lack a vocabulary to do so (Coltrane, 1994, p. 55).<sup>15</sup> Coltrane (1994) claims that men are more likely than women to

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<sup>15</sup> This observation might explain potential interviewee reluctance, but it leaves open the question why they expressed initial interest in being interviewed in the first place.

accept the status quo of gender norms, even if it means a negative experience for them. The existence of Todd's journal poses interesting questions if interpreted in this light. Could it be argued that Todd published this journal partly as a way to express emotion that he felt he could not express in other ways? Did he publish this journal because of a perception that other people were not interested in listening to him? However, to consider these speculations would necessitate relying on prior research and interpretation in order to conceptualize men as fathers in a particular way. This question shows how it is already embedded in a conceptual matrix.

I came across Todd's journal while I was doing my literature review on non-resident fathers, thinking I was going to conduct interviews. Todd finished a PhD program at an American university, and is a self-proclaimed advocate for fathers' issues. I am not necessarily interested in promoting his politics nor his obvious push for family law reform. However, I came to his work with a perspective on non-resident fatherhood formed by my own experience, and a way of conceptualizing fatalism shaped both by that perspective and by my undergraduate training. Thus, it was possible for me to accept the subject-position of his desired reader somewhat uncritically (more discussion of this in Chapter Five), having observed situations similar to those he described. Further, the results of my literature searches turned up accounts that were similar to those voiced by non-resident fathers I knew, as well as accounts of non-resident fathers given by other researchers. On one hand this repetition and saturation of information could be treated as data and "slam dunk" evidence of obstacles and injustices faced by non-resident fathers. On the other, I needed to become more aware of the ways in which it is possible to selectively see and selectively miss or ignore data: for example, the abundance of

accounts by mothers left without resources or subjected to physical or emotional abuse. In this thesis, I concentrate mainly on one non-resident father's account, along with a few references to accounts by other non-resident fathers for context. It would have been easy not only to select but also to use such data unreflexively to confirm an unexamined narrative tendency instead of asking about the work such narratives do, and about their social consequences. I had to learn reflexivity by *un-learning* such tendencies.

In the course of my narrative analysis, I began to become aware of an interesting dualism in Todd's narrative construction of himself. On one hand, he defines himself, through his narrative, as an activist. But on the other hand, he articulates a sense of his own powerlessness that struck me as fatalistic. Initially, I approached this articulation as evidence of Todd being in an objective state of fatalism, and subsequently, by considering Todd's *experience* as fatalistic. But I only have access to his journal, and not to the situations he describes or his actual experience of them. I became more interested instead in how Todd's journal constructed his own subject position and agency in a way that can be conceptualized as fatalistic. Like an academic, Todd drew on other narratives to construct his own in a highly articulate way. Many fathers do not conceptualize what is happening to them in custody battles beyond saying that the system or their ex-partners are "unfair" and that their experiences are "painful." In my own approach to analyzing Todd's narrative, I too drew on other narratives, academic and non-academic, some in ways I acknowledged and was conscious of, others in ways that reflected my perspective, positionality and allegiances, in ways that at first I did not explicitly reflect on. My argument in this thesis is that Todd, on the evidence of his journal narrative, wrote himself into a fatalistic subject position. My discovery, in writing this thesis, that it was



possible for me too to write myself into a subject-position without (ever) being fully aware of doing so. Thus, this thesis is also a documented record of my own struggle to become aware of Todd's narrative by becoming aware of my own investment in it, and the social and cultural formation of that investment.

### **Laying out Todd's Personal Journal**

To facilitate the reader's comprehension of the argument in the next two chapters, I will conclude this chapter by describing the layout of Todd's journal as published online. Todd's *Confession of a Deadbeat Dad* was originally 900 pages of hand written journal entries. They were compiled and typed in an unpaginated electronic format as a ebook (around 300 pages), which I converted to a PDF so I could print out one copy to highlight and analyze. The ebook was released and sold on amazon.com beginning in 2013. It is broken down into four main chronological parts that span the period from early 2005 until a date close to its online release. However, the actual personal journal entries date only from between 2005 and 2007 with a retrospective discussion added in 2013. There are also "homework" sections throughout the journal where Todd retroactively added material inserted between the journal entries. At the beginning of the journal narrative in 2005, Todd was 32 years of age and shared three young daughters with his partner ("Tess"). The personal journal is not paginated, and therefore, I will cite its contents by entry date. If there is no date given, that is because it is a "homework" entry. In such cases, I will include the earliest date or section headline/title connected to it.

Part one is called "Separation" and it narrates the stage at which Todd started perceiving relationship problems. Todd explains in this section that he suffered from depression and drinking problems. He begins his journal entries at a point in which he

suspects Tess is having an affair. He is confused and does not want to initiate divorce because he is unsure if he would win custody or even what he would do with the responsibilities of custody. However, throughout the journal entries, Todd makes and repeats an assertion that he should get partial custody because he is spending a lot of time out of work caring for the children after a business project failed. He is the primary caregiver in the home while Tess works long hours at a high-paying career. He eventually moves out of the home due to what he describes as frustrating tensions with Tess. Tess obtains legal counsel regarding custody and separation, while Todd does not, and eventually she claims sole custody of the children and also claims what Todd describes as most of their possessions.

Part two “After divorce – returning to school” explains Todd’s experiences after the separation and leaving the marital home. He claims that he wants to financially better himself (and his children) and he describes becoming very busy with a return to an undergraduate degree program and work in the hospitality business. He lives away from his children and sees them on weekends or at times when he is not working. His relative lack of connection to his children, and his self-described new role as a parent, begins to become an issue for him.

Part three “Struggling to make my way” explains his struggles to see his children once he has made the decision to attend graduate studies. The financial problems become intense. He is temporarily homeless and staying on people’s couches. He is not initially expected to pay court-ordered child support. His non-payment of child support becomes an issue for Tess once Todd starts to rent his own apartment, when their joint business loan goes down, and Todd wants partial custody.

Part four “continuing my fight – more school (and legal woes)” is a post-journal section written in late 2013 to protest what he sees as injustices perpetrated against him – as a non-resident father – by his ex-wife, lawyers, and the family court system more generally. This section includes several published emails, pictures from his life, and court documents, as part of the overall narrative package, but also as a potential way to tie the whole together in a more exploratory fashion.

## **CHAPTER 4: WRITING MYSELF THROUGH TODD'S JOURNAL: A REFLEXIVE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS**

As noted, I am not a non-resident father myself, but I have an emotional stake in the social, economic, and legal issues described by many non-resident fathers. I have lived with the affective consequences of what I will describe as fatalistic responses to other's non-resident fatherhood. The point of a reflexive narrative analysis is not simply to repeat or verify the claims of another person, or to examine how close those claims are similar to those made by other individuals in similar circumstances, but to address how I, as a reader and hearer have approached, responded to and interpreted narratives I have taken to be sociologically relevant. How has my response, and the interpretive choices stemming from it, knowingly or unknowingly reproduced a narrative framing, a set of ideas, or a preferential reading? How might my response relate to my own personal formation as a man, family member, a father, a member of a social class?

This chapter has four main components: first, I address how I constructed my own positionality in my analysis of Todd's journal and how I started to reflexively unpack both that positionality and my own conceptualizations of fatalism more generally; second, I address my conceptualization of gender and class, and their intersections, as a way to understand how I reconstructed and employed the concept of fatalism through my reading of Todd's journal; third, I unpack the parental isolation I witnessed in the case of non-resident fathers in my own extended family (and among other acquaintances), and how its impact on me may have shaped my reading of Todd's journal, and fourth, I conclude by clarifying how at first I unreflexively used Todd's journal to reproduce a particular version of a "the deck is stacked against fathers" narrative that reflected and

reproduced my own subject-formation and the personal, political, class, gendered, and ideological leanings that gave it shape. By undertaking this reflexive narrative analysis, I am better able to understand not only my own implication in the social construction of non-resident fatherhood but also what is involved in the conceptualization of sociological terms like fatalism – how conceptualization is a complex and social process, not merely a linguistic or logical one. Going forward, this thesis is about my own journey, as much as it is about Todd's.

### **TODD WROTE ME AS I WROTE HIM**

The narrative tropes I initially “found” and focused on in Todd's journal can generally be described as follows: “deadbeat dad,” “father-as-wallet,” “vindictive ex-wife,” “decks stacked against fathers in family court,” “non-resident parents are unduly isolated,” “too much red tape for non-resident parents,” “fathers are not babysitters,” and the like. In interpreting these narrative tropes, I suggested that Todd emphasized gender and class in narrating his predicament, but downplayed other potential aspects of his social situation and status. The tropes I focused on were also central to my own family experience, and the experiences of acquaintances in my life growing up. By reassessing them, I came to understand my own stake in my conceptualization of “Todd's fatalism.” It was also my own. I “found” narrative components that I also related to in some way. Not only did I bring my own lived experience to my work, but I allowed my response to Todd's journal to reinforce as well as to adapt my thinking about my initial hypothesis; that fatalism illuminates to non-resident fatherhood. My reading of academic literature on non-resident fathers performed similar work, as did what I knew of the statements made by fathers' rights advocates. Thus, my own interpretive understanding grew out of and

relied on elements of my own history, and specifically my gendered subject-formation, in ways that I was initially not critically aware of. My initial reading was both situated and structured.

Foucault (1984 & 1998) argues that writers construct their own agency as they write and conceptualize their experiences and responses to the world around them. Further, he argues they are enabled to do so by a whole institutional apparatus of authorial rights and responsibilities. For Foucault (1984), this makes the author an unoriginal element in writing. The notion that the author is the point of origin of a text is “dead,” or at least has given way to the foregrounding of discourse, discursive formations, and practices. For instance, I am not the sole and pure origin of “my own” thoughts, because I am “in” my writing, placed within and formed by an institutional system that “encompasses, determines, and articulates the universe of discourses” (Foucault, 1984, p. 9). Todd wrote “his” journal as a personal statement. But as he wrote it, he was also reading, and thus was incorporating into his work a wider set of discourses about (or reflective of) the politics of parenting and gender. In this sense, I would still argue that he *was* active, he *was* an agent in the construction of a narrative “reality.” But his agency was shaped by the codes of parenting, gender, personhood, and rights, as he encountered them in his own formation and situational encounters. In the process of writing his journal, he also reproduced or modified these codes, thereby developing (unevenly and situationally) a political and gendered identity and awareness, as well as a selective unawareness. In short, as much as he wrote the journal into existence, his production of the journal also may have *written him* into existence as an aggrieved and fatalistic narrative subject. His writing of the journal could be said to have developed a

life of its own as he conceptualized (in lay terms) and constructed a sense of “his own” victimhood in the process. Moreover, he may be said to have constructed himself in terms of a particular trajectory the more he read, and the more he incorporated the stories of other non-resident fathers in similar contexts into his self-narrative.

In this light, it is also understandable that I, even in my sincere attempt to be a sociological reader of Todd’s journal, may have constructed a narrative account for my own agency and for my thesis in the same way Todd constructed his journal as a document for public consumption. As Foucault (1998) suggests, this thesis will appear as an object of authorship, reflective of my own thoughts and insights, because the conventions of thesis writing are that my name will appear on it as a work of “original” scholarship. But writing it has reshaped how I see my material, the social world, and my location in it. This thesis, as a *process* rather than a project, has also *written me* as a researcher, changing how I identify and make sense of the narratives carried by the discourses in which I find my “voice.” This process continues each time the thesis is read by other who “make something” of it. The narrative tropes I listed above were elements of discourse that I appropriated initially to reinforce a particular way of conceiving “evidence” for fatalism, but subsequently, they have become elements in a process by which I have begun to reconceptualize my own approach and thinking in new ways. In the rest of this chapter, I will unpack that process.

### **GENDER & CLASS: CONSTRUCTED INTERSECTIONALITY**

I started to conceptualize my own lived experiences in new ways after I entered an undergraduate degree program. Through my appropriation of sociological concepts, I began to think about how my experiences shaped my interest in, and justification for, my

research interests including my interest in this thesis project. But while I began to see my own subject position through a sociological lens in general terms, my own particular experiences of class and gender remained largely invisible to me until I learned to conceptualize them in a new way; understanding concepts such as cultural capital and patriarchy in practical (and personal) terms and not just as structural abstractions. Class and gender are important conceptual elements in my approach to this thesis because they allowed me to think through what I took to be the most important statuses that Todd's narrative relied on. I was able to pick up on Todd's sense-making about gender and class because my working-class and male-gendered social positioning gave me insight into *how to see* concepts such as cultural capital, patriarchy, and fatalism at work in the particular social locations and situations of working-class men. I saw something personally truthful and real in Todd's narration of gender and class, from a male and working-class perspective. Therefore, it stood out. At the same time, my race and sexual orientation did not similarly open my eyes or pique my interest, possibly due to an inability to see the privilege(s) they bestowed on me. Thus, I became more aware over time of how my background and social position both advantaged and disadvantaged my reading of Todd's journal. But the awareness developed unevenly. In some ways, I am similar to Todd, sharing an ascriptive identity that can be partially described as straight, white, heterosexual, working-class, and male. Based on these similarities, and the visibility (to me) of Todd's focus on gender and class, I accumulated very few clues in my first reading of the journal about how to identify and analyse the more complex intersectionalities shaping Todd's identity and social location as the author and agent of his own story. I now have come to interpret Todd's narrative as building on a specific and



rather narrow focus: a gendered account of frustrated role performance and financial victimhood that outweighs, and often ignores, his other influential and intersectional identities (white, abled, English-speaking, heterosexual, student, ex-husband) and the privileges and disadvantages that may have gone along with them.

Todd notes that he was expected to provide for his children financially, not emotionally, because of his gender. For example, referring to male parents in general, he asks, “how much of us is defined by how much money we make...?” He angrily proclaims regret at his past relationship and partner choices, as if giving advice to a younger self: “go where the money is,” “get more respect,” and “she would be less likely to leave [if I had more money]” (Bottom, 2013, May 12, 2007). A “male breadwinner” or “father-as-wallet” narrative which assumes men should be responsible to financially provide for women and children is very much present in Todd’s narrative and how he expresses the role expected of him. As Todd puts it in a letter to Tess during their custody dispute: “just because I don’t hand you cash every month, doesn’t mean that I’m not providing for them... I don’t give you enough money... I can’t afford the right to be as involved as I should be” (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012).

Todd’s assessments of his financial responsibilities as falling short of par reproduce this “male as breadwinner/wallet” narrative trope. He seems to buy into a popular perception that women are more attracted to powerful men, but also has an ambiguous response to the role responsibilities signalled by this trope. He protests this role as a burden, but accepts what he sees as its reality. But his complaints also explain something else. Todd’s choice to return to academic education, later becoming a research assistant and graduate student (by the end of his journal-writing, he was an adjunct

instructor in Psychology), is represented as adding to his financial and time constraints. He describes having time constraints forced on him because of his need to work part time in the hospitality industry on weekends, keeping him away from his children. He claims to have had to work on weekends to fund some of his education (Bottom, 2013, April 30, 2007). He suggests that he was relatively homeless for a time, sleeping on couches at his university and in a friend's dorm room (Bottom, 2013, March 13, 2007). He claims to want a better life for his children, and higher education would be a sacrifice to make this happen in the long term (ibid), but one that makes his (male) parental and support responsibilities more burdensome in the interim.

I sense that Todd's description of his class situation inflected this narrative rendition of a "temporary hardship to invest in a better life." This sensitivity to the gendered aspects of class position is something that I also identify with, and it may have shaped how I interpret his journal. I use Erik Olin Wright's (1976) three basic criteria to define my socio-economic upbringing as working class. Working class individuals have a lack of control over: 1) the means of production; 2) investments and the process of accumulation; and 3) other people's labour power [Wright (1976) quoted in Dunk, 2003, p. 5]. My resident parents (biological mother and step-father) would be considered working class under these criteria. However, until I entered an undergraduate program, I considered our socio-economic status as "average," "middle class," or "normal," regardless of our "temporary" or "almost homeless" financial situations. Growing up, I was taught gratitude; to see our situations as fortunate because there were plenty of families who had it worse. I did not see my class "disadvantage" compared to middle class "privileges," but I was taught about my *privilege* over the working-poor and under-

class. Through such familial conceptualizations, I was taught that I was *privileged*, and my relative disadvantage (vis a vis professional or ownership classes) was *invisible* for everyday practical purposes. It was not until I learned to unpack a sociological conceptualization of “socio-economic status” that I learned to really think about my class and to become more aware of class more generally. The further along I got in my studies, I realized I was unlike my middle-class university undergraduate and graduate cohort in subtle but significant ways.

