

MAKING MEN:  
RACE, CLASS, AND GENDER PROJECTS AMONG PARENTS OF  
YOUTH FOOTBALL PLAYERS

by

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Making Men: Race, Class, and Gender Projects Among Parents of Youth Football Players

Dissertation Directed by Dr. Stefanie Mollborn

## ABSTRACT

Drawing on 50 in-depth interviews and three years of ethnographic fieldwork, this dissertation examines the experiences and sense-making of parents of youth football players. This work focuses primarily on how parents use narratives to construct their moral identities, as well as the masculine identities of their sons. With an intersectional, constructionist approach, findings show that broader cultural conceptions of masculinity are uniquely transported into local raced and classed community cultures, where parents make sense of raising boys into men. This analysis includes a comparison of two neighboring communities, one significantly more white and affluent, and the other with more race and class diversity. Findings demonstrate that the meaning of good manhood differs across the two spaces, with independence and individualism the focus of the parents in the more affluent community and shared bonds and mutual care more salient among parents in the more diverse community. Parents are faced with different challenges. In the privileged community, football is understood as deviant, and parents must account for their decision to allow their boys to play the game. In the more diverse community, football is celebrated as a community bonding activity and as a route to dignified manhood. Parents are also required to manage the day to day reality of football parenthood, and findings show that this is especially difficult for mothers. Gender structures parenting work, with mothers bearing the lion's share of emotion work and loss of parental power. Interviews reveal that fear and worry are projected onto mothers who are required to demonstrate their ability to both

deeply feel and discipline deep emotions in service of their sons' well-being. Mothers also struggle to claim parental decision-making power, as the context of football privileges men and marginalizes women. Some mothers attempt to re-empower themselves, with varying degrees of success. Findings show that it is single mothers who are best able to claim parental power, despite being largely marginalized in their communities. This dissertation explores contemporary parenthood and the construction of masculinity within national and local contexts, contributing to scholarship on families, children and youth, gender, culture, identity, emotions, and inequalities.

Dedicated to my mother  
For always being my biggest fan

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

What it means to do "good parenting" and raise "good kids" has varied over time, reflecting broader cultural shifts that accompany different socio-historical periods. Changes in the institution of The Family reflect variations in both the organization of social life and associated cultural ideologies (Coontz 1992; Mintz 1989; Pleck 1990; Smith 1993). For contemporary U.S. families, recent shifts that occurred have meant increased expectations for deep emotional bonds with children, a demand for intensive parenting, and the expectation that parents raise children into successful future citizens of the state (in ways that adhere to contemporary standards of adulthood and citizenry) (Coontz 1992; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003). Race, class, and gender ideologies influence social expectations for how parents should accomplish such tasks, creating tensions in parents' ability to reconcile deeply embedded contradictions in expectations.

White, class-privileged social norms shape cultural definitions of appropriate parenting styles (Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015; Lareau 2003) and gender ideologies complicate 'common-sense' understandings about how to raise children into adults (Messner 2009; Osmond and Thorne 1993; Schalet 2011; Ticknell 2005). Parents are not only expected to protect and prepare their children simultaneously but are also held to the task of raising them into particularly socially located adults. Studies have also shown that people believe that raising boys is a different parenting task than raising girls (Elliott 2013; Kurtz 2002; Messner 2002; Schalet 2011), and that ideas about race and class create additional complications for parents attempting to navigate childrearing. (Lacy 2007; Lareau 2003). An especially salient aspect of parenting

work, then, is figuring out not only how to raise children, but how to raise raced, classed, and gendered children, within particular contexts and through particular means.

One such context is organized team sport, which is often lauded as a valuable space for children to learn life skills, practice teamwork, and boost self-esteem, and parents are motivated to encourage their children to participate among their extracurricular activities. Existing research has shown that this emphasis on sport to be especially true for boys (Messner 1989). In American culture, football represents an especially masculine sport and space, one in which men and boys both construct and enact (either through performing or spectating) an exaggerated form of heteronormative, hegemonic masculinity. This includes the ability to withstand physical pain, demonstrate aggressive and competitive behavior, and participate in homosocial bonding and inter-male dominance (Messner and Sabo 1994). Youth football, then, offers a distinct context in which to explore how parents use particular gendered spaces in the work of engendering masculinity boys.

While the cultural narrative surrounding team sports for boys is overwhelmingly positive, a tension exists between commonly held beliefs about the sacralization of children and the potential risks that accompany sport (Messner 2009). Football, in particular, has become a thorny cultural terrain in contemporary American society. The recent cultural push-back against youth football and the increased discourse surrounding children, injuries, and tackle football complicates parents' experiences in allowing their children to play the game. Tackle football has become a point of contention in public conversations about kids and sport. This tenuous space for parents reflects growing cultural concerns about keeping kids safe, while also exposing them to positive socialization opportunities (such as team sports). These conversations take place within a broader context, where increasing national attention on sport and traumatic brain

injuries has challenged traditional celebrations of football culture, making football visible as especially high-risk and unnecessarily “dangerous” (Belson 2014).

In this dissertation, I focus on parents of youth football players as a way to examine how parents make sense of raising raced and classed boys into men within a particularly masculine space. I examine how parents accomplish this project within distinct community cultures and how they make sense of themselves and their own identities in the process. Football parents are noteworthy because they are raising boys who are playing a historically celebrated masculine sport at a time when the game has come under fire. Football parents, and especially privileged football parents are required to negotiate cultural tensions in their parenting work. Football winds up providing both resources and problems in parenting projects, as well as in their interactions and sense of self. In the following dissertation, I use 50 in-depth interviews and three years of ethnographic fieldwork to explore the experiences and sense-making of parents of youth football players in two, race and class distinct communities with distinct local cultures. With this research, I investigate the everyday parenting work of engendering race, class, and gender in boys, as well as the particular dilemmas for the uniquely situated parents who perform this work. I accomplish this by looking to the context of youth football and by considering it as representative of a distinctly masculine activity yet increasingly contested and bifurcated along raced and classed lines.

Understanding the parenting work involved in raising boys into men is important for scholars of family and gender to consider, as it reveals understandings of how boys become men both within and outside the institution of the family, and how parents’ social locations, experiences, and social psychological processes influence their parenting work. This research demonstrates the micro- and meso-level processes involved in the production of raced and

classed contemporary masculinities within the family and this shapes parents' understandings and experiences in turning boys into men. I also show how these processes influence and are influenced by, broader cultural conceptions of the intersection of race, class, and gender. I explore how this process is multifaceted, as the social location, experiences, and sense-making of both the constructor *and* the constructed are affected by meso-level ideologies that become tools in creating social realities. In studying how parents raise boys and engender raced and classed masculinity, I demonstrate the continued presence of gender, race, and class inequalities within family life, and how the unequal distribution of power among parents influences how social actors are created, and in this case, how raced and classed boys are made into men.

#### GOALS AND APPROACH

This dissertation has three main goals. First, I investigate how parents understand the work of engendering masculinity in their boys. I ask, what kinds of men do parents hope their boys become, and how do they see themselves and football as a part of that process? This parenting work is influenced by parents' own experiences and sense-making, as well as the particular community spaces they operate within. Understanding how parents experience the process of raising boys into men can help to shed light on the broader cultural context that shapes intersectional gendered ideologies and show how broad ideologies transform into individual, micro-level ideas about the "right" and "wrong" ways to raise boys. This context sets the stage for how boys are taught to be men and can help to further understandings of how intersectional gendered beliefs influence the kinds of men who are produced within the institution of the family.

Second, I analyze how parents' social psychological processes affect their parenting work. By focusing on how parents construct their identities and manage their emotions while

engendering boys, I demonstrate that the project of raising children (and ostensibly, whom those children become) is part of a larger cyclical relationship between how parents simultaneously cultivate themselves and their children. Parental identity and emotion work are also gendered (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Hays 1996; Waltzer 1998). My research contributes to the sociological understanding of how gender –of both parents and their children –influences the individual social psychological processes that affect how masculinity is produced within the institution of the family.

Third, I explore how parents' gender complicates parenting projects and either facilitates or constrains parental power in decision-making within masculine spaces (such as football). When raising boys into men, mothers and fathers experience different roles, expectations, and constraints in their parenting. Parents experience unequal distribution of gendered power and responsibilities (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1996; Sarkisian and Gerstel 2012). This creates a variety of dilemmas and circumstances that mothers and fathers must continually manage in their project of raising children. While the body of research in this area is robust, this dissertation will add to the literature by demonstrating how the unequal distribution of power between mothers and fathers influences how they are or are not able to control the masculine engendering of their boys within specific, highly gendered spaces. This project will also add to the literature by illuminating how raising boys influences how parents conceive of their parenting work and of themselves, as moral people.

In this dissertation, I use a multi-level qualitative research design to explore the sense-making and experiences of parents of youth football players. Race, class, and gender are the primary foci of parents' projects, and I use an intersectional analytic approach in my examination of both the mothers and fathers in my sample, and the larger communities they parent within. I

also focus on the influence of race and class, which matter in both parents' experiences and in the gendered process of constructing raced and classed masculinities within boys. By bringing an intersectional analytic approach to my research, I explore how multiple categories of difference (race, class, gender) intersect and impact parenting work. This method also allows me to investigate how each social identity intersects to create unique social locations that parents must manage in their parenting work. With this, I investigate the influence of raced and classed community contexts in raising boys. An intersectional social identities and community-focused approach allows for a more nuanced analysis and creates space to explore how these factors matter in fostering both opportunities and constraints for parents in raising boys into men. My study focuses on two sets of data: three years of ethnographic participant observation and 50 in-depth interviews. With this dual data set, I am able to use both observations of parents' interactions and parents' narratives to more fully understand the contexts where my participants do parenting work, how they make sense of themselves as parents, and how they understand the project of producing "good men."

## CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In this dissertation, I use interviews and participant observation with parents of youth football players to explore how these parents construct masculinities, perform work on their identities, manage emotions, and negotiate power in their parenting projects. My participants are parents of *boys* and understand their parenting as requiring them to engender masculinity in their sons. Their understandings, and thus their projects, are informed by their intersectional identities and are influenced by broader cultural constructs of race, class, and gender. Knowing and executing the 'right ways' to turn boys into men is exemplified through interactions within and stories about participants' experiences in youth football.

Football serves as a tool in parenting work, but also creates a complex landscape for parents to traverse. Being a football parent is often wrought with tensions and contradictions, and often requires parents to make difficult, seemingly untenable choices about their sons. They must regularly negotiate with others (their boys, spouses, coaches, friends, family, media, etc.) about those choices, and wrestle with their own emotions in the process. Investigating these experiences is important because these participants represent a group of parents who, like many parents, must grapple with the current cultural context of contemporary parenting, but who do so within a particularly complicated situation. Because of this, their parental experience is intensified, and thus they more clearly expose the complexities of contemporary family life (including the cultural contradictions in parenthood, engendering modern ideals of masculinity, and navigating gender dynamics within the family).

In this dissertation, I examine how the parents of youth football players navigate the thorny terrain of turning boys into men, and how their experience relates to broader social, cultural, and social psychological processes. After I review the extant literature that forms the groundwork of this study (Chapter 2) and further detail my data and methods (Chapter 3), I move to the four analytic chapters that comprise the findings of this research. In Chapter 4, I examine how parents living in my first field site, the affluent community of West Peak, make sense of their experiences as football parents through the lens of engendering masculinity in privileged, individual-focused boys. In Chapter 5, I examine the more race and class diverse community of East Summit and how they make sense of football, shared community bonds, and raising “moral” men.

In Chapter 6, I examine the emotion work (on the self, on others, and in storytelling) necessary for football parents. Parents in both communities experience this work differently,

with mothers holding the lion's share of the emotional burden (including guilt, worry, and managing external critiques). In Chapter 7, I examine participants' distinct gendered experiences in managing the work of being football parents. Here, I focus on the question of "Who gets to say?" what happens to boys in their time playing football. I examine negotiations and inequalities across both communities in parents' differing gendered power. While mothers continue to perform the bulk of the work of raising children, they often find themselves disempowered and excluded in the context of football (by their male spouses, their sons, and male coaches). Mothers, however, find innovative ways to regain some control but do so within a context of fear and constraint.<sup>1</sup> Differing levels of privilege, marginalization, and family forms also matter for mothers' ability to exert parental power in decision-making for their boys.

In the final chapter (Chapter 8), I conclude this dissertation with a summary of the findings and a discussion about the study's broader implications regarding family life, parenting cultures, and contemporary masculinity. I end this section with a discussion of the project's limitations and suggestions for future work.

#### A NOTE FOR THE READER

While a research study on football, children, and parents is particularly timely considering the growth in cultural debates surrounding the issue, there are several contributions and implications of this dissertation I believe would be useful to consider while reading this dissertation. First, yes – this research does grapple with the often asked "Why would a parent let their child play football?!" but from an approach of unearthing the complicated and multi-layered work of raising boys into men. This research is not an assault on parents who allow their boys to play football. Instead, the contributions of the study include bringing much-needed nuance into

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<sup>1</sup> When they cross "mom boundaries" they are at risk of punishment, retaliation, and further exclusion by their sons, husbands, other parents, and coaches.



conversations about masculinity in youth and how parents play a part in constructing and upholding the ways in which gender structures society. Yet, they also play a part in resisting some norms and expectations surrounding masculinity, childhood, and the “best” ways to be the “best” parents for their children.

Community sets the backdrop for this parenting work, and in this research, I emphasize the importance of considering how local cultures shape the social processes sociologists study. Finally, the implications of research on parents of youth football players necessarily points to broader social issues surrounding raising children in an age of precariousness (Pugh 2015) and in a "risk-based society" with a culture of fear (Glassner 1999). Combined with this is the conversation growing louder and louder about the fraying of masculinity (as we see terms such as “fragile,” “toxic,” and “insecure” more and more in cultural conversations). How then, in this context, do parents make sense of raising boys into men? How do football parents balance the work of protecting boys' physical health with their social well-being (as exercised through their burgeoning masculine identities)? How do differently situated parents imagine pathways to dignity for their boys as they prepare to become men? And how do they understand football as a part of all of that work? Those are the questions I grapple here, and those are the implications and contributions I hope to make with this research.

## CHAPTER 2

### A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

In this chapter, I review the relevant literature that informs the study of parents raising boys in the contemporary U.S. context. In this review, I take an intersectional approach, considering how race, class, and gender intersect to create unique social locations for parents and for the boys they are raising. I focus on five primary areas of extant literature to set the foundation for this dissertation. They include 1) A theoretical framework grounded in social constructionism and identity theory, 2) contemporary parenthood, 3) engendering masculinity in childhood and adolescence, 4) football, culture, and children, and 5) class and community in parenting work. In sum, this chapter establishes the foundation in which I situate my findings from my time spent with parents of youth football players in contemporary U.S. family life.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### *Social Constructionism*

In this research, I utilize a social constructionist theoretical framework to examine how parents construct identities and manage their experiences within the context of raising gendered children, namely, boys. I also use a constructionist framework to explore masculinity, with a focus on the theory of hierarchical masculinities (discussed in further detail below). A social constructionist approach “views knowledge and truth as created, not discovered, by the mind” (Andrews 2012; Schwandt 2003). In this perspective, the analytic focus is not in capturing “Truths,” but instead works within an interpretivist approach to understanding the social world and the social actors within (Berger and Luckmann 1991; Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). In this dissertation, I use a constructionist framework in my analysis of the meaning-making among my participants – at times accomplished through telling stories about their experiences and at other

times in interactions with others in their everyday lives. It is my position that it is within these spaces and with this analytic framework that researchers can uncover the sense-making, processes, and meaning that social actors attach to the “Truths” of their lives.

Social constructionism can be used to analyze and understand the vast and varied layers of social life. In this study, I call heavily upon the social construction of identity and the social construction of masculinity – and namely, how the two converge among parents constructing masculinity for their sons as a part of constructing their own moral identities. The social construction of masculinity suggests that different gendered identities are created by social actors within acts of shared meaning-making. What it means to ‘be’ a boy or a man is also constructed within a given historical and social context, reflecting current masculine expectations (Kimmel 1995; 2008; Messerschmidt 2000; Messner 1997). This theoretical position also suggests that we *make* boys into men and that boys and men are active participants in co-constructing masculine identities. There is some existing literature that explores this process, such as C.J. Pascoe (2007) and Michael Messner’s (1990a) work examining how boys construct and embody masculine identities in interaction with one another. There remains a gap in the construction of masculinities literature for research that considers co-construction within the family; namely, how do parents understand the work of co-constructing masculinity with their sons?

In this dissertation, I focus on the parents of youth football players to explore how parents engage in this process of engendering masculinity and imagine themselves turning boys into men. Existing masculinities research has shown that the social construction of masculinity must be treated as multi-faceted, as a variety of social factors (such as race, class, and sexuality) differentiate and stratify multiple masculinities (Messerschmidt 2000; Connell 1987; 1995; Pyke 1996). In my research, I focus on how parents’ conceptions of masculinity are raced and classed,

and how whiteness and class-privilege influence the parental social construction of boys' masculinities.

### *Identity Theory*

Identities are complex and can have multiple meanings in a person's life. Burke and Tully (1977: 883) define identities as the "meanings one attributes to oneself as an object." A person's identity can represent his or her own self-conception and individuality or can be based on an affiliation with a group or collective (Burke and Stets 2009). Identities are an important aspect of both a person's sense of self and their social positions in interactions and institutions. Identities are constructed and require maintenance; thus individuals and groups must perform *work* on their identities (Ezzell 2009: 1). Matthew Ezzell demonstrates this process in his research on women's rugby players. In this case, the women in Ezzell's study perform work on their devalued gendered identities by engaging in *defensive othering* (against others with stigmatized identities) and identifying with dominants, in an attempt to recover from external challenges to their feminine identities (Ezzell 2009).

Identity work represents the ways in which individuals claim and give meaning to a sense of self (Schwalbe and Mason-Schrock 1996). Identities often require management, and the type of management is specific to the broader context in which an individual is working (Bettie 2003; Vinitzky-Seroussi and Zussman 1996). Different identities are more or less salient depending on the particular space and situation, and thus identity work is influenced by social contexts and positions (Goffman 1959; 1963). In her work on girls and identity in a California Central Valley high school, Julie Bettie found that the intersection of raced, classed, and gendered identities (among her Mexican-American and white samples) were influenced by the space of the school

they attended, and how membership in different ‘cliques’ of raced and class girls created or constrained possible identities for her participants (2003).

### *Moral Parental Identities*

In adulthood, parental identities become particularly salient, as social integration and claims to positive moral identities are closely tied to parenthood status (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003; Waltzer 1998). Morality is defined as "evaluative cultural codes that specify what is right or wrong, good or bad, acceptable or unacceptable" in any given social context (Turner and Stets 2006). Moral identities reflect cultural ideals of right, good, and acceptable personhood. Part of becoming a moral, fully engaged, productive member of society is predicated on becoming what is understood as the "right" kind of parent. The type of parent a person becomes influences the value of their social identity, and this is especially true for the moral identities of adult women (Romagnoli and Wall 2012; Villalobos 2014; Wall 2001). Adhering to intensive parenting standards influences how successfully a parent can claim a positive moral identity (Romagnoli and Wall 2012).

Because parental identities are such an important part of positive adult identities, the identity work that parents perform is often lined with efforts to claim the positive moral identity of “good parent.” In the process of discursively constructing positive moral identities, individuals are able to combat potential threats to their moral selves, and craft stories that frame them as good, worthy members of society (Irvine 2013; Katz 1975). Positive parental identities are predicated on a larger consensual agreement that a person’s parenting work is appropriately performed. Studies have shown that parents are acutely aware of this, and often feel responsible to others in how they raise their children (Kane 2006; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Being able to claim a “good parent” identity, then, relies on adhering to commonly accepted ideas of what

“good parents” should be. In this dissertation, I explore how football parents craft positive moral parental identities by using discursive strategies that frame them as properly adhering to cultural standards of modern parenting. This differs across my two community field sites, as my participants became “good” people by performing “good” parents within their distinct local community cultures. The meaning of football for boys and parents varied across these two spaces, creating distinct challenges and strategies for the parents in this study.

*Telling Stories: The Narrative Construction of Identity*

Making sense of one's self, and the process of constructing a sense of self is an accomplishment that can be achieved through the stories that people tell about their lives (Irvine 1999). Early in life, people learn to communicate with others through significant symbols (such as language), a skill that is fundamental to human interaction (Blumer 1969). It is within these interactions that we learn to tell stories and to construct narratives about ourselves. The stories of our lives include specific narratives that provide an account of the experiences, events, and the moments that define who we are (Gubrium and Holstein 1998; Somers 1994). Storytelling is not necessarily bounded within "Truth," but is instead an expression of how we choose (consciously or not) to (re)construct memories. In storytelling, people are not simply relaying a neutral, chronological sequence of events. Stories capture much more than that. The study and analysis of storytelling and narrative illuminate the process of identity work and treats stories as representations of the verbal (and interactional) construction identities (Snow and Anderson 1987). It is through the narration of their experiences, feelings, hopes, remembered pasts, imagined futures, etc., that people craft identities and a sense of self (McCarthy et al. 2000; Polletta et al. 2011). Due to the incredibly emotional component of parenting, and the overwhelming responsibility put on the task of parenting, the stories parents tell are often efforts

to claim the identity of “good parent, or attempted accomplishments of positive moral identities (Katz 1975).

Within narratives, individuals can offer accounts for past, present, and even potential future actions, decisions, etc., and use vocabularies of motive to frame themselves and their conduct in a strategic fashion (Mills 1940). An account within a narrative offers explanations for behavior or actions that might be construed as harmful or possibly stigmatizing (Scott and Lyman 1968). Accounts can take the form of excuses or justifications, with the former recognizing and legitimizing the discrediting nature of the event or action, but absolving one of responsibility for its occurrence, and the later rejecting a negative definition of the event or action and wholly accepting responsibility for it. Failing to account for a possibly discrediting decision or action, particularly on the part of a parent for a child, can result in a stigmatized parental identity, based on non-accepted character traits (Goffman 1963) in the context of parenting. Narrative accounts are not only purposeful in their ability to construct (and maintain) a positive outward identity, as they also offer explanations one can use in making sense of her or himself (Irvine 1999) and assist in impression management directed at oneself (Vinitzky-Seroussi and Zussman 1996). Thus, the stories we tell and the narratives we construct are often two-fold, as they both help us to present an intentional version of our lived-experiences to others, as well as help us to make sense of our lives, within ourselves, helping to “restore (our) own sense of approval” (Irvine 1999: 47).

### *The “Stuff” of Stories: The Influence of Culture in Storytelling*

Storytelling as an act of identity construction has been used as an analytic tool in a variety of differing sociological recent sociological research, such as intersectional identities among LGBTQ youth (Robertson 2018) and gendered sexual identities among emerging adults

(Dalessandro 2018). There remains less discussion, however, of how parents use storytelling to craft moral identities within specific parenting contexts and with different cultural tools. Parents tell stories and make sense of themselves, their kids, and their parenting practices within the context of the broader culture, and use the bits and pieces of culture that are available to them in these processes (Pugh 2009). The creative thrust behind a person's story is constrained by the pieces of culture that are available to them. We have the ability to tell the stories of our lives, to construct the narrative of who we are, but we can only do so by using the cultural building blocks at our disposal (Loseke 2007). These cultural materials are not equally accessible to all (Pugh 2009), thus highlighting stories as important sites for the sociological analysis of inequality and stratifying ideologies. The "stuff" of stories tells others something about the storyteller, at least about how the storyteller wants others to understand her/him (and how s/he wants to understand her/his self). The "stuff" of stories are dependent on particular cultural contexts and often results in "incoherent" narratives (Pugh 2013). It is the paradoxes of social life that produce contradictory schemas, resulting in contradictions in people's narrative accounts (Pugh 2013: 48).

As parents use contradictory cultural tools in their storytelling, identity work, and sense-making, they are forced to reconcile multiple conflicting parental expectations (such as simultaneously safeguarding kids from risk, while instilling a sense of resiliency and independence). Contradictory explanations within stories often point to struggles within the emotions invoked by particular cultural schemas. While emotions are oftentimes assumed to be biological or "natural" responses within human beings, scholars are increasingly turning focus to the study of the social construction, and social stratification, of emotions (Hochschild 2003; Loseke and Kusenbach 2008; Sharp and Kidder 2013; Thoits 1989), and more specifically, the



intersection of emotion, narrative, and culture (Pugh 2013; Illouz 2008). Contradictions within culture result in contradictions within stories, but they also offer multiple schemas available to people as they craft the explanations of their actions. Emotions, here, influence which schema the individual chooses, and for what purpose. Feelings and emotional meanings take on varying degrees of salience, depending on the particular story one is telling (or even different moments within the same story), suggesting that emotions can impact both the action of the event and the retrospective story one tells about "what happened" afterward (Pugh 2013).

*Identities and Emotion Cultures: Emotions in Stories, Emotion Work on the Self*

Understanding emotions is important in understanding the stories people tell about themselves, the identities they attempt to construct, and their ability to sustain such projects. Emotions are not intrinsic and instead vary across time and space. Different societies (and subsets of society) have particular emotion cultures and ideologies, which include sets of ideas and beliefs about how people are supposed to feel in different contexts or situations, often referred to as "feeling rules" (Hochschild 2003). Feeling rules inform "display rules," or the guidelines for when and how to express emotion in different contexts or situations (Hochschild 2003). These different contexts or situations can often contain conflicting expectations for emotionally driven behaviors, dictating what is considered "right" and "wrong" actions for differently situated people and creating complicated and difficult conditions for those within them (Kemper 2007; Wingfield 2010). Individuals tell stories that are shaped and constrained by which emotions they think they should display (an emotional performance), and are also strategically used to frame themselves in whatever light serves the narrative the best. The use of emotions in narratives helps with a considerable amount of the reconciliation work that is

necessary due to conflicting cultural schemas, making possible the achievement of a positive outward identity.

The process of telling stories also requires a certain amount of emotion work on the part of the story-teller, as it is necessary to bring emotions ‘in line’ with the narrative being constructed and the self being presented (Turner and Stets 2005). Emotion work explains the inner process of changing one’s feelings or emotions to reflect the external definition of whatever situation one finds her or his self in, which includes specific emotional ideologies and expectations (Hochschild 2003). A person's emotions should match the story they are telling to make it authentic, and sustainable (for themselves) to tell. Often, individuals' emotions are not immediately in line with outward expectations or with their own narrative and require "work" within to either suppress or change those emotions deemed problematic or inappropriate (Turner and Stets 2005). For example, if one is telling a story that frames them as a “good parent” within the current cultural context, then that story is must match up with cultural expectations of parenting, including the emotional culture. If parents’ emotions do not match the story they tell, then they must manage those emotions and work to change them. Within this dissertation, I examine parents’ stories to show the incredible amount of emotion work necessary within their narrative constructions of “good” parent identities.

## CONTEMPORARY PARENTHOOD

### *The Changing Landscape of Parenting*

Parents of youth football players raise their children and perform parenting work within the context of contemporary parenthood. Contemporary cultural expectations of modern parenthood are complex and have amplified over time (Elliott and Bowen 2018; Lareau 2003; Lee 2008; Thelen and Haukanes 2010). These cultural expectations are often described as

“intensive,” most notable via the concept of Intensive Parenting. This parenting ideology, as defined by Sharon Hays, is a primarily class advantaged approach to parenting that is child-centered and requires large amounts of time, energy, emotions, and expert knowledge (1996). The ideology of intensive parenting has become culturally dominant and sets the standard for all parents, despite reflecting white, middle-class norms and expectations (Nelson 2010). Recently, scholars have suggested the demands of parenting have opened to include fathers, expanding the concept of intensive mothering to one of intensive parenting (Shirani et al. 2011). Since the late 1980s, what is considered “best” for kids has been culturally redefined within this context of intensive parenting, along with other middle-class parenting styles, such as concerted cultivation (a parenting style that prioritizes organized activities, the use of language, and interaction with institutions) (Lareau 2003) and symbolic deprivation (where resource-rich parents withhold purchases and practice restraint to demonstrate good values and parenting) (Pugh 2009).

Increasingly, family scholarship has focused on the cultural ideologies of parenting, and the varying parenting styles utilized among differently situated people (Blair-Loy 2003; Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Hays 1996; Lareau 2003, Pugh 2009). While dominant “ideological codes” of family life continue to privilege white, middle-class life (Smith 1993), specific expectations for parenting in the U.S. context have shifted, as have the meanings associated with “good parenting” and the “right things” for children (Cherlin 2009; Coontz 1992; Mintz and Kellogg 1989; Ticknell 2005). The rising social value of children and expectations for protecting children as “innocents” has intensified (Coontz 1992; Mintz and Kellogg 1989; Rotman-Zelizer 1985). This has resulted in new cultural schemas and models of “good” parenting, and “good” mothering, more specifically (Blair-Loy 2003; Hays 1996). In the last several decades, the new

demands of intensive parenting have expanded to include fathers, as well (Pleck 1990; Shirani et al. 2011).

Modern, intensive parenting is defined as child-centric, expert-guided, emotionally absorbing, labor-intensive, and financially expensive (Hays 1996). It also presupposes a close, deep relationship between parents and children (Coontz 1992; Stacey 1992). For modern parents, achieving the idealized “good parent” status means enacting protection, love, and care for their children at all times (Rotman-Zelizer 1985). Parents are also charged with producing the future citizens of the state, and are expected to reproduce dominant ideals of race, class, and gender within their children (Espiritu 2001; Lareau 2003; Pugh 2009; Stacey 1998). All of these demands bleed into the cultural images and ideologies of modern parenting (Pyke 2000; Smith 1993; Ticknell 2005).

Differently situated parents are also faced with navigating the thorny terrain of contemporary parenthood, and not all parents are able to adhere to the “charmed circle” of family life, or the “Standard North American Family” (including heterosexual, married, white, middle-class parents with approximately two children) (Smith 1993). Increasingly, low-income and low-resourced parents (particularly mothers) are responding to the pressures of intensive parenting and integrating them into their moral parental identities (Elliott and Bowen 2018; Romagnoli and Wall 2012). While not all parents are able to fully achieve intensive parenthood, they are aware that they are expected to. Single mothers, in particular, are held up as examples of inappropriate parents and are often marginalized and is especially true for low-income women (Bock 2000; Edin and Lein 1997; Harris 1993). Yet, increasingly women are actively choosing to parent alone, including poor women (Edin and Kefalas 2005) and advantaged women (Hertz 2006). Within this dissertation, I include analyses of single mothers and their experiences with football

and intensive parenthood and show that while these women do experience marginalization, they are not passive actors, and instead draw on their marginalized status to regain parental power.

*Contemporary Parenting in a “Culture of Fear?”*

Parenting work does not happen in a vacuum. Much of the work parents do for their children (and themselves) is performed in tandem with broader social and cultural forces. Parenting work has also become increasingly public. Concerns about children have grown in tandem with increased surveillance on parents (Lee 2008; Reich 2016; Thelen and Haukanes 2010; Wall 2001). A fair amount of scholarship in this area focuses on breastfeeding versus formula feeding as illustrative of how parenting choices have become “fair game” in public debates (Lee 2008). Family scholars have also pointed to a shift in recent years towards a “deprivatization” of family life (Holstein and Gubrium 1995; Thelen and Haukanes 2010), where contemporary families must “perform” family life publically, and are increasingly regulated by external evaluations (Holstein and Gubrium 1995).

In recent years, the topic of children's welfare has become a widely debated public issue, suggesting that child-rearing has become understood as a public concern and "one that demands state and sometimes international intervention" (Thelen and Haukanes 2010: 1). Both State and community actors increasingly monitor modern parents as they perform their parenting work, such as when they are protecting and making choices for and about their children. Parents are regularly evaluated by outside others and are open to critiques from their community, experts, and the state (Lee 2008; Wall 2001). Parents, especially mothers, are expected to protect children from risk (Elliott and Aseltine 2013). Higher-resourced parents are typically better able to meet these expectations (Shirani et al. 2011) and are better able to defend themselves against accusations of “bad” parenting when they do not (Reich 2016).

In the United States, parents make sense of raising children within a broader framework of perceived danger and risk (Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Kurtz 2002). Scholars have defined post-modern Western society as “risk-centered,” and point to escalating social anxieties about a range of potential dangers (Lee et al. 2010; Villalobos 2014). In this “culture of fear” (Glassner 1999), scholars have suggested that children have been culturally defined as embodying “surplus risk,” or with more risk than is typically thought of as a normal part of childhood (Davis 1999: xiii, Nelson 2010 as cited in Elliott and Aseltine 2013: 720). While the idea that children face challenges throughout childhood (such as substance abuse, victimization, and violence) is not new, what has changed is the belief that such dangers are more pervasive than ever before (Elliott and Aseltine 2013: 720). This belief has resulted in an amplification of a growing trend to define children and youth as in danger, or as potentially dangerous themselves (Ticknell 2005). This framework has created a difficult situation for modern parents, as they must integrate the demands of intensive parenting within this context of heightened fears about children. This situation is challenging contemporary parents, as they are required to integrate the demands of intensive parenting into the context of worries about children and childhood. This can create a tricky situation for some, more advantaged parents of boys who play football (a sport often associated with physical danger), who feel pressed to demonstrate that they can keep their boys "safe" while playing a game increasingly defined as unnecessarily risky.

While the cultural expectations of intensive parenting and the fears about kids and risk continue to dominate modern parenting, a growing oppositional discourse about “the resilient child” has emerged in both expert and pop-cultural spaces. A new body of social, cultural, and psychological research suggests that modern parents are over-parenting their children, keeping them “too safe” and stunting their growth in the process (Hoffman 2010; Jenkins 2006; Little,

Wyver, and Gibson 2011; Pain 2006;). Pop-culture outlets have also joined in this conversation. The cultural narrative now suggests that over-parenting disallows children from developing into proper adults, and instead leaves them ill-equipped, entitled, emotionally dependent, and without the skills to navigate complicated or difficult situations (Hoffman 2010; Jenkins 2006). The "overprotected child" is supposedly kept "too safe," and is stripped of "independence, risk-taking, and discovery" (Rosin 2014). News segments and magazine articles have even begun suggesting that "good" parents should allow their children to do things such as play with fire and participate in "adventure playgrounds" with broken glass and other dangerous items, as a way to resist keeping kids "too safe" (Greenwood 2011; Lahey 2013; Rosin 2014).

Conflicting cultural expectations require that parents strike a balance between overprotecting and neglecting their children (Coontz 1992: 209). How much is too much risk for kids? How much is too much protection? These competing discourses pose a challenge for contemporary parents, and yet they also represent potential discursive tools in identity work and sense-making. In all, concerns about children and teens have grown alongside increasing expectations for parenting, and the parents of youth football players are required to find a way to reconcile this complicated situation. In this study, I include parents from two neighboring communities with varying amounts of privilege and examine how their individual material realities and their local community cultures differently shape their understandings of the "risk" of football for their boys. For the parents in my study, balancing the cultural demands of "good parenting" with negotiations with their children, friends, family, and additional 'outside influences' can prove to be difficult work that is rife with their different parenting dilemmas. In the more affluent West peak, parents who allow their boys to engage in the 'risky' sport of football are forced to account for their decision to allow their boys to play the game in their

claims to moral parenthood, as well as manage their own experiences, emotions, and identities in the process. In the more race and class varied East Summit, parents are able to discursively frame football as not only beneficial to boys and to parents raising boys, but as an important "gift" parents are able to give their sons, thus bolstering their moral parental identities.