Todd described the more personal shortcomings of his parenting and divorce decisions by including a proclamation (even if intended sarcastically) that he was a “deadbeat dad.” He seemed to construct a lack of agency for himself by explaining that it was easier to “give up” his fight for legal custody than it was to continue fighting. Because I already had the concept of fatalism in mind as I read Todd’s journal, I was primed to interpret the regulatory forces he described in his life as having fatalistic consequences, and I read statements such as “I have resigned myself to the possibility of losing my girls” (Bottom, 2013, November 21, 2005) as indicative of an objectively-existing fatalism structured by his situation. This resignation, expressed early in Todd’s marital separation, seemed to indicate a fore-knowledge that Todd would not win custody, combined with a possible uncertainty about his own ability to handle custody on his own. Troilo and Coleman (2013) argue that many fathers feel it is pointless to fight for their rights to raise their children. This is often blamed on the courts, the spouse, or the spouse’s lawyer. But I will suggest two other possible factors at work here, both of which may be indicated by the way Todd frames his sense of helplessness. Even though Todd never abandoned his children, in May 2012 he expressed the opinion that he had in

effect done so by giving up his legal battle for partial custody (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). Expressing a perceived inability to win custody, he eventually “gave up” and settled on being a non-resident father (ibid). Todd’s emphasis on the terminology of “deadbeat” suggests that he is aware of the narrative and is resisting the label, even as he accepts its inevitability. Todd states:

So I gave up. That’s right I quit. Because... as society would have you believe... I’m a deadbeat dad. At this point I realized that no amount of money, time, or educational background that I could muster would be sufficient to gain partial custody of my daughters. No one cared about it nearly as much as I did. I was wasting money that I didn’t have and fighting against an impossible former wife, a judge, a mediator, multiple attorneys, and a society who didn’t care about my involvement in the children’s lives. It was a tough resignation to make, but it had to happen for my own sanity (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012).

Todd is accepting the label of “deadbeat,” but not as a consequence of his own agency; instead, as a label placed on him over which he was no control. The deadbeat dad narrative is gendered to the extent that it reflects social narratives that emphasize the role of men, regardless of race or class, in providing financially for their children (Nathanson & Young, 2015). There is research evidence that appears to support this. According to Sousa & Sorensen (2006), non-resident fathers pay more child support on average than non-resident mothers, though this also reflects the degree of wage and wealth differentials between men and women. But the narratives around such differentials often reflect gendered expectations; for example, in the rarity of the term deadbeat mom to describe non-resident mothers who have trouble paying financial support (Hewlett & West, 1998, p.178). These expectations make it difficult to interpret Todd’s statement about giving up as an assertion that fathers who are barred from contact with their children may choose a course of action that appears like an abandonment of parental involvement and responsibilities for different reasons, such as conflict-avoidance or an

inability to financially support their children (Amendt, 2008; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Mandell, 2002). Such fathers could be labelled “deadbeats” because they have disengaged from a family they see as no longer their own (Hewlett & West, 1998) or that they are unable to support financially in an acceptably continuous way (Mincy et al., 2015). This raises the issue of who defines “responsibility” and how: it is entirely possible for ex-spouses to hold sincere but mutually-incompatible views about the non-resident parent’s obligations. Similarly, I could interpret the responses of non-resident fathers as fatalistic when they accept (even with residual resistance) the label of “deadbeat dad” whereas another reader or researcher might see a tactic for gaining advantage in a conflict or justification of a “refusal” of obligations.

That being said, social statuses such as race and class can intensify the challenges non-resident fathers face in financially supporting their former partner and/or children (Ball, 2012; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Mincy et al., 2015). A lack of financial resources or class privilege, combined with racialized oppression and discrimination could make some non-resident fathers more likely to “give up” a custody battle, and to experience and represent that decision as forced. Low educational attainment can also influence the custody rights granted to non-resident fathers (Putnam, 2015). Both educational attainment and non-residential fatherhood may be connected to the marginalization that comes with race (Ball, 2012; Edin & Nelson, 2013). Racialized and marginalized men, such as Indigenous (Ball, 2012) and African American fathers (Edin & Nelson, 2013) are both more likely to be non-resident, to fall behind on child support, to be less educated, and more likely to be disengaged from their children by prison and or addictions than their white counterparts (a similar statistical disparity with respect to these factors has

also been noted in the case of male parents compared to their female counterparts more generally). In this context, super-adding a narrative about the “missing-black father epidemic” may work to racialize and exacerbate the “deadbeat dad” narrative.

In my own life, I saw the “deadbeat dad” narrative used as a label of shame for non-resident fathers who appeared to me, or were represented to me, as unable to fulfil all their financial obligations without access to social supports. A sense of (gendered) shame, when internalized, can have the effect of reducing, rather than enhancing, motivation to change oneself or one’s circumstances, despite the fact that shaming is a social mechanism for producing conformity. For example, Todd alleged that Tess and the children benefited from his willingness to provide physical and emotional childcare – the same childcare that he claimed to have provided while Tess worked at her career *before* the divorce (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010). Todd makes a claim that when he and Tess went to custody hearing court (to decide on child custody), Tess’s lawyer argued that Todd was “voluntarily underemployed” (December 2010 – June 2012); in other words, that he was not doing “his job” to support his children, noting that lawyers argued for one-third of his income (of \$1500/month). Todd claims this was made without regard to the financial and emotional support that he was providing at the time and before the divorce, or his intention to support his daughters properly after he graduated with the credentials for a decent career. When he used his student loan money for a retainer to hire a lawyer, he claimed that this added to an argument for his apparent neglect because he was able to “afford” a lawyer (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). He thus builds a case that the custody battle seemed to be focused on Tess’s side and on the deficiencies in his own role-performance, not on the practical issues for

providing for the children. In a letter to Tess, Todd attempts to defend himself against such alleged deficiencies, but ends with a statement that has resonated with me: “just because I don’t hand you cash every month, doesn’t mean that I’m not providing for them... I don’t give you enough money... I can’t afford the right to be as involved as I should be” (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). Without naming it as such, Todd is implying a gendered class difference between him and Tess. He protests the possibility of reading his financial circumstances as reflecting his parental motivation or suitability, but then he immediately follows that protest by mocking what he represents as Tess’s apparent wish to remove that right from him. In a way, he is stating that Tess “defeated” him at the divorce and custody process.

In a discussion of non-resident fathers’ experiences in the family court system, Kimmel (2013) suggested that “The deck is stacked... because the courts have failed to take into account the enormous changes in men’s lives as parents” (p. 168). Note the similarity here between how Kimmel’s statement constructs the lives of his research subjects and how Todd’s statement constructs his own reality. Todd, like Kimmel, refers to changed parental roles for men, and uses that reference to represent himself as a natural parent rather than a mere monetary provider. And like Kimmel, he constructs a “deck is stacked” narrative trope to address his inability to fight successfully for partial custody.

In my own family and personal life, I have heard and sympathized with variations on the “deck is stacked” narrative trope, as applied to the situations of male non-custodial parents. Thus my initial identification of Todd’s response to his custody situation as “fatalistic” was intertwined with an empathetic identification with that situation and a

wish to find sociological evidence for what I took to be its common occurrence as a social reality. However, what has come to interest me now is the way in which Todd's use of such tropes to construct a narrative of blocked agency may also construct an imagined reader, and also potentially a constructed *justification* for giving up the custody fight by representing himself as a victim.

### **Fatalistic Resistance and Resentment: A Gendered Counter-Narrative**

In unpacking Todd's way of writing – his discursive or rhetorical practices – I have started to see a gendered pattern in this way Todd framed himself, and in terms of which his narrative has the potential to frame its ideal reader – as a gendered victim. I can see how non-resident fathers I knew personally employed similar tropes of gendered victimization in efforts to repair or make sense of damaged relationships, identities, and experiences. Justification involves both explanation and what is called in court language, “pleading” – a plea to be understood, listened to, and empathized with as a person who is experiencing a lack of agency. Such statements thus “call out” a response in the hearer, positioning the statements can act as mechanisms of social action. Since I was a young child, I have known several non-resident fathers, some very close to me, negotiating relations with ex-spouses that were filled with emotional, social, and financial turmoil around maintaining support for or contact with their children. I developed an emotive sense of their loss and/or lack of agency and powerlessness, of the perpetual malaise of their situations, and their inability to change those situations, which I subsequently conceptualized as unjustly blocked agency. Having listened to these non-resident fathers' stories (especially as a youth), and seeing what they went through in regards of interpersonal conflict with ex-partners, I was predisposed to later see the concept of



fatalism as relevant to the situation of non-resident fathers more generally. I also continued to “see” this hardship as loss as a lack of agency; as powerlessness imposed on non-resident fathers (but not mothers) among my more recent acquaintances. The kinds of stories I was exposed to helped reinforce a selectivity in the kinds of stories I paid attention to.<sup>16</sup> Hearing these men express their feelings and experiences, I began to empathize with, note other instances of, and want to give a voice to, their expressed injustices. It was easy for me to transpose these sympathies to my reading of Todd’s journal because there was a similarity in tone and narrative content in their accounts. It was also easy to notice and identify things in their narratives that I could identify with as a man and as a parent. In other words, I did not just “see” what was there, but actively noticed what fit with the pleas for understanding that had shaped me as a gendered subject.

This does not invalidate any of my more sympathetic interpretations of Todd’s journal, nor the situations I witnessed while growing up, but becoming aware of that process of identification meant that I came to understand that the fatalism I “found” in Todd’s journal was not simply identifiable as factual in an objective sense, but was something narratively produced in his writing and my reading. Thus, I had to take responsibility for my reading in some sense. However, there is one sense in which this awareness strengthens, rather than weakens, my sense that fatalism is a social

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<sup>16</sup> I was predisposed to see these hardships as gendered and as borne by men because I did not know a non-resident *mother* in these contexts as well as I knew the men. Moreover, I was not equipped at the time to think critically about the possibility that the *resident* mothers in the situations described might have been able to generate their own hardship stories that I was not hearing because they might have been absent from, minimized or discounted in the non-resident fathers’ accounts I heard, and/or in the sympathetic hearing these accounts got from other adults in my presence.

phenomenon that can have a real social impact. The words and actions of family members and acquaintances who narrated stories of blacked agency arose out of their subjective experiences, and their motivated constructions of those experiences, but their words and actions have actual, concrete effects on social relations, social situations, and on the social formation of other people. The ability of fatalistic narratives to permeate the lives of family members, friends, and coworkers of non-resident fathers thereby becomes more than a matter of my own empathetic concerns. It encompasses the social construction of experience; the normative construction of parenthood, and the active making and reinforcing of a gendered social world. This is a part of what makes it real and socially identifiable.

Todd focuses specifically on gender and class issues in describing his situational powerlessness, taking what Doucet and Dawkins (2012) would call a short-range view of his gendered victimization. But he does not explicitly examine the macro-level and long-range social privileges that he could be said to participate in and benefit from. Such privilege shows more in what he *does not* say. Male (also white, able-bodied, straight) experience is often conceptualized as an intersection of invisible privileges based on ascriptive traits (Mullaly, 2010; Tarrant, 2009). Intersectionality is “the notion that subjectivity is constituted by mutually reinforcing vectors of race, gender, class, and sexuality” (Nash, 2008). This means that overlapping identities can simultaneously (and exponentially) reinforce one’s privilege, or in some cases undercut it, depending on the combination. An example of intersectionality relating to class and gender is Coston & Kimmel’s (2012) claim that working-class men are disadvantaged compared to middle-class men because they are more expendable, have less education, and receive lower pay

for dangerous manual work, despite their shared gender privilege. Coston and Kimmel (2012) suggest that privilege is not monolithic but exists in a wide variety of forms and contexts. In other words, privilege can work within or be complicated by a variety of intersectionalities to form identity.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, privilege need not to be consciously recognized to be employed. Theorists of “whiteness” in (post)colonial settler societies argue that being “white” or sometimes “white passing” (the ability to appear white to others who observe them in public) takes place in terms of a set of standards that are taken for granted as if they are universal and not racialized. Thus, white privilege, and the norms and roles which support it, tend to be invisible to their beneficiaries, until they are significantly challenged (Ingram, 2001). Middle-class “settler” men, who (importantly) fluently speak the official and dominant language, and are abled-bodied (for example), can often have their privilege reinforced by intersectionality. Thus, when gender norms shift, undermining an implicit and unexamined expectation of male privilege, men may tend to foreground newly-encountered situational disadvantages (as in custody battles) but define them as indicating structural disadvantages of being male (explained more in Chapter Five). Todd was in a structurally privileged situation regarding his general identity. There is no sign that he was forced to think about race or sexual orientation, for example, as either advantages or impediments in his daily life. He had the privilege to not see these privilege(s).

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<sup>17</sup> Given my formal education and life experience, I now am more aware of being “white” (i.e. not racialized under a colonial or minority context). However, I find that whiteness easier to overlook than being gendered. This is perhaps because gendered roles and expectations became more visible to me than issues of racialization.

As I have noted, class and gender as forms of oppression or privilege affecting my own life were often invisible to me in my early life. I did not see my own working-class consciousness or my male privilege, even though (or perhaps because) our family was integrated into a neo-liberal and patriarchal society. To some degree, I may not have noticed these aspects of my status because my socialization was complex and multifaceted. For example, I was a youth who learned to be “urban” during the week and “rural” on some weekends; Irish and Scottish Canadian; politically moderate depending on context; “non-macho” depending on context; and, blue-collar working-class. I am hardly an outlier in this lived experience. I was socialized to see society as a “man’s world,” but with some “local reversals of patriarchy” (an idea discovered later in university), which I conceptualized earlier as “trade-offs” based on a mix of identities.<sup>18</sup> I did not always benefit as a man situationally even though I did structurally. The key thing, though, is that such situational reversals were often more “visible” to me, and more emotionally troubling, than the structural conditions.

Modern (20<sup>th</sup> century) patriarchy still operates to place responsibility for home and children on women, while men are “freer” to focus their lives outside the home, making a living and “dominating” the public sphere, and being responsible for physically protecting the family. In my own life, I have seen social expectations placed on my mother and step-mother to care for the home, cook meals, and nurture children more than

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<sup>18</sup> Trade-offs, in the sense described by Connell (2005) as “local reversals” include a couple of examples I noticed myself: Men have more opportunity to work high-paying jobs, but they also have the burden of being expected to risk death or injury in many of those jobs (Stergiou-Kita et al., 2015). Also, boys in primary education are seen as favoured by teachers in class, but students of all genders perceive that boys are punished more harshly than girls for disobedience (Sadker, Sadker & Zittleman, 2009).

they were placed on my step-father and father. This was gender socialization. The men in these families were not consciously conspiring to ignore how they benefit from a structural power-binary. They may see life as a give-and-take. As noted earlier regarding my class and gender experience, *privilege and disadvantage can both be invisible if they are not conceptualized as such, or explicitly challenged.*

Sociologically this makes sense, but I also feel an urge to emphasize this point defensively as a man and a father, formed in a particular family, gender and class context, to assert that “these fathers are not bad and experience *real* disadvantages in contemporary society.” Like Todd, I feel the compulsion to defend and justify in response to a perceived identity-threat, and that compulsion lends itself to some particular narrative choices. Todd’s willingness to write himself into a subject-position of “giving up” arguably has class connotations. In my own upbringing, I was familiar with a world view that represented social agencies and institutions as outside one’s ability to influence or control. I later came to recognize this outlook as working class. But Todd, in representing courts, bureaucracies, and the like in this way is also positioning himself as a gendered victim of these institutions and of Tess’s actions. This self positioning lends itself to the construction of a particular type of narrative – a victim narrative – in which the narrator is an agent only in voicing injustice done to him, and is the helpless object of others actions and of circumstances beyond his control.