## BOYS IN "TROUBLE": ENGENDERING MASCULINITY IN BOYHOOD

### *Multiple Masculinities and Masculinity in "Crisis"*

Parents raise boys into particular kinds of men, and their parenting projects reflect particular versions of masculinity. Hierarchies of race, class, and sexuality complicate masculinity (Connell 1995; Pyke 1996). Normative conceptions of masculinity persist and reflect heterosexuality, whiteness, and class-privilege (Connell 1987;1995; Messner 1989; 1990b; Pyke 1996). Hegemonic masculinity shapes the structural and cultural contexts where gender takes on meaning in interaction (Pyke 1996) and situates non-normative masculinities as subordinated (Connell 1987). Parents raising differently raced and classed boys do so within this larger gendered structure. The parents in this chapter were influenced by how masculinity worked in their primarily white, class-privileged community. In this space, expectations for doing the "right" masculinity were defined by "ascendant" masculinity, or a "soft" enactment of power and "civility," contrasting more overt enactments of masculinity represented by displays of aggression and violence (Pyke 1996). These parents were also required to respond to alternative responses to more privileged masculinities, including discourses that set up "compensatory" masculinity (associated with lower-status, hypermasculinity) against ascendant masculinity, reframing it as over-conforming and weak (Pyke 1996).

Masculinity, it has been said, is "in crisis" (Horrocks 1994; Robinson 2000). Social, political, and labor market changes have put stress on more traditional, normalized ideologies of



men's roles in society, resulting in gendered tensions (Beynon 2002; Rogers 2010). This has trickled down into cultural conversations about 'boys in trouble.' Beliefs about young men and boys 'in trouble' extends from concerns about fewer men attending college (Guo 2014; Vedder 2015) to the development of "lost boys" or a generation of underemployed, entitled, and irresponsible young men (Till 2008). Football parents are raising boys in this larger cultural context and must make sense of their parenting work alongside concerns about boys and the "critical years" of adolescence and young adulthood (Kimmel 2008).

Parents of youth football players are tasked with the project of raising boys into men, and they are expected to foster boys' masculine identities while they navigate the supposed 'perils' of adolescence. What it means, though, to appropriately engender masculinity and to raise teenage boys, depends on contemporary socio-historically based definitions and understandings surrounding age and gender. In the case of youth football, concerns about teenage boys reveal gendered ideologies that naturalize masculinity and adolescence, and obscure how they are both socially constructed. First, gender ideologies are essentialist and suggest that attributes and traits such as courage, assertiveness, and emotional control, are natural and normal characteristics of masculinity (Connell 2005; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). But, not all displays or embodiments of masculinity command equal social value. Masculinity intersects with other social identities, such as race, class, and sexuality, and create a stratification of multiple masculinities (Kimmel 2012; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Dominant, hegemonic masculinity occupies most social value and power and can be understood as the embodiment of the form of masculinity that most closely adheres to the socio-historically dominant expectations of manhood, which are coupled with whiteness, class privilege, and heterosexuality (Bucholtz 1999; Hughey 2012). In youth football, parents find a masculine space in which their boys are engendered with raced and

classed masculinity. Existing research has demonstrated the significance of homosocial activities for men and boys (such as football) as these activities police the boundaries of masculinity, maintain hegemonic masculinity, and subordinate femininity and marginalized masculinities (Bird 1996).

The engendering space of football is not without tensions, which also reflect larger cultural concerns about ‘boys in trouble’ and the precariousness of manhood. Existing research in this area has defined masculinity as precarious because it is dynamic and social constructed (Connell 1987; Kimmel 2008; Pascoe 2007; Messerschmidt 2000). Masculinity is a social achievement and requires regular work to maintain (Bemiller 2005; Kimmel 2008, Pascoe 2007). Both individuals and broader society are invested in creating and maintaining boundaries around masculinity (Connell 2005), and parents are held responsible for instilling proper gender attributes in their children (McGuffey 2008; Messner 2009). Increasingly, experts, scholars, and popular cultural outlets have problematized the masculinity in adolescence (Horrocks 1994; Kimmel 2008; Till 2008), and the discourse surrounding the negatives of football for kids reflect these tensions.

#### *Early Stages of the Life Course: Engendering Masculinity in Childhood and Adolescence*

The concept of a “life course” has garnered more attention from scholars of children and youth in recent decades, shaping studies of children and situating childhood as a distinct period of human life (Elder 1994). The life course perspective emphasizes considering how individuals are constructed, are agentic in their own growth, and develop over discrete phases across their lives. Childhood (including early and middle) and adolescence are distinct phases of the life course, and it is important for research on the early stages of the life course to recognize and

analyze them as such. These stages of the early life course are where socialization begins (Elder 1994; Handel 2011), including gender socialization (Stockard 2006).

Engendering masculinity begins early in childhood, and is an ongoing component of parenting work (McGuffey 2008). Childhood is often mistreated as a universal experience, obscuring variation in intersecting social identities (such as gender and age) (Gordon 2010). There is, however, a growing body of literature that considers how children's gender influences how parents make sense of raising their sons, though this research is based primarily on young boys (Kane 2006; McGuffey 2008; Messner 2009). In his work on trauma, race, and gender affirmation, C. Shawn McGuffey (2008) found that parents express much concern about their children's development of gender identities and that this is particularly salient for parents of boy children. In his study, McGuffey's findings show that parents' (especially fathers') narratives around fostering heteronormative masculine identities in their boys are rife with anxiety and suggest they put more parenting work into protecting their boy children's masculine identities.

Similarly, other scholarship suggests that parents are especially dedicated to assisting in the development of their boy children's masculinities (Kane 2006; Schrock and Schwalbe 2009). Kane (2006) found noticeable gender differences in how parents responded to their children's gender nonconformity. In her study, respondents demonstrated more anxieties and performed more policing around their boy children's enactment of gender. Existing research shows that parents think about boy children's gender differently than they do girl children, and are particularly invested in fostering boys' masculinity in childhood.

Discussions about gender and childhood should not be collapsed into a single conceptual category, obscuring the importance of considering the different phases of childhood. Adolescence, especially, is culturally understood as a distinct (and exceptionally problematic)

phase of childhood (Lesko 1996), and as requiring distinct parenting work (Kurz 2002). Beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the newly formed conception of adolescence as a unique stage of the life course began to take shape. Fueled by the scientific interest of social and behavioral experts, biologists, anthropologists, and others, adolescence was defined as a particularly important developmental period (Gordon 2010; Lesko 1996) and teenagers as embodying “heightened risk” (Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Kurz 2002; Ticknell 2005). The naturalization of adolescence, and the commonly held belief of its unique “problems, characteristics, and needs” (Lesko 1996: 142), has influenced cultural expectations of parenting. Parents’ ability to effectively rear teenagers, specifically, is socially significant, as the outcome of such parenting is broadly understood as producing adults who are “unified, self-reflective people with coherent identities and emotional control” (Lesko 1996: 142). Teenagers occupy social concerns, yet there is little research that explores how parents think about raising teens, or how they engage in parenting them. There is also little research on how parents make sense of raising boy teens, and how the process of turning boys into men affects their own experiences, identities, and sense of self.

There are a few exceptions, which focus on different types of specifically maternal carework in raising teenagers<sup>2</sup> (Elliott and Aseltine 2013; Kurz 2002). In her 2002 study, Demi Kurz explored mothers’ lived-experiences in raising adolescents. She found that as children age, parents adjust their parenting approaches to reflect their teens’ newfound autonomy and begin negotiations with their children that are markedly different from when they were younger. As children become teenagers, parents must redevelop their care work strategies to both allow children to increase their independence, while continuing to maintain some control over them

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<sup>2</sup>. However, there remains a significant absence of research on how fathers parent teens.

(Kurz 2002). In this research, Kurz suggests that further research is needed to understand the gendered aspects of raising teenage children and calls for additional consideration for how the intersection of multiple categories of difference influence parenting (2002). This work also points to the need for additional research to excavate the important variations in parenting work enacted in the different phases of childhood, and particularly in adolescence.

Adolescence is influenced by variations in other social identities (Lesko 1996). More sociological work on children and parenting has begun to focus on gendered adolescence, but much of this research has concentrated on how parents conceptualize and manage their teen's sexualities, specifically (Elliott 2012; Schalet 2011). In her work on teen sexuality and parenting, Amy Schalet found that within American culture, parents tend to be more overtly controlling of their teenagers and understand them as inherently conflictual, and their sexuality as something to be feared (2011). Sinikka Elliott's research on parenting and teen sexuality has shown that parents largely consider teenagers as 'risky', and experience deep fear and anxiety around their own ability to parent them (2012).

The literature on adolescence and masculinity primarily focuses on the experiences of the boys, themselves (Kimmel 2008; Messerschmidt 2000; Pascoe 2007), and is limited in capturing how children's gender and age influence how parents make sense of raising teens. More research is needed to understand how these categories of difference intersect to complicate the ways in which parents make sense of raising kids, and adolescent boys, more specifically. In this dissertation, I begin to address this absence by turning to the parents of adolescent football players as a group of particularly situated parents who grapple with the complicated task of turning boys into men. In this dissertation, I examine how parents across two distinct communities make sense of the parenting work of engendering masculinity in their boys by

analyzing both their interactions and their stories about football, parenthood, and raising boys into men. This research sheds light on how contemporary parenthood and the process of boys becoming men are shaped within specific social contexts and are influenced by broader cultural ideologies of family, parenthood, race, class, and gender.

## FOOTBALL: RE-IMAGINING AN AMERICAN TRADITION

### *Historical Origins: Race and Class in Football*

While public and expert opinions define team sport as a positive socializing space for youth, football stands apart as an activity that has become increasingly understood as problematic. The “dangers” of football have received attention in public forums (Belson 2014) and has come under scrutiny for its “violent” nature (Bachynski 2015; Jenkins 2012). Concerns about problems of risk associated with the game are not only directed at the players (risk of injury to the body) but have also been focused on how the violence of the game may instill or encourage violence *within* the players (risk of engendering violence).

From high schools to colleges to the NFL, football has been traditionally celebrated in the U.S. and is considered the ultimate exemplar of American masculinity (Hoffmann, Falk, and Manning 2005; Kaiser, Williams, and Norwood 2016). While traditional celebrations of football are far-reaching, the sport has a particular classed and raced history, which complicates the sport for differently situated people. In its early incarnations, football had privileged class boundaries and began as an elite game played by young men attending prestigious Northeastern universities (Conlin 2009; Overman 2011). Over time, however, the physicality of the game began to take on a different cultural meaning and was re-imagined as “brutal and dangerous” (Conlin 2009; 561). At the same time, the type of men who played the sport shifted from elite university men to working-class men, and football became understood as a “viable channel for social mobility”

(Overman 2011: 153). As a football player, a less-privileged man could use his athletic position to gain a university scholarship, and, with the creation of American professional football organizations in the 1920s, he could even parlay his playing into a professional career. It took several more decades for football to open up to non-white men, but by 1970 more than 30% of professional players were African-American. As of 2014, nearly 70% of professional football players identified as Black or African-American.

While football has remained an important American sport, engagement in the game has been split between creation and consumption. Which men are supposed to create the sport by playing, now poignantly differs from which men/boys are supposed to consume the sport for entertainment (Messner 1989; 1990b; 1992). As the game has increasingly been defined as risky and "dangerous," it has also become understood as requiring the sacrifice of the body of the player. Less privileged men, by either race or class, have become the imagined appropriate players of the sport (Burstyn 1999). Race and class-subordinated men's bodies are stripped of social value and are conceptualized as appropriate for sacrifice (Belkin 2012).

Additionally, race and class subordinated men are associated with "hyper-masculinity", or a marginalized, imagined "out of control," over, and violent masculinity, particularly in contrast to more privileged men (Pyke 1996). Men who were assumed violent by nature, and whose bodies were less valued, became the players of this game. As class and race subordinated men were shifted into the role of player, more privileged men were shifting into the role of consumer of the sport, whereby they were able to continue to engage for entertainment and performance of masculinity, without exposing their bodies to the physical risks of playing (Messner 1990b; 1992). Advantaged parents who allow their boys to expose their bodies to the

risks of football challenge the cultural conceptions of which bodies are appropriate for the sport. Privileged boys' bodies, thus, are not defined as those that should be playing football.

*Dangers, Debates, and Defense of Football*

Conversations about the physical consequences of football to players' bodies appear in a variety of outlets. Everywhere from opinion editorials, to scientific medical journals, the public has been increasingly exposed to a story about football, one that challenges traditional celebrations of football culture. These stories emphasize the risk and danger of the sport and have impact cultural conceptions of its appropriateness. These conversations are particularly salient in the public discussions of youth football. Children playing football has become a hotly debated topic, one that is occurring within a broader cultural conversation about children and youth in America today. Parents are implicated within these debates, and the parents in my study spoke directly to them in our conversations. Recent articles in well-read outlets, such as The New York Times and NBC Sports News, have called parents to question, asking, "Should parents let their kids play football?" and reporting "Football's risks sink in" (Belson 2014; Guida 2014; Jenkins 2012).

In tandem with the amplification of news and media coverage, medical and scientific experts are weighing in on the conversation, producing well-cited and fiercely debated research on the physical risks and consequences associated with the sport. The findings vary, but most of which centers on brain, neck, and spine trauma. Research has suggested that the injuries associated with youth football, in particular, have actually decreased in recent years, that the risk of serious injury and/or fatalities are statistically "low," and that the rates of injury in youth football are actually lower than in other, less contested, sports (such as girls' soccer and boys' lacrosse) (ASFIR Report 2011). This research is cited often in media coverage of the game, and



influence how parents understand the context of youth football. Parents are also exposed, though, to differing reports about the safety of football for children. Other oft-cited studies measure the risk associated with football as “high” (Arnason et al. 2004), and suggest that playing tackle football as a child poses a significant risk to players throughout their lifetime, affecting their thinking and memories (Stamm et al. 2015).

In addition to concerns about the bodies of players, public attention has focused on how the perceived violence of the game can influence players psychologically and emotionally, suggesting that issues of abuse and domestic violence can be traced back to the violence within the game (Vasilogambros 2016). NFL players and issues of domestic violence have become almost synonymous, and are sensationalized in media stories. Controversies surrounding allegations of domestic violence and high-profile players (such as Race Rice, Adrian Peterson, and Greg Hardy) illustrate a growing moral panic that suggests the violence of the game engenders violence within the individual players. The race implications here are unmistakable, as it is primarily men of color who are represented in the visual representations of hyper-violent players.

Public conversations about the "culture of violence" within football create a problem for parents of youth football players. Youth sports are understood as positive for children because they are supposed to help appropriately socialize them into adulthood. Learning to be a team player, learning self-discipline, and how to navigate wins and losses are all associated with sports for children. It is believed, though, that parents who allow their kids to play a sport that fosters violence, however, are not exposing their children to meaningful life lessons. This context creates a particular dilemma for parents, and particularly to advantaged parents, who allow their boys to play the game.

Conflicting reports about the safety of football combines with the increasing number of opinion editorial and other public outlets that have highlighted the potential dangers and risks associated with the sport, particularly for children. This creates a complicated terrain for parents to navigate, as they are charged with the responsibility for their children's welfare. Parents feel the pressure of growing public concern about the physical, psychological, and emotional risks of football for kids. Advantaged parents, in particular, are also subject to the additional threat of scrutiny on their choice to allow their son to play a sport often associated with less privileged men and boys. Due to the risks associated with football, the men and boys who are considered suitable for the sport are those whose bodies have been deemed appropriate for physical sacrifice (social devaluation) and who do so as a potential mobility strategy.

Privileged boys do not fit this description. Additionally, football has been re-defined by some as a sport that potentially teaches the wrong kinds of lessons about adulthood, and manhood more specifically. Privileged masculinity is associated with power and control, while marginalized masculinities are associated with a lack of power and control (Pierce 1996; Pyke 1996). Privileged boys are expected to become privileged men, men who are able to comport themselves appropriately. Football, as it is being re-defined, challenges the development of appropriate class-privileged masculinity. If football has been re-defined as a hyper-masculine, violence-inducing sport, then parents who expose their children to such activity are called to question. Parents of youth football players must contend with the evaluation that they are exposing their boys to the “wrong” sport, and are preparing them to become the “wrong” kind of men.

COMMUNITY, CAPITAL, AND CLASS IN PARENTING WORK

Previous family scholarship has demonstrated how more privileged parents intentionally choose communities in which to raise their children as part of their parenting work, and that these choices are influenced by their race and class positions (Friedman 2012; Lacy 2007; Pugh 2009). In one example, Allison Pugh's work on parents and consumerism showed that class privileged parents chose particular residential areas and schools as part of their consumption habits in supporting their children (2009). Similarly, Karyn Lacy's 2007 work on Black, class advantaged families examined the ways in which the parents in her study sought out "Black enclaves," or neighborhoods of similarly situated Black, class-privileged families, to raise their children in. In both cases, parents considered their (and their children's) classed and raced identities and structural realities in intentionally choosing to live in communities that they felt would best support their children's well-being (including top schools, extracurricular activities, and, in Lacy's case, a buffer from racism). Increasingly parents (and more specifically, parents with the means to do so) include the selection of community in their intentional consumption habits for their children (Pugh 2009; Sherman 2017).

Community is also important for less privileged parents and families, as well. Research has shown that within less resourced and rural communities, families are more dependent on shared resources among community and family members (Hofferth and Iceland 2011). Within less resource-rich communities, collective bonds and mutual support are more heavily emphasized. For less advantaged parents, choice of community is centered on becoming part of a group whose local culture norms demonstrate the importance of shared resources (Brodsky, O'Campo, and Aronson 2000; Coontz 1992; Naples 1992). Among those with fewer resources, survival is ensured by banding together and sharing resources. In lower-income areas, parents are more likely to share material resources with other parents in their community, as well as help

each other with child and elderly care (Collins 1994; Coontz 1997). As parents make choices they imagine will help to ensure their children are well-resourced and cared for, the influence of community across class lines has received increased attention among researchers. Scholars of urban and rural sociology are calling attention to communities as an important site for the development and construction of different types of capital, particularly social capital (Flora 2011; Hofferth and Iceland 2011) and cultural capital (Sherman 2017).

Communities matter to parents raising children as they look towards increasing resources and capital, and they also matter to the development of status-based identities. The social significance of neighborhoods is connected to status and identity work in the formation of class and race-based identities (Allen, Powell, Case, and Coward 2007; Lacy 2007; Savege et al. 1992). This research has examined the ways in which a “new” middle class of highly educated, yet less financially privileged, professionals use urban, gentrified neighborhoods as sites of distinction, building communities that are high in cultural capital in their efforts to claim privileged class-based identities in the absence of high economic capital (e.g. Allen, Powell, Case, and Coward 2007: 240; Butler 1997; Butler and Robson 2003).

Other research has shown how members of the middle class who are rich in economic capital, but who have less cultural capital, build exclusive, yet inconspicuous communities labeled as ‘suburban landscapes of privilege’ where individuals are able to co-create a definition of class privilege that emphasizes financial resources above cultural capital (e.g. Allen, Powell, Case, and Coward 2007: 240; Duncan and Duncan 2004; Savage et al. 2005). Taken together, this research demonstrates how identities can be carved out in communities via class distinctions, allowing the community space to work as a comparative status boost for some residents at the

cost of others (a process I examine among parents in the community of East Summit in Chapter 5 of this dissertation).

Pertinent to my analysis of parents in the class and race-mixed community of East Summit is the extant urban sociology literature on community, class, and identity among what is referred to as the "marginal middle class." The marginal middle class represents those individuals and families living in middle-class suburban neighborhoods that are mostly populated by those who are more likely to fall into the lower-middle-class, working jobs at the lower end of the "white collar" labor market, and that also include those with structural and cultural realities that align more closely with working class life and "blue collar" jobs. It is in these spaces that some moderately class advantaged parents and families can construct boosted class-based identities for themselves and their children through distancing and othering strategies, thus enhancing their status. In their 2007 work on the management of spoiled identity in 'marginal' middle-class neighborhoods, Allen, Powell, Case, and Coward found that members of the mid to lower middle-class who choose to live in 'marginal' middle-class and mixed communities did so in an effort of aspirational class achievement. In these communities, these individuals were able to buy nicer homes and were, in relation to other members of the community, "well off."

Additionally, Allen et al. found that these individuals were aware of the possible 'spoiled' identity associated with living in their mixed-income communities and performed defensive othering in their identity work to manage their class-based identities as a result. Thus, communities create both challenges and opportunities for families in their identity and status projects for themselves and their children. In this dissertation, I emphasize the importance of communities in family life and their influence on parents' experiences raising boys into men.

## CHAPTER 3

### DATA AND METHODS

In this chapter, I review the methodological design and data for this study on the experiences and sense-making of parents of youth football players. For this research, I used a multi-level, qualitative approach, including three years of participant observation and fifty in-depth interviews with parents of boys who were playing or had recently played youth football. With qualitative interviews and observations, I was able to examine and answer questions about the experiences, sense-making, and social psychological processes of parents raising boys through youth football. The data collection for this project took place between 2012 and 2017. In the following pages, I review the study design and data collection methods for this study, as well as discuss my researcher positionality, research ethics, and some of the challenges I experienced conducting the study.

#### FINDING THE RESEARCH AND ENTERING THE FIELD

I began this research in the fall of 2012, starting with participant observation and in-depth interviewing in my first community field site, West Peak. I was broadly interested in studying families, social psychological processes, and inequalities and ultimately decided to research parents of boys playing tackle football. In formulating the study, I chose to call on the method of opportunistic research, whereby I drew upon my biography, experiences, and life situation to help lead me to an interesting and accessible research topic and site (Riemer 1977).

Opportunistic research, also called “start where you are,” includes tapping into personal experience and biography to provide a “springboard” for research and is a commonly used and accepted method in qualitative social science research (Lofland et al. 2006).

During the several years before beginning this study, a number of my friends and peers had become parents and began sharing with me their understandings and experiences in this new role in their family lives. Topics of parenthood became increasingly salient in my life, despite not having any children myself. I began to ask questions about why and how family was taking on such an important new role in the lives of those around me, and about the dilemmas that my friends and peers were facing as they entered parenthood.

I decided to follow my interest in the experiences of parenthood and began looking for a possible field site in which to meet and observe parents and families. I wanted to integrate myself into a space where I might meet and get to know more families in the area and begin learning about parents' experiences and what mattered to them in doing the work of raising children. I decided that looking to children's extracurricular activities would be a good place to start, and I began attending a few community youth football games in West Peak (my first field site). This was facilitated by a professional contact who had a child playing on one of the teams. There, I was introduced to some of the parents as a student-researcher interested in studying families. Due to the intimacy and privacy surrounding the institution of the family, finding and gaining entrée to a field site where one can meet and observe families is a notoriously tricky task (Baca Zinn 1979). It took a little while for parents to open up to me, and my integration into the network of parents was slow but steady.

Scholars have used children's sporting events as a way to explore sociological phenomena, but their research interest is usually directed at the youth themselves (for exceptions see Messner 2002 and Friedman 2013). In contrast, I was most interested in family dynamics and the parents of the players. Parents appeared to be grappling with difficult tensions around injuries, negotiations with coaches, and relationships with other parents, as a few examples. They

also seemed to be experiencing pleasure and fun at the games, suggesting that the experiences of football parenthood were complicated. I was also aware of the rise in larger cultural conversations about children and risk (Elliot & Aseltine 2013) and around children, football, and injuries. I decided that I had a unique opportunity to dig into the experiences of football parenthood at a time when parents who allow their boys to play are increasingly met with criticism. By studying parents of youth football players, I could learn more about the experiences of parenthood, the work of engendering masculinity in children, and the social psychological processes inherent parents' projects of making men.

In the following pages, I fully outline this study's research design. I begin by reviewing my study design and community field sites. I next discuss my data collection methods: participant observation and in-depth interviewing. From here, I move to detailing my sampling methods, my participants, and how I treated and analyzed my data, followed by a discussion of my researcher positionality and issues of reflexivity. I end the chapter by considering the boundaries inherent in the data that inform this research.

## STUDY DESIGN

### *Why a Qualitative Approach?*

In designing the study, I found that a qualitative approach would best serve my interest in deepening understandings of the experiences and sense-making among parents raising boys into men. Within the context of youth football, I wanted to examine in-depth interviews—stories—that parents tell about why they allow their boys to play the game, their fears and worries in regards to the game and the work of making men, generally, and how they manage their own experiences along the way. It felt important to bring those stories in line with observations of parents at football games so that I could watch as parents negotiated and managed the challenges



they experienced in that context. I was curious to see if their stories told in interviews matched what I was watching in the field. Additionally, my time in the field helped to shape some of my understandings of what parents were experiencing and thus was able to bring questions in the interview setting to get a better sense of how parents were experiences what I was watching.

Collecting and analyzing multiple forms of qualitative data is what allowed me to answer the questions I came into this study with. I chose to focus on participant observation and in-depth interviews, as I felt it was the combination of these methods that would allow me to capture a deeper understanding of my data, field sites, and participants. Among qualitative researchers, the combined approach of participant observation and interviewing is emphasized (Lofland et al. 2006), stressing the importance of the complementary, yet distinct contributions of the two methods. Methodological conversations among scholars have asked questions about how qualitative researchers use different methods to answer different questions. In their paper on attitudinal fallacy, Jerolmack and Khan press the importance of ethnography, as well as understanding that interview data does not necessarily accurately represent behavior, or “what people say is often a poor predictor of what they do.” (2014: 178).

In contrast, other scholars point to interview data as especially fruitful sites in which to capture narrative meaning-making and “culture in action.” In her paper on interviews and culture, Allison Pugh points to the utility of in-depth interviews, as they allow researchers to witness the process as individuals use pieces of culture in their stories and sense-making. Here, the use of interpretive analysis is central, as it reframes the “problem” of interviews as only representative of post-hoc rationalizations and instead look to those rationalizations and contradictory cultural accounts as rich sites for analyses (2013: 42). In this dissertation, I

consider both of these positions and consider both sets of data: listening to what people say (in interviews) and watching what people do (in participant observation).

By including this combination of methods, I was able to more fully capture parents' experiences and begin to make sense of them. By both observing and talking with parents, I was better equipped to parse out interactions from retrospective talk and storytelling. In-depth interviews offer windows into participants' understandings of their actions and experiences, as well as the active processes and cultural tools that inform why they tell the stories they tell (Pugh 2013). With semi-structured, in-depth interviewing, I aimed to capture parents' sense-making projects through the stories they told about football parenthood. In-depth interviews allowed me to understand some of the social psychological processes among my participants, including how they performed work on their parental identities. With in-depth, loosely structured interviews, I was able to perform a more nuanced and complex analysis of participants' narratives (Rubin and Rubin 2012).

Participant observation allowed me to explore and understand the construction of meaning within interaction in my field sites. This approach includes a methodological observation of the activities and behaviors of people in their everyday lives and settings (Emerson et al. 1995; Lofland et al. 2006: 17). It is commonly accepted among qualitative researchers that to fully understand a group or field setting, the researcher must become involved in the activities of the group or site so that s/he might grasp the unspoken meanings, the taken-for-granted phenomena, and the spontaneous sense-making that occurs within the environment (Emerson 2001). Combining this method with in-depth interviewing, researchers can better identify, describe, and more accurately represent participants' descriptions and perceptions of their own behaviors and the meanings behind them (Becker 1996; Emerson 2001). Taken

together, these methods help capture actions and events, meanings co-constructed within interactions and storytelling, and a better understanding of the discrepancies that are, at times, present in the space between what people say and what people do.

In addition to this multi-method qualitative approach, it also became clear to me that I needed to capture the experience of differently situated parents to understand the nuances of their experiences more fully. Studying one, mostly homogenous group would limit the analytic possibilities of the project. I explored different options for diversifying the parents I would include in the dissertation and ultimately decided to diversify by conducting a comparative study of two neighboring communities. With this decision, I chose the community of East Summit as my second field site, which neighbors my first field site, West Peak.<sup>3</sup> By including a comparison community with more race and class diversity, I was able to capture how varying social contexts and local cultures mattered to parents' experiences in raising boys through youth football.<sup>4</sup>

#### THE FIELD SITES: BUILDING COMMUNITIES

My field sites for this research include West Peak and East Summit, two neighboring communities with distinct local cultures. Including two communities in this research created a rich opportunity to compare and contrast the experiences of parents living and raising boys within the different spaces. In this section, I provide descriptions of the communities and begin to build a portrait of the local cultures within them. I begin by with details about how I delineate these spaces into what I refer to as "communities." The concept of "community" is flexible and fluid, and can also be somewhat vague and without a specific, commonly agreed upon definition (Sampson 2004). The term community can be used to describe an assembly of like-minded

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<sup>3</sup> Names of participants and communities have been changed to ensure anonymity.

<sup>4</sup> This research received IRB approval in the Fall of 2012.

people, a group of people who share a geographic area, and other collections of social actors (Mollborn and Sennott 2015, Sampson 2004). Among urban and community sociologists, communities share several key characteristics, including a shared territory (which can be tangible or intangible), connectivity and established relationships, organized interaction, and shared values, beliefs, and culture (MacQueen et al. 2001).

I considered these characteristics in my conception of the two community field sites in this dissertation. I was loosely guided by the boundaries of two neighboring school districts but primarily looked to my participants' representations of what they consider to be their communities. Both West Peak and East Summit are located within the same county, but they are very different communities, and the parents included in this summary created very clear delineations between the two communities. In this section, I detail my field sites, as well as how I understood and analyzed them as two distinct communities.

To join a club-level football team, parents provide their address and the school their son attends within their application. From there, the boys are assigned to a team in the corresponding area of the corresponding school district that they live and attend school within. To join a school-affiliated team (such as high school), the boys must attend that school. All 25 of my East Summit participants and their sons lived within the same school district (which I refer to as "Eastern School District"), attended schools within that district, and played on the corresponding teams within the district. The football team I observed in East Summit, the Eagles, was also located within that same district.

My conception of the West Peak community had blurrier, yet important, boundaries. The southern-most boundary of the Eastern School District pushes up against a different school district (which I refer to as "Western School District") and is more white and affluent in

comparison to Eastern. Of the 25 West Peak participants in my study, 20 lived within the Western School District and had boys who attended schools and played on teams within that district. The remaining five did not. During my data collection (in both interviews and in the field), I learned that there was a small segment of the Eastern district (and one area in particular, that had one high school and one club level feeder team), bordering on the Western district, that community members considered to be quite dissimilar to the rest of the Eastern district, and dissimilar from the community of East Summit. Instead, participants described that area, that high school, and that club team as more connected to and sharing more similarities with the community that occupied the Western district: the community of West Peak. This was not entirely surprising to me given my familiarity with the area. This area is where I performed my observations and collected field notes with my second team, the Talons.

Thus, I took my participants' thoughts, feelings, and representations of their communities to heart and challenged the idea of strictly using the school district boundary as the community boundary in this case. In analyzing my interview data and field notes, I found consistency across participants in both communities, demonstrating that parents across my samples agreed with this community boundary for West Peak. While this small area was technically located directly on the other side of the school district boundary from the rest of the West Peak community, it was, in essence, a part of West Peak. Parents from that particular area typically did not identify as being a part of the East Summit community and felt there was a strong cultural distinction between themselves and the rest of East Summit. They also did not consider themselves to be official residents of the Western district, although they identified culturally with the West Peak community. In fact, before I was made aware of these distinctions in the communities and early on in my data collection, parents' social networks in this borderline area of the East Summit

school district led me to other parents in West Peak, not in East Summit. The parents and boys that they knew and were friendly with were residents of the West Peak school district; thus my snowballing led me out into the rest of the West Peak community.

As time went on, I also learned that East Summit participants likewise considered those “borderline” parents to be others and not really a part of the rest of the East Summit community. They felt that those parents and boys were largely dissimilar to themselves and that they were more integrated into the West Peak community. Analyses of my findings support this divide. My observations at the two field sites were quite different and corresponded to the narratives that participants in the two communities provided about their experiences and sense-making.

Thus, the boundary between the two communities is imperfect when measured along formal municipal or school district specified lines. The boundary, however, is not blurry or misunderstood among the people who live in these communities. In this dissertation, I center the experiences, sense-making, and representations of my participants and use their commonly understood boundaries in my conception of the West Peak and East Summit communities. Below, I provide more details about those distinct communities and the local cultures within them.

#### *Site 1: The Community of West Peak*

Understanding the cultural space of West Peak is important to understanding the positionality of the West Peak parents in this study, as well as their particular dilemmas and subsequent strategies. These are *not* parents raising kids in rural areas, in lower-income areas, or in areas of the country that some would stereotypically associate with the celebration of football (such as communities in Texas or other southern states). The parents in this sample of my study

are parenting in a community where health has a particular definition, and where privileged race and class ideologies influence local cultural ideals of wellness and safety.

The community of West Peak is located the Western School District (including the small subset of East Summit, as mentioned above) and is in a mostly suburban area near a large metropolitan city in the West. The following demographics<sup>5</sup> include Western School District, combined with the demographics of the subset of East Summit that I include as a part of the West Peak community (see explanation above). The population of West Peak nears approximately 143,000 and is considered a thriving and successful community. The area is primarily liberal, white, and affluent. The racial and ethnic makeup of West Peak is approximately 78% Non-Hispanic white, 14% Hispanic, 5% Asian, 1% African American, and 2% from other races. In the area, 70% of people have at least a four-year college degree. The median household income in the area is approximately \$80,000, well above the national average. Housing prices in West Peak are also above the national average, with median selling prices hitting \$450,000. Schools in West Peak are well known across the larger metropolitan area as being among the best in the state.

West Peak is primarily known for its liberal political leanings, and as being one of the more progressive areas of the swing state it is located within but does also include some pockets of more conservative people. West Peak also has a distinctive culture. Known throughout the state as being a haven for health, the residents of the West Peak community pride themselves on being heavily involved in outdoor recreational activities, consuming high-quality (and high-cost) natural and organic foods, and living a more natural lifestyle. Popular outdoor activities in the

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<sup>5</sup> These data come from the 2010 U.S. Census.

area are typically exercise-based activities, such as long-distance running, mountain biking, and hiking. Popular indoor activities include yoga, Pilates, and Tai Chi.

The affluence of West Peak is represented in particular status symbols, including expensive outdoor equipment and athletic clothing. At games, parents arrived in expensive athletic gear from popular stores like Lululemon and Athleta. Around West Peak, people regularly wear costly running pants, tops, and sneakers to everyday events. In West Peak, health is prioritized and publically performed through an aesthetic style often attributed to white, affluent culture.

*Site 2: The Community of East Summit*

While located very close to West Peak, the community of East Summit has some stark differences. The population of East Summit is around 100,000, and while not particularly affluent, is considered to be a solid and especially "tight-knit" and family-friendly community. East Summit shares with West Peak a love for the outdoors, and popular family activities include visiting local hiking trails, utilizing county parks, and cycling. In contrast to West Peak, East Summit residents do not flaunt the same resources in their outdoor, health-focused lifestyle (absent are things such as expensive bicycles and the regularity of yoga studio memberships that are common in West Peak).

Instead, East Summit has more variety and pockets of different neighborhoods, particularly with regards to race and class. The community has a thriving Latinx community spread out across several neighborhoods of the eastern end of the area. There are also pockets of more working-class families, living separately from the more solidly middle-class families (which I refer to later in this dissertation as the "relatively more privileged" East Summit parents). In East Summit, the racial and ethnic makeup is approximately 58% Non-Hispanic



white, 25% Hispanic, 3% Asian, 1% African American, and 13% from other races. In the area, 38% of people have at least a four-year college degree. The median household income in the area sits right around \$60,000, and median housing prices are approximately \$220,000. In contrast to West Peak, there is much more heterogeneity across both race and class in East Summit.

Additionally, while health is also particularly significant in East Summit, feelings about football, in particular, are not as tense as in West Peak. In East Summit, many community members enjoy and celebrate the game, and it is not overwhelmingly considered to be deviant. There is some variation here, but football's place in the East Summit community is much more grounded in shared bonds. Community and high school football games are spaces and opportunities where members of the community – even those without children – come to spend time with their fellow community members and cheer on their teams in solidarity. In this dissertation, I compare and contrast the two communities and the parents who live within them to better understand how these disparate community cultural spaces shape parents' experiences and sense-making in raising boys, and particularly, raising boys through youth football.