### **A Victim Narrative: Protesting a Constructed Fatalism**

I came to realize that victim narratives have the potential to create a resentful subject position that also makes certain ideological positions and dogmas more attractive. During my undergraduate tenure, I felt that carefully supporting “fathers’ rights” causes

through a pro-feminist lens could be a way both to correct patriarchal norms and to address patriarchal *disadvantages* faced by fathers who want to be more involved with their children. This would be a potential way to satisfy what I took to be valid in (progressive and moderate) short range fathers' rights activism while honouring a long range feminist outlook.

However, if one begins to see themselves as victimized and lacking agency due to gender or class, one may tend to look selectively for ways to (re)confirm this through resentment and passive resistance. This resentment may include those who are threatened by recent social and cultural changes, but also those who buy into cultural narratives that portray some groups as victimized by making motivational comparisons to other groups. Researchers, too, are human beings who may become invested in a particular point-of-view. I routinely visualized "gender" and "men" when a discussion of non-resident parenting would arise. This influenced my initial construction of non-resident fathers, and not non-resident mothers, as fatalistic subjects. Becoming invested in a particular point of view can lead researchers to continually resurrect the same (social) problems as things that need to be addressed regardless of progress on the initial goal, and even to discount progress made if it does not fit with the continuity of their thinking or agenda (Levari et al., 2018). Non-resident fathers became central to some of my thinking on gender, partly due to what I felt was the lack of empathetic discussion about them in sociology. I narrowed in on gender prejudice as a social problem faced by non-resident fathers with fatalistic consequences, because I wanted a wider, non-reactionary and progressive discussion to address the specific contextual and situational injustices expressed and experienced by non-resident fathers.

This was a major impulse behind my original thesis project, and one that initially shaped its narrative strategy. However, I sensed that this way of formulating my project was easily politicized, and I wanted to understand where that politicization came from. I was at first more sensitive to how others (my readers) might politicize my own approach in unwanted ways (as being anti-feminist or misogynistic, for example), than to how my own approach and narrative placement could be politicizing. I certainly did not consider myself a “fragile” or “reactionary” fathers’ rights activist, but I did see an issue with reactionary and motivated politics (including my own) becoming too central in social research. I felt there was more value to studying the social world than trying to negotiate politics with others. My reaction “against politics” led me to notice certain kinds of resources in the sociological literature I have searched. For example, Campbell & Manning (2018) reinforced my reaction against what I saw as reactive politics by describing some more vocal elements of contemporary university student culture, and contemporary Western society in general, as having a strong “victimhood culture,” suggesting that being able to influence others to accept the existence of one’s perceived victimhood is a form of cultural capital that shapes individual and group identities. Lukianoff & Haidt (2018) draw attention to what they construct as a problematic identity politics (which they appear to understand as a process of placing identity groups in oppressor-oppressed binaries), built on narratives of identity-based victimization, by allusion to loaded terms such as “call out culture” and “common-enemy identity politics.” I found it easy to empathize with such narrative constructions of political frustration, not seeing how the phrases they used cut off or made it easy to denigrate counter-narratives (for example, about accountability, integrity or safety) dealing with the same examples.

But as I became more critically reflexive in thinking about the politics of my empathetic identification, and more aware of feminist counter-narratives to it, I became less comfortable in it. I then sought to deal with that discomfort by situating myself in a resistant middle ground between or above what I constructed as two opposed, competing and mutually-denigrating narrative tropes regarding men's issues: (1) "male tears" (the idea that men still seek to dominate attention in complaining about loss of privilege; an idea I disliked but felt obligated to take seriously in academic settings) and (2) "the deck is stacked against fathers" (an idea with which I was predisposed to identify). In conceptualizing my position this way, in terms of Campbell and Manning's (2018) definition of "victimhood culture," I wanted to limit my participation in what I narratively construed at the time as opposed victimhood and identity claims ("identity politics"), to avoid being shamed in the light of either pole of contention. But my way out was made difficult by my positivistic and critical formation as a sociologist. Sociological positivism lends itself to the view not only that the real social world is transparently available to empirical research, but also to the idea that "objective," non-political research questions can be formulated when addressing one's social experience. The non-political positioning of positivism was attractive, but I was becoming aware that my own position was already politicized. My wish to escape politics was *itself* a political response against what I had construed as a series of traps to shame me and others like me based on personal identity and political line. There was also a class connotation to my perception of these shame traps; I felt as if I had no place in the world, let alone a middle-class academic world. But my way of making sense of all of this dug me deeper into a politics of my own making that I could not yet see. Thus, still in the throes of identity politics



*even as I wished to transcend it*, I found myself quietly cheering Todd's gestures toward a "vindictive ex-wife" narrative trope because it seemed to fit situations I had witnessed that appeared to me in a similar light.

### **The Vindictive Ex-Wife Narrative: A Resistance to Parental Gate Keeping**

However, the "vindictive ex-wife" trope does a particular kind of narrative *work* and is often found in men's narratives about contested marital dissolution. From the standpoint of narrative analysis, the trope may express a reality in some way, but its truth value is beside the point. *As part of a narrative*, this trope works in particular ways that have particular consequences. It works to set up a counter-positioning of the other that *reinforces the victimized subject-positioning* of the narrator. Where the narrator is represented as blocked or helpless, the vindictive "Other" by contrast, may be presented (to be "seen") as powerful and manipulative; less a fellow subject than a threatening object. Where the narrator is represented as resigned, humanly sorrowful and resentful at "having to give up," the Other is dehumanized by being represented as implacable or tyrannical in a way that discounts other possible readings of her motivations or of the situation.

Todd writes that Tess wanted the "house and kids," forcing him to become a non-resident parent on the sidelines (Bottom, 2013, November 9, 2005). Todd reflects on a legal agreement on a parenting plan that was being drafted by himself and Tess: "[Tess] removed every bit of my parenting authority and guaranteed influence and parenting time that I would have regarding the girls" (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). In this instance, and others, Todd adds to the "vindictive ex-wife" trope another binary contrast, between himself as innocent or transparent, and the Other as duplicitous.

Todd represents Tess as wanting to maintain control over him, but in a way that allowed her to move on with her life with *her* children and new partner, without Todd's involvement. Todd's contrastive positioning of Tess as tyrannical, emotionless, and duplicitous tailors the "vindictive ex-wife" trope into a way to extricate himself from the "deadbeat dad" stereotype. At the same time, this positioning helps to justify his giving up as a result of the contrasted Other's actions: they are a source of his problems. This narrative off-loading is apparent when he states, "she's punishing my attempts to be involved by demanding more money" (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). In short, Todd narrates himself into a *non-agent* subject-position. The counter-positioning of Tess as implacable appears in Todd's allegation that Tess would not negotiate custody (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012), repeated in various forms throughout the journal. These repeated complaints and protests also assert a reversal of patriarchy and privilege (Tess being situationally and parentally privileged), which is tied to personalized allegations of a lack of good faith negotiation of custody, but also does its own more general narrative work.

It appears from Todd's narrative that Tess wanted sole custody of their children, but *her* reasons for this are not explored here. Todd claimed that Tess would drop her request for more child support *only after* he gave up his legal fight for partial custody (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). That claim resonated with me, as I heard allegations that it was made towards non-resident fathers I knew personally. Again, that resonance meant that I was predisposed to "notice" and identify with similar stories in the literature I consulted, as such this example (that gave me "chills" due to its consistency with a story I heard growing up) in Troilo & Coleman (2013, p. 170):

[a] father also explained how, due to a 3-month period of unemployment, he got behind in child support payments, and his former wife told him to “sign away your parental rights so Aaron [stepfather] can adopt them, and you don’t have to worry about doing things like that [paying child support].” Because of their former wives’ behaviors, these six fathers found it difficult to be involved in the ways they felt were necessary. They generally limited their time with their children to what was specifically documented in the custody arrangement because of potential or ongoing conflict. They rarely attended events if they knew their former wives would also attend. But in successfully avoiding their former wives, they also avoided their children. (Troilo & Coleman, 2013, p. 170).

This example, like Todd’s allegations, depends on a reader’s acceptance of the subject-position of an idealized non-resident father caught in circumstances not entirely of his making; expected (in terms of traditional gender roles) to be a financial provider, but unable to do so through no fault of his own, and wanting to be an involved father (in terms of new parental expectations) but barred from acting in that capacity by an ex-spouse’s actions. Again, aside from the truth value of these allegations, there is a common narrative trope operating here. In it, an implied or stated reversal of traditional gender privilege lends dramatic effect. The female partner has “litigation privilege.” And, as in the “vindictive ex-wife” trope, a contested “Other” is constructed to highlight the subject-position of the narrator. Where the narrator demonstrates a wish for attachment to his children, the “Other” is represented as discarding attachment: “I do not need your money, please go away.” Where the narrator’s motivations are motivated as straightforward and his circumstantial difficulties as beyond his power to alter, the “Other” is represented as duplicitous, either for manoeuvre to get what she wants by taking advantage of the narrator’s situation, or by defining the narrator as a “problem,” unwelcome at family events. Again, this renders the Other’s subject-position as blank, except for negative qualities like implacability, self-interest, and vengeance. It leaves aside her emotional and situational motivations; for example, where a custodial mother

may have concerns about domestic violence or abuse that lead her to feel a necessity to limit contact in some form. Again, a narrative analysis foregrounds how truth-claims are made, rather than beginning with the validity of the claims themselves. How does the narrative construct not only the narrator as only wishing to be understood when few others will vindicate him, but also position an ideal reader disposed to similar wishes or concerns?

To be fair, Todd's Othering of Tess and her subject-position as *blank* was not consistent or necessarily even consciously intentional. At various points in the journal Todd states that he was not being fair to Tess and it was *he* who was vindictive. In some ways he pulled on an "abusive husband" narrative trope to express vulnerability to the reader, in that he did not see himself as completely innocent on all fronts. For instance, Todd describes waking up late to be with the girls with the consequence that "[Tess] was kind of pissed, which I can understand. I really do feel bad about being late." (Bottom, 2013, "After Confirming the Affairs (Early May till Late September, 2005)"). In another example, Todd admits that, "By mid- to late summer I had gotten drunk and vindictive (verbally aggressive) with [Tess] a couple more times. I realized what I prick I was being, but I couldn't control it. It was very destructive but I just couldn't stop the pattern" (ibid).

The "vindictive ex-wife" trope is closely related to, and often employed alongside, a "maternal gate-keeper" trope in Todd's journal. Even though Todd did not always explicitly gender Tess in this role, I saw it as gendered and read his reference to it in that way. I was predisposed from my own experience to see custodial mothers as formal and informal gatekeepers, able to promote, restrict and/or regulate a non-resident father's access to children. There is evidence in the literature on parental roles that such

gatekeeping can occur, and that it is gendered today in a way that favours the mother, reversing the parental authority that governed parental custody in the early nineteenth century (Allen et al., 2012, p. 62; Amedt, 2008; Edin & Nelson, 2013; Mandell, 2002; Minton & Pasley, 1996; Mincy et al., 2015; Whitehead & Bala, 2012, p. 151). As in Todd's journal, the new partners of ex-spouses can also be represented as associate gatekeepers, with their own interests and concerns for their step-children, and wish to support the ex-partner (Mincy et al., 2015, p. 96).

Doucet (2007) argues that mothers often occupy a gatekeeping role because women are seen as bearing primary responsibility for, and are socialized to be child experts due to the embodied centrality of pregnancy and breastfeeding to their parental roles, in addition to the social availability to them of parental leave. Mother may invest in this situation by developing a mothering moral identity that reinforces the symbolic power and authority of mothering (Doucett, 2007, p. 230-231). In short, a resident mother's gatekeeping is not a form of agency or power that simply exists as a fact of nature, but is itself shaped by the gendered history of the patriarchal family and the division between the domestic sphere and public and economic life. One could call this a form of "subordinate" parental capital.

I identified parental gatekeeping<sup>19</sup> in Todd's journal as occurring informally through advice and policing of behaviour. Todd routinely described Tess as explaining to him (as a father) what his duties to the children were, though mostly in terms of financial

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<sup>19</sup> The literature often discusses "maternal gatekeeping;" however, it is important to note that gatekeeping is a social role, not a natural attribute, so I refer to *parental*, not *maternal*, gatekeeping. It is about who is allocated the power to be a specific kind of gatekeeper after separation or other particular situations. However, the use of *maternal* gatekeeping can be an acceptable term when the particular situation is gendered.

demands, rather than physical care. As a Christian, Tess was also concerned about Todd's previous drinking habits and missing some of his alcoholics' anonymous meetings. However, Todd recuperates his moral position relative to hers by referring to his own suspicion that she often drank wine in the presence of their daughters, thus making her a hypocrite in his eyes (Bottom, 2013, November 14, 2005). He also claims that Tess became upset, and started gossip with mutual acquaintances at the church they both attended, over Todd's possession of a Maxim magazine (hidden from the children) that was taken as a sign of bad parenting<sup>20</sup> (Bottom, 2013, October, 14, 2005). But this narrative recuperation of self also does something else. It constructs a place for a reader, sympathetic to Todd's cause, to occupy. And if the reader comes from similar class or other situational circumstances, and/or knows people in similar circumstances, such narrative tactics can position such a reader in a way that "triggers" their own anxieties and identifications, making them complicit in a quest to "prove the truth" or "end the injustice" of it all. In these examples, Todd uses Tess's statements and actions to construct a sense of her exercise of power as a gatekeeper – as a sort of unfair gatekeeper "leverage" that contrasts to his narration of his own powerlessness and the sidelining of his own parenting priorities.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> A "dumb dad" narrative trope in television commercials and popular culture also affected my reading of maternal gatekeeping. Many images of fathers in contemporary society, specifically advertising, show husbands and fathers as incompetent and dumb who need to be saved by an intelligent and rational wife or mother (Bivins, 2015; Kaufman, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> The academic literature mentions an extreme type of parental gatekeeping called parental alienation. Parental alienation (when one parent alienates children from another parent) can happen to non-resident mothers or fathers, and can be thought of as an under-reported form of family violence (Allen et al., 2012, p. 62-63; Baker & Darnall, 2006, Giancarlo & Rottmann, 2015; Godbout & Parent, 2012; Harman, Kruk, & Hines, 2018; Whitehead & Bala, 2012, p. 163). Some research suggests that sometimes false

## **Class as Partially Independent from Gender**

As I have mentioned, I saw and still see, Todd's narrative framing as fatalistic, though I now conceptualize this as a narrative strategy leaving aside the question of whether or how Todd's objective condition can be called structurally fatalistic. I also argue that his narrative framing reflects a kind of working-class response to social institutions built for and by the (upper) middle-class. But Todd's journal does not explicitly foreground class, and the manner in which it "others" Tess lends it to a reading more in terms of gender. That is how I initially read it, though paradoxically, I wanted to reject the identity politics of gender. But my earlier identification with Todd's subject-position kept pulling me back into the politics I wanted to reject. The narrative tropes that othered Tess worked to justify Todd as an objectively wronged individual based on his identity – as an example of wronged men/fathers, which I read and felt a connection to as a man, even as I tried to resist doing so.