## DATA COLLECTION

### *Participant Observation*

I began participant observation for this in the fall of 2012 when I found the Midline Youth Football League<sup>6</sup>, a club-level youth league that included football teams across my two community field sites. These club-level teams were considered “feeder” teams for the local high schools. The league was community run and sponsored, and participation was open to any boy currently enrolled in a local, school-district zoned middle school. The league was separated into

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<sup>6</sup> I have changed the names of the youth football league and all teams/schools mentioned throughout this dissertation to protect the privacy of my participants.

sub-leagues that corresponded to ages and grade levels. As I entered the field, I decided to focus on teams in the eighth-grade (approximately 13 years old) league, hoping to be able to follow them as they transitioned to high school if I was able to stay with the group over a few years. In West Peak, I spent two years with the parents of boys playing on a team named the Talons. During my first year (2012) with the Talons, the players were in the eighth grade, and their ages ranged from 13 to 14 years old. During my second year (2013) with the Talons, the boys had transitioned to high school. That year, the boys played directly for the school on the junior varsity team. Their ages ranged from 14 to 15 years old. There was no one set site for the West Peak football games I attended, as game sites were held in various community parks and school fields around the local area (as well as surrounding towns and cities for “away” games).

I attempted to immerse myself into the space of football parenthood as much as possible. At games, I spent the majority of my time on the sidelines with parents, engaging in informal conversations and interactions, talking with them about their boys, the game, and about football parenthood more generally. The majority of my observations happened in these public spaces (as games were held in public community spaces and were open to the community to attend). I also attended other team events such as team practices (which were also open to the public) and volunteering at a homecoming parade float decorating party (which was held at the home of one of the mothers I met at my West Peak field site). On several occasions, I helped parents with transporting boys to and from practices and games. I spent approximately 45 hours of field work at West Peak (with the Talons) and attended 25 events (most of which were practices and games). I have approximately 275 pages of field notes from my time observing in West Peak.

In 2016, I moved on to my second field site in the neighboring community of East Summit. I chose a team I call the Eagles in which to perform participant observation and as my

point of contact for recruiting parents for interviews. Like the Talons, the Eagles belonged to the eighth-grade league of the Midline Youth Football League. The boys' ages also ranged from 13 to 14 years old. The Eagles was the feeder team for the high school on the east side of town. I spent one year and one season with the parents of the Eagles in East Summit. I attended ten events, spent approximately 20 hours, and collected 125 pages of field notes during my time in East Summit. Parents of the boys on the Eagles team were more ethnically diverse than those on the West Peak team, and many parents spoke Spanish, a language I am not fluent in. In an attempt to mitigate this language barrier, understand more interactions, and recruit more parents, I requested the assistance of a fellow graduate student who is a native Spanish speaker. My colleague attended three of the ten East Summit games with me. While at the games, she observed parents, had informal conversations with them and recruited for interviews. After the games, we would discuss our time in the field, and I would take written notes on her translations. I do not use her interpretation of events as data and instead focus on her translation of what was being said.

In total, I observed 35 football games and events across three years. I spent approximately two and a half to three and a half hours at each game, which resulted in approximately 70 hours of time spent in the field. I accumulated approximately 400 pages of field note data. While in the field, my position as a researcher was overt whenever possible. As I would meet people on the sidelines, I would introduce myself as a “student researching families.” There were, undoubtedly, some people at the games whom I was not introduced to, and who may not have known my position as a researcher. During early visits to my field sites, I allowed my focus to be open and general, taking in all of the new information as it came to me.

### *Research Questions and Themes*

As I grew more experienced with my sites, my focus narrowed and centered more closely on emerging research questions and themes. These included: How do parents manage concerns about boys' well-being? How do injuries complicate this work? What other concerns do parents of youth football players have? What is meaningful about football in raising boys? What challenges do parents experience and how does this vary based on race, class, and gender? How do parents interact with each other, the boys, and the coaches? How do those interactions help us to understand their experiences and sense-making in raising boys? This practice is commonly used in qualitative and ethnographic research (Emerson et al. 1995).

While at the games, I would make mental notations of what I saw and sporadically use my iPhone's notebook application to write down jottings, or keywords to be used at a later time to recall observations (Emerson et al. 1995: 19-20). During my time at the field sites, I also engaged in informal conversations with parents. These conversations were crucial in helping me to formulate an understanding of what I was observing on the field and the sidelines, as well as aided in the creation of my first interview schedule. For example, I learned that parents' descriptions of their "learning the boundary" of the sideline did not always match up with what I saw (particularly in regards to how gender structured the "boundary.") This combined method helped me to focus in on those sections of parents' stories, as well as interactions that occurred at the sidelines of games.

After each game, I spent approximately three hours writing field notes, in which I would account for my observations of the day, reflect on my positionality in the field, and mark the beginnings of themes that were emerging. I developed a practice wherein which I divided three hours spent writing into two segments: two hours directly after the game and one hour a day or two later. Returning to my field notes after a short amount of time had passed allowed me to

recall events that I had missed during my first segment of writing, and also allowed me to hone and refine the notes by adding details or adjusting incorrect recalls.

### *In-Depth Interviews*

Across both field sites, I collected a total of 50 interviews: 25 in West Peak and 25 in East Summit. This totaled approximately 75 hours of digitally recorded interview audio data that was later transcribed.<sup>7</sup> I conducted my West Peak interviews in the fall of 2012 and spring of 2013, and my East Summit interviews in the fall of 2016 and spring of 2017. Parent interviews are central to this dissertation. After spending time observing parents, it was important to balance that data representing “what people do” with interviews, which represent “what people say.” People’s actions and behaviors do not always match their talk, stories, and sense-making about such actions and behaviors.

Interviews with parents allowed me to dig into their stories, their identity constructions, their emotion management, and other important aspects of football parenthood.

I focused primarily on face-to-face interviews and conducted 48 of the interviews in person.<sup>8</sup> These interviews were in-depth conversations and consisted of open-ended, guiding questions that were created to stimulate conversation between myself and my participant. This method of interviewing is one of the preferred practices among qualitative researchers (Rubin and Rubin 2005). Interviews lasted between one and three hours. I asked participants about their experiences as football parents, about their feelings, opinions, beliefs, and concerns about their boys playing the game, and about their thoughts on parenthood, more generally. Questions and topics included the themes of becoming a football parent, how they thought football influenced

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<sup>7</sup> I discuss transcription in more detail on page 16.

<sup>8</sup> The remaining two were conducted via telephone, at the participants’ request.

their boys, the challenges of football parenthood, moms and dads in football, negotiations with coaches (and other adults), and making decisions about their boys in the context of football.

While I did create and use an interview guide to help structure the interviews around particular themes (see Appendix A), I approached interviews flexibly. At the beginning of each interview, I explained to the parents that while I did have a list of questions and topics I was interested in discussing with them, I was more interested in us having an organic conversation. I explained that I was more interested in what they had to tell me than I was in any ideas I had coming into the project. Interviews flowed like conversations, where I might ask a question, but then allow the discussion to move in other directions if parents guided us in that way. I tailored my follow-up questions to each particular interview, encouraging parents to talk about what felt important to them. This resulted in some changes to the interview guide over time, but essentially the themes and topics were consistent across all interviews.

Interviews were held at a location of the participant's choosing. Most often, parents chose local coffee shops to meet. A few interviews were conducted at participants' homes or community parks, and one interview was held on the University of Colorado Boulder campus. At the start of each interview, I presented the participant with a consent form, which had been previously reviewed and approved by the University of Colorado Boulder Institutional Review Board. Participants read over the consent form, and I specifically reviewed with them the potential risks of participation, how I would keep their identities anonymous, and that participation was always voluntary. All interview data were de-identified to ensure that I was protecting participants' privacy. This included any names, locations, schools, etc. that could be traced back to the participant. Participants (and any people they mentioned, including their children) were given pseudonyms. At the end of each interview, I spent approximately one hour

writing post-interview memos. These memos captured my initial thoughts and impressions of the participant and the interview. Taking post-interview notes and memoing was an important part of the interview process (Loftland et al. 2006). All interviews were digitally recorded, with participants' permission, and later transcribed.

## SAMPLING

While at games, I began recruiting for interviews primarily through convenience sampling. Convenience sampling is a non-random method and is based on recruiting participants who are chosen due to their convenient accessibility and proximity to the researcher. The specific convenience sampling method that I employed was 'snowball' or 'chain-referral' sampling. This is a sampling method for recruiting participants who possess the characteristics of interest to the study via connections through initial contacts (Loftland et al. 2006). For my study, the characteristics of interest for recruitment were simple: the person needed to be over the age of 18 and also be a parent of a boy who was playing youth football or had played within the last five years. All of the parents who participated in the study had boys who played or were currently playing tackle football.

I stayed conscious of the parents I was recruiting, as I was most interested in recruiting parents of kids who played at middle school and high school ages. I was particularly interested in recruiting parents who had parented boys through the transition from middle school/club-level football to high school football, and potentially into college. I found that I did not have to strategically recruit to bring these parents into my sample, as many of those whom I met through referral recruiting had had such experiences. I was also conscious of the ranges of age, race, ethnicity, social class, sexuality, and family context in my sample, and attempted to bring as much variation as possible through recruitment efforts. In the end, I found that recruitment

proved somewhat challenging and that I needed to include all of the parents who were responsive to my invitations to participate (as opposed to strategically recruiting for variation in the sample).<sup>9</sup>

Participants in qualitative research are often recruited through convenience methods, and snowball sampling is regarded among qualitative researchers as an appropriate and successful recruitment technique for qualitative studies (Loftland et al. 2006). While recruiting at the football games, I asked possible participants the following question: "I'm researching how parents feel and think about organized sports for kids. Would you be willing to sit down with me in an interview where I could ask you about your thoughts? The interview should last between one and two hours and can take place at a time and place of your choosing." I also used convenience sampling and snowball sampling to recruit from within my social network, asking friends and family if they, themselves, would be willing to participate or if they could connect me with anyone they knew who might be willing to participate. Of those people whom I did interview, I again asked if they could connect me with others who fit the recruitment requirements and might be willing to agree to an interview.

The second recruitment method I used was internet advertising. I used the free message board posting website Craigslist to display my advertisements. My postings on Craigslist included a call for parents who lived and parented in West Peak or East Summit and who had a child who played or had played football in the last five years. I described the project as a research study on families and football, and stated that I was looking to talk to parents about their "experiences and thoughts about youth football." Over time, I began to have a more difficult time recruiting parents, and especially parents from East Summit, and began offering \$30

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<sup>9</sup> I described the sample and participants in further detail on page 15.



compensation for each interview for all participants in the study from that point onward. In all, I compensated five West Peak parents and 22 East Summit parents.

## THE PARTICIPANTS

In total, I interviewed 50 parents of youth football players for this study, including 25 West Peak parents and 25 East Summit parents.<sup>10</sup> Of my total sample, I interviewed 29 women and 21 men. I spoke with 36 white, Non-Hispanic parents, 8 Latinx parents, five African-American parents, and one Asian-American parent. My sample included 35 parents who were married or partnered and 15 who were divorced or not partnered. I categorized seven parents as class disadvantaged, six as less class advantaged, 30 as class advantaged, and seven as especially class advantaged. I based this categorization on several points of data, including participants' discussions about their class backgrounds, their own parents' occupations when they were growing up, participants' current occupation and highest level of education, and descriptions of current family capital. For example, I considered no high school degree to correspond with class disadvantaged, high school degree and some college as less class advantaged, bachelor's degree or master's degree as class advantaged, and Ph.D. or medical degree as especially class advantaged. Similarly, I considered unemployed as class disadvantaged, jobs like construction and nail technicians as less class advantaged, positions such as teachers and nurses to be class advantaged, and careers as entrepreneurs, CEOs, and surgeons to be especially class advantaged. These measurements are, of course, imperfect.

In my attempts to classify my participants, no single indicator would place them into a class category. Instead, I took a holistic approach across multiple points of data to carefully classify parents' social class as accurately as possible. Class categorization remains a difficult

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<sup>10</sup> See Appendix B for a table of participants' demographics.

"box" to project onto people and does not really give room for participants to self-identify (as even asking for a participant's yearly income is considered potentially inappropriate and off-putting). With this, I looked across the multiple points I have detailed here to best represent their class positions at the time of the study. Below, I include a further breakdown of the characteristics of my participants by community.

#### *West Peak Participants*

My West Peak sample was overwhelmingly white and class privileged and reflects the privilege of the West Peak community. I interviewed 21 white Non-Hispanic, two African-American, one Asian-American, and one Latinx West Peak parent. I classified none of my West Peak participants as class disadvantaged, one as less class advantaged, 17 as class advantaged, and seven as especially class advantaged. I interviewed 14 West Peak women and 11 West Peak men. West Peak participants' ages ranged from 37 to 62 years old, with most (21) parents in their 40s and 50s at the time of the interview. Within my sample, 19 parents self-identified as married or partnered and six parents as divorced or not partnered. My West Peak interview sample included four parents of boys on the Talons team and 21 parents of boys from other teams in the West Peak community.

#### *East Summit Participants*

My East Summit sample was considerably more class and racially and ethnically diverse than my West Peak sample and also reflects the demographics of the broader community. In East Summit, I interviewed 15 white, Non-Hispanic, three African-American, and seven Latinx parents. My East Summit sample of participants was considerably less affluent than my West Peak sample, which also reflected the socioeconomic demographics of the area. I classified seven of my East Summit participants as class disadvantaged, five as less class advantaged,

thirteen as class advantaged, and none as especially class advantaged. East Summit participants were also younger on average than West Peak participants, with their ages ranging from 33 to 54 at the time of the interview. I interviewed 15 women and 10 men from this community. My East Summit sample included 16 parents who were married or partnered and nine who were divorced or not partnered. Of the 25 East Summit parents who participated in an interview, six were parents of boys on the Eagles team, and 19 were parents of boys on other teams located in the East Summit community.

#### TRANSCRIPTION, CODING, AND ANALYSIS

All audio data was transcribed for later coding and analysis. I transcribed all field notes and informal conversation notes. I also personally transcribed 15 parent interviews. The remaining 35 interviews were transcribed using a professional transcription service. All data (audio files, notes, transcripts, participant information) were kept in a locked cabinet in my research office on campus or in secured folders on my personal computer. Once all of the data had been transformed and transcribed, I began coding and analytic memoing. The coding process is a means to sort data into thematic categories so that sections of data can be considered in an organized fashion and take on meaning (Loftland et al. 2006: 200). The analysis was inductive, and I took a grounded approach to allow themes in the data to emerge organically. I manually coded by reading through transcripts and writing analytic memos based on emergent themes. I returned to each interview and field note three times to review the data and refine thematic codes. I started with a preliminary round of coding, where I analyzed both the interview and field note data for emergent themes. Upon revisiting and refining the organization of the data, I moved towards more focused coding and analysis and eventually reorganized the themes into four broad areas (identities, emotions, gender, and community culture), with each area including three to

four sub-themes. After the creation of my coded themes, I moved to memoing, which consists of writing down analytic notations and ideas about themes and sub-themes in an organized manner (Loftland et al. 2006: 209-210). I used these analytic memos to help organize my themes and begin to build the data chapters of this dissertation.

#### POSITIONALITY, REFLEXIVITY, AND REFLECTIONS

Reflexively considering my positionality in the research was an integral part of my time at my field sites and the interviewing process, as well. I considered my position as a young woman researching families and how my position may affect my participants. I believe my age (specifically, that I was younger than all of my participants and for some, several decades younger) and gender mattered considerably. Researchers who have insider status are (usually) more likely to experience trust and inclusion (Baca Zinn 1979), while researchers with outsider status can use their ignorance (real or perceived) to elicit rich descriptions of members' meanings (Thorne 2001; Twine 2000). I believe my youthfulness combined with not having any children of my own positioned my participants as the "experts," giving them space to feel confident in their actions and narratives of parenthood. I also believe this may have created some distance between us, as perhaps my position as a young, single woman could have affected participants' ability to imagine that I could understand their experiences. As one mother told me during our interview, "Being a parent is quite a thing – you don't really get it 'til you're there."

I also believe my gendered positionality mattered in how my participants understood me and how it may have influenced our interactions. I believe being a young woman facilitated my presence in the field and that participants were more comfortable with me around their children. If I had been a young single man, I do not believe parents would have been as readily comfortable with me around their families. Race and ethnicity also mattered to my positionality in this research. I

believe my position as a white woman eased my access to my field site and that my white privilege allowed me to be largely unnoticed and seen as unthreatening. This was more complicated in the East Summit community, as I believe my whiteness created considerable distance between me and the Latinx parents who had newly immigrated. I believe I was less trusted and that our language barrier made me more of an outsider among them, creating challenges in our interactions.

Reciprocity was another critical aspect of this project. While the fuzzy lines around 'ethics' in social science research are continually debated (Berg and Lune 2011; Fine 1993; Ellis 1995), my own 'moral compass' lead me to prioritize exchange with my participants. Research can be, in some ways, undeniably exploitive, as researchers develop relationships with participants to further the goals of research – but these exploitive relationships can be altered and balanced through reciprocity (Baca Zinn 1979; Blauner and Wellman 1973: 323). During my time at the games and within interviews, I attempted to 'give back' to my participants in any way that presented itself. Most commonly, the resource that I was able to offer was my attention, as I spent time listening to parents' concerns and sharing in social exchange.

One example involves Cynthia, a participant I spent time with at games, often lending a caring ear to her worries about her sister, her position in the neighborhood “mom dram” (drama among moms), and her frustration with her boss at work. After our sit-down interview, Cynthia and I spent an additional hour and a half just chatting about her life, from internet shopping to her family’s upcoming vacation. This additional time I spent with Cynthia was not providing me with relevant data, but being willing to listen, share, and reflect with her felt important as a way to balance our exchange, to show her generosity as she had so graciously shown me. It could certainly be argued that this time spent still did benefit my research (as it created opportunities

for Cynthia to feel more comfortable with me and possibly share more in the future with me), but it feels important to note that my sense-making around it was not as such. Instead, this experience with Cynthia and similar experiences with other parents felt like opportunities to give back, to support, and to show my gratitude to them.

#### LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The data and findings in this dissertation should be considered with the understanding of what boundaries and limitations are inherent within them. While I was quite broad with my sampling criteria,<sup>11</sup> it is important to address potential sampling issues. First, my interview data are based on parents who self-selected into this study. These parents understood beforehand that we would be discussing kids and football, a topic that has received more attention and public criticism in recent years. This fact may have driven certain parents away from participating, out of fear of judgment or general discomfort in discussing their decision to allow their boys to play. This also could have been a specific motivator for some of the parents who did participate and who perhaps had stronger opinions on the matter than other football parents. My sampling methods were also based on convenience and snowball sampling, which could have resulted in my being “pulled in” to certain networks of parents, which may not reflect the experiences of all parents in the West Peak and East Summit communities.

An important limitation of the data and methods of this study is the inequity between the data I collected in West Peak versus East Summit. I spent twice the amount of time in West Peak as I did in East Summit. Parents were also more comfortable speaking with me while at games in West Peak. In East Summit, parents were friendly with me but kept some distance. I spent time

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<sup>11</sup> I included all interested participants who self-identified as a parent of a boy who was playing youth football or had played within the last five years.

with them but did not spend as much time chatting with them as I was able to with parents in West Peak. The goal of qualitative research is to capture the richness of the process of sense-making, and I do not claim generalizability with my findings in this dissertation. My sample is relatively small and is based on parents living in culturally specific spaces. While both communities have differences, particularly in their racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic makeup, they both exist within a health-conscious and nature-focused environment. This cultural context mattered<sup>12</sup> and shaped parents' experiences and sense-making. While my data and findings cannot be used to make generalized statements about all football parents, they do show us parenting processes. These data and findings serve as a window into how dominant and local cultures shape parents' experiences, how particularly situated parents make sense of raising boy children, and how these phenomena help shape parents' identities and emotional selves.

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<sup>12</sup> I address, in detail, how space matters to parents and to my findings in Chapters 4 and 5.

## CHAPTER 4

“THESE BOYS’ LIVES ARE TOO EASY”:  
RECONCILING MASCULINITY AND PRIVILEGE IN WEST PEAK

This dissertation focuses on the experiences and sense-making of raising boys in the context of youth football for parents in two neighboring, yet distinct communities. In this chapter, I begin with an examination of parents in my first field site, the affluent community of West Peak. My time spent with West Peak parents at football events (games, practices, etc.) and in interviews revealed an incredibly complicated and context-specific situation: football in the privileged West Peak was deviant, and football parents' moral identities were called into question for allowing their boys to play. In the pages that follow, I analyze the "work" these parents performed, in both their interviews and interactions, to defend their moral parental identities and make sense of the multi-layered dilemmas they experienced as parents raising privileged boys in the context of youth football. I begin with an introduction to the community space and with a demonstration of the unique tensions and worries West Peak parents experienced. I then examine the rhetorical strategies parents' used to solve their dilemmas, including telling stories about constructing the "right" kind of masculinity in a space defined by competition and individualism.

I attended my first youth football game in West Peak during a particularly scorching week in the fall of 2012. Upon arrival at the West Peak Community Park, I encountered a sea of spectators occupying the sidelines of the field. Climbing up the tall grassy hill that flanked the playing field, I looked out at the boys preparing for the game. There were two clumps of boys on each side of the field, swallowed by pads and helmets that made them appear tiny in comparison. They paced the “play” side of the sideline – the space where only coaches and players were allowed to occupy, delineated by an invisible, but salient boundary that parents and spectators



were not allowed to cross<sup>13</sup>. On the other side of the boundary were the families, friends, and community members who had come out to watch the game and cheer the boys on.

This day, a team of 8<sup>th</sup>-grade boys known as the Talons was playing a serious rival and tensions were high. I strolled along the Talons sideline, listening to conversations about the "brutal heat," recent home renovations, and some good old fashioned gossiping about the parents of the players on the competing team from the other (less race and class privileged) side of town<sup>14</sup>. As the day wore on, I turned my attention to the game and halfway through observed an interaction that helped me to better understand the definition of the situation I was witnessing. I watched as a player on the Talons team raced down the field, trying to keep up with the ball sailing through the air. He jumped, caught the ball, and fell to the ground where he was subsequently buried by an avalanche of boys from the opposing team. I watched the parents around me explode in excitement (at the successful pass completion, as I learned to call it), then turn silent and serious (while the West Peak player was underneath a pile of other boys). One by one, the boys pulled themselves up, and eventually, the player I had been watching popped up with the ball in hand. The sentiment quickly shifted back to elation, parents breathing sighs of relief and calling out with pride to congratulate the boy. Worries around physical injuries in youth football mattered to parents, yet they were also invested in the boys' other experiences with the game, including public displays of strength and success.

In my time attending games and other team events, West Peak parents grew more comfortable with me, and I began recruiting for interviews. Interviews with parents revealed significant tension among my participants, and included stories about why they made the choice

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<sup>13</sup> I discuss this boundary, and how parents navigate it, further in Chapter 7.

<sup>14</sup> This team was part of the community that later become my second field site, East Summit.

to allow their boys to play, feeling judged by other people for saying "yes" to football, their worries about physical injuries, and what they saw as the "real" dangers (other than football) that their boys were facing in life. Julie, a white, class-advantaged mother in her early forties, talked about the dilemmas she experienced as she decided to let her son play football. She explained, "it took time, it took time, I did not want it to happen. I fought it all the way."

Julie was concerned about the physical risks of the game, but she was also concerned about the social consequences of saying no to football. Julie admitted she worried that prohibiting her son from playing might ostracize him from his friends. She explained, "I didn't want to embarrass him." Julie, like other parents, felt that either decision posed risks to her son. Similar to Julie, Richard, a white, class-advantaged father, also talked about the struggles he and his wife experienced when their son expressed interest in football, as he told me, "Oh no, we were like, oh no! We were so hoping he'd be into like baseball or something, but nope, football. And we wanted to say no, but were like, how could we do that to him? And his friends would know. It'd be bad."

#### CONTEXT MATTERS: UNDERSTANDING FOOTBALL IN WEST PEAK

Richard and Julie exemplify the ambivalence that West Peak football parents described and the difficulties they had in choosing to allow their boys to play. These parents weighed concerns about the physical injuries their sons faced playing a risky game against equally, perhaps more, weighty misgivings about the social harms their boys would face if they were overly protected from those harms. Parents' ambivalence was amplified by the privileged cultural context of West Peak. In this community, youth football appeared more frowned upon than it might have been in other community contexts. Existing studies on sport and masculinity have shown that the consumption, not performance, of the spectacle of violent sport can work to

differentiate higher status men from lower status men, and to “construct and clarify differences among various masculinities” (Messner 1989; 1990b; 1992). Most people in West Peak understood football as a sport to consume, not to perform. West Peak parents shared that they worried that football was not quite the right choice to make for local boys, despite its national status. Karen, a white, class-advantaged mother, captured this sentiment, stating, “People love football. They love it. It’s the big sport. But for kids here? I think that it will be a sport that will not be around for too long.” And John, a white, highly class-advantaged father, said, “We (parents) have this weird feeling about football. It’s like, we really love it, but then we don’t want our kids to play... we have all of these feelings about football.”

Understanding the cultural space of West Peak is vital to understanding the positionality of West Peak parents, as well as their particular dilemmas and subsequent strategies. West Peak live in a community where health has a particular definition, and where privileged race and class ideologies influence local cultural ideals of wellness and safety.<sup>15</sup> Popular youth sports in the area include some team sports, such as baseball and soccer, and especially popular sports for youth include more individual-focused sports, such as skiing, hiking and running, cycling, and rock climbing. Parents’ stories and interactions, which I detail in the following pages, establish the community as highly connected and cohesive, but that local norms and values center independence, individuality, and self-reliance. Each family takes care of itself, and each boy becomes his own man. Sport is a meaningful way in which these sentiments are expressed, but football, in particular, is *not* understood as an appropriate sport in which to do so.

West Peak parents are influenced both by their local culture and by broader, national discourses about children, risk, and football. In a 2014 issue of *The New Yorker*, then President

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<sup>15</sup> See Chapter 3 for a more detailed description of the community field sites.

Barack Obama stated, “No, I would not let my son play pro football” (Remnick 2014). President Obama’s comment was couched in a conversation about the long-term effects of concussions, prompting him to weigh in on football’s appropriateness for children. The comment quickly became a staple sound bite in both media and everyday conversations about football, children, and risk. Increasingly, traditional celebrations of football have been threatened by concerns about safety, which have grown more salient in cultural discourses (Belson 2014). This shift has occurred amidst growing anxieties about children and risk, more generally (Elliott and Aseltine 2013). Unsurprisingly, tensions about football and anxieties about children have coalesced. The growing discourse about traumatic brain injuries in the NFL has bled into a cultural debate about children who play the game and the parents who allow them to do so (Guida 2014). As such, critiques about parenting are embedded in concerns about youth football; these critiques call parents of youth football players to task for allowing their children to play a game culturally defined by violence (Bachynski 2015; Jenkins 2012). These critiques, in turn, have been countered by calls from other “experts” and media outlets for being too protective (Hoffman 2010; Little, Wyver, & Gibson 2011; Pain 2006), especially of boy children (Bachynski 2015; Rosin 2014).

Within the privileged community of West Peak, parents are understood as being highly resourced (in terms of finances, cultural capital, and education) and thus are held to a high standard of “responsible” parenting. In West Peak, there are “no excuses” for irresponsible parenting. In my conversations with parents of youth football players, they revealed that football was often considered “irresponsible” and unnecessarily dangerous among people in the area. They also pointed to a competing concern: that their privileged positions could hinder their boys’ ability to develop robust masculinities and become “tough,” resilient, and self-reliant men.

Parents understood their choice to let their boys play tackle football as a means of solving this masculinity dilemma (as they imagined the game would “toughen up” their boys) would mark them as deviant, “bad” parents in their community. The West Peak parents in this study are distinctly raced and classed parents – privileged individuals trying to make sense of what it takes to raise boys into good men appropriately, and whom those good men were supposed to be. I treat football as a site of a difficult, potentially deviant parenting situation for these privileged parents in West Peak, who made the locally unpopular choice to allow their sons to play tackle football. Youth football serves as a distinctly masculine context that illuminates the goals, the struggles, and the strategies these particularly raced and classed parents employed as they worked to both understand and manage the project of engendering the “right” kind of masculinity in their children, while navigating inherently difficult and contradictory local expectations for “doing” good parenting.

These parents worried about their boys getting hurt, and they feared that others would judge them for allowing the boys to play, but they also described concerns about turning their privileged boys into “strong” men. In this analysis, I argue that advantaged parents of youth football players resuscitate a particular version of masculinity as they work to defend their parenting position. I show how West Peak parents resolve these concerns by pulling on cultural beliefs about risk and resilience in boyhood, and emphasize what they described as the “nature” and needs of teenage boys. These strategies help privileged West Peak parents to address their dilemmas and align their parenting work with cultural expectations for intensive, protective parenting *and* the growing demand for producing resilient men. In the process, they construct a distinctly privileged and idealized image of the “right” kind of masculinity.

In the following analysis, I show how masculinity creates both dilemmas and solutions for West Peak parents. I demonstrate how constructing masculinity works as both a tool and a constraint for privileged parents raising boys and shapes their sense-making as they turn boys into men. In the following section, I begin by outlining the dilemmas West Peak football parents experience. In addition to the previously mentioned dilemma of making the decision, parents also expressed three kinds of worries about their sons' participation in youth football: worries about being judged, worries about physical injuries, and worries about raising boys into appropriate men.

#### THE DILEMMAS OF FOOTBALL PARENTHOOD: NARRATIVES OF WORRY

##### *Worries about Being Judged*

Coming into my field site, I was aware of the growing cultural discourse about football and risk. Parents' stories revealed that they were also aware of this talk and the imagined "surplus risk" for children (Elliott and Aseltine 2013). Being a football parent meant having to justify their choice to allow their children to play a game increasingly defined as dangerous and excessively risky (Bachynski 2015). Because of this, the parents in my study often described others' questions about their choices about football as questions about whether or not they were good parents. Outside critiques came from multiple locations, most prominently family and friends. Angela, a white, class-advantaged mother and a self-described athletics "aficionado," told me about her family's response when she first allowed her son to play. She explained, "I was worried, I knew what people would think. I grew up in a house, you know my parents, I grew up hearing, 'Only bad moms let their sons play football.' It was that outrageously not acceptable for anybody in our family to play football." Julie had similar feelings about outside critiques from friends and family. Julie lived in an affluent part of town, and runs in especially

well-resourced social circles, making her decision to allow her son to play particularly deviant among her peers. She told me:

I've had so many different avenues of information come my way about the danger of it [football]. From friends who are medical doctors, who are, you know, a friend of ours is a medical doctor and working on investing and developing a new kind of helmet. And my husband had dinner with him, and he was like, he told him that [son] was playing and he said, 'I'm sorry, I just can't even, I can't even hear that. I can't support that.' And you know, that's really jarring. And then for President Obama, every year, to say, 'I would never let my son play football'...and then I'm watching the games. So...but it's just complicated.

Julie's comments demonstrate the challenges some parents faced in interactions with others, but outside judgments were at times less direct and manifested in the form of discourses found in media representations of the “dangers of football for kids.” Parents spoke about what they saw in news stories and talked about how those conversations seemed to vilify parents who allowed their boys to play, which made being a football parent, as Julie put it, “complicated.” Similarly, Robin, a white, class-advantaged mother, told me about a “stressful” story she heard (but couldn't remember where) about the NFL and concussions. She explained:

There was a professional football player who had a gazillion concussions, and he killed himself. In his suicide note, he left that he was leaving his brain for study. That got a lot of attention to this whole concussion issue. A lot of the professional football players that are now retired are all coming out, and they're talking about how they don't have, well, their cognitive functions are impaired...

Robin went on to explain that these stories not only caused her to worry about her son's safety but also that she believed they influenced how other people might disapprove of her choice to allow him to play, which was hard for her to manage.

Patricia, a white, class-advantaged mother, exemplifies the way parents in my study talked about being affected by media stories about football and injuries and worrying about how others would perceive them. In our discussion, she made sure to express that she shared concerns about the physical dangers of the game. She told me, "You don't want to see your kids get hurt,

and football is a physical sport, and there has been a lot of media about head injuries, about serious injuries, life-altering injuries, and you never stop worrying about that. Of course you do. I think sometimes; it's emotional, that's your kid out there. It's hard." Patricia's story demonstrates the dilemmas and worries football parents described experiencing. Parents' choices for their kids are public, and choices about football are high stakes. The growing critique of football for children causes football parents a different kind of worry: worry about outsiders' judgments.

### *Worries about Physical Injuries*

As Patricia's previous comment demonstrates, parents worried about their sons getting hurt. All of the West Peak parents I spoke with acknowledged that playing the game comes with physical risks to players, and nearly every parent was direct about worrying about physical injuries. As Mary, a white, class-advantaged mother, told me, "You know, there's always a concern there. That they could get a nasty injury because it's a very, very rough sport." Mark, a white, class-advantaged father, explained, "We see those kids out there, and they're like, 'oh I want to play!' and we worry, like, goodness, this kid's gonna get killed out there." Parents' narratives of worries about physical injuries came up regularly in our conversations, often on the heels of discussing their worries about being judged by others for allowing their sons to play the game. While they seemed to reflect real concerns about boys' safety, narratives of worry about injuries were important to parents' stories, as they worked to demonstrate that parents responsibly recognized potential "dangers" and thought appropriately about them.

Enthusiastic football mom, Angela, was telling me about how other parents in her social circle had given her "A hard time, oh yeah..." for letting her son play football. She was tense as we chatted, pulling on her wrists and pushing her coffee cup around the table in front of her. It



was at this point in the conversation that she shifted her narrative from worrying about outside judgments concerning injuries to a narrative of worrying about the injuries themselves. She told me, "God it's hard; it's so hard!" She continued, "I worry, but not about ankles or knees, like, I care about the head and the spine. I don't want him paralyzed, and I don't want him brain damaged. Of course, I think about, worry about that stuff." Angela appeared upset. At the same time, Angela's comments validate other people's concerns about her son playing football, as she, as a good parent, "of course" worries about him getting hurt. She legitimizes outside judgments but also situates herself as a parent who knows how to think about injuries.

Narratives of worry about injuries helped parents "prove" they are good parents by showing "appropriate" concern about the game and helped them to respond to outside judgments from others. These narratives also made being a football parent harder, as they reflected the fears parents felt about their boys playing and the emotional management necessary to navigate the situation<sup>16</sup>. Lindsay, a white, class-advantaged mother, demonstrated this, as she explained, "I just honestly worry about him being hurt all the time because you hear that football is so dangerous...sometimes it's hard to even look at (him playing)." Like Lindsay, some parents described needing to shield their eyes to manage their anxieties. Others were so worried they described finding it hard to breathe, as Keith, a white, highly class-advantaged father, put it, "We just kind of hold our breath and wait," and Patricia explained "Yeah, I just kind of hold my breath. I just hope at every game it will be okay." Despite these worries, these parents allowed their boys to play the game, creating a need for ways to minimize both the worry itself and

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<sup>16</sup> I return, in detail, to the incredible significance of emotion work in the experiences of football parents in Chapter 6.

judgments from others. As I discuss in the next section, concerns about boys' bodies provide a complex means of deflecting those judgments while creating another kind of worry in itself.