Despite this pull toward gender grievances, I did identify with certain elements of Todd's narrated selfhood that reflected my socio-economic upbringing. With what could be called a working-class cultural capital, I sensed in the narrative something that seemed to fall in line with an anti-intellectualism I had accumulated growing up, before attending university. As suggested by Dunk (2003), working class anti-intellectualism can protest the idea that formal professional state of mind or an intellectual education is somehow more valuable than blue collar "common sense" tacit knowledge. As a working-class

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accusations of child or spousal abuse can be made by one parent, often the mother, to limit or end another parent's visitation rights (Kruk, 2013; Lowenstein, 2012; Whitehead & Bala, 2012). Todd's narrative seems to deny that any abuse might have happened that may have affected his access. He claims several times that the children showed routine empathy and sorrow at not being able to see him more.

youth, I tended to be skeptical and suspicious of banks, insurance companies, universities, politicians, (middle-class) social activists, government bureaucrats, and the public school system, which seemed monolithic and appeared to display what, in hindsight, I would call a middle-class bias. Middle-class people did not seem to face day-to-day financial or institutional barriers that were taken for granted in working-class life. Due to this they seemed to carry a particular cultural capital that came across (again, in hindsight) as entitled and comfortable. However, living in a society governed by an ideology of liberal individualism and meritocracy, I lived with the possibility of taking on middle- and upper-class aspirations, and thus also of normative and role conflict between loyalty to family and workmates and loyalty to the ideal of individual achievement (Sennett & Cobb, 1972). At the same time, growing up in a matrix of familial and class loyalties may have insulated me to the extent to which negotiating shifting class differences can involve complex interactional and emotional work, much as shifting gender differences do. My world view in this regard may have shaped my thinking not only on the family law system and institutional red tape, but also on the methodological and epistemological components of this thesis. Of course, personal psychology can be said to play a part in all this, but it is sociologically relevant as well.

Karl Marx (1867) argued that, in a capitalist system, goods and services are produced in the form of commodities. These are produced by human labour, but because that labour has been sold to the employer, the commodities are likewise owned by the employers. Thus, to the worker and consumer, commodities appear as if they just exist as things because they are divorced from the actual circumstances of their production. They are sold and thus their value takes the form of money used for further capital investment.



This leads to an irony. Workers produce capitalist commodities, and also the value embedded in the money realized by their sale. But to the worker, all these things appear as if they exist independently, and even as if they have power over the very workers that produce them. This has similarities to the world of popularized positivism, which treats objects of observation as if they exist independently of the observer and have their own inherent qualities.

Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) discussion of cultural capital and social capital taught me that my socio-economic status was shaped by social connections, social priorities, and the types of cultural knowledge I had accumulated. I became aware that my (mostly) middle-class cohort in university possessed much different cultural and social capital than I did. Inglehart's (1990 & 2018) post-materialism thesis is useful in explaining middle-class culture, specifically its social priorities, which emphasize self-fulfillment over loyalty more than does a working-class consciousness. Post-materialism is a middle-class cultural positioning defined by priorities such as environmentalism, political engagement, buying fair trade and ethical products, or volunteering, rather than living paycheque to paycheque, avoiding renting homes in dangerous neighbourhoods, catching up on monthly bills, and looking forward to the neighbourhood pub Friday night (pay day). I thought to myself: it was as if middle-class people were engaged in society and with social institutions while working-class people felt the need to fight their way through those institutions on a day-to-day basis and defend themselves from them, while consciously protecting their individual and familial pride as ordinary people. Of course, this resembles a "wine and cheese vs. beer and hot-wings" generalization, but it strikes me that such generalizations do reflect some differences in class culture that are pertinent

to this thesis: in particular, suspicion of middle-class professionals (judges, lawyers, social service administrators) and the organizations they are responsible for running (courts, social services, and the like).

### **PARENTAL ISOLATION AND FEELINGS OF SEPARATION**

My reflexive narrative analysis of Todd's victimized narrative has taught me that the situation of being a non-resident *parent of any gender* can be conceptualized as fatalistic, depending on the particular intersection of structural factors and power dynamics at work in the *situation*. Fatalism is not a response reserved for male parents who lose custody. That being said, Todd's fatalistic subject-formation, as reflected in his narrative, seems to be deeply gendered. My own subject-formation is influenced by class as well as gender. I tended to use non-resident fathers as an agent-type template to frame my thinking about fatalism because I knew non-resident parents, identified them as male and "felt" their pain growing up. When I think about the narratives surrounding Indigenous parents during the "60s scoop," or migrant parents at the southern U.S. border separated from their children (news of this became mainstream in 2019), or (as I will shortly explain) a child protection regime that seemed to investigate child abuse accusations in complete secrecy, I feel an emotional connection with those parents and their children based on what I tend to see as their powerlessness in the face of institutional realities foreign to them and which they have little ability to influence. This is the emotional dimension of how I came to understand Durkheim's concept of fatalism. I read a perceived inability of parents to do anything to protect their children's emotional wellbeing in such situations as fatalistic, and I do so in a way that I think is inflected by class as much as gender.

As a non-resident parent, Todd can be described as expressing a sense of isolation and separation from his children that Durkheim called “pitilessly blocked.” He expressed frustration and sadness at how he was physically distanced from his children due to living in a different suburb of a major American city (Bottom, 2013, January 18, 2006), suggesting that the long drive between his university and his children’s residence limited his visitation. He was frustrated by what he saw as a responsibility imposed on him (and not Tess) to commute both ways if he wanted to see his children (Bottom, 2013, Jan. 18, 2006). I noticed that Todd, like other non-resident parents, appeared to struggle to rework their relations to their children due to physical distance (Marsiglio and Roy, 2012, p. 11).

### **Mental Health**

Mental or psychological distress are subjective reactions to stressors experienced by some non-resident parents (Mandell, 2002; Yuan, 2014). Depression can be considered a form of distress that can derive in part from social stressors such as adaptation to a new non-resident/noncustodial status that comes with negative evaluations by others (Kruk, 2015, p.81; Whitehead & Bala, 2012). Depression and alcohol addiction appear to have been present in Todd’s life, by his own account (he mentions his involvement in AA, as discussed earlier), both before and during his custody battle, beginning shortly after the time when Tess (by Todd’s account) had an extramarital affair with a man who eventually became her new partner and involved in the lives of their children. In describing his severe anxiety and worry about potential bipolar symptoms, Todd states, “All I know is that I need help. Now. And for a long time. I can’t imagine living the rest of my life like this. And not being with my girls fucking kills me inside. I

cry a lot about that... nearly everyday... how do people do it? How will I ever do it?”  
(Bottom, 2013, January 28, 2006).

Moreover, Todd described recurring nightmares which he attributed to the divorce and his ensuing noncustodial status. He described these dreams as invoking “feelings of extreme loss regarding my girls and marriage” (Bottom, 2013, October 18, 2005). While attending university and feeling isolated from his children, Todd describes his first suicidal thoughts: “As I cried, I had my first serious thoughts of suicide. Do I have enough Tranxene to do it? Would it do it? How else *could* I do it? Could I get another prescription soon to help my efforts? And this scared the shit out of me” (Bottom, 2013, January 28, 2006).<sup>22</sup> The non-resident fathers I knew would (in my estimation, at least) try to hide their issues with depression and other psychological issues, while using narrative tropes such as the “deadbeat dad” or the “vindictive-ex” as ways to express the emotional hardships they felt. These tropes are gendered, but it is also worth asking whether they may also be inflected by class in the case of non-resident fathers whose subject-positions have been formed to view middle-class social institutions as beyond their influence or agency. In such cases, the ability to produce and control a narrative of

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<sup>22</sup> If Todd committed suicide, it could be considered fatalistic suicide. I do not remember suicide being discussed by non-resident fathers in my own life, but Durkheim’s study of suicide and subsequent research suggests that fatalistic suicide, like other forms of suicide, correlates with both gender and marital status in different ways. Divorced men are 9.7 times more likely to commit suicide than divorced women (Kposowa, 2003). Some of these suicides are due to fathers’ losing contact (in part or in whole) with their children (Cantor & Slater, 1995; Kposowa, 2003; Kruk, 2013; Qin & Mortensen, 2003). According to Kruk (2013), there is a suicide epidemic among fathers without custody or contact because they lose connection with their children. However, a full study of mental distress among non-custodial fathers and mothers would need to take into consideration a full range of gendered factors, including claims that women attempt suicide more than men do.

self-justification, even if it is to narrate “giving up,” could have psychological value as a form of compensation to address their felt or experiential sense of injustice.

### **Bureaucracy**

As I will discuss shortly, a “red tape” narrative trope was present in Todd’s journal. I was predisposed to notice such a trope, being inclined to see non-resident parents as over-regulated through bureaucratic procedures and repeated requests for official documentation. Thus, I was liable to accept Todd’s references to these as factual, and not to seek out a lot of corroborating evidence for them in the experiences of non-resident parents. I can give an anecdote to highlight the way in which I developed such as predisposition: I know a very close acquaintance who used to help care for foster children as a support worker to foster parents. The children she was caring for were three siblings who apparently had been apprehended at birth because of the birth mother’s persistent drug problems, which had also affected the children’s pre-natal development. The children made a “hopefully forever family” home with a (new) foster family where the acquaintance worked as a nanny (and eventually as an emotionally-close caregiver) to the children. I got to know the children myself. Seemingly without warning, and for reasons unclear to the care worker and me, the children were apprehended by government workers, and split up from each other. My acquaintance felt distraught because, from her perspective, the children were in a much better situation in the dissolved foster home in which they had become familiar, rather than in a series of temporary arrangements in other homes separated from siblings and caregivers they had come to know. Having become emotionally invested in the children, I too felt a lack of agency, a sense of loss, and an inability to stop or influence a life-altering change in the children’s lives. That

reinforced my suspicion of government organizations and policies. I felt I could not help anyone in the situation, was instantly angered when I found out (I vividly remember that I was at work in a construction “job shack”), and felt that I had been *personally* bullied by an unaccountable, incompetent, and strategically over-bureaucratized-revolving-door of disenchanted and alienated social workers and government administrators/“directors” with the power to make life-changing decisions seemingly at a whim. Of course, given that I had no official standing in the case at the time of the apprehension, I was not privy to any information the government workers might have had. But it felt to me as if the official mechanisms in place to “protect” the children were deliberately set up to bar those who cared about and for the children from access to information pertaining to their well-being. In turn it was easy for me to interpret my role in the situation fatalistically. I had developed a vested emotional interest in these children and their well-being through my relationship with some of the individuals involved, even though the children were not my own. But I could not act on my feelings. This experience happened around the same time as I discovered Durkheim’s concept of fatalism during my undergraduate studies. I may never have noticed the cryptic footnote describing “fatalism” without my personal experiences illuminating the concept in a way that made sense to me. What this anecdote also illustrates is an additional dimension of working-class experience. Wariness of official procedures and bureaucracies tends to go along with a positive evaluation of *personal* arrangements that make “common sense.” Procedures and policies developed in more abstract ways, such as the accounts that Dorothy Smith (1974) describes as making up a “documentary reality” in official organizations, appear as a result to be a way to resist the human contexts of official interventions.

In his journal, Todd mentions some examples of bureaucratic rules that he characterizes as isolative and contributing to his inability to access school records of his children. Kruk (2013) and Millar (2009) note that non-custodial parents are often blocked from access to their personal information by schools. If the parent in question is already disposed to experience or see bureaucratic authority as opaque, corrupt, and tyrannical, this can add a layer of fatalism to an existing skepticism about institutional authority. As a fairly sympathetic reader of Todd's narrative, I was predisposed to think about and highlight the following example.

Todd alleges that he emailed the superintendent of his children's school asking if he could stay updated on their educational progress (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010). He received a response suggesting that, as he was not listed as an emergency contact, he had no right to such information, unless he could provide proper documentation – implying a custody order documenting a legal right to such information. Todd writes that he was confused by this response and asked the school superintendent what “provide proper documentation” meant. After what he describes as an initial “lack of response,” the superintendent replied stating that “I won't know if the document you sent me [the divorce settlement] will allow you these rights until I read it. We are happy to help you but you will need to help yourself by sending us what we have asked for” (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010). The superintendent added that Todd could fax the documents. Todd notes that instead of providing a fax number, the superintendent gave him a link to a general webpage to find the fax number himself. It appears that Todd's perception was that Tess, and the primary parent on file at the school, was given the de-facto powers of gatekeeper by the school. Todd stated that “my role as a

divorced father would start to become very unclear” (ibid), and he claimed that Tess did not do much to support his attempt to get school records. Todd was frustrated with what he perceived as a lack of response and red tape with the superintendent and Tess’s apparent inaction to allow access to information. He asks, “Did I break some kind of law?... How could a father be ‘allowed’ permission to access or to be informed about his children’s schooling...is it any wonder why fathers are so frustrated... How are fathers to be (and stay) involved when their requests to do so are avoided, ignored, or prohibited?” (ibid).<sup>23</sup>

Todd resists the legal term “visitation” by routinely mocking it and putting quotations around it in his journal; resisting the idea that he is “visiting” his children, in favour of a self-perception that he is raising them. For instance, he notes, “...for the most part things went relatively smoothly with ‘visitation’ [sic] and other such matters” (Bottom 2013, December 2007 – December 2010) and also stated, “transportation to ‘visit’ [sic] my daughters was left solely as my responsibility” (Bottom 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). In his narrative, he is adamant about addressing time with his children as “visitation,” using ironic quotations. Annoyance with such terms can be exacerbated if there are no significant legal penalties for custodial parents who deny visitation rights to the non-resident parent (Mincy et al., 2015). Todd expresses his frustration with legal and

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<sup>23</sup> As a (resident) father myself, I was predisposed to tie bureaucratic documentation to gender by specific incidents. On the birth of our first child, government of the province I live in sent my spouse and I a parenting information package identifying the mother as the “parent” and me (the father) as the “partner.” The public health nurse who stopped by the day we got home from the hospital made similar references. Moreover, the Canada Revenue Agency will automatically refer to the mother as the “person who is primarily responsible for the child” (mothers will be sent the Canada Child Benefit, and the like) unless there is a request, by the “parent/mother” to suggest otherwise. See <http://www.cra-arc.gc.ca/bnfts/uccb-puge/menu-eng.html>



bureaucratic language in addressing changes to his and Tess's parenting agreements as "full of BS and legal loopholes" that benefit Tess as a custodial parent (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010).

Todd expressed frustration with bureaucratic processes in a variety of ways. He alleged that one of the daughters got in trouble from Tess when she returned a call from him after it was "too late" to use the phone at Tess's (and the daughter's) residence (Bottom, 2013, January 31, 2006). Another expressed example of Todd's frustration includes when he decided to demand that Tess come to pick up their daughters from his home. According to Todd, Tess then threatened to get the police involved (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). Todd claimed that Tess had her lawyer send him a letter that asked Todd for a "motion to establish support" (child support) because she was allegedly unhappy with him wanting to change transportation provisions (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). Todd writes that after this event Tess threatened to deny access if child support was not paid to her (Bottom, 2013, December 2010 – June 2012). Todd's journal also suggests a bitter argument ensued, including legal threats against him and mockery of him with degrading comments (Bottom, 2013, September 24, 2006).

My own initial approach to Todd's journal was not simply anti-intellectual in a working-class sense, but was also affected by my sociological formation. In the early twentieth century, Max Weber famously suggested that a process of scientific and bureaucratic rationalization was necessitated by the increasing complexity of Western society (Brubaker, 1984. P. 3). Weber referred to this impersonal regulation of social and individual life as an "iron cage" of rationalized rules and procedures: an inescapable and universal bureaucratic machine (Mitzman, 1969, p. 177). This iron cage of inarbitrary,

formal, and “objective” regulation, codified in laws and procedures, could also be said in Durkheimian terms to be a primary form taken by blockages to personal and collective agency in modernity: the modern force of fatalism.

Robert Merton (1952) proposed that this bureaucratic world selects for, or encourages the development of a “bureaucratic personality” acclimatized to a strict procedural and regulatory authority: a personality that prefers “special procedural devices of objectivity” with a “clear-cut division of integrated activities” (p. 362). A twentieth century template for organizations in which such personalities thrived, was the introduction by large corporations of Taylorist methods of control over large workforces in the interests of consistent and rational business planning.

The bureaucratic personality is less a psychological profile than the result of practical conformity with a set of textual and institutional practices. Dorothy Smith (1987) suggests that individuals are constituted as subjects and ruled by forms of organization vested in and mediated by texts and documents. This occurs in terms of priorities and conditions that are external to, but also to varying degrees internalized by, individuals in their personal and occupational relationships. Smith (1987) defines ruling relations as “a complex of organized practices, including government, law, business and financial management, professional organization, and educational institutions as well as the discourses in texts that interpenetrate multiple sites of power” (pg. 3). These ruling relations are “rationally organized. They are objectified, impersonal, and claim universality (Smith, 1987, p. 4). These textual and practical ruling relations are the ways in which society is “ruled, managed, and administered. It includes what the business world calls management...” (Smith, 1990, p. 14). Todd seems to represent himself in

relation to official institutions and agencies not as a bureaucratic subject but as a bureaucratic object, outside the textual and bureaucratic ruling relations that govern his ability to stay connected to his children. The “too much red tape” narrative trope, which he reproduces and repeats in his journal, positions him as a subject whose agency is frustrated, and emphasizes that frustration, for example, by suggesting the legal profession and court bureaucracy is “a real racket out there. A brotherhood of legal professionals who make a living off of the trials of fathers who simply want to be involved in their children’s lives” (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010).

As conjugal arguments and tensions increased during the divorce and custody negotiations, according to Todd’s journal, Tess’s attorney sent an email threatening to file an “emergency motion” to force Todd to give up selected visitation times, because Tess wanted to book classes and activities for one of their daughters during his scheduled visitation time (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010). Todd represented this as another example of how custodial and residential parents appeared to him to have the advantage when the family court system is involved. He also claimed that he got his own legal counsel in 2012, but then could not afford it on an ongoing basis. He writes that an attorney he met with implied he should “roll over and be happy with anything that [he] could get.” (Bottom, 2013, December 2007 – December 2010). In the journal, these events are represented in a way that reinforces a notion that the family court system expected him to give up his fight even for partial custody. Todd represents himself in the end as exhausted, financially unstable, and unwilling to fight over custody, or to spend money doing so if the odds were stacked against him. For a reader predisposed to think of institutional authority as external and inscrutable, and open to the idea that male parents

are socially and politically disadvantaged in custody battles (based on repetitive outcomes of decisions and justifications for those decisions), this can generate a wish to corroborate his story and “expose injustices” that can be identified. For a sociologist interested in the concept of fatalism, Todd’s narrative construction of himself as blocked at every turn makes it easy to read his situation as an exemplar of fatalism. But from the perspective of narrative analysis, it is important to bear in mind his agency writing himself into a fatalistic subjectivity.

### **A CONCLUSION ON TODD’S NARRATIVE**

To conclude, I’d like to return to the concept of fatalism to suggest a way which this interpretive and constructivist conceptualization of it can be connected to a social reality. Fatalism is a term that speaks to aspects of my own life; that feels “real” to me and seems to fit specific situations I have experienced as over-regulation or as undercutting my own agency. But this experiential reality is not the same as what Durkheim would call the reality of a social fact. For fatalism to be described as a social fact or social pathology in Durkheimian terms, it must resist our imaginations (not mine alone, but also others) and must be explainable at the level of the social. In what sense could Todd’s narrative construction of his blocked agency, or my subjective experience, be reconciled with Durkheim’s realist epistemology? Or is that task impossible? I would suggest that there are ways to at least to *connect* constructivist and realist approaches to the concept of fatalism, while still recognizing those approaches as distinctive, and as doing different kinds of work. In Chapter Five, I will explain how this might be possible, after first summarizing and making explicit the insights I have gained from the narrative analysis described in this chapter.

## CHAPTER 5: WRITING THROUGH BLOCKAGE: THE NARRATIVE CONSTRUCTION OF FATALISM

In this chapter, I want to make explicit what I think are the key insights that a narrative analysis of Todd's journal makes available, and to indicate how these insights relate to a rethinking of the concept of fatalism and of its usefulness. I will discuss these insights in three general parts, as follows: first, I will discuss further how my analysis of Todd's journal was a process through which my thinking and reading evolved. In other words, how did it take the process of *actually doing* a narrative analysis for me to clarify my own approach and the purpose of this thesis? I will highlight the most important stages in this process. I will argue that this process was not only helpful to me but is a valid way to approach social research. In other words, 'locking in' an epistemological and methodological approach prior to beginning to work with one's materials is not the only way, nor always the best way, to do social research. Second, I will highlight the particular ways in which Todd's journal involves the narrative construction of subjects and objects, including "Todd's" subject-position as the main character in, as well as narrator of the story. I will also discuss the subject-position of a "preferred reader" of the published narrative, and the narrative construction of other subjects (most notably, 'Tess'), as well as the material and institutional objects that constitute Todd's narrated "world." In the third and final section of the chapter, I will examine what I will call the second-order or theoretical objects that I bring, as a sociological reader, to Todd's narrative, as well as some specific narrative elements, familiar in the wider society (more specifically, present in the larger discursive context) which both Todd and I mobilized in his writing and my reading of his journal. I ask to what ends they were mobilized as narrative tropes, and

note some possible consequences of their mobilization. In conclusion, I relate these points to a re-visiting of the status of “fatalism” as a sociological concept and indicator of a social reality. Having shown how fatalism is narratively produced in Todd's writing and my reading, can I still claim that fatalism is or can be a social fact in a way that is compatible or complimentary to Durkheim-realist terms?

### **NARRATIVE ANALYSIS AND REDOING MY OWN THINKING**

I pursue the question of how to define and use fatalism in light of the analysis carried out in this thesis. However, to do so, it is important to summarize and clarify how the direction of this analysis changed and evolved. On one level, the purpose of the previous chapter was clear: I did a narrative analysis of Todd's journal. However, both the previous chapter and this one chart an evolution in my reflexive thinking: in my epistemological stance, my methodological approach, and my way of theorizing my topic. *Even my language choice and technical terminology has evolved from chapter to chapter. At this point in the thesis, I want to make that evolutionary process clear, as well as leave some inter-chapter repetition of ideas, because it has fundamentally changed both what I now “see” in Todd's journal, and how I see it now. This is a process.*

At the very beginning of this project, I proposed that I would find a sample of non-resident fathers and interview them, and then code the interviews for evidence of fatalism, defined as Durkheim would define it (a social-structural condition which blocks the agency of an individual or group, generating a “hopeless” response). When I encountered difficulty in getting interview prospects to commit, I changed my approach to a detailed analysis of one major text: Todd's account of his custody battles and their effect on him. I proposed to analyze this journal somewhat like an interview transcript,

looking for evidence of fatalism. To that, I would add corroborating evidence from the available literature on non-resident fathers.

However, the first problem I faced with this approach was the realization that neither Todd's journal nor most of the sociological literature could give me direct evidence of *fatalism* as a social-structural condition. Most of the sociological literature that I consulted involved interviews with non-resident fathers, and I came to realize that this presented the same problem as did Todd's journal. The men interviewed, like Todd, spoke of their personal experiences. What most of the literature and the journal gave me, then, was not direct access to information about social structure, but instead about men's experience of and responses to particular situations. In other words, I was trying to derive objective information about a structural condition from a set of subjective accounts and "experiences." If I wanted to get information about the structural conditions that I hypothesized were blocking the agency of non-resident fathers, I would have to do a detailed analysis of the court system itself, a statistical analysis of how cases were handled and resolved, plus an analysis of legal and other documents for changes in the relative treatment of male and female, resident and non-resident parents before the courts.

This was clearly far beyond the scope of my proposed project, so I settled instead for an analysis of non-resident fathers' situational experiences. This led me to reconsider the definition of fatalism as a quality of experience, and since we experience situations more directly than structures, I also entertained the idea that fatalism would be a useful concept with which to analyze specific social situations, like the ones Todd detailed in his journal.

However, as soon as I turned in this new direction, I faced another problem. Todd's journal still did not, and could not, give me direct evidence even of the situations he found himself in, or even of his experience. I was not there to double-check his perceptions. And even if I were there, I could only experience the situation as me, not as Todd. For all my sympathy for him and what I took to be his situation, I could not in the end overcome this barrier. My main informational source did *not* give me direct access to a set of real situations nor to a set of real experiences. What I had access to was a document, and I was beginning to realize that this document was not a transparent window on a "lived experience" regardless of the numerous people I know whose claims and stories seemed to indicate that they had experienced similar things. As noted earlier, Todd's journal only told me how he *represented* his experiences, in writing.

This was not a problem of the truth or falsity of Todd's writing. Todd may have written his journal with the most sincere intentions in the world, but as soon as he began writing, he began to potentially form and shape his experience in terms of a particular social position, a particular language, a particular set of ideas and concepts, and a particular way of telling a story. In other words, *Todd was doing what we all do: he was making meaning in a way that obeyed social and cultural rules for making meaning, in a way that would make his story intelligible and recognizable to others.* Or to put it sociologically, he was constructing an account. This was where I began to turn away from seeing Todd's journal in a positivist sense as empirical evidence of real-world events and actual experience, and began to see it instead as a narrative, constructed out of narrative elements, to produce particular effects on, or for, the reader. In short, this is where I turned to narrative analysis in the end.



However, I then encountered yet another problem, pointed out to me by those who read earlier drafts of this thesis. Narrative analysis leaves aside questions of the essential truth or falsity of the narrative, or how well it corresponds to a reality. Instead, narrative analysis focuses on how the construction of a story produces certain effects, including truth-effects. But I kept wanting to insert evidence that Todd's account was *really* true, in other words, to retreat back to a positivist approach to truth-claims regarding experience.

This was the point at which I was encouraged to consider why I felt it to be important to make a case for Todd, who was also making a case for himself. I realized at that point that my own experience of family life was centrally important to my formation as a subject, specifically here as a reader. My family experience included situations similar to those that Todd described, and I wrote a coda to the thesis describing them (elements of that coda are still present in this version of the thesis). From a positivist perspective, this constitutes "bias" which is something to eliminate or limit as much as possible. However, from a constructivist perspective, it becomes a topic of interest in its own right.

I came to see my own response to Todd's journal as worthy of discussion in two ways. First, it was evident that Todd's journal was an exercise in self-justification. In other words, he was constructing a narrative self: an account of his blocked agency and honest intentions. But in doing so, his narrative also constructed a space for a particular reader: a male reader who could say, "Aha, yes, I can see how it is for him, I recognize what he is going through. I've seen these *exact* things happen in my own life on multiple occasions." In short, just reading Todd's journal led me into a particular subject position.

Choosing his narrative for a thesis topic already showed, in retrospect, some explicit evidence of my openness to that subject-position. I was being constructed, and constructing myself, and in some ways constructing Todd himself, as Todd's preferred reader. I am the reader who has seen what Todd has experienced.

At the same time, though, this was not all just "Narrative Todd's" work. I brought my own predispositions to my reading. Again, from a positivist point of view, such predispositions are to be suppressed. Even Durkheim (1982) argued that what he called "prenotions" needed to be abandoned. But I was beginning to take constructivist epistemology more seriously, and that, plus narrative analysis itself, encouraged a different response: to clarify, make explicit, and seek to understand (in writing) my own predispositions. To put it another way, I could treat my own active implication in Todd's text, by taking on the subject position of its preferred reader, as part of my narrative analysis. This led me into *reflexive* narrative analysis, looking at how and why I as a reader engaged in my own construction of the meaning of the text as a way of constructing a meaningful self.

One possible objection to this approach is that it leads into a kind of navel-gazing in which the topic becomes "all about me." But from a sociological perspective, I am "me" only in a shared web of meaning and in social interaction (Cooley, 1902). I became "me" through an ongoing process of socialization. In short, subject-formation is a *social* process. Thus, exploring my predispositions to sympathize with Todd (as he narrates himself) became a sociological exploration of my social formation, in particular *social* settings and in terms of particular social statuses. How I became a gendered self was one obvious avenue of exploration, but I came to realize that my affinity with several of

Todd's responses also arose out of my formation as a member of a working-class family and its perceptions of and encounters with "documentary reality" (Smith, 1974) and "relations of ruling" (Smith, 1987). I detailed that realization in Chapter Four.

### **THE NARRATIVE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTS AND OBJECTS**

Having explained how I came to focus on a reflexive narrative analysis of Todd's journal and my response to it, I will now summarize what I see as the key insights I was led to by this form of inquiry. The main point of my analysis is that Todd's journal was written to produce its truths. As discussed earlier, both Foucault and Dorothy Smith argue that any form of discourse (including narrative) that makes truth claims *produces* truth as an effect. This is the case with Todd's journal, though its truth-effects involve representing the truth of what Todd writes as existing *prior* to the writing, and as motivating it. Todd's narrative voice is in a sense "positivist," appearing to give just the facts (as he experienced them), as well as evidence, including copied emails, photos, and other photocopied documents. This is the way the journal is meant to be read, and it is the way I first read it, as if it conveyed Todd's "lived experience" and as if that lived experience actually occurred directly and transparently, as documented evidence confirmed. However, *the actual process of my being convinced* by Todd's narrative was something that happened over time – the time it took me to read it. In other words, as a reader, I *co-produced* its (seemingly prior) truth over the actual time it took me to read and think about it. But having now re-read it reflexively, as a co-production of truth between reader and writer, what did I come to see as most significant about its construction as a narrative?

My first answer is that Todd's journal *constructs subjects* that are positioned in

different but interlocking ways, and it also *constructs objects* with which or toward which those subjects act. To start with the most central subject, in the journal, “Todd” is constructed both as the narrative “voice” of the story, and as that story’s central character. Todd is positioned as a man, a non-resident father, someone with a history, with concerns and grievances, with emotions, and above all, with a *need to be heard on his own terms*. He is also positioned as a *frustrated and blocked agent*.

Todd’s journal also constructs a “placement” for its reader: a particular subject position from which to respond to the story. Different readers may accept, resist, or reject that placement, but Todd’s writing clearly indicates a preferred way to read it. Todd is potentially writing for a reader who may not know the situation of non-resident father (sort of an education about his situation and its injustice), but also a reader who will “get it” from a non-resident father’s perspective. He writes about marital discord, about yearning to be an effective and engaged parent, about blockages to that yearning, about attempts to rectify an “injustice,” about failures to do so, and thus about frustrated agency.

Todd’s narrative voice also constructs other subjects. They are not as fully fleshed out as is “Todd” himself. They constitute “others” he encounters in his quest for justice. They are represented as having different kinds and levels of agency, but their emotional lives are only sketched rather than detailed, and mostly in terms of their relations to Todd: their effects on Todd’s emotions, agency, and self-perceptions. These others include his ex-wife, “Tess,” his daughters, Tess’s boyfriend, lawyers, counsellors, judges, school officials and other bureaucrats, police, and so on. The most important of these is Tess, presented as Todd’s main antagonist. Some others are only mentioned in passing. It

could be argued that some of these other subjects are represented in the narrative more as objects than as subjects: as acted-on or acted-for or acted-against, rather than as active in their own right. Todd's daughters fall into this ambiguous category. Todd describes their possible wishes, and the impact on them of his absence and Tess's actions, but they are described mainly as *objects* of care and concern, of influence or manipulation, or of deprivation. In the narrative, they are represented as affected by others' actions more than as actors. Todd has strong feelings for them, and hints that the feelings are (or were) reciprocated, but again, they are positioned more as *objects of his* feelings rather than as active respondents to them. This may have to do with their age, and definitely has to do with a narrative foregrounding of the tug-of-war with Tess. To many readers, especially if they vicariously see things through Todd's eyes, this way of representing the children would not seem surprising. Nonetheless, it is interesting and worth noting, especially given the recent emphasis on "the best interests of the child" in custody decisions, and on ways to identify those wishes fairly and free of influence. This judicial language positions the child as a vulnerable subject rather than as an object of struggle or care. It also, however, enhances the agency of another subject in the process: family court judges, who assess what the child says (and also what psychologists or social workers might say about what the child says) independently of the parents.

Todd's journal is also written to construct objects. Some of these are concrete – documents, cars, dwellings, furniture, alcohol, gifts, *etc.* Others are more abstract: money, courts, schools, laws, policies. There is also a third class of objects relevant to Todd's narrative, though Todd does not refer to them explicitly. These are objects *that I supply* and that I incorporate into my reading of and writing about the narrative, *as a*

*sociologist*. This class of objects could be called second-order or theoretical objects. They are abstract concepts that are nonetheless taken to designate social realities. They include gender, race, class, privilege, social institutions (as distinct from concrete social organizations), social systems, ideologies, cultures. Fatalism, in Durkheim's usage, is a concept that designates this kind of second-order, theoretical, but also "real" object.