*Worries about Turning (West Peak) Boys into Men*

The concerns these parents voice are specific to class-privileged boys and are not shared by football parents in the less class-privileged community I studied. In privileged West Peak, parents expressed deep concern that their boys were growing up without experiences with adversity that would help them develop the skills necessary for adulthood, many of which were classed and gendered. Patricia told me, "I think these kids really aren't challenged in a lot of ways. I think, especially teenage boys, they need that. They need that accountability, that responsibility. I just don't think these kids are getting that," and Robin explained, "I think teenager's lives in our culture, isn't so tough. We're too easy on them." Robin's comments reflect her class-privileged community and culture, and the narratives of worry within them.<sup>17</sup>

Parents' narratives of worry about turning West Peak boys into men seemed to be fueled by fears that their boys were over-protected, and that saying no to football could exasperate that problem. Richard exemplifies this, as he told me about parents who pull their boys out of football:

Like some parents, especially in football, oh you can't, you shouldn't yell at the kids. But I'm sorry, that's part of the game. So you do yell. Sometimes we get carried away. I mean, I've gotten carried away. Some parents don't like it. Some kids don't like it. And consequently, they leave. And it's too bad. It's teaching boys, like, they can't take what's hard in life.

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<sup>17</sup> As I examine in detail in Chapter 5, in contrast to West Peak, parents in the more class and race-diverse community of East Summit did *not* express worries about life being "too easy" for their kids. Many of the less privileged East Summit parents I spoke with described the exact opposite: worries about life being harsh and difficult for their children.

For Richard, it is necessary that boys have exposure to hard situations and to be able to withstand them, but in West Peak, he fears over-protective parents are disallowing boys from having experiences that would teach that how to "take what's hard in life."

Like other parents, Jason, a white, highly class-advantaged father, worried about children, and especially boys, being "too sheltered" and becoming "too soft" in the privileged space of West Peak. Jason, an unusually outspoken father, described feeling concerned that West Peak boys (and their parents) were "too sensitive" and "thin-skinned," and ultimately, were weak in comparison to other boys. At one point in our conversation, Jason explained to me why he thought West Peak's teams struggled when playing against those from "other areas." Comparing the weight of the boys on West Peak teams to boys from other teams, he told me, "We just don't have what I call the 'big nasties,' and so I really do see that as a cultural difference. Our kids tend to be more yoga and tofu. We're playing other kids and they're more McDonald's."

While Jason starts out comparing the size of the boys' bodies, he ends up making a cultural distinction between West Peak boys and other boys from surrounding communities. Yoga and tofu are health markers often associated with whiteness and class privileged tastes and which can be used to feminize men. This becomes especially apparent as he contrasts the small-framed, "sensitive," "yoga and tofu" West Peak boys against other "big nasty" boys who are "more McDonalds." McDonald's is a classed and raced marker often associated with urban, minority, and lower class culture. The other areas surrounding West Peak have more mixed race and class demographics, and some of which have significantly more class and race diversity. While Jason was careful not to name a specific team or city, his reference to other "McDonalds" teams with "big nasties" suggests a reference to teams with more black, brown, and working-class boys, whom, in his story have larger bodies and are potentially tougher (as indicated by his

use of not only “big” but “nasty”). Jason’s comment demonstrates worries West Peak parents have about engendering appropriate masculinity for their boys in the context of privilege, but also that they make clear distinctions between their boys and other boys that reify their status. West Peak parents worry their boys may turn out “too soft,” but they also draw raced and class boundaries against lower-status boys they frame as “too tough” – or in Jason’s case, as “big nasties.” Jason’s comments illustrate how the characteristics parents worry about are the same characteristics that make West Peak boys elite.

In the end, these parents decided to let their sons play football, explaining to me that their worries about the social costs (for their boys) of saying no to football outweighed their fears about the potential physical injuries associated with the game, as well as their concerns about being judged for making an “irresponsible” parenting choice. Worries about their son's masculine development mattered to parents, but they also invigorate these worries as a sense-making resource in the process of justifying their decision-making. In the following section, I examine this resource in parents' narrative strategies as they attempt to defend their identities as good, responsible, moral parents.

#### NARRATIVE STRATEGIES AND DEFENDING IDENTITIES: RESUSCITATING MASCULINITY TO JUSTIFY FOOTBALL

Football came with multiple challenges for West Peak parents. They worried about their boys getting hurt, and they worried about other people judging them for allowing their boys to get hurt. They also had real concerns about raising their boys into the “right” kind of men. In this section, I demonstrate how the worry about turning privileged boys into strong men shaped West Peak parents’ strategies for managing and reconciling their conflicting worries. Masculinity and local culture created the context that parents’ dilemmas developed within, but they also shaped the tools they had to solve those problems. Reconciling privilege with masculinity served as one

of those tools. To help solve their dilemmas around the danger of football, parents resuscitated masculinity to justify why such danger was necessary. Injuries to boys' bodies were dangerous, but injuries to boys' current and future masculine identities were even more dangerous.

*Getting “Tough”: The Need for Risk and Resilience in Boyhood*

In parts of their stories, parents repositioned fears about boys and football as unnecessary worrying, and an excessive, even detrimental, level of risk avoidance. Parents expressed feelings of frustration about living in a “culture of fear” (Nelson 2010), or as Jason put it, “Today is a world of overprotective, ultrasensitive parenting.” Similarly, in response to talking about others judging his choice to allow his son to play the game, John explained, “It’s just a world of extreme over-parenting.” Parents' narratives addressed the worries they experienced as football parents and resisted larger cultural anxieties about children, football, and risk. When discussing “risks for kids,” Robin told me, “To me, life is carcinogenic. You can get hit by a truck tomorrow or whatever.” For Robin, “worrying about every little thing” was an inappropriate approach to life and an inappropriate way to raise boys. When I asked Brian, a white, highly class-advantaged father, about his thoughts on the risks associated with football, he bristled at the question and said, “You know, everything is a risk these days...it’s like we’re living in the wussifying of society.” He went on:

I mean, obviously there are physical risks [associated with football], but there are physical risks doing lots of things, and I kind of feel like, you know, I think being tough and being boys...boys learning how to be tough and getting through some of the things you have to get through when you’re in football...you know, the discipline, just the difficulty of conditioning, the difficulty of everything you have to go through makes you a stronger person. Physically, mentally, all of that.

Brian’s comment is illustrative of how parents challenged outside critiques that they were exposing their boys to “unnecessary” risk and instead repositioned the problem as *over-*protecting children. Brian also illustrates how gender informs their sense-making about risk

specifically for boy children. These are not simply narratives about avoiding or not avoiding risks; these are, as Brian told me, stories about, “boys learning how to be tough.” For Brian, over-worrying about the physical risks of football, and not allowing boys to play, would be prohibiting them from learning the necessary lessons of boyhood. Implicit in Brian’s story was how he, as a good father, was instead protecting his son from becoming a “wuss.”

Parents’ stories were rife with calls for boys to be allowed to learn to manage the risks of football as a way to simulate learning the risks of life and to become “tough” in the process. Parents equated saying no to football with an over-avoidance of the necessary risks of boyhood. As Karen, white, class-advantaged mother, told me, “Football makes them tough, and boys need that.” Parents’ stories drew on cultural beliefs about the importance of socializing resilient masculinity in boyhood and helped them to manage their own and others’ fears about physical injuries by “solving” the problem of raising privileged, “weak” men. In these narratives, learning to be resilient through the “toughness” of football was more important than avoiding physical risks, as Patricia exemplified when she told me, “You know, there’s a toughness about it (football). I think other parts of teenager’s lives in our culture isn’t so tough. We’re too easy on them.” While Patricia uses the gender-neutral “teenagers,” her comment is about teens, toughness, and football. Her comment is about teenage *boys*. Patricia juxtaposes the beneficial “toughness” of football against the alternative: teenage boys’ privileged lives that are “too easy.”

*Controlled Risk: Football...For Now*

Parents’ stories situated the positive benefits of football in the temporary stage of childhood and adolescence, where, according to parents, it held less potential for physical injuries. As Mark told me, “That’s just the way it is. You know, at this age, you play for a while and you play for fun. But that’s it, it doesn’t go any further than that.” Patricia echoed Mark’s

comments about football's temporality in her son's life, "Football isn't for later. He doesn't have to be or even wants to be, a pro football player. No way." Parents distinguished between playing football in youth and playing football in adulthood, which they marked as really dangerous. As Richard explained:

I mean professional ball is different. Even college ball is different. These days in the NFL, you have a front line that is 3,000 pounds all together. I mean, it's just the sheer force of the hits and the size of the players that cause damage. Playing professionally, well the risks of physical injury are incredible. Of course they are. Those guys get real injuries. You know, as kids... that's just not the deal. The injuries, it's not the same thing. And what the boys get out of playing, it's great for them. Lots of exercise and teamwork. It's good stuff.

A father of two players and a big advocate of how the game helps "shape these guys," John also felt that football was "great for boys," but did not support football in college. John told me

He [son] could have walked on to the first-string of his college's football team, but no, he didn't want to, I didn't want him to. I supported his decision because at [Western University] it's very academic, very rigorous. And he's an engineering major. That's intense coursework, and in college, he's not playing around.

John's comments marked football as inappropriate in his son's transition to adulthood, a time in which he expected his son to shift his focus away from playing sports to middle-class career development (see Messner 2009).

Parents' narrative strategies framed football in youth as making sense for boys. In response to worries about physical injuries, they minimize the risks of the game by relocating the "real risks" of injury at college and professional levels. They also emphasized football in youth as "just for fun" and drew boundaries between their support of football in boyhood and supporting football as a career aspiration. In this way, they project classed risks of the game onto those who would continue to play past high school. In comparison, they framed their management of football in their boys' youth as different, and as part of an appropriate class-marked transition to manhood.

*Nourishing the "Nature" of Adolescent Boys*

Parents' narrative strategies essentialized masculinity and constructed gendered meanings around boys' bodies to do what? To justify letting boys play. They defined young male bodies as being able to withstand the physical risks associated with football and suggested that the physically aggressive nature of the sport gave them an outlet for their "natural" aggression. I spoke with Anna, an Asian-American, highly class-advantaged mother, about how her ideas about boys' bodies influenced her decision to allow her sons to play football. Anna described football as "perfect" for teenage boys. She told me, "I think what's special about football...it's very aggressive, it's very ra ra ra, it's for the boys, for the men, it ain't a sport for the girls." She went on to explain that as they become teenagers, boys become aggressive due to testosterone levels "raging," and that their bodies are primed for the violence of football. She concluded by describing football as "special for boys" and that using their bodies in the sport was "healthy." Naturalizing boyhood justified Anna's decision to let her sons play. As she put it, "I think with the testosterone levels running, the teenage boys really need this (football), and more so than girls. You can see it in their faces, this kind of aggression...they need to put it somewhere."

Boys, bodies, and "nature" came up often in my interviews with parents, as they used this narrative to manage various worries that accompanied their experiences with football parenthood. During our conversation, Keith had been expressing some concern about the "extreme physicality" of football, but nimbly shifted his narrative as he began to explain, "But, I don't think it's natural, especially for boys, to sit and not move all day...and for most boys, yeah, that doesn't work out well. They need a physical outlet to get their yayas out." Lindsay told a similar story, describing her thoughts on boys' specific needs for an outlet for aggression. She told me about a conversation she had with her husband when they were debating whether or not



to let their son play football. She explained that while she initially resisted because she was worried about injuries, her husband eventually convinced her to let their son play because, "You know why there's all this stuff going on, all these school shootings? Because kids, boys, they aren't being allowed to get their aggression out, and then they build it up, and they don't know how to release it, and it's not being released." In this way, Lindsay positioned their choice as necessary. Without an outlet such as football, she proposed, boys' violence might erupt in socially unacceptable ways. Both Keith and Lindsay's comments illustrate how parents talked about boys' embodied needs and used that talk to frame themselves as good parents for recognizing these needs and providing a socially appropriate outlet for their sons.

Parents also used this strategy at games and in interactions with each other. On the sidelines, I often heard parents talk about boys' bodies as being capable of withstanding the violence of football due to their youthful, masculine bodies. Parents compared boys' bodies to "rubber-bands" and "Gumby," emphasizing their flexibility and their ability to "bounce" on the field and "bounce-back" from injury. As I heard one parent tell another after a boy sustained an injury during a game, "Don't worry! These boys, they just bounce at this age. It's incredible!" Parents often used this strategy to mitigate both emotional and interactional discomfort when boys got hurt during games. The narrative of youthful, masculine bodies that can and should withstand violence and aggression as a sign of masculinity was a standard fall back for West Peak parents.

*Becoming the "Right" Kind of Man: Masculinity, Affluence, and Individuality*

Parents explained that risk and resilience in boyhood were important and that avoiding physical injuries at all costs would counter their projects of engendering "tough" masculinity in their boys. These stories were also classed. Parents' highlighted football (and the risks

associated) as an important site for their boys to learn how to be particular kinds of men by emphasizing individuality and a sense of a valued, unique self. Affluent parenting styles emphasize the cultivation of individuality and “specialness” in children (Lareau 2003). The value of individuality is significant in American culture (Lesko 1996), and middle-class parenting entails identifying each child’s unique talents and customizing childhood (Lareau 2003). Mary demonstrates this as she explained:

I could have said no, but why? Why would I do that? It would have been me not letting him be himself and doing what he needed to do to be himself. Just because I see something some way doesn't mean that you know...he's an individual and he has to do what he needs to do for himself for whatever his reasons. He needs to do that. And I'm not going to step my foot in the way.

While in other parts of her interview she spoke of having reservations about her son playing (she even shed a few tears), Mary explained that she ultimately made the right decision by not prohibiting her son from taking risks. In her narrative, Mary deals with the worries of outside critiques and her fears about physical safety by reframing herself as a good parent who didn’t “step my foot in the way” of her son becoming “himself.”

Julie described similar feelings. For her, risk-aversion did not align with raising boys into good men, even though she had explained, in vivid detail, just how much she worried about her son getting hurt, and how difficult it was to be judged by her friends for letting him play. She told me, “How could I say no? It would be crushing his spirit, who he is as an individual. I could never do that to him. This isn’t about me; this is about him. I try, I very much try to remember that. This is about my son finding himself, who he is, what he loves. I try to focus on that.” Julie is direct about situating her desires (for avoiding physical risk) in opposition to what is best for her son: that he faces danger, develops as an individual, and “finds himself.”

Alan, a white, class-advantaged father, was emphatic about supporting his son's desires and not letting the fear of risk dominate his parenting decisions. He explained, "It's what he feels like doing, it's what he feels is right. And he puts the effort in, why not let him play? Because anything can happen in life. So, it doesn't necessarily have to be [football] to get injured. Does your kid believe in what he's doing? Then I think you need to support him." For Alan, good parents recognize that physical risk is a part of boyhood and good parenting means accepting and allowing boys to follow their passions to find their true selves. Angela echoed Alan's sentiments and quite succinctly demonstrated how the participants in my study framed how "good" parents should not stand in the ways of each child's individual talents. She explained, "It's not that bad moms let their kids play football. It's that bad moms don't let their kids go for what they're passionate about."

Contemporary class-advantaged cultural expectations of good parenting include prioritizing extracurricular activities for children (Lareau 2003). Accordingly, the parents in my study framed football as a positive, beneficial extracurricular activity for boyhood – not one that was excessively risky. Julie explained:

Yeah, in doing it [playing football], it's learning how to understand, to learn others. And then applying what you know about somebody to utilize his strengths to win. It's incredible. I mean, that's parenting, that's what you care about. I think [the benefits of football] ranges from the physical benefits to the emotional benefits, to the skills of leadership, to having empathy and mentorship, and enabling others to do their best.

Julie's description of the positive benefits of football highlights particular skills that she imagined would assist in her son's imagined middle-class future, where he will become a leader and a mentor to others. Lindsay thought football was a "really, super important" part of her son learning about failure as he got closer to graduating from high school. And for Robin, football was incredibly beneficial in teaching boys "to stand on their own two feet." She went on to

explain, “You’re teaching them not to look at you to come solve all their problems for them. You’re teaching them to self-advocate.” In their narratives, West Peak parents reconceptualized football in youth not as excessively risky, but as positively benefiting boys by bolstering desirable traits of masculinity and American middle-class ideals of rugged individualism<sup>18</sup> and personal initiative (Kimmel 2017). Mary had similar feelings and was direct about connecting her son's masculine identity with him becoming an "individual" as an adult. She explained:

It’s about a building of character, and there’s not that many traditions that do that anymore. Football’s one of the few. In football, it's a part of immaturity that gets let go of because they really have to step up, let's just say they have to step up to the plate and really be on a team, hold their own. It's a rite of passage, from a boy to a man.

Mary suggests that football is suitable for boys in youth, as it helps them to mature, to learn to work with others and to become men.

Parents highlighted the negative consequences of prohibiting boys from encountering risk and becoming resilient in boyhood. Their narratives demonstrate that by permitting some risk, they are allowing their boys to become independent, to develop their passions, and become their “true” selves. Parents redefined risk as a necessary part of boys learning how to make choices and develop into strong, autonomous men, helping them to manage worries about physical injuries by highlighting the importance of engendering an “appropriate,” individual-centered and resilient masculinity. When discussing her concerns about her son getting hurt while playing football, Lindsay explained, “Well, but then I don’t want to keep him in a bubble now, you know? Because then when he goes out in the world, all of a sudden he has to do everything and he won’t know how to make a choice.”

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<sup>18</sup>. This stands in stark contrast to the constructions of masculinity in my second field site, East Summit, where "good" men are not focused on the individual self, but demonstrate manhood by caring for others. I detail this contrast in Chapter 5.

Anna expressed a similar sentiment. She told me, “Yes, I worry! But I let him make his own decisions. He needs to learn this. What is he going to do, when he’s a man, and there’s a job thing? What, he’s going to call his mommy and ask if he should take the promotion? He needs to figure that out. He needs to learn to make those hard decisions, to do it on his own.” Anna suggests that by overprotecting her son as a teenager, she would be stunting his growth into an independent man. To make her point even clearer, Anna casts herself as her imagined adult son’s “mommy” in this scenario, a rhetorical move that works to infantilize (and perhaps feminize) this dependent version of her son – a version she wants to avoid at all costs. Anna’s comments are gendered and classed, as she draws on the ascendant middle-class masculine ideals of achieving career success and exhibiting self-direction and self-advocacy in manhood (Pyke 1996). Both Lindsay and Anna address the worries they have about their son’s bodies getting hurt, but explain that they decided to allow them to play by considering what’s best for their boys’ futures as they become men.

Parents’ strategies helped them address the worries they articulated about being football parents. They worried about their boys getting hurt, they worried about others judging their choice to allow them to play, and they worried about raising boys into “strong” men in the privileged space of West Peak. The narratives I have outlined in these findings show how parents address those worries, thus defending their choice to allow their boys to play and reclaiming moral parental identities in the process. First, their stories incorporate both worries about injuries *and* worries about making good men. Ultimately, the stories work to justify why concerns about making good men outweigh concerns about injuries. Parents show that “of course!” they worry about injuries<sup>19</sup>, but that they understand the job of making good men as incredibly important.

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<sup>19</sup>. See Chapter 6 for a more detailed discussion of emotions and emotion work among parents.

They also work to create a particularly classed version of masculinity and of "good men," and recreate ideas about boyhood. Finally, parents draw on discourses about young masculine bodies to reframe boys' bodies as capable, and possibly in need, of absorbing controlled violence. By doing this, they are able to explain *why* they let their boys play football, despite worries about physical injuries, and that by doing so they are helping them to become good, middle-class men.

## CONCLUSION

Football parenthood posed multiple dilemmas for West Peak parents. For these privileged parents, football was a dangerous choice, but one they explained was necessary. They had serious concerns about the physical risks of the game and worried about how others would judge them for allowing their boys to play. They also had concerns about their boys coming of age in a context of privilege, suggesting that their abundant resources and their affluent community setting might disallow them from becoming strong, resilient men. West peak parents resolved these worries by emphasizing the importance of the final and most crucial concern: making good men. Their strategies resuscitated masculinity to justify their choice to allow their boys to play football, drawing on cultural beliefs about the need for risk and resilience in boyhood and the physical and biological "nature" and needs of teenage boys. In the process, West Peak parents also constructed their sense of idealized masculinity within their local context, where real men are individualistic, self-reliant, and resilient, ready for a world that necessitates a neo-liberal, "every person (and family) for themselves" mentality.

In all, West Peak parents were able to use these strategies to solve their dilemmas and to reconcile privilege and masculinity. These privileged parents represent those that were the best poised to opt out of football, as they did not need the game for college scholarships and were well positioned to advocate for what they thought was best for their boys. They could have said

no, but they didn't. Their narratives demonstrate how they made this choice, and the conditions under which they came to their decision. They illustrate something else, as well. West Peak parents' stories reflect the strength of the constraining power of masculinity, even among high status, well-resourced individuals. These parents worried about their boys getting hurt but ultimately explained that their futures as particular kinds of men were the more critical projects to prioritize. As previously stated, I do not necessarily treat these narratives as complete "truths." Instead, these are the stories West Peak parents tell first to capture their parenting struggles and second to explain how they manage them. Masculinity permeates both, demonstrating its power to constrain and influence the choices parents make for their boys and the sense they are able to make of the experience.

This chapter reflects the voices and experiences of a specific group of parents, those living in a primarily white, class-privileged community. These are not parents living in communities that hold more traditionally positive views on football, nor are they parents who might consider football as a means for social mobility for their boys. West Peak parents shed light on the relationship between contemporary parenting, raising boys, and engendering masculinity within particular contexts. West Peak participants' experiences are influenced by broader expectations of intensive parenting and risk-culture and serve as an example of how advantaged parents traverse such rocky terrain. In the next chapter, I turn to the more class and race-diverse community of East Summit to explore how parents with less privilege navigate similar, yet distinct parenting experiences in youth football.

## CHAPTER 5

“IT TAKES A VILLAGE”:  
COMMUNITY, RESPECTABILITY, AND MORAL MASCULINITY IN EAST SUMMIT

In Chapter 4, I examined football parenthood in the affluent community of West Peak, where football was primarily defined as deviant and required parents of youth players to justify their choice to say yes to the game. In that community, the football parents I spoke with used cultural tropes of masculinity and privilege as part of their discursive strategies, highlighting the importance of boys learning resilience and independence, both values well regarded in their advantaged, individual-focused local community culture. In this chapter, I turn to the neighboring community of East Summit, the more race and class diverse community that sits flush against the northern edge of West Peak. In my analysis of East Summit, I discuss football's different definition in the local community culture, as a game linked to status, morality, and the importance of community bonds. In this chapter, I discuss the ways in which the challenges of football parenthood are markedly different in this space (compared to West Peak). I also show how these differently situated parents use what I call *the community narrative*, *care capital*, and *moral masculinity* concepts (all of which I define within the chapter) in their sense-making about football, community, and raising boys into men.

I arrived at my first youth football game in East Summit early, about twenty minutes before the game was set to begin. I had worried I would struggle to find the game site in this community I was unfamiliar navigating. Similar to my approach to West Peak, I had identified a boys' club-level youth football team to follow in an attempt to observe and understand the experiences of the parents of the boys who played in the area. I chose the Eagles, a community



sponsored team<sup>20</sup> of eighth grade boys in East Summit who were starting up a new season of tackle football. As I crossed the field to find a seat in the bleachers, I noted feeling nervous. I didn't know anyone, had no connection to the team, and felt a bit self-conscious in the space. As I climbed the bleachers during that first game, passing parents and siblings and other game-goers in the community, I was struck by my sense of awkwardness. There was a lot that was similar to West Peak, a group of excited boys scurrying around a field, surrounded by family and friends in the community. And yet, in those first minutes entering the site, I realized that there was so much that was different.

I found a seat in the back of the bleachers and fidgeted with my purse, trying (probably unsuccessfully) to appear as though I belonged. Looking around, I realized I had joined an area of the sideline occupied by parents and families who appeared race and class mixed. I was primarily surrounded by Latinx families, Black families, and a handful of white families. I looked down at myself. My khaki shorts and cable-knit sweater stood out among the rough jeans and worn hoodies. I gazed down the bleachers and across the patch of grass that was sandwiched between the rows of benches and the clumps of boys outfitted in helmets and pads that seemed to swallow up their small bodies. I noticed that the Eagles parents down-field along the sideline were different from the group I was sitting among. The other group appeared to include parents and families that were mostly white (with a few Latinx parents scattered in) and were dressed in the \$60-a-pop team sweatshirts and older, faded yet crisp, jeans and sneakers. Due to this variation, and apparent segregation, race and class appeared much more salient to me in my first game in East Summit compared to the overwhelming race and class homogeneity of West Peak.

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<sup>20</sup> This was also similar to my approach in my other field site, as the West Peak Talons was also a club-level, community-sponsored team of eighth grade boys in the first year I spent with them.

While attempting to make mental notes of what I was witnessing, I was startled when a smiling short-haired Latina woman sitting several rows in front of me turned around and started talking in my direction. “It’s going to be a great game, don’t you think? I really think they’re going to come back from last season’s crappy turn.” I took a deep breath and came up with something to say. I smiled back at her and chirped somewhat awkwardly, “Yeah, I sure hope so!” A man sitting in the row behind me chimed in, “Me, too. Last year was brutal.” The woman nodded at us and turned back around to begin dousing the small, wiggling child sitting next to her in sunscreen and bug spray. During that first site visit, several parents struck up conversations with me, asking my opinion on “calls” and “plays” of the game. A couple of parents even asked me to stay with and watch their younger children while they ran off to the restroom or the concession stand. I was surprised at how comfortable people were and willing to integrate me into the community space.

I learned something in my introduction to East Summit. This community was different from West Peak. In West Peak, parents took their time warming up to me. I learned that while that community was quite cohesive, West Peak families and community members were meant to be independent and self-directed. They did not describe “coming together” for the well-being of the group and were slower to integrate new members. This contrasted with East Summit, where people didn’t know me, I had no one to vouch for me, yet parents were quick to welcome me into the space. I noticed that despite what I understood as some class and race difference among the parents, people seemed friendly and comfortable moving across those boundaries, interacting with different parents, – yet they always retired to “their end” of the sideline, delineated by race and class. Through interactions at games, I learned that strong integration and connection made sense in East Summit – but within limits. Parents’ stories in interviews corroborated my

impressions. I learned that East Summit prides itself in being communal, bonded, and as Greg described, “really tight-knit,” and that in the presence of different degrees of limited resources parents felt that, as Rachel explained, “it takes a village” to get by and to raise kids. I also learned that this image of a welcoming, bonded community was somewhat idealized, as I watched race and class push parents apart interactionally at the games (such as segregating into groups at the sidelines). This also occurred discursively in narratives, and as I listened in interviews as parents used markers of difference to distinguish themselves, and their sons, from other more marginalized East Summit parents and boys.

Although adjacent to West Peak, the community of East Summit shares some similarities with its neighboring community, yet it has its own distinct culture.<sup>21</sup> Often considered in the broader area as a middle-class community, East Summit is by no means as affluent as West Peak and has more race, ethnic, and family structure diversity (such as single and divorced parents). During my two years with parents in West Peak, I had heard parents talk about East Summit. It was the “other side of town” and was often used as a comparison in West Peak parents’ conversations, particularly as an example of “blue-collar families” and of less privileged boys who were better at playing and better suited for football. In East Summit, parents periodically discussed their West Peak neighbors as well. In East Summit parents’ descriptions, West Peak was often described as a hyper-privileged community, rampant with “helicopter parenting” and entitled, out-of-touch children. What was similar across both communities, however, was the fact that the parents I observed and interviewed appeared to use youth football as a way to manage their identities in their respective communities, within their stories of raising their sons, and as a cultural tool in framing the parenting work required for turning boys into men.

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<sup>21</sup> Discussed in further detail in chapter two.

In this chapter, I focus on the parents of East Summit and primarily on their stories of good parenthood and raising boys in a mixed-class and -race community that they characterized as cooperative, bonded, and communal. I examine how youth football in this "tight-knit" community created the backdrop for how differently situated East Summit parents managed their parental identities via their status in the community and their structural realities. Community, identity, and the pursuit of status, all worked to shape participants' experiences and sense-making, both as community members and as parents raising boys into men.

## FINDINGS

Parents in East Summit found themselves following local cultural norms in allowing their boys to play football. In contrast to West Peak, football was not understood as a deviant choice among East Summit community members. Instead, parents emphasized their success in raising boys as football players. The game taught their boys important life lessons, and it helped strengthen already robust bonds among members of the community. East Summit parents spoke with great pride about their community as close and bonded in their conversations about how parents and community members regularly come together to support each other (and each other's children). According to my participants, East Summit is built on mutual support, sharing resources, and close ties. These bonds were emphasized in their stories about their boys becoming men through youth football.

For the East Summit football parents I spoke with, claiming moral parental identities was accomplished by making connections among football, community, and teamwork. Football turns boys into "good," moral men who are invested in and take care of their teammates, excellent practice for their future roles as respectable men who will be committed to and take care of their families and communities. The parents I spoke with exhibited varying degrees of ease and

difficulty with this narrative strategy, particularly along the lines of privilege and marginalization. In the following sections, I detail this strategy and parents' attempts to use it in their identity work and sense-making. I begin with an exploration of the shared definitions of football, boys, and community that parents construct in their narratives. Next, I detail how more privileged East Summit parents use the football and community story (and reshape it) in their attempts to construct comparatively advantaged identities for themselves and their sons. Finally, I examine the narratives of more race and class marginalized East Summit parents and how the community story fractures in their attempts to use it in their sense-making about community, identities, and the well-being of their boys.

#### TALKING FOOTBALL: CONSTRUCTING THE COMMUNITY NARRATIVE

East Summit parents' descriptions of their community reinforced what I witnessed at games. Across my sample of East Summit participants, parents used the term "community" broadly and demonstrated that they did not see hard lines between the larger East Summit community, the community of football parents, or even the community that their boys were forming with each other. In these stories, parents emphasized bonds, connections, trust, and mutual support, and took great pride in being a part of a group defined by cooperation and care. They also emphasized that this was particularly important in light of limited resources and potential hardships. Jeff, a disadvantaged and separated Latino father, captured the community sentiment when he told me, "Yeah, and we [East Summit] get it. Times, just life, can be tough sometimes, you know? So we rally around to right the ship because we're actually all in the damn thing together. When you do this, you really learn to trust people." Similarly, Pamela, a class disadvantaged, married Black mother, explained, "Community spirit is important and it develops over time. Even on the [football] team, it's like that. And it's really like that among

parents. You need to get to know each other and then you foster a close community. And we put in that work around here." Parents also used this opportunity to contrast East Summit to other "worse off" communities, like Greg, an advantaged, married white father, did when he told me, "It's all where you live. There's property taxes and resources, or there's not. Some communities really struggle with resources, like the rural areas around here, or the inner city districts. East Summit is really good because the wealth gets spread around more. We know how to get that done." For East Summit parents, the well-being of one person was embedded in the well-being of the community, and this was a characteristic they took great pride in.

In this bonded community, youth football was celebrated as an activity that contributed to the overall well-being of the boys who played and to East Summit, more broadly. Youth football games were sites where families and community members could come together to have fun, catch up, and build solidarity. Many parents described how the game, like Josh, a disadvantaged yet married Latino father, put it, "Just gives us [community members] a chance to slow down and come together." Eva, a less class advantaged married Latina mother explained, "Life is work work work. The games are a nice opportunity for us all to relax and enjoy and see each other." When discussing what she considered were the benefits of football, Sandra, an advantaged, married white mother, told me:

Football is just so great. For boys, and for us. You feel like you're a part of a family and you develop friendships with the other parents and the kids develop friendships with the other kids. And, it's a tight-knit group, and you have fun and you travel together. Blah, blah, blah. Lots of sports can do that. But, it's just more so in football.

I asked Sandra to tell me more about why she thought football was "more so," about what she thought was particularly special about the game and its ability to not only bring the boys together but to bring the community together, as well. She explained:

I'm not quite sure what it is other than if you ask my boys, 'What was the best locker room?' Out of a hockey locker room, wrestling, football, baseball; they will tell you it's the football locker room. That's where the biggest camaraderie was. Both of them, if you ask them, I think they will tell you that it was the football locker room that created the most memories, the most friendships, the most camaraderie, the most ... you know, there's just something about ... And like, we we're heavily involved, and other parents too... My husband and I and a couple other parents bought grills. So that we could, you know, do cookouts. You know, tailgating before the games. And, just ... I don't know. It just ... It brings a school and a community together. And, that was really evident in East Summit. 'Cause it's a tight community.

In her comment, Sandra nimbly weaves together football, boys, and the community in her explanation of what was good about the game. This emphasis on and use of the word “camaraderie” was common in my interviews with East Summit parents as they talked about the importance of friendship and relationship building for their boys. Like Sandra, other East Summit parents I talked to told stories about how important it was that their sons connected to other boys on the team and relished in their belief that the relationships their boys built in football were so strong, they would stay with them for the rest of their lives.

It was also common for parents to tell me that the game’s ability to nurture close relationships was equally important for themselves and for the community. As Scott, a less class advantaged married white father, similarly explained, “It brings boys and parents and schools together, you know, when the team’s doing well the whole community comes together to root for them. It’s like we’re all doing well with them.” Similar to other studies on youth football and community (Bissinger 1990; Hoffmann, Falk, & Manning 2005), the parents in East Summit described the significance the game held for the community at large. What was especially notable in Est Summit parents' narratives was how they highlighted football as demonstrative of the community's identity. Football became an extension of their attempts to explain how football worked as a tool to achieve an important goal: connection. As Scott explained above, when the group is doing well, everyone is doing well. There is strength in numbers.

Across these stories, it became evident to me that group connections were incredibly important to East Summit football parents. A bonded community is a good community, and good, moral community members are committed to and contribute to those bonds. Parents linked these understandings to the lessons they imagined their boys were learning through football. They felt the game would give them the opportunity to practice creating, supporting, and committing to a “tight-knit” community: their football team. Parents also emphasized their appreciation for the opportunities that football gave their boys to perform communal care-taking off the field. Greg, a class advantaged, married white father, told me, “It’s really great. Nobody questions the fact that we have a good [football] program. They do some nice community service. You know, becoming good Christian men.” Greg’s comments show how parents connected their boys’ engagement in football and work in the community with learning how to become not only good people but good *men*. Greg was somewhat unique among the parents in my sample in his use of religion to emphasize morality as a part of “good” masculinity. Yet, his emphasis on raising boys into moral men who care for the community well represents the parents across the East Summit parents I spoke with.

Respectable masculinity and community service work came up often in these conversations. Rachel, an advantaged married white mother, explained, “You know, this is about more than football, it’s about you being respectable young men and becoming that. So they do community service and a lot of extra things other than football.” And Linda, an advantaged married white mother, expressed a similar sentiment when she told me:

And something that football did that I appreciated is...they believe in doing this community service work. After the flood here, I don't know if you're aware, but there were floods here in 2013. The football players helped reconstruct yards of some elderly people that couldn't do that. I think that's very powerful. That's our son.



In our conversation, Linda expressed great pride in her son's involvement in contributing to the community and, particularly, that he was taking care of others who could not take care of themselves, by themselves. This wasn't just something he did. It was who he was: "That's our son." This comment also exemplifies how parents used these stories to reflect on their own moral parental identities, as Linda did (on her own and her husband's behalf) when she reminded me that this respectable man-in-the-making was "*our* son." Their narratives demonstrate that in East Summit, the definition of being a good person was tied to a commitment to the community, and through football, these parents show how they are accomplishing that for themselves and their boys. Football not only gave Linda's son the opportunity to practice performing such work. It also, and perhaps more importantly, taught him to want to give to the community and that in doing so, he was becoming a better person (and, perhaps, a better man).