As a sociological reader of Todd's journal, I describe his (narrated) responses as inflected by class and gender, and as fatalistic, but Todd himself does not use these terms. My use of them signals that I am not *only* a sympathetic reader of the narrative on the same level as Todd. My use of these terms also sets up an analytic distance. My reading, as I noted in Chapter Four, sets me up in a subject-position that embodies a tension. I am both a sympathetic and a distanced reader: I wish to understand and perhaps identify with the narrative figure of Todd as a fellow-parent, but I also want to understand his predicament at a level beyond the narrative; the level of social analysis and of supplying social context. This second level brings with it the possibility of a critical analysis: not being *personally* critical of Todd on "his own" level as narrator and narrative agent, but critically analyzing how that "Todd" is constructed and placed by "his" narrative within a discursive politics of class, gender, family and parenthood.

Let's explore these points by looking more closely at "Todd" as the subject of "his own" story. He is situated in basic ways in that story as an ex-husband and non-resident father. He is also positioned as a frustrated agent in relation to his ex-wife, her allies, the courts, and school administrations. He cannot gain the ends he (potentially) seeks, and his failure to do so is represented mainly as the result of five things: (1) a bias against men in custody decisions, (2) a bias against non-resident fathers' involvement in

the schooling and care of their children, (3) his ex-wife's implacable resistance to his attempts, within his financial and other limits, to be an involved parent, (4) the machinations of lawyers and other professionals, and (5) his own self-made, precarious, and difficult employment/financial/educational circumstances. In short, the narrative represents Todd's failed agency mainly as a consequence of barriers, circumstances and actions external to him which he cannot control. He *sees and experiences* all these barriers but pleads his case to the reader that he is trapped by them. He is also narratively represented as a man of feeling. The impacts of these barriers on him are often represented in emotional language. For instance, Todd as narrator describes talking to a counsellor at his church about his situation: "I've lost everything. I've lost my marriage and now my family... I was done... I hadn't done anything wrong." The counsellor suggested "neither of those are true." This description is followed by an emotive response: "*Mother fucker! I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING WRONG! WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU EXPECT FROM ME? WHAT OTHER REACTION COULD I HAVE?*" (Bottom, 2013, "After Confirming the Affairs (Early May till Late September, 2005)"). Here, the use of capitalization and italics, as well as the language, conveys an emotional message. He feels despair; he worries about his children; he feels emotionally deprived by his absence from them. He feels frustration at his ex-wife's actions and his own helplessness, and this erodes his sense of self-worth as a parent and creates a resentment and defensiveness when his version of loss is challenged. Todd was seemingly writing when he was initially upset and hurt.

As a sociological reader of the journal, I ascribe certain things to "Todd" at a second-order level, in order to conceptualize and contextualize his situation and

responses. I note that while any non-resident parent of any gender may face and feel frustration, Todd's frustration, as narrated in the journal, appears to be that of a male who expects "equal treatment before the law" in a way that signals a short-range view of equality and rights, but also certain lack of awareness of the gendered history of custody law, property law, of marriage, and of domestic violence as social reinforcers of male privilege. In other words, it can be argued that he senses a localized and acute decline in his status as a man as well as a parent, but does not (or is not able to) see that sense of decline in terms of the history of patriarchy and of changes in custody decisions or of the many continuing vulnerabilities faced by women, as described earlier. I also represent Todd's frustrated responses to the courts, educational and social-service bureaucracies, and middle-class professionals, as possibly indicating a working-class view of the world and of the institutionalized distinctions between domestic and public spheres.

Most importantly, as a reader familiar with the conceptual apparatus of Durkheimian sociology, I read Todd's journal as a narrative construction that represents him, as its central figure and author, as both a *failed agent* and as failing socially "through no fault of his own." In other words, Todd's narrative self-representation is readable as someone who in the end "gives up" on attaining legal custody. This fits a description of his response as fatalistic, but from the standpoint of a narrative analysis, the interesting thing is that "Todd" (as author) takes over 900 hand-written pages to *produce* himself as a fatalistic subject. **I interpret his narrative as the record of a process in which he actively writes himself into fatalism as a subject position with which his reader is invited to identify when experiencing similar situations.** Whether or not this position is justifiable, a narrative analysis indicates that this journal is a



product of a significant amount of *work*: thus it embodies an exercise of *agency*. As a *narrative* agent, Todd *actively* produces himself as the central figure in a story about his *lack* of effective agency. This, as I will suggest below, has implications for how one may think about fatalism.

Now, let's take a closer look at the reader of the journal as a subject. How does the narrative "work" to form and position the subjectivity of a "preferred" reader? I have argued that Todd's journal constructs a space for a reader who has some knowledge of custody cases and/or of non-resident parenthood. The narrative unintentionally positions both Todd and the reader as white; ironically by *not* mentioning (his) race (a key feature of "whiteness" is that its subjects feel no need to specify their race, but take it and its privileges for granted in ways that are more difficult for racialized persons). The narrative also positions its reader as sympathetic to a view of bureaucratic institutions (like the courts, school systems and social-service agencies) as monolithic, unfeeling, hard to navigate, or even closed against him or people like him. It positions the reader in two possible ways. First, as someone who may value "family" in fairly traditional terms (father, mother and children, closely bonded within a domestic environment seen as a refuge from the "outside" world of the economy or government). Second, as someone who values protecting pre-existing personal bonds that children create with parents, regardless of those "outside" world forces.

My initial receptivity to Todd's narrative was driven by the way my own subject-formation positioned me to "fit" these characteristics. I "fit the criteria" in ways that at first seemed natural and obvious. It took some struggle for me to start to see how that "natural fit" was a product of two things: how Todd's journal was constructed for

particular type of reader, and how I was formed as a socially-located subject: a working-class male, a father, someone who knew and empathized with non-resident fathers in conflictual custody situations, someone who had witnessed what I took to be arbitrary government interference in a family situation.

As I have noted, the journal constructs additional subjects who are positioned as “others” or “objects” in the narrative. His children appear ambiguously as subjects who are mainly objects of care and concern but who are also constructed as smart and strong kids in the middle of a dispute. But perhaps the most interesting construction of an “other” in the narrative is of Tess, Todd’s ex. Todd’s journal contains many references to her actions and statements, especially as they relate to himself and their children. But the narrative does not give a fully-realized portrait of her: her own emotions, fears, aspirations, resentments, or her own frustrations. For the most part, the only hints to her interior life are Todd’s suggestions that she, for the most part, acts out of self-interest. But aside from that, she is represented one-dimensionally, almost as if she is an implacable force of hostility. She is represented as consistently determined to block him from his children’s lives, but for reasons that are not completely explored with any authority outside his own perceptions of events or experiences.

This is not surprising. There is a massive self-help literature on interpersonal conflict which points out how we can give a full picture of our own perceptions and feelings while at the same time reducing our opponents to cartoons or threat-figures. But in the journal, this Othering of Tess also follows a narrative pattern that goes beyond this individual situation, as I will explain below. Similarly, I have suggested that Todd’s Othering of bureaucratic officials and professionals may have a wider cultural context,

related to class. This could also be said of his representations of the “otherness” of institutional objects, like school or government bureaucracies, or courts. However, the “othering” of Tess hooks into a context that is arguably more gendered than classed.

The various objects that appear in Todd’s narrative, in combination with these “othered” subjects, are things and forces he has to contend with, and that, in his narrative, he brings together to form a “world” – a set of circumstances external to him, on which he blames his inability to exercise parental agency. The way in which they confront him with barriers allows him to represent himself, as an actor in the narrative and as its author, as a good person (more specifically a good father) caught in a tragedy, faced with an outcome not of his own making (or maybe better put, of his non-making). This is fatalism as an effect of narrative construction.

### **NARRATIVE TROPES AND THEIR CONSEQUENCES**

This effect is constructed in the narrative through what Foucaultians would call discursive practices, or what Dorothy Smith (1987) would call textual practices or the construction of documentary reality. These practices involve the use of language (wording, sentence structure, ways of building up to or illustrating a point, reinforcing points through patterns of repetition and emphasis, etc.). More directly related to the focus of this thesis, constructing such an effect also involves the use of narrative resources available in a common culture: ways of organizing and producing a story that are culturally familiar. These can be used to create a unique effect, but it is their shared or common availability that lends them power and makes the narrative easier for a reader or hearer to “get into” or identify with. In Chapter Four, I discussed Todd’s use of master narratives and narrative tropes that would already be familiar to a range of readers, some

to a wide range, and some to a “preferred” readership constructed by the narrative.

Among the tropes I identified at work in Todd’s narrative, two stand out for further discussion. One is named explicitly by Todd. The other is not explicitly identified by Todd, but I argue it is present in the way the narrative is formed. The first is the “deadbeat dad;” the second is the “vindictive ex-wife.” The “deadbeat dad” trope refers to non-resident fathers who do not fulfil their support responsibilities to the mother and/or children. Usually, the reference is to court-ordered support and to support in financial terms. In particular narratives, the reasons for this lack of support may vary, and may include any of addiction, financial irresponsibility, inability to keep a job, or deliberate hiding of income or other forms of evasion, either out of self-interest, or revenge, or to maintain some sort of threat/control. The term “deadbeat” implies failure, either economic or moral or both. It may also have gendered implications, as in failure as a man; failure to follow through on male responsibilities, traditionally-defined. In short, the trope sets a tone of negative judgement in narratives in which it is used.

Todd, as I have noted, explicitly accepts “deadbeat dad” as a label for himself, after detailing his failed efforts to provide for and engage with his children as he sees fit. But this explicit acceptance is not simple acceptance. Todd accepts the label in the sense that his objective circumstances mean that he cannot fulfil his role. But the point of his acceptance of the label is to make a sarcastic and ironic point about its lack of fit. If it *seems to fit* him from the outside, he insists that it *does not fit* his intentions or motivations. In that sense, it is clear that he sees the potential imposition of the deadbeat label on himself as unjust. However, he is resigned to it: the deadbeat label, applied not only to him but to his narrative of failure, reinforces his assertion of blocked agency: he

can do nothing more to avoid the label. That he can do nothing to avoid the label, in other words, is part of the way he asserts his fatalism. But that assertion carries a further interpretive possibility. Todd self-applies the label in order to make a point (in the context of the foregoing narrative) about the *injustice* of its application in his circumstances. This leaves an opening for the reader to question the label in a wider sense; to ask “is it possible that many deadbeat dads are, like Todd, unfairly accused, even maneuvered into situations from which they cannot escape the label?” The extent to which this interpretive opening is *left open* or made obvious allows for a possibility to politicize the narrative.

The “vindictive ex” trope divides along gender lines; there are stories about vengeful men and vengeful women. In stories about men, the vindictiveness is often represented as a threat, involving intimate partner violence or bullying. In stories about women, on the other hand, the emphasis tends to be on legal or emotional manipulation, including efforts to reduce or eliminate the male parent’s access to his children or to influence children to develop a negative perception of the non-resident father. Todd does not consistently label Tess a “vindictive ex,” and as discussed, he does represent himself as vindictive several times. But the terms of the narrative are such that the reader is led to interpret many of Tess’s actions as self-interested and vengeful. The possibility that some of her described actions could stem from frustration, fear, or protectiveness is not seriously raised: to do so would be to damage Todd’s self-construction as well-intentioned, honest, emotional, but restricted by his circumstances. His explicit naming of his issues with drinking serves in the narrative to underscore his honesty, but his narration of these issues is entirely about how it could be manipulated by Tess, and thus

forecloses the possibility that Tess might have had a genuine concern about her or the children's safety or economic security because of it. Again, as I have noted above, it is common for anyone in an adversarial situation to narrate it in a way that makes oneself appear justified and to cast the other in a bad light, often in a caricatured way. Again, however, the fact that "vindictive ex-wife" stories about manipulative women circulate, and that the trope is commonly-known and available to aggrieved male parents, means that its employment in a narrative (or its interpretive importing into the narrative by a reader) raises a potential political issue. In other words, what are the possible consequences if or when a particular story about a "Tess" is written in a way that makes it available as a resource for readers inclined to make more general statements about "women"?

The question above can be interpreted personally: what is Todd's personal responsibility for the way he writes his narrative and his decision to publish it? What is my personal responsibility as a reader in discussing it, verbally or in a published document? But beyond the personal is a more properly sociological question: How does the writing, telling, or reading of stories in terms of this trope contribute to a politics of blame which essentializes groups of people (i.e. women) in negative ways and diverts attention from other ways of seeing the politics of gender? Do tropes such as these exert a fatal pull, luring writers and readers into personalized or stereotypical battles that might actually reinforce social systems that essentialize gender and reinforce gender inequality?<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> I feel that a writer should understand not only how their work can be used as a resource for readers inclined to reproduce stereotypes about people (eg. "vindictive ex-wife" being taken to mean "women"), but also understand *why*. Stereotypes are a social problem of

To carry the above point just a little further, is it possible to ask whether the individualism of North American culture tends to reinforce a tendency to treat gender issues in personal rather than systemic terms? Is it *also* possible to suggest that such personalization might ironically also have a *class* component? Basil Bernstein (1971),

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inequality when they influence the dehumanization of a group's social identity (class, gender, race, and the like). This is partly why I initially wanted to address the "fatalism" of a mostly *privileged* group of people: non-resident fathers. Stereotypes against non-resident fathers can reinforce aspects of inequality for both men and women (Mandell, 2012). This cuts across "privilege" lines. Moreover, what kind of role do academics and gender activists play in creating stereotypes and essentializing gender if they use a trope like "male tears," with little nuance or flexibility, to describe work or activism that focuses on non-resident fathers' concerns? Could descriptions of an ideological, static, and stubborn version of "male privilege" act as a narrative trope? Could such a trope act as a resource for academics and politicians who wish to denigrate those who show concerns for men's or fathers' issues as "reactionary" and "misogynistic" because they focus on the "wrong" identity? I feel sociologists have generally done an insufficient job at accepting responsibility for addressing these questions because of their potential to reproduce counter-productive narratives.

I have come to believe that many researchers who use social concepts to explain "lived experiences" need to do a better job at addressing such issues as representation. I caught myself using "patriarchy," "class," "intersectionality," and "privilege" with the same positivistic intent I originally had in employing the concept of fatalism. I developed the same concern I had with fatalism: can researchers take concepts related to powerlessness for granted as "fact" without critically questioning their assumptions about such concepts? My reflexive narrative analysis, in terms of a constructivist and interpretive paradigm, has taught me about the limitations of "lived experiences," especially when addressing one's own narrated victimization based on an identity, status, or agent-type. Researchers, too, have to be careful about ascribing a static and under-defined concept of "male privilege" to descriptions of lived experience because there are always changing and evolving resistances within shifting power relations, always competing narratives with different perspectives, and different socio-political agendas (re)creating and (re)conceptualizing these concepts. Concepts relating to lived experiences do not designate objective social facts or truths, and thus researchers using them need to realize the social plasticity of their use, and work to critically assess even basic definitions of a concept like fatalism and take nothing for granted. That being said, I have used the term *male privilege* the way it is used in relevant literature, because the scope of the thesis does not allow a thorough unpacking of every term. I wish to only draw attention to the need to avoid essentializing the term, and seeing it instead as a marker of structural or political effects.

writing about class differences in British society, in *Class, Codes and Control*, claimed that “[f]orms of spoken language in the process of their learning initiate, generalize and reinforce special types of relationship with the environment and thus create for the individual particular forms of significance” (p. 76). Bernstein argued that working-class speakers in Britain communicated more in terms of what he called “restricted” speech codes (compressed, relying on tacit, shared insider and implied knowledge), while middle-class speakers were adept at using both restricted and “elaborated” speech codes (language in which things are spelled out and specified in ways that allow the making of theoretically-elaborated general statements with wide application). Both types of code allow for generalizations. But in restricted speech codes, the generalizations tend to be made through concrete images or stock figures (manipulative women or violent men, for example) whose significance is shared as a set of assumptions. In elaborated speech codes, the basis and the criteria of a generalization are likely to be made more explicit, and also likely to be expressed in abstract terms (“class,” “gender ideologies,” “social stratification,” “discursive practices”). Is it possible that the ability to avoid the urge to personalize is in some ways a *class-bound* linguistic ability that goes along with the status of universities as training-grounds for the middle class?

### **FATALISM AS A SECOND-ORDER CONCEPT: DISCURSIVE OR SOCIAL FACT?**

I now will return to the questions raised first in Chapter Two: what way of defining fatalism as a concept makes it most useful for social inquiry, including inquiry into the social *construction* of meaning? Would that definition still remain true in any way to Durkheim’s intent? I will argue that Durkheim uses the term fatalism as what I



have called a second-order theoretical concept. Indeed, it could be said that most sociological concepts are of this type. Thus, they are concepts that work best in terms of what Bernstein (1971) called “elaborated” speech codes, as defined above. I want to begin by clarifying that I do not see restricted or elaborated speech codes as either good or bad in themselves.

Restricted speech codes are useful, and Bernstein (1971) points out that they are useful specifically in a class context. For workers, they are a way to communicate and share knowledge among themselves while protecting that communication from bosses. They also build bonds of solidarity between workers, given that they rely on shared tacit knowledge. Elaborated speech codes, on the other hand, have allowed a vast expansion and sharing of knowledge and insight in the humanities, social sciences and natural sciences. At the same time, it can be said (and I have experienced this, *you know*) that elaborated speech codes are also useful in a class context. They can be used to disempower working-class “common-sense” and at the same time to shut down those who are not trained in using specific, abstract and theoretically-explicit definitions.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> Sociological concepts are employed in elaborated speech codes to the extent that they are carefully and explicitly defined, explained and contextualized, not used as a shorthand for shared but assumed meanings. The theoretical and exploratory examination of the concept of fatalism in this thesis is an example of the use of elaborated speech codes. It is possible that some sociological terms could come to be used in ways that resemble restricted speech codes, if the term becomes a shorthand label whose meaning is assumed and shared by an in-group without explanation. But fatalism in this thesis means something slightly different than popular dictionary definitions, or even definitions used by other Durkheimians. I am not using the term as if it stands on its own terms as self-evident or as if its meaning is taken for granted. Unlike the use of slang or in-group terms that connect people on the basis of shared assumptions, my use of the term “fatalism” has *not* become a common shorthand and thus a part of a restricted speech code. Should it become an in-group shorthand in future (like popular terms such as “cool,” for example), then it could become part of a restricted speech code based on shared and un-elaborated

Thus, both “common sense” *and* “theoretical language” can be used in class-exclusive ways or have exclusionary effects.

Elaborated speech codes are also useful to those who exercise authority within modern systems of abstract control, like bureaucracies. Bernstein also suggested that school systems can act to “sort” students, restricting access by working-class students to levels of education that allow familiarization with elaborated speech codes, such that abstract language becomes a class barrier. Thus, he argues, an official tendency to denigrate restricted speech codes can serve to “disable” social mobility and the exercise of social power by those who use restricted speech codes.<sup>26</sup>

I believe that theoretical work on a concept like fatalism can lead to new and genuine insight. I am glad that I was able to access an education that helped me develop my sociological insight using elaborated speech codes. At the same time, I recognize that such access is a privilege still shared unequally, and from my own experience I feel that mastering abstract knowledge is often more difficult for working-class students than middle class ones, because working-class students must learn new and often alien forms of abstract language, and un-learn a tendency to default to what they would describe as “common sense,” but what academic philosophers label as “misplaced concreteness.”

How is a Durkheimian sociological concept a second-order theoretical concept?

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assumptions. But the complexity of the term, as I have explained it in this thesis, may make that unlikely.

<sup>26</sup> Politicians will often communicate using restrictive speech codes with an electorate or “base” by constructing “outsider” opposition politicians during election debates with, “I speak for modern hardworking Canadian families trying to put food on their tables” or “my opponent is completely out of touch with the problems of Canadian [insert any identity or group].”

To answer this question, we must start with Durkheim's definition of a social fact as something beyond the level of individual biology or psychology that impresses itself on the consciousness in an undeniable way, like the pressure of a social norm. That impression of "something real" that resists our imagination is not yet a theoretical concept, or even just a concept. It *becomes a concept* when it is *named* and given a meaning that links it to other names and meanings. It becomes a *theoretical* concept when that name, its application, and its links to other concepts are analyzed and tested. Many theoretical concepts in sociology, like religion, altruism, or fatalism, come from ordinary language but are then subjected to refinement. Others, like anomie or egoism are already semi-technical terms, and sometimes a whole new functional term is invented by sociologists – like, say, "ethnomethodology" or "structuralism."

Let's say a population of workers feels trapped and powerless in the face of a labour system like slavery that is stacked against their autonomy or independent agency. That system is a social arrangement they cannot wish out of existence; it is a fact of life for them. If they resist or ignore it, they are punished. For a Durkheimian sociologist studying their plight, their slavery is a *social* fact. What that means is that the sociologist looks at the actual existence of a system of slavery, perhaps compares it to other systems of slavery and to non-slave labour systems, and makes an argument that this system of slavery exists as a social fact in two senses. One, it impresses itself on the slaves who are subject to it. Two, the sociologist notes evidence of its existence that other sociologists cannot wish away.

Obviously, I am leading you, the reader, toward Durkheim's concept of fatalism. But positing the existence of a system of slavery that blocks the agency of slaves does not

yet give us “fatalism” as a Durkheimian second-order concept. Durkheim includes in his definition not just the barrier, but also the *response* of those who encounter the barrier. The characteristic responses of trapped labourers to slavery also collectively constitute a social fact, if observation and statistical measurement indicate that those responses exist in some regular and predictable way. Durkheim suggests, in his footnote on fatalism, that one possible response to systematically-blocked agency is suicide. He explains this in personalized terms (what it’s like to feel blocked and despairing), but the personal experience of blocked agency is not part of the concept of fatalism as a social fact. Durkheim is making an *inference* here – what it must feel like to experience blocked agency. But the “factual” aspect of fatalistic suicide doesn’t reside in a personal experience, for Durkheim, but in a *suicide rate* that can be *linked* to a population suffering blocked agency. That linkage is made *by comparison*, for example, to a population in different circumstances. This thesis has only suggested a *possibility* of non-resident fathers and/or parents experiencing fatalism as a group. It has not proven it.

To call such responses to such barriers, “fatalism” takes things to another level, involving conceptual, theoretical and observational work. The label alone doesn’t do this. It is the *combination* of barriers *and* characteristic responses to them, under the label “fatalism,” that does it. But this combination in turn only happens when the name “fatalism” is definitionally linked to three *other* concepts in a four-part theoretical framework – altruism/egoism/fatalism/anomie – which in turn is based on a binary distinction between integration and regulation. And the “facticity” of these terms depends (in Durkheim’s *Suicide*) on the gathering, comparison and analysis of statistics. So, slave-labourers’ responses become an example of “fatalism” (despair in the face of excessive

and inescapable regulation) only as a result of a considerable amount of work! This is what makes Durkheim's epistemology realist rather than positivist. He posits that social facts exist as realities, but that reality is *available* to sociologists *meaningfully* only as a result of conceptual and scientific work. In other words, a second-order sociological concept names a "reality" which is *already invested* with theory.

This may sound surprising given that Durkheim (1982), in the *Rules of Sociological Method*, says that sociologists must resolutely give up all preconceptions in order to gain access to the reality of social facts. This ambiguity might possibly explain a shift in Durkheim's epistemology towards a "middle ground" that comes out of his work on suicide, and is realized most fully in *The Elementary Forms of Religious life* (2001). Especially in *The Elementary Forms*, it becomes apparent that giving up preconceptions is part of the *ongoing* work of a sociologist. It is not like dropping something at the door of sociology before entering. Durkheim devotes many pages in *The Elementary Forms* to refining his concept of religion so that it ends up being something quite different from assumed or common-sense uses of the term.

But Durkheim (2001) also says something in the concluding section of *The Elementary Forms* that opens his approach to something like a social-constructionist epistemology, when he argues that (a) observation alone cannot give us direct access to the real in a way that bypasses theoretical interpretation; (b) scientific concepts and even logic descend from religious origins, and (c) science still resembles religion in constituting a system of beliefs and practices held collectively by scientists. Ultimately, Durkheim argues that science parts way with religion (and also with common-sense thinking) in that science involves a self-conscious (i.e. reflexive), systematic and

disciplined refining of concepts and theories for ever more specific application but also ever more universal ends. But if we imagine some utopian future in which science attains such universalism and conceptual precision, it would still be rooted in society – in this case, some universal society of humankind – and its concepts and logic would still have religious origins. In other words, this universal science would still be a human construct.

Thus, as I came to realize in writing this thesis, fatalism is not something that can simply be “found” in social reality. To posit its existence is to engage in interpretation. This is even more clear when we take into account the complexity of Durkheim’s (1954) definitions of altruism, anomie, egoism and fatalism in *Suicide*. As I noted above, in all four cases, Durkheim does not simply identify a structural condition of society that can be labelled with one of these terms. He also makes inferences as to what it must be like to experience them. And further, he studies them through people’s *responses* to these structural conditions. In short then, we can say that fatalism has three components: (1) an observed *and* theorized structural condition that blocks the agency of some population, (2) an inferred set of subjective experiences that such a population suffers (for example, feelings of despair or hopelessness), and (3) the population’s statistically-measurable *response* to the condition, mediated by a common subjective experience. Of these three components, (1) and (3) are potentially measurable as social facts, while (2) must remain an inference, even if there is evidence of it in, say, suicide notes or other writings.

What this means is that in many cases of fatalism, we must take into account the role of interpretation. There are some cases, which we might call extreme limit cases, in which fatalism is evident in unthinking passive conformity. For example, some people in concentration camps in World War II gradually lost the will to live. They did not actively

commit suicide or go on a hunger strike; they just stopped eating or taking any measures to ensure their survival. But there are many other examples of what Durkheim might call fatalism that actually involve meeting blocked agency with agency of another kind. To actively commit suicide in the face of circumstances one cannot change is still to engage in some act of will. To complain to family members about being put in an impossible position by an ex-spouse or the courts is also to engage in an act of will – to talk. And certainly Todd’s writing of a 900-page journal, which he then condensed, typed, and published online, was an act of will. As I said earlier, Todd actively narrated himself into fatalism. And further, to undertake a willed act in response to structurally-blocked agency is also to engage in active *interpretation*. Todd, for example, tells us he felt despair. We cannot know that first-hand, but he tells us in a very articulate way how he feels and why he feels that way. In other words, *he interprets* his situation, his feelings about it, and his response to it.

It is possible to argue that Todd *feels* despair before he *interprets* it as despair. But Todd entered his marriage, and later his separation, custody battle and divorce, not as a blank slate but as a conscious, adult human being who had a specific social location, identity, and status. Thus, we can argue that his feelings were *already shaped by* the social meanings and interpretations that he brought to his situation. This is important because it means that despair or any other kind of fatalistic experience (outside of extreme limit cases like the one I mentioned above) is not simply a direct result or function of a structural condition of society. For example, it is possible to imagine two different groups of people who might respond quite differently to a social situation in which their agency is blocked. Let’s say one group is a set of peasants who have been

taught all their lives that their situation is God's will, and that no other kind of society is possible or even thinkable. One can imagine that they might not enjoy their situation, but at the same time they might tolerate it without falling into despair. But imagine another group of peasants who get the same teaching, and are in the same situation, but are also taught in church that both peasants and lords descend from the same couple, Adam and Eve. They might come to *interpret* their situation differently as a result, as unjust, and start to feel either anger or despair more strongly. This is especially the case if they learn to conceptualize this sense of anger and despair as *unjust*.

There is evidence that Durkheim in *Suicide* understood this interpretation in his discussions of anomie, egoism and altruism. He refers to these as pathologies in a modern, *individualistic* society held together by organic solidarity, and further, he ties them to specific examples of meaningful activity, like Protestant versus Catholic Christianity, being a member of the military, or being married or unmarried. It can be argued that egoism and anomie might be experienced and interpreted in ways that lead to higher rates of suicide. If we think of fatalism in the same way, then it would be important not just to identify something social that blocks agency, but also to explain why, structurally speaking, a particular population might be more liable to experience *and interpret* it as unjust or hopeless. In other words, what concept of hope or justice provides the contrast?

This interpretation could still be treated as a social fact. For example, one could do a meta-analysis of all sociological studies of non-resident fathers that involved qualitative interviewing, in order to get a sense of whether there are patterns to the ways in which those fathers interpret their situations. I came to realize, looking at a lot of the



published literature on non-resident fathers, that the things they said to interviewers does not give us direct and un-mediated access to their experience. Todd's detailed account, for all its dramatic description of his interior life and well as his actions, also does not give us direct access to his individual, subjective experience. I can know my own experience as "real to me" but that doesn't make it real to anyone else, or sociologically real. But if the stories told by non-resident fathers tend to fall into certain patterns, then it is possible to say that the pattern points to the possible existence of a social fact. This social fact would not be the structural blockage in itself. Fathers' stories do not give direct evidence of the structural blockage of will. That would involve a detailed study of case law, court systems, family structures and marriage, among other things. Fathers' stories also do not give us direct access to their feelings; only to how they *made sense of* their feelings. But patterns of interpretation, and narrative patterns, *can* be said to be social, and I have argued in this thesis that Todd, in interpreting his own situation, picked up on narrative patterns present in the culture and already used by others in similar situations.

The point here is that to understand "fatalism" as a social condition we have to go beyond identifying a blockage. We also have to be able to say *for whom* it is a blockage, and *in what way it is interpreted* as a blockage, and to understand also that a "fatalistic response" may involve an *act of will meant to communicate an interpretation* of one's situation in terms of despair or hopelessness. In other words, how did the blockage come to be perceived? How did it get interpreted? This in turn means looking at how perception and interpretation are always situated, always from a particular perspective that relates to social *location*. How is a perception of or response to blocked agency

highlighted by some specific, historical contrast, say between justice and injustice? Is that contrast universal? Or is it specific to a particular group and its history?

For example, in the case of non-resident fathers like Todd, could it be argued that their sense of injustice and even bewilderment relates to a shift in both the history of custody case law and in the social and cultural status of men as parents and spouses? Could it be that Todd's sense of injustice was sharpened not simply by a lack of agency, but (also) by expectations that he took for granted, that were part of his socialization, that shaped who he was as a spouse and a parent, but that now are open to question? Further, could it be that writing himself into a fatalistic corner was one way in which he could come up with an interpretation of these changes that "saved" his former sense of self by re-interpreting it? That is, by interpreting Tess as single-mindedly opposed to his efforts to be an engaged father, and interpreting the courts and bureaucratic institutions as monolithic and closed to his efforts, does he then construct himself as a noble victim of circumstances for which he is not responsible?