As Linda and Greg well exemplified, the parents in East Summit described a kind of *moral masculinity* in their understandings about the kinds of men they hoped and helped their sons to become. In contrast to West Peak's emphasis on independence, individualism, and self-reliance, in East Summit the valued masculinity was based on the strength of dependence, where "good" men are moral men, whom others can and do depend on. Strength is defined in terms of a man's commitment to the group (such as the community or their family), leadership and dependability, and the willingness to care about others. The point of community service came up very often among my East Summit participants as they attempted to exemplify for me the ways in which their boys were learning to do and want to do good, moral masculinity. It was a point of great pride for parents. In contrast, among my sample of 25 parents in West Peak, not a single participant brought up community service (or similar activities or orientations). In West Peak, parents were concerned about demonstrating the ways in which they helped teach their boys to

be good men via their ability to stand on their own two feet, to withstand challenge, and to carry themselves (and only themselves) through life.

In East Summit, moral masculinity was connected to another concept I refer to as *care capital*. Among more privileged East Summit parents I spoke with, their own capacity to take care of other people and to be those that “others” depended on worked as a sort of status currency for them. The more a parent could position themselves as connected and committed to the community, and as those who were the providers, not the receivers, of the community’s shared resources, the better that parent could place themselves at the top of the local social hierarchy. I suggest that care works as capital because, for these parents, only those who have the combination of available resources and the desire to share those resources with “less fortunate” others are able to acquire and use this capital in their status based identity work. As I discuss in the following two sections, privilege mattered to the ability for one to access to this *care capital* and mattered to the success of football parents’ attempts to use the community narrative in their claims to good parenthood and raising good, moral men. Despite the ubiquity of the community narrative, there is boundary work around who is responsible for and gets to participate in the building of a strong community (as I detail below).

The East Summit parents I spoke with worked to create a shared narrative of a bonded, tight-knit community that was exemplified through youth football. The game illustrated several important points in the community narrative: The game itself teaches boys the importance of group commitment and solidarity and also generates occasions for the community to come together and keep their relationships strong (an important task in a community based on the willingness to care for one another). In the next section, I show how youth football also worked to create opportunities for more privileged parents to demonstrate their individual status or

position in the community via the “work” they performed through their role as football parents. This manifested in several ways and varied across parents with different race and class positionalities. Whether or not they were “providers” or “receivers” of shared community resources mattered for parent’s identity work and the work they were doing on their boys’ masculine identities. Whether or not they were actively contributing to the “tight-knit” community mattered for whether or not a parent was able to use football and the community narrative as a way to demonstrate that they were good people. Next, I examine privileged East Summit participants, parents who marked themselves as examples of good, altruistic football parents, whose stories about youth football not only upheld the community narrative but also worked to position them as comparatively better than other parents, and their boys as better than other players on the team.

#### MAKING DISTINCTIONS AND CREATING BOUNDARIES: IDENTITY WORK AMONG PRIVILEGED PARENTS

In my conversations with East Summit football parents, I came to realize that parents with comparatively more race and class privilege than “others” in the community (including advantaged parents and even some less class advantaged parents) exercised a different strategy in telling the community narrative. These parents worked to use the community narrative as a way in which to distinguish themselves from other parents, namely race and class marginalized parents, and their boys from other players on the team. They did so by emphasizing class and race differences that would mark them as good, moral, respectable middle-class people in comparison to others who were deficient in some way. These relatively more privileged parents in East Summit included those who had stable (yet limited) socio-economic resources, were usually white, and were usually married. The only exceptions were one class-advantaged, light

skinned, American born Latino fathers (Matthew) and one class-advantaged white mother (Heather) both of which were just very recently divorced at the time of our interview (suggesting that perhaps their long-standing identity in the community was as married, and this had not yet changed). These few exceptions point to the importance of the combination of advantaged factors that either allowed a parent to be integrated into the privileged East Summit group or not. Race and ethnicity mattered – but combined with class-advantage, male privilege, light skin, and an American-based identity, Matthew was able to earn a spot inside the privileged group despite not being white. Similarly, marriage mattered, but for some parents (such as these Matthew and Heather), they were able to side-step being pushed out of the group via their very recent divorces (which people in the community may not have heard about yet) and by bolstering their other privileged markers (such as class-advantage).

For these relatively more privileged parents, the absence of greatly abundant financial resources (such as those seen more often in West Peak) made this identity work complicated for those who used this strategy. Their stories were peppered with moments where their socioeconomic realities poked through their attempts at class distinction, such as when Sandra, an advantaged married white mother, told me about how she felt about her son playing football. In addition to telling me about how much she appreciated football teaching her son to give to other, less advantaged boys on the team (such as through helping to pay for equipment, as I show below), Sandra also explained:

I mean our philosophy was, you're only a kid once. You have the rest of your life to work. And, you are gonna work the rest of your life. You know, we don't ... there's no freebies. We don't have any big inheritance. You're going to have to support yourself and it's going to be hard. But, enjoy the experience of being a kid and being able to be involved in sports. 'Cause that isn't happening later.

Despite the numerous moments in her interview where she positioned herself and her son as

“better off” than others and as “providers” in their community, here Sandra reveals some economic constraints. By suggesting the importance of sport in childhood, she also suggests that she does not imagine her son will have the leisure time necessary for sport when he becomes an adult. Leisure time is a mark of class distinction (Bourdieu 1979, Clawson & Gerstel 2014), but it is one that Sandra is unable to actually achieve. Interesting, some of these parents, despite not always having the material resources to back up their claims to privilege, did point to leisure time as a distinctive marker between themselves and other parents, as I will discuss in greater detail below.

With this in mind, I do not necessarily define these parents as class-privileged. Instead, I intentionally refer to them as “more privileged” and as “more advantaged” as it is their comparison to other, less resourced parents in the community that helps them to make class distinctions and attempt to claim “good,” respectable, middle-class identities for themselves and their boys. Compared to the parents in West Peak, more privileged East Summit parents were not especially class privileged. In West Peak, parents typically held four-year degrees (or higher), and typical occupations included engineers, physicians, and CEOs. They described owning multiple homes and taking lavish international vacations with their children every year. In East Summit, more privileged parents held comparative privilege in contrast to the more marginalized parents in the community, including poor and low-income parents, parents of color, and single mothers. More privileged East Summit parents had varying degrees of education, with many reporting some college but not four-year degrees. Typical occupations included secretarial work, massage therapy, and medical assisting.

These parents described (mostly) stable financial positions and emphasized their ability to use their resources to help less fortunate boys on the football teams. Relative to marginalized

parents in East Summit, more privileged parents pushed closer to a privileged class status. These more privileged East Summit parents clearly connected social class to positive, moral, and high-status identities. Football dad and coach Greg, an advantaged married white father, exemplified this when he told me about how he saw the community and football parents changing over time:

Slowly but surely it's become a better community. The quality of parents, like those who would come to games drunk, they slowly dissipated in favor of a much more, higher socioeconomic, responsible, better-educated parent. So, higher quality parents, those who knew they had to make a commitment to the kids.

Greg minces no words. He clearly describes both whom parents should and should not be and connects "higher socio-economic" parents as "higher quality" parents. He tosses in other class markers, as well, such as the value of education and a child-centric parenting style. Additionally, while it was less explicitly discussed, race also mattered in these distinctions. The majority of these more privileged parents were white mothers and fathers. As I will discuss later in this chapter, these parents did, at times, "slip" and point to race as a distinctive marker of the "others" in their comparative stories.

The more privileged East Summit parents in my sample did use their comparatively more abundant financial resources in their boundary work, but they also pointed to other ways in which they more closely aligned with middle-class culture and values in their identity work than other parents (and boys). In the American cultural imagination, the middle class represents a kind of moral identity, as it sits between the failure of poverty and the greed of wealth, and represents long-established American values of hard work, success, and deservingness (Wuthnow 2017). Claiming a middle-class identity through markers of middle-class respectability allowed some of the parents in my study to transcend their limited monetary resources. Middle-class respectability can be described as a process through which individuals ascribe positive values such as hard work, education, responsibility, honesty, self-sufficiency, cultural refinement, and philanthropy

to the identity of the middle class (Wuthnow 2017).

In his 2017 work on this topic, Robert Wuthnow argues that this respectability is constructed by “othering” people who do not or cannot fit into this easily recognizable, socially approved category. This research echoes findings discussed in other research examining individuals who align themselves with middle-class respectability in an attempt to manage other, potentially discrediting aspect of their identities (Lacy 2007; Dalessandro 2018; Allen, Powell, Case, and Coward 2007). I argue that in their attempts to claim moral parental identities via making moral men, the more privileged East Summit football parents in my study looked to markers of middle-class respectability and class distinction in their self-comparisons to other parents and boys.

These parents worked to distinguish themselves and their boys by emphasizing their willingness and ability to *give* to “others” who were in need (which I illustrate later) and did not discuss any experiences they had when they, themselves, direct received resources from others (particularly with regard to time and money). While they followed the larger story of shared, bonded community, their stories framed them as the providers of resources, not the receivers. This was an important distinction, as it allowed more privileged East Summit parents to draw symbolic boundaries between themselves and the parents and boys who not only were unable to provide to others but who also were willing to take or receive the shared resources from others.

More privileged East Summit parents’ stories included, with great pride, numerous examples of ways in which their sons helped “lift up” other, less capable boys on the team. Sandra, an especially outspoken mother, exemplifies this well. When I asked her about what, if anything, was difficult or challenging about football, she told me about the “hard work” her son put into helping other boys on the team. In one example, she explained:

So there was a boy that was always on his [her son's] left, and he always got confused about the plays. And, so Ryan would always have to tell him, you know. They'd get ready to go down and he's like, "Okay, do you know which way you're blocking? Right? Left?" You know. "Do you know the play?" So it taught them to help the weaker and I don't know if they could have learned that in a classroom in geography or history, or math. You know what I mean?

Sandra's comments clearly position her son as strong and as more prepared, responsible, and prepared for life than this other boy on his team. By ending her point on this important lesson ("helping the weaker"), she suggests that football, in contrast to academics, is what facilitated her son learning this lesson. She believes that was beneficial for her son to learn, to think of himself as the kind of person capable of lifting up others in the group who were in need. But in her example, this was not an elderly person who needed help with their yard. This was another boy, a masculine peer, and her son demonstrated his superiority relative to this boy. Also, and just as importantly, he demonstrated his ability to recognize his superiority and *use it* to assist this other boy. Sandra went on to tell me:

And that, that's the whole "take a village" thing. Because, I can remember we would know which kid struggled and as parents and peers, even the boys ... You would help a struggling student, you know. Like, "Dude, we need you for the game." So, we need you to keep your grades up. We need you to, you know ... Don't skip class. Don't go smoke pot. That is, you know ... We need you to be a part of the team. And, that goes again to the helping the weak, which it may just be a character flaw. Or, it could mean that they needed tutoring. They needed some additional academic help. And, you'd either figure out a way to have a parent help 'em, a teacher. You know, a peer. You know, we'll sit together after football practice and I'll help you with your math. You know, that kinda stuff.

Here, Sandra begins to weave herself into "helping the struggling," as she explained how she and her son knew to step in and help "the weak." As this other boy failed academically, her son did not, showing his valuation of education. This other boy's drug use suggested he had a "character flaw" that her, respectable son did not have. She quick shifts to telling me about how her son understood that he should use his academic and "character" superiority to intervene on behalf of



this weaker boy, thus demonstrating not only his superiority but also his respectability.

Other more privileged parents told me similar stories about their boys helping other, weaker, less disciplined, less capable boys on the team. Melissa, an advantaged married white mother, also talked to me about other boys on the team and their academic deficiencies and, most importantly, how they created an important character building opportunity for her son. She explained:

The hard stuff was the disappointments and teaching them how to handle that, you know. And more so, like, losing a state football game was a way easier disappointment than a friend who struggled and couldn't make grades and who couldn't be a part of the team anymore. Because they wanted them to be a part of the team. And, they knew could only do so much.

Melissa went on to tell me how proud she was of her son that he learned to care less about winning games and care more about his “friend who struggled.” With this, Melissa demonstrates that she values, and she’s teaching her son to value, caring for others and for the group. In telling me that “they knew they could only do so much,” Melissa also claims that her son cared to intervene on behalf of his failing friend, but also had to learn when to step back and let the consequences unfold.

In these stories, parents also pointed to examples of how members of the community (especially coaches) also recognized these traits in their sons. In one example, Heather, an advantaged married white mother, told me:

Because every coach and teacher would always did tell me that both boys (sons) were leaders. And, I don't think you can teach that. I mean, I'm sure my husband and I may have some sort of influence over that. But, I think it was just the boys being a part of team sports and football and recognizing, someone does have to be the stronger leader and step up. And, they just did so.

Heather’s comments are interesting in that she dances between her sons’ leadership qualities as being, perhaps, innate (“I don’t think you can teach that”) and ‘humbly’ suggesting that it might

have been the result of her and her husband's good parenting. She shifts it quickly back to football and explains the necessity for leadership. The team, the game, demands it. And her sons can be the leaders among boys (and, later, leaders among men).

In another example, Matthew, an advantaged (yet recently divorced) Latino father was beaming when he told me about a conversation he had with his son's coach:

He [coach] said, "It never ceases to amaze me. Your boys always picked the weaker, non-player first. They never wanted that kid to be picked last and to have that feeling." And, like, I saw it where ... cause he [son] was a pretty good player. So, if a kid never scored a before, that was their score for the season. They would say, "Dad, I'm gonna feed him a pass to where he gets to score." You know, because ... And, so it's like, you got it! You know, this isn't football. This is life. Helping the other person. And, oh my goodness, I could go on for a million examples like that. Like helping the ... I don't know how else to say it, but the weaker ones.

This language of "helping the weaker" boys came up regularly among these parents. It was important for them to show their boys as stronger, in comparison, but also that they would use that strength to benefit the weak and to benefit the entire team. East Summit boys were constructed as boys becoming strong, yet altruistic young men. Good, moral, and "better" men for their communities. As Matthew explained, this isn't just a game, "this is life." And it matters. In their narratives, more privileged parents took opportunities to bring the work of making good, moral, strong men *back* to themselves and the work they did to make those men, as Linda, an advantaged married white mother, did when she told me about her now 18-year-old son:

Even his work stories, you know, when you hear him give me different examples it's like, "Oh my goodness. You really did learn the lesson back in ninth grade or eighth grade and you've carried it through to your adult life." You know, it's like amazing to watch and think, "Wow. I think maybe I did something right!" But, like I said, it's certainly not all me. It takes a village.

Linda nimbly jumped from taking the credit for her good son, a good man, back to the community narrative, "it takes a village." In their attempts to weave distinction into the community story, parents used this "humble-brag" strategy, a way to demonstrate their

superiority while appearing modest, in discussing their sons' accomplishments. In this way, parents were able to present themselves (and their boys) as "better than," while working to maintain their "good," caring, and moral identities.

Linda was incredibly proud of her son; I do not doubt. At the time of our interview, her now "adult" son was 18 and working construction in Wyoming, trying to save up for junior college. She was incredibly proud when she told me that, too. Linda reminded me that the structural realities for these parents did *not* mirror the material privilege of the boys and parents in West Peak. Instead, they appeared closer to a potentially discreditable, solidly middle-class status. Other research has shown that residents of lower-income neighborhoods do use defensive othering and distancing boundaries against lower class neighbors as a strategy to manage their discreditable class-based identities (as they felt somewhat embarrassed by the neighborhood they lived in) (Allen, Powell, Case, and Coward 2007). The more privileged East Summit parents in my sample seemed to be doing something similar, but slightly different. I argue that instead of fully distancing themselves from the other parents and boys, they worked to stabilize their class-based identities by creating distinction through connections to those whom they marginalized, framing themselves as deeply linked through their relationship based on the roles of providers and receivers. Parenthood and football gave more privileged East Summit parents a stage to play the part of providers, and the "other," less fortunate East Summit receivers (played by both parents and boys) gave them the tools they needed to play it convincingly.

Comparative talk about "others" did not stop at the boys. More privileged parents regularly discussed the other football parents that they saw as deficient, as failing, and as setting poor examples for their boys becoming men. One very commonly used trope was that of the single mother. Single mothers were used as examples of families where boys wouldn't get the

masculine socialization or that would deprive children of their needs, such as when Robert, a less class advantaged white father, told me, “You know those families, where there's no male influence. It's sad and just typical. You see it around here. You know, single mom family where kids don't get the attention they need. Certainly not enough money for sports.” Dawn, an advantaged married white mother, shared a similar sentiment when she told me:

The single parents, single mothers. They're not providing the structure, the nutrition, and the rest, and all the other things that boys need to be a healthy athlete. And, no multiple sports. Those families can't afford it. You talk to any coach, they will tell you they would prefer to have a multiple sport athlete than a single sport athlete. That part it is financial, somewhat. You gotta, you know ... They tell a kid, "We can't afford four sports. You need to pick your favorite." And, you can play that one. But, that's all you get. So, part of that's financial but part of that is also time. They're working parents. You know, they're not there to get them to practices and pick them up and do all the parts parent's need to do to help out, too. So we have, you know, the carpool moms like me and some of the others that make sure they all get there and get home. And, there isn't a warm plate of dinner waiting for them at home because again, working parents or single parents. So, I think it's all ... It's the whole circle.

Dawn's comments are multi-faceted. She uses the trope of the single mother and the trope of the poor and “working” parents, all of which are lacking privilege-based markers that she in comparison embodies, such as the “right” parenting skills, education about health (nutrition and rest), money, and leisure time so that they are available to carpool and bring boys to practices and games. She also frames herself as the “savior” to those deficient others in this comment, as she contrasts herself as one of the “carpool moms like me.”

These “sad” families gave more privileged parents the discursive power to both point to deviant “others” and position themselves as the solution to those bad parents (just as they had done with their boys, above). Stella, an advantaged married white mother, exemplified this when she told me:

And, some of the sad stories we would see, you know. Like, a parent or a grandparent never coming to a game. You look on the sidelines and you see the same parents always come and that one kiddo who has no support whatsoever. No mom or dad. I can remember

buying team pictures for those kids. You know, they loved football. They wanted to have the memory. They wanted to have their single shot and their team photo because those were their buddies that they enjoyed working out with every single day and playing football. They had no money to buy the team photos. And, you know, all the things that I've seen and observed and been a part of over the years.

Stella points to absent parents, poor parents, and the pain that those parents cause their boys. She goes on to explain how she not only notices these deficiencies and problems but intervenes on behalf of the boys, stepping in and supplementing where their own parents cannot. These stories in many ways mirror the stories parents also told about the lessons their boys were learning in football, about how to recognize their own superiority and use it to help others. Their layered narratives, defensive othering, boundary building all work to illustrate the following equation: moral, respectable parents raise moral, respectable men, a construction which requires a less moral, helpless other. If you accomplished this, you got to be a "good" member of the "tight-knit" community of East Summit, as Greg, an advantaged white married father, demonstrated when he said:

We're all tight around here. But, you can tell the parents who have a little bit more money, there's like a bit more stability. I think those parents do more to form the community. They're the ones who get the team sweatshirts made and buy them for the kids who can't. And they help them do fun things. But I get it. When you're lower socioeconomic, people are, it's more stressful. It's like with those parents, I don't even know where those parents are, let alone them being a part of fostering a community.

These stories pointed to other less financially resourced parents who could not afford things like uniforms, equipment, travel costs, nutritious food, and who did not have the leisure time to attend games regularly. More privileged parents also used these other parents and their deficiencies as an explanation for the physical injuries that football poses to the boys who play. Compared to West Peak, most East Summit parents did not talk about injuries with great concern (particularly in regards to the "problem" of injuries and football), but the parents who did were typically more privileged parents who used injuries to distance themselves from other parents

who were unwilling or unable to keep their boys “safe,” as Sandra, a white advantaged married mother, did when she told me:

Like, anytime a kid broke a bone, my oldest son would say. ‘Oh, he didn't drink enough milk. It is so much about ‘it takes a village’. If the parents aren't giving them proper nutrition, proper rest ... I mean my boys were on a schedule like you can't believe. You know, they came home from a sport they did homework, they ate dinner, they did more homework, and they went to bed. And they got up, and they did it all over again. And they had three squares a day. They had the right kind of breakfast to give them fuel and nutrition to get 'em through lunch. They had a good lunch. They had a good dinner. They didn't eat junk food, lot's of pop you know. They drank milk all the way up through high school dinners. And, nutrition and rest and all the other pieces and parts are so important.

Sandra’s comments illustrate that not only does she understand this, but that her son has internalized it and knows how to tell the story, as well. Here, she sets other parents up as having less knowledge and ability to keep boys safe and demonstrates how she *does* do those important parenting tasks to protect her son’s health. Chris, an advantaged white married father, expressed something similar when he said, “Of course, there are some parents, it’s just different. I have a different perspective. I made sure my son got the specialty helmet ‘cause it’s better, safer. It was expensive. And I have more understanding of, like I make sure I’m an educated person. It matters.” Chris points to both money and education, both markers of class, to distinguish why he was able to better protect his son from injuries.

In these ways, the more privileged parents I spoke with in East Summit used youth football, the work of raising boys into men, and the community narrative of shared bonds to craft a kind of middle-class respectability. This identity work served to help them to build comparative class-based identities, contrasted off of the other boys and parents on the team. In some ways, they looked to their ability to afford (for their boys and other boys) to purchase the necessary football paraphernalia to mark their class difference. But as Sandra demonstrated in the previous section in her comment about a lack of “family inheritance” for her son, money was

not unlimited. In the absence of an abundance of financial resources, these parents used other markers of middle-class respectability, including altruism, philanthropy, respectability, leisure, education, and health to comparatively claim an advantaged class-based identity for themselves and their boys. The key here is that while the community narrative emphasizes sharing, caring, and bonds, it matters what a parents' position is in the community equation. For these relatively more privileged parents, positioning themselves and their boys as providers and as respectable set them up to claim a higher status in the community (in comparison to "others").

This was also important to their stories about turning their boys into men. Similar to parents in West Peak, East Summit privileged parents imagined that part of their job was to help their boys become the best men they could be. What that meant, though, was quite different. East Summit parents did not imagine setting their boys up to become future CEOs and surgeons, men who would rise to the top of their work worlds and who would and could compete with other men for top financial/political positions, men who could do so because they were pushed to be strong, independent, and individually focused. Instead, East Summit parents emphasized the importance of teaching their boys the importance of the local, and the importance of achieving high status in the local context. Parents did not expect their boys to become world leaders – but they did want them to become community leaders: men whom other men looked up to, men who could and would "take care" of other, weaker people (including women and children).

Also in contrast to West Peak, East Summit parents were not concerned with "toughening up" their boys. The real challenges of life would do that for them (as I discuss in more detail in Chapter 5). Instead, they were focused on the opposite: making sure their boys would achieve good masculine identities via a commitment to the group, being a person others could and would depend on. They also did work on their own identities in the process, as they demonstrated how

they were similarly situated as high status in the community via their class-difference and their role as care providers, not care receivers. Interestingly, this occurred for both men and women in my sample, suggesting that while much of their story was framed as “turning boys into men,” the strategy was, perhaps, shaped around gender identity, but I suggest may actually be more about distinctions in classed identities.

#### FRACTURES IN THE BONDS: MARGINALIZATION AMONG LESS-PRIVILEGED PARENTS

The more privileged parents in East Summit were able to use *the community narrative* in their efforts to construct good, moral identities for themselves and their boys. This strategy, however, was not available to all of the parents I spoke with. The less privileged East Summit parents in my sample told very different stories and appeared to have a very different relationship with the community narrative of bonds, sharing, and care. These parents were marginalized based on either their lower-class status, their race, and being a single parent. In this section, I turn to the stories of two, differently situated marginalized East Summit parents and their attempts to use the community narrative in their sense-making. What unites these two stories are their descriptions of the fractures in the community bonds for marginalized parents. What sets them apart is how they attempted to navigate those fractures in either pushing hard to embrace the narrative anyway or completely divorcing themselves from it.

I start with Sharon, a white disadvantaged single mother and low-income nail technician in East Summit. Like other marginalized parents, Sharon attempted to tell the community narrative of bonds and care, as when she told me, “Of course, I love living here! Everyone helps everyone out. People are actual friends. It’s a great community of people. And he’s on a great time. It’s an excellent program.” Sharon chatted like this for a little while, telling me about how



she enjoyed the friends she had made at football games and that she was really proud of the man her son was becoming via his involvement in football. She admitted that “at times” she felt a bit like other parents “judged” her for being a single mother, but she laughed it off, “But it’s fine, they just have more traditional lives. We’re just a little different.” About twenty minutes into our conversation, Sharon’s interview turned complicated and proved to be difficult for her to get through. At three points in our “chat over coffee,” she asked for breaks to take time to “compose herself,” as she told me. This occurred when she began to tell me about her son’s football injuries and the story of how he almost lost his life.

Sharon’s son Austin had been playing football since the fourth grade and was a popular, successful player on his high school football team. During one, seemingly mundane “away” game, he took a nasty hit during a play. She was worried, but “Coach and, they have this trainer, too, they both checked him out and said he seemed ok. I trusted them.” The game went on and eventually ended, with Austin still in play. “He told me he wanted to take the bus back with the rest of the team and then go out for pizza with them. I told him if it was ok with Coach, it was ok with me.” Later that night after Austin arrived home, he started complaining of pains in his abdomen. Then he started urinating blood. Hours went by. It got worse. “His urine looked like coffee. I called Coach, like a million times, but he never answered.” Sharon didn’t have health insurance and as a single mother, didn’t have another parent to look to for help with navigating the situation. Eventually, she made the decision to take Austin to the emergency room. There, doctor's examined Austin and informed her that, as she told me, "He had lacerated his kidney almost completely in half. They told me they didn't even understand how he had gotten to the hospital. They told me he should've died on the field." Thankfully, Austin made a full recovery and was even able to keep his kidney. But Sharon's experience did not end there. She described

how she and her other son, Kerin, would have to take turns going to the hospital to see Austin while he was recovering from surgery, "he was so scared." She told me:

And it was weird, because like no one from the team came. I mean, Coach came like once, but other than that. I was wondering where everyone was. It was like everybody disappeared. I felt like no one wanted to talk to me, to us. And how we're going to afford this? And even if just someone could have called. I had made a few comments to some people that I had some concerns that Coach hadn't responded to me that night, and that he let Austin play hurt. And it was like, they didn't like that. They were really defensive of Coach.

Sharon did not feel supported by the community when she and her son needed it the most. No one came forward with emotional support or financial help. When I asked her what she thought of that, she told me, "I guess I was just confused about why. I still don't understand entirely." I nodded in response but stayed silent as she stared out the coffee shop window. A moment later she physically perked up and looked back at me:

But I will tell you after everything calmed down I put together a support group and like a communication train so that if anything ever happened to one of the boys again, we'd all be able to get in touch with each other. And really, everyone has just been fantastic about that. Everyone's participating. Really coming together. So, yeah. Everyone around here is really great about that kind of thing.

We talked for a while longer as Sharon tried to move back into the bonded community narrative. She told me about how excited everyone was when Austin returned to school and then eventually, to the team. I asked her if she worried about him continuing to play. She told me, "Sure, because you never know. But life is, you never know, right? You can't hide from the hard stuff. And he just would be devastated if he couldn't be a part of the team anymore. His place with those boys, it's just who he is. He even asked me, mom, without football, who would I be?" Yes, who would he be? As Sharon described it, Austin's entire identity rested in that community of boys and he wouldn't give that up, even after a brush with death. Sharon, as well, described how she would even miss being a part of the team and other football parents. Sharon and her son

had strong bonds to their groups, to the team, and the community. But despite this, her story fractures when she truly needed the community. Sharon's narrative reveals that the community support is conditional, and can be withheld if one isn't the "right" kind of community member<sup>22</sup>. Her story also circles back to those of the more advantaged parents I discussed earlier in this chapter, such as Linda, Dawn, and Greg, suggesting that their stories of being the reliable, caretaking parents for marginalized boys are just that, stories.

Despite this, Sharon did not let go. She kept trying to emphasize her connection and the community's strength. I pondered this for a while after her interview, eventually coming to the realization that she did not have much of a choice. She needed her community and her son needed the team. Their identities, and security, were embedded within them. I suggest that due to Sharon's (and her son's) marginalized, precarious, and disadvantaged position, they found themselves more vulnerable, and thus more apt to ascribe to the community narrative of sharing, mutual care, and a "safety in numbers" approach.

I end this section with Doug and Pamela's story that started with hope but ended in betrayal. As a self-identified African American married couple, Doug and Pamela were class disadvantaged but had high hopes for the community of East Summit. The two had met and began raising their two boys in a poor area of Arkansas, but had saved enough money for Pamela to get a degree and to move to a new place: East Summit. I interviewed Doug and Pamela after they had been living in East Summit for about 12 years. I spoke with them separately and found that they both told similar stories about their experiences in the community. Doug's story was

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<sup>22</sup> Sharon's story also calls attention to the emotion work she needed to perform on herself in disciplining her emotions surrounding her son's near-death experience, the failure of the community to support her, and the worries she had with her son continuing to play. Sharon's story points to the work of emotions inherent in football parenthood, a process I examine in detail in Chapter 6.

especially pained and informed by what he described as his “broken heart.” Doug and Pamela had chosen East Summit many years before because, as Pamela explained, “We had dealt with a lot back in Arkansas. Being Black people there was hard. And we had looked around and some friends told us about this community and how great it is and everything.”

Doug’s recollection was very similar, and he went on to tell me about how much hope he had for East Summit when they moved in. Doug and Pamela had hoped that in this new, supportive community, they would be able to raise their boys so that they, as Doug put it, “could have a chance.” Their two sons had always excelled at sports, and especially in football. Doug and Pamela had imagined football as a way for their boys to go to college. It would be the only way, and they desperately wanted that for them. “I believed in this place,” Doug told me, “I believed that everyone takes care of each other here. I was wrong.” Doug told me the story of how his boys, in his words, were “used” by the community, the school, and the coaches to help the local team excel. His boys would be played every game, often with injuries, “But it was worth it, because of where it was going to take them,” Pamela explained. Doug told me about how he had always been bothered by the fact that, as he explained:

Coach, he gave the other kids medals and honors and stuff and...except my kid wasn't good enough? But you play him every game and you tell me you need him when he's hurting and stuff so you play him anyway? He was on that field doing all the work and stuff. And he got nothing. You call those other white kids up and give them honors and say they did all this stuff. No, they just play the game on our backs and they get ahead.

Doug told me it took years for him to finally admit to himself that despite their hopes for a tight community, racism was rampant and that he and his boys were regularly “Used and abused by those damn people.” This was difficult for Doug to talk about, as he told me, “I don’t want to sound like a racist or none of this stuff, it's just that, these people. And the white kids. They get everything. We get nothing.” Football was expensive, demanded incredible time commitments,

and often required his sons to push their bodies to their physical limits. But they played because it was their chance for college, for the chance at upward mobility, not, as Doug put it, "To just be used to get into the playoffs and have the big college scouts come out and look at the team and stuff. And then when the scouts are there, my boys get benched. You know what happened? They played all the white boys that day. Now my boys, well that chance is gone." Pamela similarly told me in our conversation, "These boys gave so much to them, we gave so much to them. I, I don't understand. Why? How could they do us like that?"

Neither Doug or Pamela attempted to resurrect the community narrative in their interviews. They were heartbroken by the community<sup>23</sup>. They were betrayed. They once had believed the community narrative of shared bonds, but those bonds had fractured. The community was not there for them or their boys. Instead, the community took from them, used them. Doug was the only father to shed a tear across my entire sample of both East Summit and West peak communities. And when he did, he told me:

But you know what? It ok. We always tell my kids, always say, life and stuff, always do stuff, you always going to have problems in life. Don't take the bad things, take the good things and use it. Make sure you putting the right way, using the right way. You take these things in life and you carry your stuff with you the rest of your life. It'll make you a better man than anybody else. You don't depend on no one. You take care of yourself, your business. My boys know that. They learned that lesson. They going to be just fine.

Doug imagined his boys would be ok not because of the community, but instead despite the community. His sons did learn lessons, but not the same ones that the more privileged East Summit parents described their sons learning. Doug imagined his boys learned about hope, lies, and betrayal and that this would equip them to "be just fine" in life because they now know that "you always going to have problems in life" and that "you don't depend on no one." In East

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<sup>23</sup> I return to the emotions and emotion work necessary for differently situated football parents in Chapter 6.

Summit, the shared narrative was of bonds, care, and community. Everyone knew the *story*, but not everyone was able to benefit from it. Sharon, Doug, and Pamela represent more marginalized parents in East Summit and how those parents reveal fractures in the celebrated “community bonds.” While Sharon, a single mother, and Doug and Pamela, two married parents of color, had different levels of commitment to telling the community narrative, there are connections across their stories. All three parents' narratives reveal hopes and expectations that the “close-knit” community would support them, as promised, and a reality that the community narrative of ‘moral providers’ to ‘less fortunate, less moral receivers’ may merely be that, a narrative.

#### COMPARING COMMUNITIES: MAKING MEN IN WEST PEAK AND EAST SUMMIT

In this section, I consider my two community field sites, West Peak and East Summit, and the parents raising boys in those spaces. In this discussion, I bring the two communities and groups of parents into conversation with one another and consider their unique social locations, as well as how they create similarities and differences across experiences and sense-making.

In both West Peak and East Summit, parents carved out their moral identities by using football to show how they were raising “good” men according to their local community cultures. In West Peak, parents who said “yes” to football violated local cultural norms of parenting, as the game was locally defined as excessively risky for children. Football was also marked as a poor fit for boys in West Peak, as many parents pointed to “other boys” in “other,” lower socio-economic communities in the area who, they explained, were better suited and more successful at the game (particularly, boys from more urban, working class, and communities of color – such as East Summit). Therefore, football represented a deviant choice for affluent West Peak parents and was a problem to be solved.

In contrast, East Summit parents understood football, and their choice to allow their boys to play the game, as normative, even celebrated, in their community. These parents were following the rules for raising boys. In their sense-making, East Summit parents did not describe football as a problem to solve. In fact, for many parents, football was a precious gift they could give their boys, as they did not have the means to give them other resources or opportunities. In contrast to West Peak parents who were required to deflect the threats that football created for them, East Summit parents emphasized their success as parents who were looking to football as a way to support their boys' burgeoning masculine identities.

In East Summit, parents focused on collectivity, cooperation, and respectability in framing their boys and themselves. Being a good person, and becoming a good man, means that you value and contribute to your community. As a number of East Summit parents told me, "it takes a village" to raise children and get through life – especially as folks with limited resources. One way in which this manifested was through East Summit parents' talk about their boys performing community service as part of their work on the football team. Volunteerism and service was a source of great pride for these parents, as it represented the practice their boys were getting, learning to be the kinds of men their community could depend on. In my conversations with West Peak parents, not one parent brought up community service or volunteering. Boys' connection to their community was absolutely not a part of their sense-making about what was important in raising their boys and preparing them for manhood. Instead, West Peak parents talked about and were concerned about whether or not their boys would be able to take care of themselves. These conversations reveal that in West Peak, becoming a good man mean that you were resilient, independent, and focused on individual attainment, which was quite different from the moral masculinity via community bonds in East Summit.

Parents in both communities bumped into challenges in raising boys into men, albeit different challenges that made sense in their local community cultural contexts. West Peak parents' moral identities were called into question for allowing their boys to play football, and their neutralization strategies included pointing to a different, and perhaps more important (to them), problem: how to raise privileged boys into strong men. By introducing this second dilemma, West Peak parents redefined football as the solution to reconciling masculinity and privilege for their boys. In their stories, football was recast as a solution, not the problem. In this way, parents were able to reclaim their moral parental identities, suggesting that they made the difficult, but important, choice to allowing their boys to play football. Football would expose boys to danger that parents could control, thus allowing them to develop toughness and resilience in a monitored, protected space.