If we can say this, even hypothetically, then we can also say that fatalism is *not always a simple case of social dysfunction. It can also involve a politics of interpretation*, a politics that could have social consequences. To mention briefly another possible example, the speeches that U.S. president Donald Trump makes to his supporters at political rallies also pull on common narrative elements and restrictive speech codes, and do a similar kind of work. The stories that Trump tells position himself and his audiences as noble victims of outside forces: corrupt elites, immigrants and "illegal migrants," socialists, Democrats, and so on. This victim narrative is a highlight of a kind of victimhood culture and identity politics that I mentioned earlier. Victimhood narratives

based on status and identity are now a way for even non-oppressed groups to articulate a common identity and express how they feel they should be understood (Campbell & Manning, 2018). Some of Trump's followers have claimed that they like it when he makes outrageous statements, *because he can* (Ramp, 2016). In a way, this oddly echoes Obama's earlier campaign slogan, "Yes we can!" They feel blocked in what they can say by "political correctness," but Trump is *free* of that constraint. He is their agent. In other words, what they like about him is that he can exercise agency on their behalf, or that he promises they can "take back" agency, in the form of control of "their" country, "*again.*"

### **CONCLUSION: SOCIAL FACTS AND THE NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF EXPERIENCE**

To conceptualize a personal story as fatalistic, whether it is my own or another's, is to take one's personal situation and move it into culture, language and society in a particular way. *Todd did not engage in such second-order conceptualization*, but in pleading his case to the reader as a good man wronged, he does two things. He tells a heartfelt personal story, but he does so in a way that appeals to shared ideas, shared stories, shared tropes, shared rhetoric. He tells his story from the point of view of *sincerely believing it to be true as he tells it*, but he tells it to persuade others, to pull on the sympathies of his readership. In so doing, he is helping to construct a readership that is sympathetic to his claims and that identifies with his subject position. There is no contradiction between these aims. That is how we all tell of ourselves – again, whether we realize we are doing so or not. However, if we believe that sociology is about *greater understanding*, not just about amassing facts, then social researchers who listen to stories need to be reflective about how these stories are made and about how they themselves

may hear those stories and record them in particular ways. How Todd constructs his story hooks into a larger politics of gender, at least potentially. Similarly, when we talk to, interact with or listen to others, we are not neutral observers. Even though I never interacted personally with Todd, I was not a neutral reader of his writing. If the purpose of sociology is to help others gain a better understanding of themselves as social beings, we cannot do that without learning about our own stake in our research and interpretations. Adams (2012) found in her research on female athletes from the 1930s that her interviewees described themselves, as women, differently than she first assumed they would. As a feminist scholar, Adams realized that she was writing herself into her subjects' oral histories. To deal with this issue, two things are needed. First, a better awareness of one's own assumptions and one's stake in the research. But Adams also argues for consciously allowing informants to explain, in their own voices, their own account of their lives; allowing a sense of peoples' experiences and feelings to emerge from their narratives with less judgment. Amendt (2008) also emphasizes respect for the way people tell their own truths during interviews or when telling their story. "[A] person's reality is what he or she considers to be true" and "when people say they are unhappy, they are not lying" (p. 13). This does not mean that researchers should *assume* such narratives are objectively true, but that there is value in examining *how* detailed and personal accounts are put together as accomplishments, and *how* truth claims, and claims about feeling, are made.

My own sympathies with Todd's narrative voice, as a non-resident father who expressed an emotional longing to be involved with his children, and who described his experiences vividly, affected the way in which I attempted at first to conceptualize his

experience as fatalistic. In a sense, it can be said that *I initially over-respected Todd's voice* as “fatalistic” in terms of my own narrative agenda, the same way Adams (2012) assumed a specific gendered experience of former athletes in her research. Bonner (1997) argues that a necessary step in sociological understanding or dialogue is to understand not just what someone is saying, but where they are coming from in saying it. But Bonner says that the quest for sociological understanding must go beyond an empathetic identification *of, or with, the other's* point of view. The next step is to understand it, and one's own response to it, *critically*; to understand *how* that point of view is constructed, limited and socially located. This can be done respectfully. *I began to unpack Todd's assumptions, but this did not mean I had to disrespect or trash his fervent wish to make his case, and speak his truth as he saw it.* I ended up asking about his responsibility for the way his narrative about Tess could be read, but I did so to *open up* another way of hearing and thinking about his narrative voice, one that ideally I would like to see available to Todd and others like him, not to shut his voice down. I also began to question the subject position that I brought to reading Todd's narrative. At first, it felt like I had to punish myself for false assumptions, but gradually, I came to realize that such questioning could be done in a way that ***respected my own personal story as my initial way into sociology and into exploring the usefulness of the concept of fatalism. Respect is the opposite of blind acceptance.***

### **A Potential for Discursive Social Facts in Future Research**

In the course of this project, I decided to forego a discussion of fatalism as a *condition* affecting non-resident fathers, or as an *expression* of such a condition. Instead, I came to focus on evidence that there is something social at work in the *narrative*

*construction* of powerlessness, and something collectively meaningful in resistance to or negotiation of that powerlessness. Shifting from Durkheim's notion of fatalism as expressive of agency "pitilessly blocked and violently choked," I have become more interested in the "oppressive discipline" that is characteristic of descriptions of blocked agency like Todd's. For Durkheim, a social fact involves three necessary elements. There must be some sort of force or constraint at work that can somehow be perceived or experienced but that is not reducible to mere imagination. It must have an effect not just on a single individual but on a plurality or collectivity. And it must be possible to conceive of this force or constraint as involving the action of a social cause that produces social effects (Durkheim, 1982, p. 1-2). All of these criteria are more complex than they first appear to be.

In the case of non-resident parents, family courts pronounce and administer judgements that derive not only from case law or human rights law, but also from special interests, bar associations and other professional groups, and academia. Such judgements and the shape of their administration also derive from broader collective representations: gendered expectations, assumptions about class, and about what constitutes a normative ideal of parenting or of a "family." In individual cases, accounts given by former partners and their lawyers, family members, judges, psychiatrists and others may factor into court decisions and their management. And as with prisoners, the judgement of what constitutes "overregulation" in such cases may vary. My review of the sociological literature on non-resident fathers turned up a significant amount of material indicating that many non-resident fathers were troubled by a lack of involvement in their children's lives, and saw that lack of involvement as a consequence of unjustly blocked agency. But

most of this material depended on interviews or survey instruments that gathered non-resident fathers' descriptions and opinions. Thus, these studies do not give direct access to the subjective reality of these fathers' experiences, but instead reflect the ways in which they have *constructed* their situations as *meaningful*: how they have used their linguistic, narrative and cultural resources to construct *representations* of their experience for a survey questionnaire or an interviewer. Their responses are expressions of their experiences, but any *meaningful* description we give of our experiences is always already an *interpretation* of it that takes into account who we are communicating with, our purpose in communicating, our use of language and narrative, and our sense of our social location.

Nonetheless, such representations, if they were to become widespread and influential enough to result in institutional change or collective action could contribute elements to the development of social facts in a Durkheimian sense. Social facts can take the form of normative or motivating statements that are, in their origin “external to any individual or the mind of an individual... norms backed by sanctions... imposed by language, the force of myths and symbols, and the pressures of public opinion...involving a lack of choice.” (Thompson, 1982, p. 59). Common and collectively-shared linguistic or discursive forms of expression, or narrative elements commonly-shared across a population, could be theorized as social facts in this sense. It can be argued that changes in custody legislation and case law during the twentieth century, which undermined the rights of the father so dominant in the early nineteenth century, were driven by the activism of women and others concerned for child welfare, who shifted normative patriarchal discourse in the direction of a mother's “natural”

connection to her children. Todd's narrative, my narrative, and the narratives of non-resident fathers more generally, are connected through acts of reading, writing, speaking and publishing: through communicative action and its infrastructures. When the experience of blocked agency generates responses (even if they are termed "fatalistic"), those responses can be shared, can permeate entire families, and through social media, can impact the narratives and actions of thousands of men and women; perhaps even generating an entire informal literature of shared experience relating to perceived injustice and loss. The shared *experience* is not and cannot be a social fact, but evidence of a widely-shared genre of *communicative representations*, along with norms that they reinforce and *collective action* taken in their name, could be studied and described as social facts.

Although my emotions and the personal narratives I brought to my reading of Todd's journal are not social facts in this sense, they have both social roots and potential social effects, as I discussed in Chapters Three and Four. But on the basis of my analysis in this thesis, I cannot go so far as to say that Todd's writing and my reading are valid examples of a social fact called fatalism, nor of its predictability: that would entail a large-scale study of a very different type. My original purpose for this thesis was to claim that the lived experience of specific groups, regardless of privilege, identity or status, could be connected to a social force that imposed on them a real form of powerlessness. This claim turned out to be a lot messier to sustain than I had thought it would. I cannot claim with certitude that non-resident fatherhood is marked predictably by an objectively-existing, general *social* condition called fatalism.



When it comes to my own narrative, constructed out of my witness to the lives of non-resident fathers in my extended family, I am without doubt. I cannot wish away certain core elements of what I saw from the social position I occupied at this time; how institutional or social-structural forces which I then took to be beyond understanding or influence, affected the lives and agency of these non-resident fathers. In a sense, this makes my experience “factual” *for me*, though it does not meet the criteria of epistemological realism or the existence of a *social* fact. That experiential feeling of truth also does not rule out my own active *making of meaning* out of those experiences, using assumptions, ideas and narrative elements available to me. These in turn were shaped by my social location: I saw through working-class and gendered eyes. Because I had seen or sensed something powerful that seemed to limit my relatives’ lives, I found myself initially identifying with elements of Todd’s narrative *as if they were simply factual*. In part, this was because I connected a faith in lived experience to the positivism of my early sociological training, taking both my observed experience and my emotional construction of it as *real*. I also brought a frame to my reading that was shaped by my early exposure to accounts given mainly by non-resident fathers. That frame fed a tendency to interpret familial situations involving non-resident parenthood in light of one set of experiences – the father’s – and in a way that eclipsed the experiential accounts of resident or non-resident mothers. In short, I did not witness the direct experience of these non-custodial fathers, but I was exposed to something just as powerful; the *accounts* they and family members supportive of them constructed of it. These helped form a general pre-dispositional pattern for my own narrative sense-making of gender, parenthood and custody; a pattern congruent with what Todd claimed about the world that blocked and

displaced him from a role he represented as his justly-deserved right: to be an engaged parent of his children.

I can say that I witnessed actual events that had a social dimension, and that in that witnessing, I was encountering social facts. But this is a long way from claiming definitively that I saw *fatalism* at work in a way that could legitimately be conceptualized as a social fact. Nonetheless, it is possible to argue that the witness of a parent, a child, or a spouse to their experience of a situation or a set of pressures can be judged to be factual and social, if related through theoretical and conceptual work to the existence of similar shared narratives, and to other social evidence (collective action, institutional structures). It is not necessary that non-resident fathers have the ability to conceptualize their experiences as “fatalistic” in order to assert that their accounts point to the existence of fatalism as a social fact. Thus, my own recollections, the research literature I have cited, and narratives like Todd’s, could be used to claim that many non-resident fathers experience institutional or normative barriers to agency that they articulate as constituting a “hopeless” situation for them and that they respond to in characteristic ways that could be called fatalistic. If their responses are significantly similar across a population, then those responses can be said to exist as a “general” fact in relation to that population. If those responses are represented in terms of *collective meanings*, which allow recognizing and interpreting new situations as part of the same category of event, then they can be said to constitute a social fact in themselves.

However, this does not necessarily mean that these responses are directly the result of an actual, as opposed to a *perceived* injustice or powerlessness. This is true not only of fathers’ narratives but of researchers’ or theorists’ claims. Researchers, too, can

use taken for granted concepts related to powerlessness as “facts” without critically questioning their own assumptions or their own work in constructing that facticity. Reflexive narrative analysis, working from a constructivist and interpretive approach, taught me about the limitations of “lived experience” and its unreflective conceptualization, especially when addressing one’s own expressions of victimization based on an identity, status, or agent-type that is socially-located and has a history. Fatalism in Durkheim’s definition is a collective response to blocked agency, but it also involves *collective representations about the perception and interpretation* of those blockages.

### **A Discursive Durkheimian Outlook**

I have established that a reflexive narrative analysis cannot directly convey experience or give us social facts as Durkheim defined them. But this does not mean there are no points of connection between Durkheimian theory and a social-constructionist approach to narrative. Durkheim himself argued that language is a social fact that does not simply translate thought; it also creates it. Collective representations embody master narratives and are produced by discursive practices in ways that can limit resistance to changing them. In this sense, a Durkheimian conceptualization of social *actions and practices* could be useful to discourse and narrative analysis and for research into the social construction of meaning. (Pearce, 2001). As I have argued, if we unpack Durkheim’s short footnote on fatalism, it indicates that people can and do *actively represent* their experience of blocked agency as unjust or not, depending on their circumstances and symbolic resources. Thus, identifying oppressive and oppressed agents is the result of practices in which meaning is discursively constructed within specific

situations. Social pathologies (like fatalism) can still be said to be structural, or the result of broad social forces, but the creation of these structures and forces is mediated by social and discursive practices which take place in specific situations (the “local” dimension of power, as Dorothy Smith termed it), and involve the use of a shared, symbolic stock to make collective representations. One implication of seeing fatalistic narratives in this way is that narrators and readers/hearers may identify one thing as the “cause” of their blocked agency while completely ignoring other things that a sociologist might see as equally or more determinative. Thus, for example, what Durkheim called the “forced division of labour” may constitute a structural condition that limits and cramps the lives of working-class men, but those same men may see it not as an injustice but as simply the way things are. Similarly, Todd blames Tess, bureaucracies and lawyers for his troubles, but does not see the labour market he participates in, or the costliness of his post-secondary education, or the taken-for-granted individualism structuring his narrative, as blockages in a similar way.

These practices, in their particular social situations, are not social *facts* in a Durkheimian sense but are still *social*. They draw from and contribute to a collective stock of symbols, discourses and narratives, and *how* they do so can be studied sociologically as a network of practices and representations and influences. Fatalistic narratives may have common identifiable characteristics and may be constructed in similar ways. They may draw on characteristic linguistic, rhetorical or narrative elements, and may lend themselves to particular kinds of readers. They may also shape the politics of marriage, parenting and custody by elevating particular narrative tropes to the status of

master narratives: for example, tropes like “the deck is stacked against fathers,” or “the vindictive ex.”

My discussion of fatalism as a process of narrative meaning-construction suggests a way to take narrators seriously as motivated and emotive social subjects, not simply as objects crushed by forces against which they have no recourse. Todd’s “I am a deadbeat” proclamation could be said to be a kind of fatalistic suicide-by-narrative (he writes himself into a box from which there is no escape), but his creation of that narrative still is an expression of agency, an appeal, and a kind of recourse through the attaining of a readership. This is also true of my own struggle to understand Todd’s narrative experience of blocked agency both personally and sociologically. Thus, instead of fixing the concept of fatalism under glass, so to speak, I have embedded it in a living process of interpretation.

This thesis answered a call by Pearce (2001) to develop a radical approach to Durkheimian thinking on contemporary issues, while not abandoning his realism. The more personal goal of this thesis initially was to unpack and apply the concept of fatalism in a way that could explain my question about how fathers, otherwise a structurally gender-privileged group, could experience so much pain and loss in and as a result of custody battles. But over time, I became interested in how narratives of blocked agency were meaningful “expressions” of subjective experience. Then, finally, I came to focus on the actual process of making meaning through writing and reading – how the *narrative construction* of blocked agency was, ironically, a form of agency. This opens up new ways to think about power and powerlessness beyond who “has” it and who does not. How does it work? In what practices does it reside? In what social relations or

institutional arrangements does it accumulate? In this light, we can take seriously Durkheim's three-part approach to the concept of fatalism as involving (1) positing the existence of a socially-imposed blockage to agency as a social fact, (2) inferring that those subject to the blockage experience it *as meaningful* (e.g. already composed of collective representations like "injustice") and (3) proposing that *responses to blockage* can involve other forms of agency, like narrative sense-making, or suicide. This allows us to see "fatalism" as a process which includes active sense-making – the active construction of meaning. This in turn allows us to see in fatalism not a fore-ordained closure, but a complex and fascinating *politics of meaning*. Further, although in this thesis I have given up the idea of bringing together Durkheimian realism and social constructionism within a single epistemology, I have suggested connections across the realist/constructionist divide. The turn to discourse in social thought (for example, by Foucault) was indirectly influenced by Durkheimian theory (Pearce, 2001), and both Erving Goffman and Harold Garfinkel drew upon Durkheim in their respective developments of symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology (Ramp, 1999). Feminist theorists such as Lehmann (1994) who are interested in the social construction of gender can use Durkheim even though he did not explicitly study *gendered* power relations. I hope I have established in this thesis not that there is one fixed meaning to the concept of fatalism, but that this concept remains productive for theoretical and research paths that Durkheim opened up, even if he did not, in his time, fully recognize or pursue them.

**To be continued...**

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