In this strategy, West Peak parents used *defensive othering* to suggest that other parents who say “no” to football were those who are not solving the more important problem of coddling boys and producing privileged, weak men. West Peak parents' identity work was based on stressing that they understand the “right” kind of men they want their sons to become: a man who embodies a privileged class position, but who resists the perceived weakness associated with privilege by demonstrating the ability to be resilient *and* the ability to compete successfully among other privileged men. These parents' claims to good parenthood were located in their focus on resilience, competition, and independence for their boys – and for themselves.

Parents in East Summit used some similar strategies – such as the use of “others” to bolster their own and their sons' identity work. This manifested among the relatively more privileged parents of East Summit, who used care capital, or the ability to be the “saviors” of others,” to demonstrate their high-status positions within their community. More privileged East



Summit parents performed work on their own and their sons' identities by creating comparative, class-based identities that were contrasted off of the more marginalized parents and boys in the community and on the team. In East Summit, good men were defined as those who care about their communities and who can and do take care of their communities, families, and even other men. They are the men whom other men look up to. They are the men who lift the community up. Within a community experiencing some class insecurity, these parents and their boys could provide to other, less fortunate parents and boys who were willing to take others' shared resources.

In their stories, more privileged East Summit parents explained that these were the kind of high-status men they imagined their boys were learning to become, and that this was work they (parents) were also doing currently as good people and good community members. In their narratives, relatively more privileged East Summit parents cast football as an example of supporting community that became the backdrop for proving middle-class respectability (for their boys and themselves). In a community defined by mutual support, they are the givers, not the takers, of goodwill and shared resources. While East Summit parents gendered this process for their boys becoming men, the status that care capital could bring also influenced both fathers and mothers' identity work, suggesting that while cloaked in gender, this strategy may have been just as, or even more so, influenced by a struggle for class status than gender identity.

There were differences among parents in both communities, and one identity marker that appeared to be particularly interesting in comparing across communities was marital status. In East Summit, single parents (particularly, single mothers) and divorced parents were largely pushed out of the privileged group in the community and were used as morally failing parents to whom the more advantaged parents could compare themselves. In West Peak, this did not appear

to be the case. The single and divorced parents in my West Peak sample did not tell similar stories of marginalization, and the married parents did not appear to use them as “others” in their moral comparisons. Instead, the incredible amount of affluence in the area appeared to bind these football parents together, regardless of marital status. They were able to come together as a group to point to other West Peak parents who were making the “wrong” and weak decision to not allow their boys to play football.

I believe there are a few possible explanations for this. In East Summit, resources, even among relatively advantaged parents, were limited; thus, there could be no assumptions made about parents’ abilities to have and use resources to properly parent their children. In contrast, West Peak was understood as an affluent and highly resourced space, and the same was projected (usually correctly) onto the parents who lived there. Thus, even single or divorced parents may have been understood as parents who had plenty of resources on their own, making it possible for them to use those resources to parent their children. In fact, one of the issues in West Peak that amplified football’s deviant status was the understanding that these all *were* highly resourced parents, and thus should “know better” about how to use their resources to keep their boys safe. If parents’ privilege was called into question, then it could have been more difficult to hold them accountable in the same way.

In considering the similarities and differences across the two communities, there are a number of different possible influencing factors to reflect on. One additional difference across the two communities is the transitional nature of West Peak as opposed to the longer-standing stability of East Summit residents. West Peak is known as a community that attracts affluent people from across the country, and my sample of parents reflects that (with most having relocated to West Peak in their adulthood). The West Peak community is largely made up of

transplants and people who do not necessarily feel a longstanding investment in or rooting to the community. It is more common, generally, that the experience of modern class privilege is connected to a more physically transient life, as people move around for education, careers, and more. This does not appear to encourage an investment in the local. There is less pressure to commit to the local community, and thus, perhaps, status is conceived of by parents as being achieved outside and beyond the local – on the national “stage.”

West Peak boys and parents appear to imagine themselves playing on a national stage of competition and attainment, of individualism and independence. They are not concerned with connecting to and taking care of their neighbors and community members. Instead, it is normative to look outside and elsewhere to establish identity and status. West Peak parents talked about their children eventually moving to other states to attend prestigious schools and to their eventual prestigious careers. Their imagined future for their children was embedded in being successful on the world’s stage, in a competitive world of every person, or every man, for himself.

In contrast, East Summit has deeper, longer-standing “roots.” In decades past, the community was once more integrated into surrounding farming areas, where families had lived and worked for generations. The community has grown more suburban over time but still has a sense of this connection and generational presence. This is reflected in my sample of East Summit parents, with most of them having either been born in the area or relocated there when they were children or very young adults (some from the surrounding farming areas). Because of this, it could be argued that the individuals are more invested in and committed to their community, and identify more with their local social world. The local space (community) becomes the “stage” to form identity and claim status.

Additionally, these resource-limited parents do not imagine their boys will go off to far away prestigious universities and land in high-status careers in cosmopolitan, faraway places. That may be the case in West Peak, but in East Summit parents imagine their boys will most likely stay local and will most likely be most closely attached to their community of proximity – where they live and work – and that community will most likely be one they have longstanding roots within. For these parents, a "national achievement stage" is not a part of their understandings about preparing their boys for manhood. Instead, they are invested in their local community – that is where they (and their boys) gain high-status identities through their moral commitment to their friends, family, and neighbors.

In the following chapters, I continue to consider the similarities and differences across the communities and football parents' experiences and sense-making in making men. In the two upcoming chapters, I consider how gender matters to parents – and particularly how motherhood becomes an especially complicated role to navigate in both communities. I begin with a chapter on emotions and emotion work and then move to a chapter examining the gendered nature of decision-making or "Who gets to say?" what happens to boys in football. Despite their differences, mothers in both West Peak and East Summit experience significant challenges and burdens in these situations, yet, they also find themselves with different tools to draw upon to solve those dilemmas.

## CONCLUSION

Like their West Peak counterparts, East Summit parents looked to football as a way in which to manage their moral parental identities. They differed, however, in that they framed themselves, and football, as normative in East Summit (compared to the deviance in West Peak), and instead used their experiences of raising boys in youth football as a way to construct

themselves as good people via their membership in a cooperative community. As I discussed above, this strategy worked out better for some parents more so than others. East Summit parents who were more privileged (via race, class, and family structure) were able to use football and community as a way to distinguish themselves, and their sons, as “providers” not “receivers” of shared resources. They emphasize what I refer to here as care capital (or their comparative ability and desire to perform carework on others in the community) to bolster their claims to respectable middle-class identities for themselves and their sons in the absence of the abundant financial capital that is typically associated with a privileged class. In this way, they are able to do work on both their own and their sons’ identities, as this strategy also frames the imagined men their boys will one day become: Good, moral men who are the providers, the caretakers of others.

In contrast, this strategy did not work as well for marginalized parents in the community. Parents of color, non-partnered parents (divorced, separated, single), and parents with lower incomes were othered in the community. Despite the dominant narrative of a bonded, “tight-knit” community, we see privileged parents use the less privileged parents in their symbolic boundary building – framing themselves as good, giving parents in contrast to poor, deficient parents in the community. We also see some, but not all, marginalized parents working towards protecting the narrative of a bonded, cooperative community despite their experiences that suggest community betrayals and fractures in the bonds. For some parents, the fractures materialize in the form of racism and opportunity hoarding, where the community withholds resources from their boys (benching boys of color during games, making sure college recruiters see white boys play, giving white boys a larger and louder “stage” in the community). For other parents, fractures are seen in their stories about physical injuries and finding little space or support from the community in protecting their sons' health. These parents were exclusively women, most of which low income,

single mothers. For both the parents of color, low-income parents, and parents' who held a deviant family status (e.g., single or divorced), their stories reflected community betrayals. This created difficulties for them, particularly in their attempts to talk about the connection between community, youth football, and their good parenting for their boys' futures. If good parent identities and good boys becoming good men are rooted in a bonded community (and football as a source of community connection), then what do people do when the community betrays them and their sons? The fractures in the community become fractures in their stories and results in fractures in the sense-making of parents who are “othered” in a community defined by mutual support.

Parents in West Peak and East Summit shared the experience of using football to demonstrate that they were good parents, raising good boys, into real men. They did so in different contexts of deviance and norm-following, and in varying classed communities and socio-economic structural realities. For both sets of parents, doing identity work required some relative talk, comparisons, and differentiating between themselves and other parents. In West Peak, parents used defensive othering to neutralize accusations of bad parenting and football and to reclaim good parental identities. In East Summit, parents used stories of community connections to bolster youth football's already normative place in the community. More privileged parents were able to use that story as a way to distinguish themselves and their boys by claiming relative middle-class respectability in a mixed-class space. Less privileged parents in the area struggled to use the “connected community” narrative and instead reflected fractures in the bonds through examples of being used by and betrayed by the community. Across both communities and different sub-groups of parents, what was similar was that all parents looked to narratives of raising boys into men through youth football as a tool in their parenting work and in

the development of their own moral parental identities. The details changed, but the goal remained the same. The strategies differed, and they worked better or worse to varying degrees for differently class- and race-situated parents.

## CHAPTER 6

“IT TAKES WORK”:  
MANAGING EMOTIONS

In Chapters 4 and 5, I examined how parents across the communities of West Peak and East Summit constructed and attached meaning to the choices they made for their sons in the context of youth football. In those chapters, I showed how different local cultures shaped parents’ understandings of the kinds of men they wanted their boys to become, the ways that they, as parents, could support the process, and how they imagined football’s place in their parenting projects. While in close proximity, the two communities were distinctive spaces with different emotion cultures or sets of norms and expectations about showing and feeling emotions (Hochschild 2002). Managing football parenthood required parents to perform work on themselves. This included both work on their identities and work on their emotions or the management of their own feelings (Hochschild 2002).

In contemporary western society, parents are held to specific standards of child-rearing, and there is considerable pressure placed on parents to raise their children in socially-sanctioned ways. In successfully accomplishing contemporary parenting and meeting culturally defined expectations of "good parent," individuals also get to become "good people" in the process. But this work and achievements require that parents bring their conflicting emotions in line with the definition of the situation that they are simultaneously creating and maintaining. This includes redefining and restraining their own emotions and demonstrating emotions that are considered appropriate in any given situation. For football parents this can be an incredibly difficult task, consider the costs of the game (physical, social, and material). In raising boys into men through football, parents learn to tell stories that frame them as “good,” moral people making “good” decisions for their kids, and to bring their feelings in line with those stories.



In this chapter, I focus on how parents, and particularly mothers, do work on their moral parental identities and engage in a substantial amount of emotion work as part of football parenthood. I examine how gender structures divergent emotion projects mothers faced as a result of “doing” football parenthood in their respective communities. Here, I consider how privilege in West Peak and marginalization in East Summit influenced the emotion work differently situated parents needed to accomplish to manage their feelings, identities, and specific challenges.

The analysis for this chapter centers the parents in the two communities for whom emotions were particularly salient in their stories: mothers in general in West Peak, and in East Summit, marginalized mothers specifically. In the privileged context of West Peak, football represented deviance and thus was potentially discrediting to parents’, and especially mothers’, moral identities (detailed in Chapter 4). In the analysis for this chapter, I examine how West Peak mothers told stories of emotional restraint in managing this challenge, both publicly and within the interactional space of the interview. In East Summit, football was woven into a larger narrative of community bonds and shared care in a resource-limited structural reality (detailed in Chapter 5).

In this chapter, I examine how, in contrast to the relatively more privileged parents in their community, marginalized East Summit mothers told stories that demonstrated the emotion work necessary in parenting boys through hardship and how, at different times, football could be both the cause of and the solution to adversity. Across both communities, mothers were required to do a significant amount of emotion work. Specifically, it was when mothers were not socially accepted *themselves* (marginalized East Summit mothers) or when mothers were *doing*

something not socially accepted (all West Peak mothers), that they needed to perform work on their emotions, both publically and privately.

In the following sections, I discuss the gendered and classed emotional landscape of football parenthood. I begin by examining the marginalized mothers of East Summit and their stories of hardship and mothering, a situation that forced them to reconcile the work of managing the pain of adversity for themselves *and* their boys. I next examine how emotions mattered to West Peak mothers' impression management strategies, as stories about emotional restraint helped them to solve the problem of identity threats in the context of doing football motherhood within their privileged community. In this chapter, I spend more space in the analysis examining the complex emotion strategies of West Peak mothers, who more explicitly used emotions to solve specific identity problems. While perhaps less theoretically complicated, I include the stories of emotions and hardship in East Summit as an important contrast to West Peak and to remind the reader that the emotion work these differently situated mothers were faced with was shaped by their particular material situations and the local cultures they parented within. I also consider fathers, as well as the relatively more privileged East Summit parents, as contrasts to the emotional experiences of the particular mothers I center. I end the chapter with a discussion of how the different variations of emotion work across the two communities, in some ways, reflect shared experiences across the communities and the lines of privilege.

#### EMOTIONS IN STORIES OF HARDSHIP IN EAST SUMMIT

Emotions were evident in many of the conversations I had with East Summit football parents, but they differed significantly across lines of privilege and marginalization. What was most striking being the very controlled expression of positive emotions among the relatively more privileged parents in my East Summit sample. As I discussed in Chapter 5, more privileged

East Summit parents' stories were predicated on using the community narrative of group bonds, mutual care, and positivity. As shown in Chapter 5, those stories were full of feelings of pride, joy, and a sense of self-confidence. In contrast, my conversations with more marginalized East Summit parents, and particularly with more marginalized mothers, were rife with stories of pain, worry, feelings of impotence, and self-judgment. I focus on those stories in this section, highlighting the incredible weight of difficult emotions these disadvantaged, othered women were required to manage as part of their experiences as mothers.

*Stories of Football, Hardship, and Acceptance*

As discussed in Chapter 5, my conversations with East Summit parents revealed that most parents (mothers and fathers, privileged and disadvantaged) spoke about football for boys very positively and explained that they did *not* spend a significant amount of time worrying about injuries. Instead, parents' responses to my questions about fears of boys getting hurt reframed the real injuries of life as located in life itself. This was especially true among marginalized parents and the disadvantaged mothers with whom I spoke. Tammy, a white, disadvantaged, married mother of two boys exemplified this when she discussed her concerns and worries that her boys would get hurt playing football. She explained:

Worry? Sure, but, no, not really. I mean, life is hard. Football's not hard. Football's great. I worry about paying for football and how they'll feel if we can't do that. Or like, I worry about them finishing high school. I mean, I worry about what's next for them. Sure, that's the stuff to worry about, right?

Tammy's experience as a low-income parent was complicated by the fact that, as she explained to me, her husband spent large chunks of time incarcerated. She told me, "Basically, I am a single mom a lot. It's hard. And I know it's hard on the boys." Tammy, like so many other disadvantaged mothers in my East Summit sample, reoriented my understanding of football parenthood, worries, and risks for boys. For these mothers, football was not dangerous, per se.

*Life* was dangerous and painful. In speaking with Diana, a Black, divorced mother of one, she explained it as, "Life is not easy. And being here and being Black. Football's good for him, people look at him and it makes sense. And if anything, it helps him and me make more sense to people here." Diana's consideration of her (and her son) being a racialized other in the community helped her to reframe football as a possible antidote to a more severe risk of life: being Black within a racist context.

When I asked parents about how they felt about the hardships they described to me, their narratives reflected a sense of acceptance about what a disadvantaged life might look like for themselves and their boys. Hardship was not a battle to be won; it was one to survive. Pamela, a less class advantaged, Black, mother of two boys (and wife to Doug, discussed in Chapter 5), illustrates this well, as she told me, "I try. We try. I work a lot, and I think I give them a nice life. I work a lot, a lot. But they're not going to get everything. That's just senseless. Of course, they're not. They know that. I just want them to be ok, just as ok as I can make them. Thinking anything beyond that is just, whatever." Pamela was the primary breadwinner in her family. Her husband, Doug, had been out of work for many years and she very much felt the weight of singularly providing for her family. However, she also explained that she and her boys accepted and understood the constraints they would experience in their lives and did not express any expectations that life would be without hardship. As she told me, doing so would be "senseless."

#### *Feelings of Impotence and Self Judgment*

Tammy, Diana, and Pamela represent other marginalized mothers in my East Summit sample and the ways they very explicitly discussed experiencing hardships in life and how they saw football as a bright spot in their sons' worlds. They, along with others, demonstrated that with this understanding of life (not football) being hard for their boys, they needed to manage the

feelings that accompanied such an experience. Tracey, a white, disadvantaged, single mother, spoke with me at length about how difficult it was to know that her son would live a disadvantaged life and that there was not anything she could do to change that. She explained:

And, oh god, it hurts. It hurts. To my soul. I want him to have everything in life that I couldn't give him. I want him to be the kind of father that he never had. I want him to be able to do for his children more than what I've been able to do for him and never have to worry about it, like, 'Oh, if I go buy them a mouth guard, am I going to be able to pay my electric bill?' I don't want him to have those kind of worries. I want him to get to go to college, and I want him to have a career, and I want him to be the father ... He wants to be a father. He wants to be a dad someday, and he wants to help coach his kids' football teams. I go, 'Well, what if you have girls?' 'Mom, there will be a football player amongst them. I guarantee you.' I just want him to have the most amazing adventures in life, be able to take his kids to Disneyland or on vacation. Jesse has never been on vacation. He's never been on an airplane. He's never seen the ocean because everything I've had has gone into our life. I don't want him to struggle like that anymore. That's my hopes for him. I just can't give him more. I cry all the time about it, you know? It hurts me to see him, and just not be able to do more for him. But hey, at least football. Thank god for it. I can give him that. It just means so much that I can do at least that.

Football is incredibly salient in Tracey's narrative, as it works as the gift she *can* give her son, among the imagined resources that she could not give her son. Knowing she was able to make football possible for her son, despite not having enough money to buy safety equipment, was a way for her to manage those feelings. This was also a way for Tracey to tell a story, through emotions, about doing her best to be a good mother. Her comments here also reflect back to the local definitions and routes to "good" moral masculinity for boys in East Summit. Here, she connects her son's future role as a father and even how he might use football to be a good father (through coaching).

Eva, a less class advantaged, married Latina mother, similarly reflected on how she imagined her son would 'miss out' on some of the joys of life that she was unable to give him. Her story, like those of so many other marginalized mothers, weaved football in as a balancing resource. Eva told me:

I know it's hard for him. I get him the stuff I can, when I can. But those stupid team sweatshirts are like \$60! It's so dumb. But then he's the only kid without. That kills me inside. I can't even really put into words how that feels. And like, as a mom. And that's me. That's my deal, my responsibility. That's just all I can do for him. It's just...[groans]...and football, it's just a really good thing. It just evens everything out. He's out there with those other boys and he's doing great in the game and he feels so good about himself. Yeah! [laughs] It's worth the money I don't have [to pay to play]!

Stories of pain, survival, and acceptance of a disadvantaged life were common among the more marginalized mothers in East Summit. As discussed in Chapter 5, these mothers were largely othered by their identities as single-mothers, low-income mothers, and, for some, mothers of color. Fathers, too, experienced marginalization in East Summit. For them, stories of frustration and anger were not uncommon, and they were more likely to push back against the community, directly (see Chapter 5). For fathers, the pain of hardship was framed as the responsibility and the result of the community (either via betrayals by coaches, betrayals by members of the community, or within life itself). Responsibility and emotions (and the responsibility for emotions) were primarily externalized. This was different for marginalized mothers. Their stories of the pain in the hardships of life for their boys was couched in self-judgments and self-flagellation. It was their fault that they could not protect their sons from the hurt of a disadvantaged life. Their expression of managing those emotions was more internalized and self-directed.

#### *Football as "A Gift" in Managing Emotions*

In East Summit, stories that captured emotion work in football parenthood were particularly salient among more marginalized mothers. For these mothers, it was disadvantaged *parenthood* and *boyhood* that was painful and difficult, not football. For them, parenthood within the context of football worked as a way to express their pain while showing that *could* give their boys the resources and gifts that were available to them (such as paying for football, showing up

to games, and football as a possible route to status). In this space, talk of emotion was not about physical injuries associated with the game (as it was in West Peak). Instead, East Summit emotion work was embedded in the injuries of hardship and structural inequalities. These mothers were required to manage feelings of impotence and self-judgment (in their inability to shield their sons from the pains of a disadvantaged life). They were also required to manage the hurt that, at times, accompanied the ways in which the community failed to support or integrate them (as Shannon, Doug, and Pamela so saliently exemplified in Chapter 5). Yet, these mothers also found ways to regain some sense of power and feelings of self-worth by presenting youth football as something they could do and give to their sons, something that *might* help offer their boys feelings of joy and valued identities in their communities.

Tracey and Shannon, both white, disadvantaged, single mothers, are two excellent examples of this emotional experience for disadvantaged mothers in East Summit. Both mothers emphasized the pain of not being able to shield their sons from the harsh realities of a disadvantaged life and directed a lot of blame and shame at themselves in the process. They both spoke of football as a shining light in their sons' lives and in their own experiences as mothers, as the game brought incredible meaning to their boys' lives (and status). Football was also exemplary of what they *could* give their sons, and they took great solace in being able to do so. However, both Tracey and Shannon's (Shannon discussed in more detail in Chapter 5) sons withstood severe physical injuries playing the game. In both of their stories, they explained that their boys almost died, with Shannon's son almost losing a kidney after being tackled during a game, and Tracey's son broke his back during a "punishment" exercise during practice where players were directed to do push-ups while other players stood on their backs. Both boys eventually made full (physical) recoveries and returned to playing the game. I asked these

mothers how they felt about their boys returning to the game. Their responses were strikingly similar. Shannon explained:

It was a little scary. But life's scary. And there's nothing I can do about that. And this, this is what I could give him, you know? I remember he told me, 'Mom, if I don't play football, who am I?' There was absolutely no way I could take that from him. What would he have left?

And Tracey told me:

It was weird of course. And it was great. Because that's his light. That's the light in his life. That's where he comes alive and is loved and is seen. My stomach was in my throat, but I would never say no, he couldn't go back. It's like, maybe I can't give him a lot. But I can give him that. And I did.

For Shannon, Tracey, and other disadvantaged, marginalized mothers in East Summit, football was a gift they could give their boys and became a tool they could use to demonstrate their good mothering and one that allowed them to manage other difficult feelings of helplessness. It wasn't that they did not care about the physical injuries of football; they just understood the social injuries of hardship as more important and more emotional, as they took responsibility for not being able to shield their sons from life's injuries. This contrasted sharply to the emotional experiences and stories told by mothers in West Peak. In that community, football was primarily considered a deviant activity for children and created a very different emotional landscape. In the following section, I move to the mothers living and parenting youth football players in that community and to emotion work in their identity management.

#### GENDERED EMOTION WORK AND IMPRESSION MANAGEMENT IN WEST PEAK

##### *Feeling the "Right" Thing: Public Displays of Emotion*

What it means to be a "good parent," and what one should say, do, and feel as "good parents" do not always weave together smoothly. Additionally, expectations for "doing" good parenthood reflect a dominant culture that reflects the experience of privileged people (Coontz



1992; Hays 1996), while simultaneously applying expectations to all parents, regardless of their structural realities (Elliott, Powell, and Brenton 2015; Reich 2005). Increasingly, parents, and privileged parents, in particular, are scrutinized for *over*-parenting, resulting in coddled children who lack resilience (as discussed in Chapter 4). Yet, the rhetoric of the overprotected child has not completely eclipsed beliefs in the sacralization of childhood (Rotman-Zelizer 1985), and the strong cultural value of middle-class parenting that also prioritizes protecting children from harm (Elliott and Aseltine 2013). Mothers are largely held as those ultimately responsible for raising children (Waltzer 1998), and are those whose moral identities, linked to motherhood, are at stake for not keeping their children “safe” (Rotman-Zelizer 1985).

Within this conflicting mix of cultural expectations for good parenting, “good” mothers are expected to raise their children to become the “right” kind of people, and in the case of my participants, the “right” kind of men. These different cultural narratives set up mothers for conflicts in their stories, and they faced the dilemma of finding ways to reconcile competing expectations in their claims to good motherhood. In West Peak, both mothers and fathers leaned heavily on narratives that framed football as a positive experience for their sons (see Chapter 4), but their stories also reflected competing tensions around the potential danger of the game. The “toughening up” narrative posed different challenges for mothers and fathers, with mothers reporting especially strong pressures to account for exposing their children to risk. In this section, I argue that gender structures parents’ strategies, as they both use emotions to frame their parenting choices.

The social organization of emotions is gendered, attributing either stoicism or “active” emotions (such as anger) to masculinity and assigning a general “emotionality” and “passive” emotions (such as fear) to femininity (Shields et al. 2006). Corresponding gendered feeling rules

typically constrain men's ability to publicly display feminized emotions, such as worry, and, conversely, demand such emotionality from women as markers of their moral identities (Shields et al. 2006). In West Peak, parents' stories and behaviors at games reflected these gendered emotions and feeling rules. In my observations of parents at games, I noted that it was fathers who yelled, screamed, and kicked the ground when they felt there was an unfair referee call or when they were frustrated with the team's failure. When boys got hurt, however, it was more often mothers who would run up to the sidelines in terror or would express their worries to the other spectators around them.

My interviews with West Peak parents were similarly gendered and revealed different challenges to mothers and fathers in their sense-making. Gendered feeling rules constrained fathers' ability to talk about feelings of worry about their boys, particularly in regards to physical injuries, and instead facilitated their ability to tell stories about the “good work” the rough-and-tough game of football did to strengthen their boys (as discussed in chapter 4). However, many fathers did discuss difficult emotions and worry regarding physical injuries – by using their wives as a conduit for expressing such emotions. Many fathers talked about how their wives had a great deal of concern for the physical safety of their shared children. Scott, a less class advantaged, white, married father, explained that his wife avoided going to games because “She’s really freaked out; she knows he can get hurt pretty bad. Yeah, it can be scary.” Keith, a highly advantaged, white, married father, also illustrated this when he told me, “So, my wife, she worries, she’s hesitant...for you know, the concussion reasons and just the injury in general reasons. But, I think we were both moved by his real eagerness to try something different and new, so we were supportive.” Keith and Scott both demonstrate how fathers used their wives in their stories to talk about concerns over physical risks, pointing to the constraints fathers may

feel in openly discussing their emotional concerns. Alan, a white, married and class advantaged father, was willing to discuss these constraints around fathers and expressing emotion. He articulates this process, as he told me:

You know, a lot of the stuff that [wife] shows outward, I have the same feeling inward. So, it's not that I don't care or that I'm not sensitive or something about some of those things. I'd be feeling it too, you know, as a dad, I have a stronger urge to keep it inside. Whereas [wife], it just comes right out. 'Oh [son] is hurt!' and then she's automatically there. And my I'm saying, 'Oh [son] is hurt' but I've got to, I've got to keep it back. It's the same feeling is there, but [wife] can just let it out, express it more than I do.

Alan's explanation demonstrates how the culture of masculinity places constraints on men's ability to publicly reveal feminized emotions, such as fear or worry (Shields et al. 2006), and how this complicates fathers' expressions of emotions. By following these feeling rules of constraint, fathers are able to side-step the dilemma of performing the conflicting cultural expectations of, on the one hand, raising boys into resilient men and, on the other, protecting innocent children. Fathers were not required to demonstrate corresponding emotions of fear, worry, and concern for not protecting boy-children from the potentially serious physical harm of football. Their constrained emotions did not conflict with their stories of "controlled safety" and "positive benefits" of football for their boys. Mothers, I argue, were not so lucky.

My conversations with mothers revealed a trickier dilemma of feeling the right thing as mothers who say yes to football. While they told similar stories as fathers in regards to the conflict between achieving both learned resilience and parental protection for their boys, they were held to different emotional expectations in doing so. Mothers were supposed to worry. Mothers needed to show it. Feelings of "worry" and concern came up regularly in my interviews with mothers, and it was important to them that I understood that they understood the potential dangers of the game. For example, Lindsay, a white, advantaged, married mother, told me: "Initially it was hard [to say yes to football] because I just worried about him getting hurt. I was

so worried about him getting hurt. He's never been hurt. Thankfully, he never has. That was my biggest worry, was getting hurt or injured in some way.” Patricia, a white, divorced, advantaged mother, expressed a similar sentiment, but also generalized it beyond just her own experience when she explained, “Of course, you don’t want to see your kids get hurt, and football is a physical sport and there has been a lot of media about head injuries, about serious injuries, life-altering injuries, you worry about that. I think it sometimes that it’s emotional, that’s your kid out there, I think it’s hard, yeah.”

As discussed in Chapter 4, traditional celebrations of football culture have been challenged, and as more and more public attention has been paid to the dangers of the game. This is especially true for privileged children. Privileged parents find themselves in a context where they cannot ignore the risks of the game without appearing uninformed and potentially neglectful, and this is especially true for mothers. Expressing and understanding risk, being adequately educated, and displaying appropriate, corresponding concern was important to mothers’ stories, as Angela, a white, advantaged, married mother, demonstrated when she told me:

I was raised that my son wasn't supposed to play football. He's been hearing the dangers of ... You know, I don't care about the foot, I don't care about the collarbone. I've done my research. I care about the head and the spine. I don't want him paralyzed, and I don't want him brain damaged. I just...of course I worry about that all the time.

Angela's comments frame her as both properly informed and appropriately concerned based on the knowledge she has intentionally acquired. Angela’s narrative adhered to both the expectations of intensive parenting (emotionally absorbing, expert-driven, child-centered) *and* the gendered feeling rules that mothers faced. This solved several gendered dilemmas for Angela in her story but left her with the problem of explaining then *why* she had said yes to football,

especially after acknowledging its inherent danger. Later in her interview, Angela solved the problem by explaining to me:

He got hit in football the first day, he busted his lip. We needed to go get stitches. His coach wouldn't let him play the position. He cried, he said he was going to quit. I was like, go for it, quit! I mean everything that I could have wanted to happen, happened, because I wanted him to quit. But he never gave up. He fought through it and worked through it. I finally had to change my tune, that it's not that bad moms let their kids play football. It's that bad moms don't let their kids go for what they're passionate about. I had to really change, and it was really hard.

Angela explained that she wanted her son to figure out, on his own, that football was not the right choice. Instead, he continued to want to play. Angela describes how she eventually adjusted her ideas (and emotions) about her son playing, and adjusted her evaluation of herself as a mother. Her son persevered, and so then, did she. By bringing her emotions in line with what she defined as being best for her son, Angela struggled but was able to reclaim the identity of “good mom” that she was afraid she had lost in allowing her son to play.

*Learning to Let Go: Emotional Restraint as a Marker of Good Motherhood*

Displaying appropriate emotions worked in mothers' stories because they were framed within a larger claim of emotional restraint through sacrifice. Mothers showed their worry and concern in conjunction with expressing their belief that they were, in fact, good mothers because they were able to push past their gendered “motherly” concern to support what was truly important for their boys' well-being in becoming men. Mary, a white, advantaged, divorced mother, exemplified this when she spoke about football as a “rite of passage” to manhood for her son, and that as a good mother, she learned to restrain her emotions to allow him to make that transition:

It's [injuries] not something to like as a mother. You know, there's always a concern there. That could be a nasty injury because it is a very, very rough sport. But life is also life...And, so being able as a mother to just step back and allow it to take place. And rites of passage are not, or what they call not without danger. That's the way it is. That's the

way life is. So, being there...let's just say, you know, precautions taken and yet allowing things to unfold as they were going to unfold. And being OK with it.

Mary "learning to be OK with it" takes precedence over her own worry in her presentation of herself as making the right choice and being a good mother. The difficulty of her son playing football does not rest in the danger but in her potentially limited ability to allow her son to face the danger and restrain her own emotions. Lindsay similarly described pushing past the worry so that she could support her son, as she told me, "Sometimes it's hard to look at (son playing). But I guess, it's fun to watch him play...you know, but it worries me when he plays. But if he wants to play...as long as he wants to play, I will watch. I'll go with it. I mean, he wants to do it. It's important to him." Lindsay's statement reveals the difficulty she has articulating the conflicting emotions she is experiencing in her sense-making process. She simultaneously describes her son playing as causing her to worry and as "fun." Her statement suggests that telling stories of sacrificing one's own worries requires emotion work on the self, so that mothers can bring their feelings in line with their larger narratives.

While this was a strategy among mothers in my sample, I did find one father, Keith, who appeared to combine men's stories that projected emotions onto mothers *and* the story of mothers learning emotional restraint. He explained, "My wife, she was worried, and it was tough to manage. However, she figured it out. I believe that she really realizes that it was a great learning experience for him, though. This whole thing, facing adversity and overcoming it. So I think we're, we feel good about the whole process." Being worried and then finding a way to manage their difficult emotions was a way for mothers (and possibly for fathers through mothers) to reconcile the demand to show concern with their justifications for why they felt football was a good choice for their boys. In these narratives, being a good mother meant being able to express appropriate concern and to re-define it in such a way that showed their ability to

put their own, perhaps appropriate-yet-inappropriate emotions aside for the good of their boys becoming men. This does not mean, however, that telling these stories always went smoothly, as I examine in the following section.

*Sustaining the Story: Strategies in the Breakdown of Emotion Management in Storytelling*

While mothers used emotion work to navigate through conflicting expectations of parenting, sometimes tricky and uncontrolled emotions bubbled up in their conversations and experiences. While they worked hard to keep their stories and emotions as controlled as possible, there were moments when deeper emotional discomfort pushed through. Mothers had strategies for dealing with these moments and were, most often, able to either redefine the moment or regain control over their emotions, demonstrated an additional layer to the “work” they were required to perform on their emotions. In this case, the disciplining of emotions “in the moment” was necessary for their larger projects of impression management. In these emotional “breaks” that occurred in even simply telling the stories of emotion work, mothers demonstrated the depth of just how much emotional discipline was required of them.

Exactly half of the West Peak mothers (seven out of 14) cried during our interviews and displayed signs of shame and discomfort during those moments. Mary, a football mom who was particularly even-tempered and controlled throughout our interview, fell into this kind of “difficult moment” towards the end of our conversation. I had asked Mary several times about how she felt about her son getting hurt during games, and she has always managed to side-step directly answering the question. Finally, I decided to push her a bit harder on the question and made it more difficult for her to avoid the question. I immediately regretted my decision, as I watched her body tense up and, perhaps, even shift ever-so-slightly away from me. She broke eye contact and said nothing for what felt like an eternity. She eventually responded, her voice

softened and grew quiet. It was almost a whisper when she said, “I didn’t like it, I didn’t like it. What’s there to like about it?” She looked back up at me for a brief moment and looked back down at the table. She began wringing her hands. I saw tears welling up in her eyes, and watched as they eventually fell onto her cheeks. I felt awful and thought I might cry with her, but said nothing, allowing her the space to work through the moment without my intervention. This heaviness lasted for another moment or two before she suddenly and dramatically shifted her energy and response. Almost yelling, she laughs and says “But yeah! I’m not a boy! I wasn’t a boy then (when her son played), I wasn’t a teenage boy! It wasn’t for me to figure out, or to be!” She looked up at me, smiled and laughed, and threw her hands up into the air as if to communicate, ‘well, what can you do?!’ Things lightened up, she lightened up. I was astonished at her ability to regain control over the difficult emotional space and completely reshape the emotional definition of the situation.

This interaction with Mary is one example of the strategies mothers employed when restraining emotion in their stories became no longer possible. Reverting back to essentializing masculinity (as explained in more detail in Chapter 4), distancing themselves from the experience, making jokes, and “brushing off” difficult emotions were some of the ways West Peak mothers regained control in narrative breakdowns.

Other strategies included mothers reverting to their emphasis on being an engaged, informed parent as a way to regain emotional control. Cynthia, a self-described “real football mom,” was one of the most football-engaged moms in my sample, as I learned in both her interview and by watching her at games. Cynthia, an advantaged, married Latina mother, brought snacks to the games, was in charge of making sure the boys had transportation and spoke very highly of the benefits of football for her son. Because of this, I was somewhat taken aback during



part of our interview when she broke down and began to cry. She had been talking for a while, uninterrupted. I was listening to her talk extensively about being a football mom. In this conversation, she expressed joy, pride, and excitement as she told her story. However, deep into the story, Cynthia transitioned into (what I understood as) a moment of unexpected, raw emotion. I think the moment took us both by surprise. She was explaining the importance of her son learning not to quit, when she said, "Like, if he, like one of the reasons he plays because like, I don't...if they start a sport I don't want them to quit. I want them to finish the season. Yeah, I don't want them to think it's OK to quit, but um, yeah...but..." She had been speaking quite quickly, but when she hit this point, she slowed down, almost as if she was becoming unsure about what she was saying, what she was feeling. She continued:

I mean but, I don't know...but I think I should step back and say when it comes to this type of physical of a game, they should be able to quit. Put life...it could mean a life. Or being injured or something...because we can lose our kids. [Begins crying] They can die. You can lose them, for a stupid game. You know, it's not worth it.

Cynthia went from expressing her support for her son learning not to quit just because something "got hard," to having a moment of realization that he could die while learning such a lesson during a "stupid game." She had just finished explaining that she would not "let" her son quit mid-season, when, in the next moment, she expressed doubt and became clearly upset. From here, Cynthia began a lengthy and serious explanation of how important it is to be an "informed" parent and how it "keeps things safe."

After shifting into self-doubt and emotional breakdown, Cynthia regained control of her narrative, her emotions, and the situation by redefining the moment, in this case by focusing on being an "informed parent." This part of our conversation ended with Cynthia again feeling good (or at least it appeared so) about being a football mom, and perhaps even superior to other football moms because of how "informed" she was compared to other parents who "just don't

take the time to learn what's necessary." In this way, she further strengthened the boundary parents construct between themselves as good parents and others as "bad parents."

It is plausible to interpret these moments differently, and instead suggest that they too were strategic displays of emotion that allowed them to both show worry and demonstrate their ability to restrain (just as the mothers did in the previous section.). I argue, however, that these moments *do*, in fact, illustrate the work of emotional restraint in action, but not necessarily in ways that fit cleanly into the mothers' stories of learning to hold back and "let go." In those stories, mothers go through a process of exploration, making mistakes, and the realization of the importance of being worried, even while they managed their worry. In these moments, mothers were without the luxury of time and retrospect, which required them to spontaneously "process" their emotions and bring them back in line with the feeling rules they had constructed in their larger narratives of football motherhood. For Mary and Cynthia, pushing past the difficult emotion and getting back to "OK" required an incredible amount of creative and extemporaneous emotion work to get their emotions in line with the feeling rules they had defined for the situation (the interview, and football in general).

## CONCLUSION

Despite their differences, mothers' stories across both communities revealed the necessity to accomplish emotion work on the self in managing football parenthood. For disadvantaged mothers in the mixed class and race space of East Summit, football was celebrated as a high status, high reward activity that benefited boys and the public, strengthening the community's already strong collective bonds. In East Summit, football was woven into a larger narrative of community bonds, narratives which were more precarious and fractured more easily for disadvantaged parents in the community. In this chapter, I specifically examined the emotional

landscape of this experience for marginalized mothers in East Summit, as their emotions and emotion work were particularly salient in their more open discussions of hardship (compared to their more privileged East Summit counterparts who, I argue, downplayed hardships and the subsequent emotions surrounding them as part of their attempts to use their stories to move closer to a class privileged identity). Feelings of hurt in managing hardships for their boys was particularly painful for these marginalized mothers, but they were able to turn to stories about youth football as a way to soften that pain for themselves and their boys. In these emotion stories, football became a "gift" a marginalized mother could give her son, as Tracey explained earlier in this chapter when she told me she would never be able to give her son the pleasure of seeing the ocean, but she could give him football – a game celebrated by the community and a space where he could claim masculine worth and value.

In the privileged space of West Peak, football's deviant position pushed parents, and especially mothers, to defensively account for their choice to allow their boys to play, creating opportunities to tell stories about the importance of danger, risk, and resilience for privileged boys becoming men. However, having the "right" or socially acceptable publically displayed feelings (such as worrying about injuries) were important in mothers' stories about why they choose to allow football for their boys. However, the work parents must do on their emotions is not only situated in public displays, and in external public identities. I have also argued that West Peak mothers' stories reveal "breaks" in their sense-making that require them to perform emotion work on themselves as part of dealing with their boys playing a "high-stakes" game (in regards to injuries, status, mobility opportunities, etc.).

Many mothers I spoke with cried during our interviews. Others needed to take pauses to "compose" themselves as they discussed their experiences. West Peak mothers, at times, found

themselves telling what appeared to be unintended stories, stories that revealed to us both (as storyteller and audience), contradictions in their sense-making about boys' health and well-being. These contradictions brought up difficult emotions for mothers, who then would attempt to reshape their narratives to accommodate for the emotional "breaks." These were challenging moments and revealed the incredibly complicated emotion work required of these participants to discipline emotions for themselves to feel "OK" about their experiences, their past choices, and for many, the choices they imagined they would continue making (and the dangers their boys would continue to face).

By bringing together an analysis of the emotion work of differently situated football motherhood, I hope to have demonstrated how different experiences of work on emotions across West Peak and East Summit reflect, in some ways, shared experiences of emotions and motherhood, and how gender shapes these experiences (particularly along the lines of differential privilege). These findings show how even among differently situated mothers, for different circumstances, emotions need to be "worked out" in accomplishing mothering. These feelings were similar in that they included fear, worry, and the inability to protect their children from hardship, either within football or from life, more broadly.

An interesting contrast between West Peak mothers and the marginalized East Summit mothers was how they situated football and danger in their stories. In West Peak, Football posed the danger that mothers worried about, but football also gave those mothers the opportunity to show their good mothering via sacrificing emotion for the "good" that football would give their sons. In East Summit, marginalized mothers imagined football as a virtuous in their stories. However, this was a complicated story to tell, as football was at times a gift and at other times the cause of pain. Hardship ultimately rested in life itself and mothers described how much they

wished they could protect their boys from adversity. For West Peak mothers, a sort of controlled exposure to adversity (via the physical risks of football) was the reframed tool they used to necessarily “toughen up” their boys. Learning to restrain their emotions was how they demonstrated their commitment to what they thought was ultimately “best” for their sons.

An interesting similarity in the stories from these very differently situated mothers was how many of the women described a sense of themselves “learning” about how to be football mothers in and through their emotion work. This pattern suggests that for women parenting in the masculine space of football, there is a recognition that there is a larger cultural understanding that women and girls do not “understand” football because they are not men or boys. In the next chapter, I further my examination of how gender shapes how mothers and fathers differently experience being parents of youth football players. I consider the question of “Who gets to say?” in choices about the boys who play the game. I examine how the football’s definition as a celebrated masculine space creates particular constraints in mothers’ ability to claim ownership of knowledge (in understanding football) and thus constrains their ability to assert their parental power.

## CHAPTER 7

WHO GETS TO SAY?:  
NEGOTIATING GENDER AND PARENTAL POWER

Throughout this dissertation, I have discussed the experiences and narratives of mothers and fathers of youth football players. I have shown how parents' local raced and classed community cultures have shaped their understandings of the kinds of men they hoped their boys would become and how they imagined football as a part of that process. I have also examined the social psychological labor, including identity and emotion work, that parents need to perform as a part of managing their experiences and telling their stories. Across these analyses, I have considered differences across communities and examined how occupying different spaces impacts the ways in which parents make sense of football parenthood. In this chapter, I focus on another important difference that situates parents: their own gender identities. For most of this dissertation, I have largely explored gender through parents' understandings of engendering masculinity in their boys and, in Chapter 6, began to focus in on parents' gendered experiences through an analysis of emotions. In this chapter, I examine how parents' gender structures their experiences and considers how the masculinization of football creates very different constraints and opportunities for mothers and fathers. Here, I explore the question of "Who gets to say?": How do mothers and fathers negotiate their parental power in decision-making for their boys playing tackle football, a sport often defined by unapologetic hyper-masculinity.

Sport is an institution that has long been understood as a profoundly masculine realm (Bederman 1995; Burnstyn 1999), associated with both the maintenance and construction of masculinity for both men and boys (Bemiller 2005; Connell 1995; Lantz and Schroeder 1999; Messner 2002). While the boundaries have been widening more and more to include women and girls (Ezzell 2009), sport remains a space in which masculinity is valued over femininity and in

which women continue to occupy “outsider” status (Bemiller 2005). Football, in particular, is defined by hyper-masculine traits such as mental toughness, competitiveness, and domination and is understood explicitly as the “domain of men” (Bemiller 2005: 205; Griffin 1995). This creates a complicated situation for parents of boys who play youth football, as in this context, gender structures mothers' and fathers' parental decision making-power and negotiations with each other, their sons, and team coaches differently. This is especially complicated for mothers, as they are generally considered the “experts” on parenting and those who are ultimately responsible for parenting (including everyday decision-making for children’s well-being).

In the following analysis, I first examine how stories told by both fathers and mothers echo these gendered definitions of football and situate men as “experts” and women as “outsiders.” This raises important questions related to how mothers and fathers find themselves negotiating decision-making for boys playing youth football with differing parental power based on their gender. In the next section, I explore those questions, including how mothers and fathers negotiate their parental power with their sons, their partners and spouses, and coaches. Finally, I conclude my analysis for this chapter by exploring how, at times, mothers “break the rules” of “knowing their place” in football by directly challenging men, innovating and finding ways around the rules, or rewriting the gender rules of parenting in youth football. Here, I examine how parental power for mothers is influenced by their local community contexts and argue that there is a paradox of privilege in my study, in which more privileged mothers experience more constraints on their parental power than less privileged mothers.

#### “FOOTBALL...IT AIN’T A SPORT FOR THE GIRLS”: GENDERING THE SPACE

Overwhelmingly, parents in both West Peak and East Summit defined and described football, and youth football, as the domain of men and boys. The game was explicitly masculine

even among other sports, as Alan, a white, advantaged, married father, explained: "You see, football is the manly man's sport. It is the manliest of them all." Similarly, Jason, a highly advantaged, white, divorced father, defined football as not only a masculine space but as the masculine space. He described football as representing "Well, it is a kind of this notion of super-maleness" and informed me, "Females should not play football, this is for men." Football was a sacred, masculine space that women and girls just couldn't understand. Women and girls generally did not "belong" (other than as supporters and spectators).

Parents, including mothers, would often turn to biology and essentializing gender as a way to explain why women did not "fit" football. As Anna, a highly advantaged, Asian American, married mother explained, "What's special about football, I think, is it's a lot of testosterone. It's very aggressive, very ra-ra-ra. It's for the boys, definitely for the man. (Laughs) It ain't a sport for the girls." Anna thought for a moment before she said, "It seems like maybe girls, women, we have more self-control with the hormones because it is not raging, it is not testosterone, that's why. So that's why we have a better control, we don't have enough aggression to do football." Earlier in this dissertation, I examined how parents (in West Peak, in particular) used stories about biology to mark football as useful, appropriate, and beneficial for boys in explaining why they allowed their sons to play. Those stories also worked to mark men and boys as the owners, the experts of football and to erect boundaries that excluded women and girls.

In addition to the imagined biological appropriateness of masculinity for the game, parents pointed to fathers as the parents with the necessary expertise to understand and navigate football for their sons because they perhaps had played the game themselves once. Angela, an advantaged, white, married mother, described it this way:

Because I think at least in my experience, it's very different. Because, like, dads have played football. And having their sons play is very different than a mom, who couldn't



have played football. I mean I tried. I wasn't allowed on the team. And now I get that. There are very few women that really understand football, and we don't understand the whole mentality of ... You know it's almost like a war mentality. You know this bonding that goes on. That women, moms, you know, we don't know. We bond watching the games and decorating the stadium. But we don't bond from the violence and the hitting and the learning the plays and all that kind of stuff. That's for them [sons and fathers]. I stay out of that.

Angela's comments are interesting and multifaceted. First, while Angela's husband and the father of her son had, in fact, not played football himself, she uses a generalized imagined other to suggest that men can understand football more so than women because they had firsthand experience playing the game. She also points out that her attempts at playing the game in her girlhood were met with resistance that she now understands as appropriate, as she explained, "And now I get that." She then goes on to situate women, and mothers, in particular, as simply not having the capacity to understand football as a masculine space (which she likens to war – despite women actively serving in the military). She explains that there is a shared knowledge, a "bonding" that men and boys share, that allow them to "learn the plays and all that kind of stuff" – important "stuff" that could situate a person as appropriate for making decisions for players. Finally, she is clear about where women's place is in football, as those watching, supporting, decorating, and cheering the boys on from a distance.

As Angela demonstrates above, stories that erected gendered boundaries around football did not stop at the gender of those playing the game. They also included explanations about why women, mothers, were relegated to an unknowledgeable, lower-status parental position when it came to making decisions for the boys who played. Mothers talked about how they perceived differences between men and women, and how those differences created a circumstance in football that they just could not understand. Lindsay, an advantaged, white, married mother, told

me, “I just think they’re different, men and women. I just think they really are just different. And boys are more aggressive. We’re different, and that’s good, that’s ok.” Patricia explained:

I just think the idea of...getting your head knocked in...I think there’s an adrenaline rush in football that you don’t find in other sports. I really don’t get the appeal. I don’t know, that’s my only explanation for why they like to go out and just get beat up every weekend. I don’t begin to try to understand why they do that.

Mothers and fathers talked about football as not only a game but an *experience* that mothers simply could not relate to or truly understand. For some as described above, it was tied to biology. For others, it was a lack of firsthand experience, as Jason exemplified when he said, “With football, you see, you really have to be...you’ve got a guy next to you and you’ve got his back. And I think that’s very hard for females to understand. I mean in general. But also because they’ve never played.” The idea of natural expertise via the “nature” of masculinity and learned expertise via the “nurture” of experience (having played) defined men as the owners of football, and thus fathers (and coaches and boys, as I will discuss below) as the appropriate people to be making decisions about the boys that played.

Fathers typically held on to this ownership tightly, like Ron, a white, advantaged, married father, did when he explained, “I just, I know better. This is something I do with my son. My wife, she loves to go to the games and such. But I’m the one who actually knows what’s going on. That’s not abnormal.” Mothers recognized fathers’ claims as the “expert” parents in regards to football and also emphasized their gendered relationships as fathers and sons – relationships that mothers did not share in. This was especially important to Heather, an advantaged, white, married mother, who told me:

I think it's a bonding activity. When my younger son was young, my husband coached the football team, so probably before middle school football. That was a nice thing, I guess. They liked it. They do; they bond. They talk about it. They get it. They get each other with terminology and stuff. I mean we [mothers] don’t get that. We just don’t.

While both mothers and fathers participated in stories that framed men and fathers as the owners and experts of football, mothers' stories were less consistent in other places within their interviews. Cynthia, an advantaged, married Latina mother, exemplified this well when early in our interview she told me, "I like to go to the games and watch – I bring the snacks sometimes. It's fun! But I leave a lot of that technical stuff up to [husband's name]. He knows that stuff. I don't." Yet, later in our interview Cynthia also revealed dissatisfaction in some of the constraints she felt as a woman in what she referred to as a "boys' sport", even suggesting that "We, as mothers, maybe we should get together and find a way in so that we matter more." Cynthia's openness about her frustration in the gendered nature of the space sheds light on the strength of the gendered boundary in football parenthood, and the sense of disempowerment that mothers often described experiencing in difficult decision-making moments for their boys.

These "Who gets to say?" questions included decision-making around whether or not to allow boys to play the game in the first place, whether or not (or when) a boy should play injured, whether or not (or when) a boy had properly recovered from an injury, whether or not (or when) a boy should stop playing all together, whether or not the coach's treatment of boys was appropriate, whether or not a boy was getting enough "play time," or even if he was playing "appropriately." In the following section, I examine ways in which both mothers and fathers negotiated this difference in gendered parental power, and the question of "Who gets to say?" what happens to their sons playing football.

#### "WHO GETS TO SAY?": NEGOTIATING GENDER AND PARENTAL POWER

Parents in both West Peak and East summit recognized certain boundaries that they, as parents, should or should not cross when it came to making decisions about their boys in football. In the question of "Who gets to say?" what happens to these boys was negotiated

among parents, boys, and coaches. My conversations with parents revealed that they understood that part of the process of boys becoming men through football was their ability, as parents generally, to take a step back, to give their boys the space to make choices for themselves, and for their boys to learn to communicate with other men (namely, their coaches). This was an important rule to follow, particularly in regards to not getting too involved, too soon when it came to possible injuries or disputes about play time. “There is definitely a code,” Keith, a highly advantaged, white, married father, told me, “for parents not showing that side of them when their kid is hurt. I mean, the last thing a football player would want is to have a parent run onto the field and be like ‘oh god!’.”

Learning to hold back and find new ways to negotiate with others about choices made for their sons was not always easy, but parents' ability to navigate these rules was important to boys' burgeoning masculine identities. Keith's comment illustrates the gendered nature of the importance of parents learning the rules. On the field, boys are constructing and performing masculinity, which, parents explained (see Chapters 5 and 6) requires a sense of “toughness” and resilience that parental intervention might spoil. Learning to walk the boundary was complicated for parents, as Lindsay described, “I wanted to run out [after her son was unable to get up after being tackled]. It is our natural instinct, to take care of our children. It's what we're supposed to do.” I asked Lindsay why she felt like she needed to hold back and did not run out onto the field, to which she responded, “We're supposed to not do that. I think that there comes a ... I don't know what the time frame is, but where you need to let them take care of themselves, until they're off the field. There's a boundary.”

Lindsay recognizes the boundary and explains it was parents' jobs to let boys learn to take care of themselves. Doing this was hard, though, as she feels that accomplishing this meant

denying her “natural instinct.” Similarly, Alan explains, “It was kind of hard (to learn to hold back). You do still have that instinct...and you still have that inward desire to just go out there. But you have to put that aside, you know? That’s for coach to do now.” Parents often point to coaches as important figures with whom to negotiate when it came to choices that were made for their boys, but negotiations with coaches (usually around boys’ play time, playing while injured, and punishments) were themselves highly gendered.

Parents often pointed to the importance of boys learning to negotiate on their own behalf directly with their team coaches, as Dawn, an advantaged, white, married mother, said, “I encourage my children to communicate with their coaches directly, it’s important.” Jorge, a disadvantaged, divorced, Latino father told me about why he felt this was so important:

The coach is like a second dad. A dad away from home. He’s the one that your son goes to for advice and leadership and strength and everything else. He’s like a dad, like a second dad. Because he getting your son to do things that you don’t normally get him to do. Because around the house, you don’t tell your son to do pushups and go run around a lap [laughs], but the coach can get your son to do that and bring out the best in him.

Coaches, parents imagined, were an important part of the parenting project of making men. Here, Jorge explicitly casts his son’s coach in a quasi-parental role as his "second dad" who was teaching his son important, distinct lessons. Coaches were also where many parents across both communities placed the ultimate responsibility of keeping the boys safe while playing, like Mark, an advantaged, white, divorced father put it, “You really rely on the coaching staff to teach proper technique to avoid injuries. That’s what you do now, you rely on the coaches,” and Patricia, a white, advantaged, married mother, explained, “It’s ultimately up to the coaching staff. And we learn that. We learn to step back and give some space. The coaches, they teach the kids how to hit properly. Making sure that both teams are playing that way.” In parents’ stories, coaches are important in negotiating “Who gets to say?” what happens to boys, as parents both

give coaches considerable power over choices and considerable responsibility for boys' well-being.

Negotiations with coaches were not always positive, and conversations with parents revealed challenges. First, parents described difficult moments that boys had negotiating with coaches directly, as was so important. Cynthia told me about a frustrating situation with a coach on her son's previous team that she felt had been intentionally singling him out and picking on him, particularly when he resisted the coach's use of running laps as punishment for losing games:

He [son] learned, like, coach is your bully. Coach is your bully. But I'll tell you, I let him handle it. And it was so hard, but he learned. He learned how to deal with that man, and it has really helped him manage difficult people as he's gotten older. And really, we would have dealt with it if we had to. [Husband] would have stepped in if we decided it was necessary, but it wasn't, so that was good.

Cynthia's story begins to reveal how gender complicates the delicate balance of sharing the "say" over what happens to boys. While she explains that her son was ultimately able to handle his "bully" coach, she goes on to tell me that if parental intervention was necessary, it would be her husband who would negotiate with the coach. This was common across my interviews with parents in both communities: one of the most important boundaries was the gender boundary that mothers should not cross.

Jason was very explicit about this boundary and spoke from the experience he gained several years prior to our interview when he coached his son's eighth-grade team:

Yeah, moms don't get involved. They shouldn't. They know better. It can be frustrating. A lot of moms think that organized sports are basically an alternative day care. But this is football. And you try to coach kids up and try to really make they understand the commitment, especially in football. Moms don't get that. Football is a very tough game. And it's very physically demanding. Kids are going to get hurt. And sometimes they aren't very good, and we're not going to play them. But that's *our* decision, not theirs.

Brian, a highly advantaged, white, married father had similar thoughts about the boundary that mothers, in particular, were not supposed to cross with coaches, as he explained:

It's just not good. And it's embarrassing for the kid [if mothers get involved]. Who wants that? So most of them [mothers] know to keep back, keep out of it. And I know the coaches appreciate that. I mean, even, even if you think about boys starting to play football or not. Even if they don't. Let's just say, ok, believe me, when someone asks you 'did you ever play football as a kid?' 'Yes I did' is a good answer. That's a better answer than 'No, my mom wouldn't let me.' And even, even if you have to say your dad wouldn't let me, that's better.

In this case, Brian touches on another aspect of how gender matters to negotiations and parental power. In the hierarchy, coaches are supposed to have first "say" as the men who are controlling the space. Boys learn to negotiate on their own behalf with the coaches and develop a "say" over their own lives and relationships with other men. From there, if parents feel they absolutely need to step in and cross the boundary, to break the "rules," then it is fathers who are supposed to do so. For mothers, the rule stands, even, according to Brian, in deciding between whether or not boys should be playing in the first place.

Parents' stories reflected this parental power gender imbalance, in which fathers were afforded the "expert" role of men in a masculine space and mothers were relegated to disempowered, supporting, and unobtrusive roles. Fathers told stories about negotiating with coaches and boys, where they felt empowered to do so, as Jack, an advantaged, white, married father, exemplified when he said, "If there was a problem, I would have stepped in, sure. I would have done so discretely, with one on one with the coach. Just to say, hey, let's touch base and talk about this thing. And I think if it's done that way and you're not getting in anyone's face, then everyone's fine with it." Mothers, on the other hand, do not tell such stories. Instead, mothers describe recognizing the expectation that they would not intervene, directly negotiate, or exert parental power, as Melissa, an advantaged, white, married mother, did when she told me

about an incident where her son got hurt during a game, and the coaches had him continue to play. She told me:

I was furious. If I was a man and walked, it happened and walked up to the coach and had a conversation, the coach would have accepted it much more. Where being a woman and walking up to him would not have worked. And, I already knew that. I know there are certain situations to do things one way and there are certain situations to do it a different way. And so in this way, I felt I was correct in doing it that way instead of just confronting the man. Because he would not have been able to handle it.

Melissa was frustrated with the choices that were being made for her son's well-being but felt that because she was a woman she could not confront the coaches and demand a different decision be made. Melissa explicitly states that she felt she would have had more power to do so if she was a man, and she is also very clear that she felt that these were the rules and that there was no space for her to do otherwise.

There were also difficulties between mothers and fathers in negotiating decisions around football for their sons. Mothers and fathers across both communities framed fathers as having the ultimate “say” in such circumstances. Anna told me about what happened when her sons who played football starting in middle school ultimately stopped playing in their later years of high school. She said:

The reason why, I’m sure you might ask me later in the conversation, but the reason why we’re not continuing is because my husband...I guess me too...maybe more so my husband...feels the concussion is such a big issue. And it’s really scary. And long term effect of concussion and brain injury and etcetera. Still, you know, going on. And so we are not letting him continue, if you will. But...if they really wanted they would have pushed and I would have given in. Because, it’s a lot of for like them to decide, not me.

Here, Anna explains that the decision was joint, but positions her husband as the ultimate driver of the decision making. Additionally, she ends her comment by pointing out that if her sons had pushed harder, she would have "given in" to what they wanted. Throughout her story, Anna finds



herself “making choices,” but not quite. She has very little power in negotiating with her husband and her sons. As she explained, it was “for them to decide, not me.”

Some mothers, like Anna, did not openly display frustration with their lack of parental power. For example, after I asked Eva, a less class advantaged, divorced, Latina mother, why she felt more comfortable with her husband making choices, she told me, “I think he knows more about the game that I do. He knew more, and I think, ‘If you want to do that, then okay.’” Many mothers, however, were open about feeling disempowered, angry, and frustrated. Julie, an advantaged, married, white mother, clenched her fist and rolled her eyes when she told me about how she felt, “I just hate it, hate it. And I feel very trapped in a kind of cultural paradigm that's built around it.” Despite this, most mothers dealt with their frustrations but ultimately followed the “rules” of gender, parental power, and football – although, not all did. In the following section, I examine mothers in my sample who pushed back, broke the rules, and suffered the consequences. In this section, I also discuss how some mothers were able to exert more parental power than others, without paying the same price.

#### BREAKING THE RULES: MOTHERS’ ATTEMPTS TO RECLAIM POWER

Negotiations around “Who gets to say” and who gets to make which choices about boys who play youth football are gendered, often putting mothers in a disempowered position. For the parents in my study, football was clearly positioned as “men’s domain” – a space controlled by men in which boys learn to be men. Mothers thus experienced constraints and challenges in their decision-making power – particularly in regards to negotiating with fathers, coaches, and the boys themselves – about whether or not boys should play, how injuries should be handled, intervention in times of concern, and general feelings about the role football should play in their boys’ lives. Mothers received messages about the limits they were supposed to recognize in how

much power they have to act on the decisions they think should be made for their boys in those instances. But not all mothers follow the gendered power rules all of the time. In this section, I examine several ways in which mothers “broke the rules” and attempted to reclaim power.

First, I found that some mothers in the affluent West Peak community and some relatively more privileged mothers in the mixed community of East Summit did attempt to directly challenge men with their opinions and their claims to parental decision-making power. These confrontations, however, did not typically end well. In my conversation with East Summit mother, Linda, I learned about what some of the consequences can be for some mothers when they “break the rules.” At the time of our interview, Linda, an advantaged, married, white mother, was a successful nurse practitioner and was married with one son who played youth football from middle school through high school. She was also among the relatively more privileged East Summit parents in my sample. My conversation with Linda was interesting, as she started her story out by emphasizing how important football was in her family and that, “We just love it!” As her story went on, it became clear that football was important in Linda’s family, but that she, perhaps, was relegated to marginal inclusion in the family football bond. Her narrative emphasized her husband and son, with her role on the fringes, as her account illustrates:

My husband is a huge football fan and played football when he was in junior high and high school. Our son then developed a great appreciation for football and love of football, and began playing football when he was in fifth grade, and played every single year and loves the game of football. We've spent the last several years attending football games, and then when we're not actually attending a game that he was in, then we're watching football games or we're doing some kind of fantasy football league activity. That is, the boys do that. I don't participate in that.

Linda explained that as an NP, her background in health and medicine made it difficult, at times, to deal with the potential injuries inherent in football. In fact, of all of the East Summit mothers,

Linda was perhaps the most vocal about her consideration of injuries due to her occupation as a medical practitioner. She struggled when she explained:

Skylar did have three concussions, two concussions, while he played during these years. He had to have a couple of CAT scans, and that was the thing. If he had one more, anything else, it was my limit because of the nurse in me because I know later on, he can be significantly impacted by that, and those injuries are very serious.

At several points in our interview, Linda drew boundaries, explaining that she would call on her parental (and medical) power to make the decision not to allow her son to continue to play.

However, her narrative was complicated by fears around what might happen if she did try to stop her son from playing. She told me about a negotiation she had experienced with her husband and son that exemplifies this, as she recounted her first attempt to pull back on her son's involvement in football, "It's kind of ... I guess in our family, I'm just being honest, it's kind of a team up, just them against me and the dog, and his [dog] vote doesn't count. So, we just came to that agreement. If you are injured, if you have any kind of other head injury, that will be it. He seems fine, so ..." I asked Linda how she felt about being shut down when she tried to make a decision about her son, to which she responded:

I think it's harder for moms. Football, it's like a boy's club. At least that's how I perceive it in our family. At least in our little family, with football being such a highly valued thing by them, not by me, but by them, for me to cut it out is like devaluing them. It's one of those lines you may not want to cross or there will be consequences.

I asked Linda about what she thought those consequences might be and she explained. "If I had pushed harder, if I had stuck to my guns and he didn't play? I think I would have been blacklisted by both my husband and my son, so I had to learn to adapt and just be present and observe."

Linda, a highly skilled medical professional, was still a mother and did not get to be the one who had the final "say" in what would happen to her son, despite her concerns about his

physical safety. She tried to exert her parental power but faced and recognized the consequences if she did not give in. She learned this lesson the hard way when she went through a similar experience with her son's coach the year prior. During a game, her son, Skylar, had sustained a major hit, so hard "It was nuts, you just watched as his helmet got knocked off his head and flew across the field." She told me about confronting the coaches after Skylar was immediately put back in the game:

It was weird. And I was pissed. But like, men just communicate differently, I don't know. I was very PC about it, but I did say, "Hey, I want you to know my kid got hit tonight. His helmet was knocked off. We had to take him to the emergency room to get a CAT scan, and he has a concussion. What is your procedure for kids who have a concussion?" Maybe that coach doesn't like being confronted. I mean, I guess my husband should have gone up to him.

Linda explained that after she confronted the coach, "I'll tell you what happened from that moment on, I think they, after I made a big stink about that, they penalized my son. They penalized him for the rest of his time in football. After that incident, they consistently chose other players for the positions rather than him." In this instance, Linda learned that when mothers cross the gender boundaries of decision-making about boys in football, they are not the only ones who might suffer the consequences, but their sons may, as well.

In West Peak, Claudia, a white, advantaged, married mother, had a similar experience of confronting coaches about her opinions, claiming rights to her parental decision-making power. Claudia, a married, German-born mother, told me, "I don't actually understand Americans and this thing with American football and all the weird rules." Claudia explained that the "weird rules" were about youth football and the boundaries parents, and mothers particularly, were not supposed to cross. "They literally told us that we weren't supposed to communicate with coaches about things – it's for the boys to learn to do that for themselves. But I know that's crap, because I watch the men do it all the time." Claudia also explained that despite recognizing these "rules,"

she had no intention following them, “Absolutely not. That’s my child. I don’t know, I mean I’m from Germany and we don’t know football that well. But that’s my son, not theirs.” Claudia emphasized what she understood as cultural differences, but felt that her position as her son’s parent should necessarily “overrule” the coaches, despite them being men and her being a woman who did not “know much about football.” This approach, however, did not come without costs, as she explained:

Yeah, so I called several times [to talk about her son not being put in to play in the games enough] and then that one time I actually took myself down to his office because it was actually serious stuff [when her son *was* played while injured]. He [coach] was so angry with me. He would barely speak to me and he literally even said to me that mothers who do this kind of thing are really hurting their boys. Making their boys wusses or something. He even sent out an email to the parent listserv afterward about *moms* following the previously agreed upon rules [about parents not contacting coaches about disputes].

Similar to Linda’s experience, Claudia told me that she felt her “breaking the rules” of claiming parental power had also hurt her son, as she told me, “And well, they certainly didn’t play him *more* after those incidents, I can tell you that much.” Both Linda and Claudia represent more privileged mothers’ attempts to reclaim parental power within football and how those direct confrontations resulted in (or could have resulted in) negative consequences: such as being “blacklisted” by their sons and husbands to their sons bearing the brunt of the punishment.

In my interview with Kate, another West Peak mother, I learned that some women attempted to “push back” and break the rules while avoiding consequences by finding innovative ways to reclaim their parental power. In her story, Kate, a white, advantaged, married mother, detailed a frustrating and alarming experience that she felt well-represented ways that she, as she explained, “[I] found ways to do what I needed to do or what I thought I needed to do,” for her son. Early in our conversation, Kate explained that she understood and even agreed with the

“rules” of football for her son, stating, “I got it, it wasn’t for me to step my foot in. That was his world, a boys’ world. For boys and men. That wasn’t for me to do, start making demands.”

Later in the interview, though, Kate told me about an incident in which her son and the other members of the team had apparently upset the coaches by failing to properly execute a play during an important game, prompting the coaches to “punish” the boys by withholding water. Kate told me about her understanding of how important it was that she not “interfere” with her son’s experiences in football, but that when she felt like she had to, she, and other mothers, found ways to do so while working around the boundaries mothers were not supposed to cross:

So [I would intervene] in as non-interfering way possible, to keep an eye out on things. Where, if there were any improprieties or lack of safety, you know, especially if the coaches were negligent. Um, the one coach was [negligent] one time. Which is, like a water thing and a punishment and I was like, no I'm not going to allow those kinds of things to take place. That's not correct. I won't allow my child to be, you know, put in a precarious situation because somebody, an adult's having a fit. So, I won't allow that. But otherwise to, just be there and monitor. It's really more about monitoring than stepping in and doing anything. I don't play football [laughs]. And, also, just allowing, you know, it's again, it's a very very rough sport. And, um, you know it's not my type of thing but it doesn't mean that it's not, it wasn't my son's type of thing.

I asked Kate to tell me more about the “water thing,” to which she responded:

OK, apparently the coach didn't like the way that the boys were playing their football for some reason, and on a very hot day decided that they weren't allowed to have water. I'm not even sure if he [coach] brought the proper water, but I know that he, um, he was in a huff about something and as an authority figure like that, he's also in a position of taking care of them. And, this was way over the line. This was not going to be tolerated by myself and several other mothers. And I noticed that quite a few parents just sat there, and even dads just sat there. But I did not and another woman did not. And I think someone else did not. And we all, separately, we didn't do it together, we didn't talk about it, we separately went to the store, bought bottles of water and brought them back. And handed them, handed the water to these kids and said, ‘Here, here's your water, drink your water.’

I asked Kate if the coach was present when she and the other mothers gave the boys water. She told me:

I don't think so. I mean, it was better that he was not. In other words, not having an argument, but doing the correct thing and um, the coach had to learn something there also. He had to learn what's correct and what's not correct. And he's very lucky he wasn't reported, but maybe...well by me.... but maybe he was reported by someone else. But I knew that if anything like that happened again, he would be reported, he would be gone. Because I would not allow something like that, not only for my own son but for the whole team. That's not coaching. That's just being a bully. And I just won't let it happen.

Kate and the other mothers did not directly confront the coach about depriving their boys of water, which they vehemently rejected as an acceptable decision. Instead, the mothers brought their own water and when the coach was not watching, gave the water to the boys – ultimately making parental decisions, acting on them, and going around the coach to do so. Negotiating with the coach did not appear to be an option, as Kate said, “[I’m] not having an argument.” Kate’s experience also exemplifies the difficulty in telling such stories of innovation, of finding ways around the rules as opposed to overtly claiming parental power. Here, she emphasizes that she would hold the coach responsible “if anything like that happened again,” but by reporting him and not by directly confronting him. Confrontation still appeared to be off limits, especially for mothers.

Interestingly, crossing the gendered boundaries and doing so directly did appear to be more possible for some of the marginalized mothers of East Summit. This was especially true for single mothers and poor mothers. In talking with East Summit mother, Tammy, I learned how the gendered boundaries of football became porous for less privileged women. At the time of our interview, Tammy was a disadvantaged, white step-mother of two teenage boys who were playing high school football. Tammy had been married to her husband, Josh, for four years and had been raising his children (from a previous relationship) for “gosh, basically the entire time we’ve been together.” Tammy explained that Josh had been in and out of prison for much of his children’s lives and “So, he really doesn’t know how to raise kids – especially teenagers.”

Tammy explained that this had caused some distance to grow between Josh and the boys and that as a result, “The boys are really, really close with me. So they are kind of more drawn to me than they are him. I mean, I take the boys to practice. I chat with coach. I take them to school every day. I wake them up. I feed them. I pick up after them. I mean, I’m the sole person in this parenting.” At other points in the interview, Tammy expressed frustration through experiences of feeling “othered” by the more privileged parents and community members in her community (as detailed in Chapter 5), but throughout our conversation, she revealed that she had considerable parental power, even within the context of football. This was possible, I argue, because of her marginalized status and the community’s recognition of the absence of her husband in their boys’ lives.

I consider Tammy as one of the more marginalized parents in the East Summit sample due to her struggles with poverty and the hardships that accompanied her husband’s incarceration and drug use. Interestingly, Tammy’s marginalized status appeared to create more space for her to cross gendered boundaries that were more fixed for the privileged West Peak mothers and the relatively more privileged East Summit mothers. With her husband often in prison, Tammy functioned as a single mother relatively often and wound up developing a particularly close relationship with her step-sons. This appeared to facilitate more room for her to negotiate with them about what she wanted them to do in regards to football. This also appeared to flow into her negotiations with coaches, as well – a practice often met with distinct consequences for other mothers (particularly in West Peak). During our interview, Tammy explained that the coaches knew her husband was largely absent from her boys’ lives and so they knew to come to her with any issues, treatment she would not have received if her husband had been more present. She told me about her relationship with the coaches on her sons’ team:



They're good guys. We don't always agree, but that's ok. Like, for one, the coaches told me that he [one of her sons] needs to be more on the rough side if he plays football. He wasn't "rough enough" for the position that he played. He was too gentle. And it kind of made me angry because it's like high school. They're not playing in the NFL! So that made me a little angry that the coaches wanted my son to be almost angry when he was playing. But yeah, so I told the coaches, "This is high school football. I don't want my son hurting another high school player because then you're going to come to me saying, 'Your son just hurt, broke that other high school player.' That's going to make me feel horrible, and my son. I told the coach, 'I'll have him step it up a little bit, but my son doesn't get angry. He doesn't play aggressive. I'll tell him to step it up a little bit, but I'm not going to ...' And it was fine. They got it, they understood. They still bring it up sometimes with me and we still talk about it and stuff. But I'm just not going to do that. And they know that, they get it.

Tammy's story demonstrates her ability to directly negotiate with her sons' coaches about decision-making for football. Here, they want her son to play more aggressively. She disagrees. They come to her, not her husband (who is often absent) and they negotiate. In the end, she claims the ultimate decision-maker role and says "no" to the coaches' requests and, most importantly, "they get it." Tammy does not report punishment or consequences for claiming parental power

Another more marginalized East Summit mother, Sharon, a white, disadvantaged, single-mother, (whom I discussed at length in Chapter 5), described feeling as though the coaches did, in fact, recognize and respect her parental power because she was a single mother, as she explained, "Because, yeah, I'm a single mom, you know? I have to be both mom and dad. That means with this stuff [football], too. So I see it, for sure. I think the coaches talk to me more [than other mothers] and stuff. It just makes sense. Who else are they going to go to? There isn't anyone!" Among the mothers in my sample, this appeared to be true for single mothers, the mother whose husband was incarcerated, and for poor mothers whose husbands were largely absent because they either worked multiple jobs or migrated for work.

The important distinction here is that the mothers who experienced more parental power were women who were already marginalized in the community. These were mothers who were already othered – and specifically via their known identities as single mothers, poor mothers with husbands whose paid work constrained their physical presence in their boys’ lives (such as, attending games or interacting with coaches), or mothers whose husbands were incarcerated. In each case, fathers were absent from negotiations. Because of this, mothers’ negotiations with boys and especially with coaches were allowed more recognition. These women, as Sharon aptly put, were required to “be both mom and dad” – and the other actors in the negotiations thus responded differently to them. Their interactions with other men and boys (coaches and sons) were met with less resistance. In sum, they were afforded more parental power. This was not true, however, for mothers of color who were marginalized via their racial identities. The parental power that some marginalized East Summit mothers did not appear to extend to women of color. Due to my sample size and demographics, I am unable to make strong claims of how race matters in this circumstance. I can, however, state that my data do show that it is not marginalization itself that affords some mothers more negotiating parental power, but specifically marginalization that includes the absence of a male parent.

## CONCLUSION

Across both communities, mothers and fathers defined football (and youth football, specifically) as a male-dominated space. In football, men hold the position as experts and boys learn to move into that position through their interactions and negotiations with other boys and men. Women and mothers are relegated to the outskirts of football, as they are positioned as those without the knowledge, understanding, and even a sort of “natural” comprehension of football and masculinity, more generally. The rules indicate that mothers should stay to the

sidelines, not interfere, and should allow fathers, coaches, and their sons to negotiate among one another in regard to decision-making around playing the game. This leaves mothers with very little parental power and shuts them out of negotiations. For some mothers, this manifests as a loss of power within their own families, as they feel unable to be heard or have their desires acted upon when discussing football with their husbands and sons. For other mothers, the difficulties arise with coaches, a situation that most overtly situates mothers as “outsiders” – mothers are not to negotiate with coaches, and they certainly are *not* supposed to intervene on behalf of their sons with coaches.

Several mothers’ stories in this chapter reveal the potential consequences for mothers breaking these rules. These consequences range from failed negotiations within their families, where they worried about being shut out (or as Linda put it, “blacklisted” if they attempted to push harder), while other consequences manifested through coaches punishing their boys by decreasing their play time or embarrassing them. Despite this, some mothers did push back harder against the “rules” of moms and football. It is within this section of my analysis that I saw the most interesting differences between the mothers in my sample. It appeared that privilege constrained mothers’ ability to break the rules and avoid consequences, while certain kinds of marginalization seemed to protect some mothers from the consequences of breaking the rules. Mothers in the affluent community of West Peak, along with the relatively more privileged mothers in East Summit, appeared more bound to the rules. Those women who did try to break the rules described the most substantial negative consequences. In contrast, some less privileged, marginalized mothers, and specifically, single mothers, in East Summit were able to push back against the rules of gender and football and were able to do so with relatively little negative consequence for themselves or their sons.

Across this dissertation, I have considered how different intersectional identities and contexts have created both opportunities and constraints for differently situated parents raising boys into men through youth football. These differences have manifested between communities, within communities, among differently gendered parents (moms and dads), and for parents with different family forms (such as married vs. single or divorced). In this chapter, I have shown how, in some perhaps unexpected ways, inequalities and constrained parental power are distributed across intersectional gendered identities. In this case, mothers are largely disempowered, but it is the more privileged mothers who appear to experience the most constraints to their parental decision-making power in this particular context. Scholarship on the concept of “respectable femininity” suggests that privileged women (via whiteness or social class) use markers of “appropriate” behavior to distinguish themselves from other women, most readily within the family (Hussein 2017; Radhakrishnan 2009; Frankenberg 1993). These behaviors include adhering to social norms of respectful femininity, including politeness, agreeability, and deference to men (Hussein 2017; Frankenberg 1993). I argue that for the more privileged mothers across both communities, adhering to respectable femininity meant forgoing parental power.

More marginalized mothers, and specifically, single mothers, had a different experience. In regards to parental power, single mothers appeared to be able to enact an empowered motherhood, wherein the absence of a male co-parent, they were able to negotiate with coaches and boys and be recognized and respected in those negotiations. As the only parental voice, these women were able to speak up – and men listened. In this marginalized single parent role, these women were able to enact motherhood differently and advocate for their sons in ways that reflected what they thought was best for their children. This created a stark contrast to the

constraints that the more privileged women of West Peak and East Summit appeared to be experiencing. In this chapter, the single mothers of East Summit did not conform to traditional forms of femininity which lead to a form of empowerment, freeing them to perform a type of “activist motherhood,” as discussed in other scholarship on Black mothers (Collins 1994). In her work on Black activist motherhood, Patricia Hill Collins has shown that some racially marginalized women are able to use that position to re-center motherhood and reclaim power (1994). In that case, Black mothers were able to use their parental power to advocate on behalf of their children, such as in their communities and for their education. I suggest that the findings of this chapter link to that literature, as I draw a parallel to the single mothers of East Summit and the Black mothers of Collins’ work as sharing an experience of turning marginalization into an opportunity for empowerment, challenging ideas that marginalized mothers are without the capacity to enact powerful motherhood.

Across Chapters 6 and 7, I have shown some of the particularly challenging experiences that mothers face in football parenthood. The data suggest that for mothers, there are consequences to the women who are silenced. Women must manage their emotions as to present worry but show they can restrain it, and then find themselves with very little decision-making power for their boys. Mothers’ feelings, behaviors, and even desires to intervene on behalf of their boys are all constrained by their gender. These women discipline their emotions (whether in regards to worries about hardships or worries about injuries) and reconcile the tensions between being a “good” mother who affirms her son’s masculinity and keeps him safe, to be a good partner to their male spouses – but at the same time denying or violating their own sense of what is right for their children. The data across Chapters 6 and 7 also demonstrate that some mothers experience anger and frustration with this situation in ways that are more overt compared to

other manifestations of gender inequalities in their lives. It is plausible to suggest that this is because as mothers, they are supposed to be the experts on parenting and making day to day decisions for their children, and in football, they are robbed of this power. In the next and final chapter of this dissertation, I consider these and other findings from across the four substantive chapters and present a discussion of how, taken together, these findings shed light not only on youth football, but broader issues of a precarious society, constrained parenthood, fragile masculinity, and the meaning of childhood health.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have examined the narratives and experiences of parents of youth football players as they made sense of themselves, their sons, and the work of raising boys into men. My analysis centered on how parents' stories bolstered their identity projects, helped them to navigate emotions, situated them within their local community cultures, and guided them as they negotiated decision-making for their boys. In this final chapter, I organize my concluding thoughts on these processes into three main sections. First, I offer a summary of the findings from each of the four analytic chapters of this research. I next discuss the theoretical and empirical contributions, as well as the broader social and policy implications of the findings. I end by considering the limitations of the study and make suggestions for possible avenues of future research.

#### SUMMARY OF THE ANALYSES

Beyond an in-depth comparison of the two community sites, the four substantive chapters of this dissertation have charted a number of findings. In Chapter Four, I began by examining parents living within the affluent community of West Peak. As detailed above, football was defined as a deviant, hyper-dangerous sport for boys in that community, creating a complicated situation for parents who allowed their boys to play. Parents' narratives leaned heavily on tropes of resilient and "tough" masculinity as the bedrock of making men, particularly in a privileged setting that they associated with fragility and dependence. In this way, parents were able to reframe football as *necessary* and avoiding football as something even more deviant: producing weak men. Consequently, parents' stories reified masculine tropes of dominance and power, combined with a deep value of self-directed care, with little focus on performing care on others.

In West Peak, "good" parents raised their boys through a prism of individualism, making sure to prepare their boys to be successful in a world defined by "every man for himself."

In Chapter Five, I moved to an examination of my second field site, East Summit. In this community, parents' stories demonstrated a different definition of the "right" kinds of men they were trying to raise. In this less affluent space, parents used a *community narrative* that pressed on the importance of mutual care, sharing, and bonds. East Summit parents described the importance of football as a part of raising moral men whom others could depend on and subsequently positioned themselves as similarly moral, giving people in the process. The consequence of this, however, was the use of more marginalized parents and boys in these stories. Here, marginalized people (such as single mothers and low-income families) were cast as "failed" parents and as the dependent receivers of the community's resources, disallowing them from using the community narrative to claim good parent identities for themselves and moral masculine identities for their boys. Relatively more privileged parents in the community were able to build and draw on *care capital*, a currency representing their ability to care for and take care of others in the community. While only introduced briefly in this dissertation, I believe the concept of care capital to be interesting and deserving of future consideration and application to other contexts. The ways in which gender and class played into an emphasis on care, which is typically feminized, for boy children is somewhat surprising. It could be that through the especially masculine sport of football, parents are able to use care capital to boost their boys' status without inadvertently challenging their burgeoning masculine identities by feminizing them.

Chapter Six of the dissertation brought the parents in the two communities together in an analysis of the emotion work necessary in football parenthood. In this chapter, I found that the



lion's share of the work of emotion fell on mothers – especially mothers who felt the most vulnerable in their parenting situations. In East Summit, this weight fell on the more marginalized mothers in the community, as their stories revealed deep sorrow and feelings of disempowerment in their ability to protect their boys from the pain of living a disadvantaged life. This was prevalent in the narratives of single mothers, low-income mothers, and mothers of color – women who struggled to protect their boys from the hardships of class insecurity and racism. Within these stories, football was cast as a gift these mothers were able to give their boys and helped them to manage their emotions and frame themselves as good mothers, despite their limited resources.

In the second half of the chapter, I examined mothers in West Peak and their narratives of emotion. The emotion work required of mothers in West Peak was complex and fit closely with their larger defensive identity work. In deflecting accusations of being bad mothers because they allowed their boys to play football, West Peak mothers told stories that revealed their concerns about football, but that ultimately emphasized the importance of disciplining those emotions for the long-term well-being of their boys. As Angela explained, “I finally had to change my tune, that it is not that bad moms let their kids play football. It is that bad moms don't let their kids go for what they're passionate about. I had to really change, and it was really hard.” My findings show that this strategy was not always easy to employ, as mothers experienced emotional breakdowns within interviews that revealed the emotion work required even as a part of telling the story of doing emotion work, revealing the incredible nuance inherent in the “work” it takes to manage emotions in football motherhood.

Finally, Chapter Seven explored the rocky terrain of negotiating the unequal distribution of gendered power in parents' ability to make decisions for their boys playing football. This

manifested in situations where questions were asked about whether or not boys should play the sport at all, if they should play injured, how they should handle conflicts with coaches, and who ultimately "gets to say" what happens to the boys. In both communities, parents' stories revealed, perhaps unsurprisingly, that they understood football as a heavily male-dominated space where men reigned, and boys were learning to do so. This context left mothers with little agency and many of them described circumstances where their voices were not heard, their requests were denied, and their questions left unanswered. While there are negotiations around "Who gets to say?" mothers are largely pushed out of them.

Not all mothers follow the rules, though, and those who broke them usually paid the price by being shamed, "blacklisted," and even having their boys take the brunt of the punishment by being ousted by coaches. Interestingly, there was variation here, which appeared to be structured by privilege and marginalization. It was the more marginalized mothers, and specifically the single mothers and low-income mothers who were largely parenting alone, who were afforded more "say" by coaches and sons in the absence of a male parent. These findings suggest that in this case, privilege worked against mothers' ability to claim parental power for their boys. Instead, the need to adhere to "respectable" femininity dominated, leaving West Peak mothers and the relatively more privileged mothers in East Summit with less parental power than their more marginalized counterparts.

Taken together, the findings of this dissertation detail the nuanced ways in which parents of youth football players navigated the complex work of raising boys into men within distinct local community cultures. Parents constructed narratives about their experiences accomplishing their parenting work within their local contexts and within their material realities. Across this research, findings demonstrate that intersecting inequalities complicate this work for parents, and

especially for mothers raising boys playing youth football. Class disadvantage and racial othering also shaped parents' experiences and their ability to shape their boys' lives in ways that they imagined would help protect them in childhood *and* help them become successful men later in life. My findings also demonstrate how differently situated parents used tropes about masculinity and power in their own understandings about the kinds of men they hope their boys will become. These narratives reveal the gendered cultural tools embedded in society that are available to parents to use in their sense-making and explanations. It is important, I believe, to remember that these parents are not living in a vacuum, constructing masculinity independently as they go along. They are people, social being in unique social locations, who are constrained by a cultural context that emphasizes the importance of gender and idealizes a version of masculinity that continues to disempower women and more marginalized men.

#### THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

One contribution of this dissertation concerns theories of identities, adding to scholarship on the construction of moral parental identities. My data and findings suggest that in the process of constructing identities for others (here, raising children), individuals also construct their own identities in the process. Parents become who they are through the people they "make"—in this case, the future men they imagine they are helping their boys to become. Moral parental identities are shaped by intersectional social locations built by race, class, and gender (McGuffey 2008) and structure the ways in which parents develop their identity projects to solve particular dilemmas they find themselves in (Edin and Kefalas 2005; Reich 2016). In the case of youth football, I have shown that parents' identity work centers on what they imagine is their ability to adhere to both dominant and locally defined constructions of masculinity in raising their raced and classed boys. Adding to the literature on how an individual's own race, class, and gender

matter in their identity construction, this dissertation shows how the race, class, and gender of *others* (and particularly, others one is responsible for) also shapes one's own identity.

The findings in this dissertation contribute to the family literature by complicating narratives that suggest privilege monolithically sets up families, parents, and children for the most social power and capital, particularly in regards to negotiating with institutional actors (Lareau 2003). Instead, my participants, and particularly the contrast of race and class privileged mothers of West Peak and more marginalized low-income single mothers of East Summit, demonstrate that privilege can work to constrain mothers in some settings. Enacting empowered motherhood, especially in negotiations with male coaches, was facilitated by single mothers' parenting without a male partner and constrained by privileged mothers' connections to enacting a restrained and "respectable" femininity. This finding parallels feminist family scholarship on othered mothers, and particularly on race and motherhood, showing how women of color are, at times, able to "re-center" motherhood and claim power that allows them to advocate strongly on behalf their children (Collins 1994). To my knowledge, this dissertation makes a unique contribution to this scholarship by focusing on social class and alternative family forms in showing how single, poor mothers can experience similar empowerment, and how this finding directly contrasts to the experience of more privileged women in the same geographic area, doing motherhood in the same setting (football).

Finally, this research contributes to scholarship on the experience of motherhood and mothers' roles in raising boy children. Women's moral identities are closely tied to being mothers (Nomaguchi and Milkie 2003), and they are held ultimately responsible for children's welfare (Reich 2005; Waltzer 1998). But what happens in situations where mothers' hands are tied? Where they are pushed out of decision-making for their children? In this research, football

served as an especially masculine space to examine how women – mothers – manage being both ultimately responsible for their boys’ well-being, yet also largely disempowered and pushed out of the space. The mothers across both communities in this study demonstrated some of the challenges, approaches, and innovations they found along the way, and they also illustrate some of the consequences for such contradictory expectations for women. The cultural contradictions inherent in football motherhood reveal the tenuous position mothers experience, with constrained ability to protect their children and their own “good” mother identities. Women experience multiple tensions (including shouldering the heavy burden of emotion work and reclaiming parental power in decision-making), and find different ways to attempt to reconcile them. What this research demonstrates is that reconciling these contradictions is nearly impossible for mothers and they are often left feeling angry, frustrated, and, at times, powerless in doing the mothering work they are held so strictly to successfully accomplishing.

Finally, this research has pointed out the contradictions inherent in raising gendered children within the context of an increasingly risk-concerned society. While I believe these findings contribute to scholarship on gender, children, and families more broadly, I also believe there are important broader social and policy implications within this particular contribution. I discuss this contribution in the following section.

#### BROADER SOCIAL AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

This research is especially timely for several key reasons. I begin this discussion by considering how these findings inform cultural debates about children and football. Currently, conversations about the dangers of football and the irresponsibility of allowing children to play the game are increasingly widespread, with many inquiring, “Why would any parent allow their children to play football?” The findings in this dissertation begin to create a window into

understanding the answer to that question and also point to broader social tensions beyond just football.

As reviewed earlier in this dissertation (in Chapter Two), fears about living in a precarious world defined by uncertainty, instability, and risk have been steadily growing, particularly in the past several decades (Glassner 1999; Lee et al. 2010; Pugh 2015; Villalobos 2014). This general sense of discomfort, in what has been referred to as a "risk-based society" (Villalobos 2014) or a "culture of fear" (Glassner 1999), has been projected onto many areas of social life, including children and masculinity – both as independent and connected concepts. The findings in this dissertation demonstrate how contemporary parents grapple with raising increasingly "vulnerable" children in an increasingly "dangerous" world and how they turn to a particularly physically risky sport to do so with boys in particular.

Concerns about children's well-being permeate the cultural consciousness and inform policies and funding that are meant to assist contemporary families with supporting children's health. Typically, these policies are directed primarily at physical health (such as seen with First Lady Michelle Obama's highly publicized "Let's Move!" campaign). These policies fall short of considering how parents are actually conceptualizing children's well-being holistically and largely ignore how parents must weigh children's social well-being as part of their larger parenting projects (Pace, Mollborn, and Rigles n.d.). With this research, I have demonstrated how for parents of boy children, concerns about the dangers and risks of masculinity weigh just as heavily, and if not more heavily, in decisions they make about what is best for their boys' long term well-being. While football poses physical dangers to their boys' bodies, the game, as they understand it, also teaches their boys what it means to be a man – and more importantly, the "right" kind of man. For parents, boys' physical health is not necessarily more important than

their social health (such as socially accepted identities, social achievements, and social connections).

For the participants in this study, we see that in raising “healthy” boys, parents understand themselves as making “good” men and prioritize that aspect of their parenting work. Parents’ understandings of health for boy children include strong masculine identities – futures as men who will have worth, value, influence, and dignity. These considerations must be taken in context, as this research has also demonstrated the importance of considering local cultures, communities, race, and class in how parents make these decisions. More privileged parents worry about boys becoming weak and ultimately accept the risk of sacrificing their physical well-being in the service of ensuring this does not happen. More marginalized parents worry about their boys not becoming men who will have dignity and presence in the world and make a similar sacrifice in regards to their physical bodies. These are not parents making “bad” or “irresponsible” choices. These are parents attempting to navigate a world in which they have learned that masculinity matters to their boys’ ability to succeed in adulthood, to be respected, to have power, and to be well. From a public health perspective, this research challenges policies and initiatives concerned with children’s health that do not grapple with issues of social identities, and in particular here, with the development of what is perceived as appropriate manhood.

This is occurring in a larger social context where conversations about "fragile," "toxic," and "insecure" masculinity is on the rise. Particularly in this Trumpian era, masculinity has been challenged by voices on both ends of a contentious spectrum of debates about “real manhood.” In the current cultural climate, discourses suggest that “insecure” men are encouraged to return to more traditional, patriarchal gender enactment to “reclaim” their security and power, with

some suggesting that the election of President Trump was, in part, because he appealed to such insecure, emasculated men (Knowles and DiMuccio 2018). On the opposite end of the conversation, increasing attention has been paid to the concept of “toxic masculinity,” where more stereotypical, overt, and hyper-masculine versions of manhood have been recast and challenged, reframed not as “strong,” but instead as destructive, dangerous, and as generally harmful to society (including to men, themselves) (Salam 2019). In both cases, masculinity has been called into question and problematized, either as “too little” or “too much.”

Fears about sustaining and protecting masculinity are not new and have been examined in scholarship on boy children (Pascoe 2007) and parenting boy children (McGuffey 2008). The findings of this dissertation add to these conversations and demonstrate how parents, living within this broader context of a sense of precariousness, worries about children, and fraying definitions of masculinity, are attempting to navigate such thorny terrain. The participants in this study illustrate how contemporary parents, across class and race lines, bring these larger concerns and beliefs into their decision-making for their boys in regards to their health and in regards to the men they hope they one day become. I suggest that these findings should push policymakers and family advocates to consider how to integrate broader understandings of what it means to do "good" parenting and do "best" for children – and here, boy children, specifically – into programs meant to support how parents care for their children's well-being. When parents are afraid their boys will not become the kind of men that society demands, they pour their energies into protecting them from that fate (as opposed to protecting them from skull fractures or broken spines). And when the society that surrounds them suggests that masculinity is "in trouble," and demands the kind of men they become to be "tough," aggressive, and dominating of women and other men, then it is unsurprising that in raising boys into men, parents both put



boys' bodies as risk and perpetuate serious issues regarding masculinity that are corrosive to society.

In light of the findings of this dissertation, I have both practical and broader policy suggestions concerning football, as well as family and childhood health, more generally. While my primary experience with youth football is limited to my two field sites, I witnessed many games where the teams I studied played other teams across the larger geographic area. I paid attention to what was occurring with those other teams as well. One of the most shocking realizations I made during my time conducting this research was just how much variation there is in regards to football and safety equipment for boys, emergency response (type and time), and whether or not there is a medical expert present during the games. Unsurprisingly, the more privileged teams I observed had higher quality equipment, played in areas where emergency response was fast, and where there was always a trained medical expert present (as I inquired about at every game I attended). For the less privileged teams, this was absolutely not the case.

In watching less privileged teams, I regularly saw boys playing with broken protective padding and overheard talk of “hand me down” helmets. I also witnessed one event where East Summit was playing a particularly poor team from a neighboring town. I watched as a boy from the other team was tackled and knocked out cold. The coaches attempted to wake him up, but they were unsuccessful. What I witnessed next was truly shocking. I watched as the coaches from both teams appeared to be panicking, unsure of what to do. A parent finally called for an ambulance that took no less than *twenty minutes* to arrive. The entire time, the boy was unconscious and no adults present appeared to have any medical training, including the coaches and team staff. I attempted to check up on the boy in the days that followed, but was unable to find any information on his condition. In my interviews with parents, I asked if they believed

there was any consistency in equipment and medical personnel. Parents' answers were incredibly varied, as some thought there were regulations, others thought it was determined at a team by team basis, and some parents simply had no idea. In talking to one of the fathers in my sample, a football coach for the Midline Youth Football League, I learned that there are in fact no regulations, and that low-income teams often do play without appropriate safety measures.

I propose that whether it be at the community or school level, any sport or activity that youth engage in that leaves them open to serious injury should be subject to clearly defined and monitored (and funded) regulations that are applied to any and all teams, including those in low-income communities. Low-income communities should receive stipends to ensure they have the resources for high quality equipment and medical and emergency response training for team staff. Regulations should include mandating safe, high quality equipment and that there always, with no exception, be an adult with medical training present at any and all games and practices. Funding issues complicate this, indeed, but are no excuse for why less advantaged children's health is sacrificed or why their bodies are not valued just as much as boys on the "other side of town." As participant Cynthia told me, "They could die...for a stupid game." In light of the findings of this research, I strongly advocate for regulations that protect all children, including those most vulnerable among us, from such a fate.

I also have suggestions for broader policy initiatives for family and childhood health, more generally. The findings of this research demonstrate that people do not always prioritize physical health when balancing their (and their children's) well-being. A person's, and in this case, a child's, well-being is understood by parents as holistic, and includes their social health, as along with their physical health. In the findings of this dissertation show parents weighing out the protection of their boys' bodies with the protection of their social health, or more

specifically, their masculine identities. It is ineffective, then, to create programs that do not consider how parents make sense of their children's health in a way that goes beyond what is typically prioritized in "healthy children" campaigns (such as diet, exercise, and sleep). Physical aspects of health are important, but the parents in this study demonstrate that social aspects of health are equally, and at times, even more important to parents, and that this is true for both advantaged and disadvantaged parents. Thus, I recommend that programs and initiatives developed to support children's health integrate all aspects of health and well-being, and adjust their campaigns to reflect this. To better support families, policies must reflect their actual needs and lived experiences.

#### LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Across the different phases of this project – from my three years spent in the field and interviewing, to the three additional years spent analyzing the many pages of subsequent field notes and transcripts – I have attempted to find the balance between centering the voices of my participants and examining the deeper sociological processes embedded within their stories. This dissertation represents my greatest efforts to do so and also represents the challenges inherent in qualitative research, ethnography, and narrative analyses. While I believe I have stayed true to my data and worked fastidiously to represent my participants – the incredibly busy, yet incredibly generous parents who shared their time with me – in ways that I hope feel authentic and respectful to them, I am also aware that my analyses may not align perfectly with their positions. As I methodically analyze the parents performing the deeply personal and emotional work of raising children, it is important to reflect on this potential disparity between stories told and stories interpreted, perhaps not as a limitation, but as a meaningful consideration.

It is also important to reflect on other considerations and limitations in this study, as they help to situate the work and help point to possible directions for future research. First, it is important to consider that my findings are bound within the specific locations where I performed the research. This includes the two specific communities that became my field sites, as well as the broader geographic area where those communities are located. As discussed in Chapter 3 (Methods), health and parenthood have distinct meanings within the local culture in this region. The findings in this study are necessarily are bound to these spaces and should not be generalized to other parents, living in other communities, in other states, and in other parts of the U.S. Instead this study contributes to our understandings of process, of how uniquely situated parents import broader cultural representations of masculinity and parenthood in their locally performed work of raising children, and specifically here, the work of making men.

These considerations leave room for exciting opportunities to explore how differently situated parents may perform similar work but in dissimilar social and physical locations. This could include parents in different communities, states, and geographic areas, but could also include parents of younger boys or boys playing different sports or engaging in different extracurriculars. Additionally, future research could look to the parents of girl children and how they understand the parenting work of raising girls into women. I believe considering girl children playing sport, perhaps soccer (as it is a highly celebrate sport for girls), would prove fruitful in understanding how parents use broader representations of gender (here, “modern” femininity) in their cultural toolkits and explicate the kinds of women they imagine they are helping their daughters become.

In addition to these considerations, it is important to note that due to the demographic makeup of the areas I studied within, my sample did not have a large representation of parents of

color, single fathers, or parents raising children in alternative family arrangements (such as living and raising children with extended family members, within same-sex families, or within families with disabilities). Along with this, my sample does not fully represent parents from an important population in East Summit: Latinx immigrant communities. East Summit has rich and thriving communities of Latinx families who include people who have recently immigrated to the U.S. and whose sons play youth football. I was unable, I believe, to fully represent these parents and families in this study, partially due to language barriers and partially because I was unknown (and not vetted) in those communities. I believe it is important to acknowledge the underrepresentation of the parents and families I have mentioned in this section – underrepresented in this study and in research on family life, more broadly – and emphasize that my findings do not capture the experience of all parents – or even of all parents within my specific community field sites.

In society, parents are held to task for doing the difficult, exhausting, joyful, heavily monitored, and deeply significant work of raising children. In this study, and other scholarship on families, parents symbolize the social actors who are helping to create future generations – but they are also just people doing their best for their children, their families, their communities, and for themselves. This work necessarily varies for different parents in different situations, yet they are also brought together by their shared experiences raising children. Their children are gendered, raced, and classed – as are the parents, as are the spaces they raise their children within. In this dissertation, I have revealed some of the race, class, and gender projects parents navigate raising boys in youth football and demonstrated the profound complexities involved in such projects. As we broaden our understandings of how parents accomplish these projects, of the people they imagine they are making, and of how they become who they are in the process,

we expand our understandings of how to best support parents and they support their children, and themselves.

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## APPENDIX A

## INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

**PRELIMINARY:**

1. Your child's name:
2. Age:
3. Grade level:
4. Team:
5. Position:
6. Length of time playing:
7. Still plays?:
8. Are you Married/Partnered?
9. Other children:
10. Have you/your /spouse partner
  - a. Played football?
  - b. Coached football?
  - c. Played or coached any sport?

**GENERAL**

1. What do you think about football?
2. How did (child) become involved in football? Can you remember when (child) first showed interest?
4. Do you go to the games?
5. Does (child) have any buddies on the team? Can you tell me about them? Do you know their parents?

**LEARNING, GROWING, MATURING**

6. I've heard some people say they think team sports and football are good for kids – what do you think?
7. How do you think being a member of the team affects (child)?
8. Do you think (child) will continue to play (do you want him to, think he should)?
9. Do you think (child) will play in college – is that important to you?

**RISK/INJURIES/BODIES**

10. Some people consider football an intense sport – what do you think/feel about (child) playing?  
-What is a 'serious' injury?
11. Has (child) ever been injured during a game? If so – what did you think about what happened? *How did you feel? How did you react? Do you think the coaches handled it correctly?*

**BOUNDARIES**

12. I've noticed that the parents stay back until the kids and coaches are off the field – is that standard?

**KNOWLEDGE**

13. I asked you about the severity of the injury, but I don't even know how to gauge if one is serious or not. For you, what is a serious injury?
14. How did you learn about gauging injuries? Do parents share that kind of information with each other? Is there a coach on the team who knows about injuries?
15. Do you share other kinds of information with parents from the team? What kind of information? Are those important relationships for you?

### **COACHES**

16. What about the relationship between the coaches and the players – how do you think that's going?
17. How about the relationship between the coaches and parents – what's that like?
18. Is there a coach on the team that you think does an exceptionally good job?

### **ENDING**

19. Is there anything I didn't bring up that you'd like to talk about, think I should know, think is important?

## APPENDIX B

## TABLES

Table B.1 West Peak Parent Demographics

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Parent Identity</b> | <b>Social Class</b> | <b>Race/Ethnicity</b> | <b>Marital Status</b> |
|-------------|------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Cynthia     | 37         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | Latina                | Married               |
| Desiree     | 36         | Mother                 | Less Advantaged     | African American      | Married               |
| Anna        | 52         | Mother                 | Highly Advantaged   | Asian American        | Married               |
| Lindsay     | 44         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Julie       | 45         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Janet       | 52         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Robin       | 51         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Divorced              |
| Angela      | 52         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Claudia     | 55         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Karen       | 53         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Patricia    | 47         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Divorced              |
| Teresa      | 51         | Mother                 | Highly Advantaged   | White                 | Married               |
| Mary        | 59         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Divorced              |
| Kate        | 51         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Keith       | 52         | Father                 | Highly Advantaged   | White                 | Married               |
| Mark        | 47         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Divorced              |
| Kevin       | 56         | Father                 | Advantaged          | Black                 | Married               |
| Richard     | 45         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| John        | 45         | Father                 | Highly Advantaged   | White                 | Divorced              |
| Jason       | 56         | Father                 | Highly Advantaged   | White                 | Divorced              |
| Brian       | 62         | Father                 | Highly Advantaged   | White                 | Married               |
| Jack        | 50         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Alan        | 47         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Andrew      | 45         | Father                 | Highly Advantaged   | White                 | Married               |
| Jeremy      | 51         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |

Table B.2 East Summit Parent Demographics

| <b>Name</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Parent Identity</b> | <b>Social Class</b> | <b>Race/Ethnicity</b> | <b>Marital Status</b> |
|-------------|------------|------------------------|---------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|
| Tracey      | 47         | Mother                 | Disadvantaged       | White                 | Divorced              |
| Heather     | 44         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Tammy       | 47         | Mother                 | Disadvantaged       | White                 | Married               |
| Pamela      | 42         | Mother                 | Less Advantaged     | African American      | Married               |
| Linda       | 47         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Dawn        | 47         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Melissa     | 47         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Sandra      | 54         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Shannon     | 47         | Mother                 | Less Advantaged     | White                 | Divorced              |
| Rachel      | 46         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Diana       | 48         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | African American      | Divorced              |
| Laura       | 40         | Mother                 | Disadvantaged       | Latina                | Separated             |
| Stella      | 43         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Cecilia     | 43         | Mother                 | Advantaged          | Latina                | Married               |
| Eva         | 45         | Mother                 | Less Advantaged     | Latina                | Divorced              |
| Scott       | 37         | Father                 | Less Advantaged     | White                 | Married               |
| Josh        | 36         | Father                 | Disadvantaged       | Latino                | Married               |
| Matthew     | 45         | Father                 | Advantaged          | Latino                | Divorced              |
| Doug        | 45         | Father                 | Less Advantaged     | African American      | Married               |
| Chris       | 53         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Greg        | 51         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Robert      | 51         | Father                 | Less Advantaged     | White                 | Married               |
| Ron         | 51         | Father                 | Advantaged          | White                 | Married               |
| Jeff        | 35         | Father                 | Disadvantaged       | Latino                | Separated             |
| Jorge       | 46         | Father                 | Disadvantaged       | Latino                | Divorced              |