



## FEATURED SCHOLAR

Each month the Work and Family Researchers Network spotlights the contributions of a scholar who is making significant advances in understanding work-family concerns. We are delighted to present the following interview with Casey Scheibling.



**Casey Scheibling, Ph.D.**

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Experts Panel Link:

<https://wfrn.org/expert/casey-scheibling-ph-d/>

**WFRN - *How did you first get introduced to work-family issues and become a researcher in this field?***

**Casey** - As an undergraduate student, I took many courses on issues surrounding gender and sexuality, which spurred my interest in the sociological study of men and masculinity. For a Master's thesis study, I chose to examine how masculinities were represented in advertising for the exploding market of men's grooming products. In sifting through piles of men's lifestyle magazines, I was stuck by how often work-family issues were featured in articles and ads. This discovery led me to want to focus on cultural representations of fatherhood more specifically and substantially as a Ph.D. student—but I was unsure of where to start.

When my supervisor and I were brainstorming dissertation topics one day, we were talking about research on “mommy blogs” and he asked me whether “dad blogs” exist. I had no idea. I went home, searched the term, and to my surprise, I found a long list of parenting blogs written by fathers. With my interests in gender, family, and media, I knew that I had just found my topic.

After that day, I spent nearly five years immersed in an ethnographic study of dad bloggers in North America. I collected and analyzed hundreds of blog posts, attended their annual Dad 2.0 Summit gatherings, and conducted formal and informal interviews with bloggers themselves. Beyond my analysis of their meaning-making practices, I was inspired by the cultural work that dad bloggers were performing at the work-family nexus. In particular, they use these digital technologies to promote involved fathering, contest “toxic” masculinities, and call for social policy changes to better support parents and their families.

Overall, this project entrenched my commitment to the sociological study of work-family issues and motivated me to place more focus on determining how we can foster greater familial well-being and equity.

**WFRN - *How did you first get involved with the WFRN? What do you value most about the organization?***

**Casey** - I am a relatively new member of the WFRN. In 2020, I began a position as a Postdoctoral Fellow in Sociology at the University of Toronto where I was working under the supervision of Dr. Melissa Milkie—who was elected President of the WFRN for 2021-2022. As pandemic restrictions began to be lifted and the 2022 biennial conference was confirmed, I was encouraged to submit a paper and an application for an Early Career Fellowship, for which I was fortunate enough to be selected. This conference was an

incredibly enriching experience where I participated in professional development workshops for early career fellows, presented on my recent research, and coordinated an author-meets-reader session.

What I value most about the organization is its commitment to interdisciplinary scholarship and support. Over the past year, I have gained so much from being a WFRN Early Career Scholar. This fellowship has helped me to sharpen my research and teaching by exchanging questions, ideas, and resources with others from across disciplinary fields and geographical contexts. On a more personal level, this fellowship enabled me to form new friendships and a larger support network of colleagues. This was especially valuable to me as someone who was in a fairly precarious and isolated work position throughout the pandemic. So, on top of contributing to my professional development, I would say that the WFRN has also contributed to my own well-being by giving me a strong sense of community and belonging.

**WFRN - *Tell us about your current research, what are you studying?***

**Casey** - My doctoral dissertation exposed me to how and why fathers go online to seek out support and advice for the daily stress of parenting. Inspired by these findings, I wanted to better understand how gendered pressures affect fathers' mental health. So, for my current research, I have been conducting interviews with fathers of young children to examine how they negotiate work-family role-identities and stressors in disruptive pandemic times.

Many topics of conversation arose in my interviews, but I have focused my attention on three main issues thus far. The first issue is how becoming a parent constitutes a turning point in identity that encourages fathers to reflect on what it means to be a "man" and, in turn, revise their vision of masculinity to role model gender flexibility to their children. The second issue consists of a major difference in how fathers evaluate work stress compared to parenting stress, with the former being perceived as negative, compartmentalizable, and associated with behaviors, while the latter is viewed positively as a source of motivation to be a "good" or "better" father. The third issue relates to how the pandemic reconfigured work and family, with many fathers finding that the "silver lining" of spending more time with family during the pandemic was generative for their well-being and may have instigated a recalibration their work-family priorities for the future.

Although I am still in the analysis phase of this study, I was able to present on some notable findings at the 2022 WFRN conference in New York and was lucky enough to win the Best Conference Paper award. In the coming months, I will be finishing an

article from this project and beginning a book proposal for submission sometime later this year.

**WFRN - *What are your big findings? Did you make any unexpected discoveries?***

**Casey** - One of the “big” findings from this project concerns how fathers perceive and discuss gender expectations related to their identities as men versus their roles as fathers. More specifically, I find that fathers have oftentimes conflicting perceptions of masculinity, on the one hand, and gender roles, on the other hand. Most of the men I spoke to do not identify with traditional or “toxic” configurations of masculinity and may have even made efforts to directly challenge these identity standards for themselves or their children. Yet, many of these same men desire and/or find themselves in conventional gendered divisions of labor where they are the primary earner and secondary carer. This suggests that distancing oneself from a traditional gender identity does not necessarily entail taking on a less traditional gender role—which is unexpected because social psychological theory suggests that we try to align our subjective self-identities with our social role performances. In this case, however, I find somewhat of a divide. Fatherhood can motivate a gender identity “expansion” by enabling men to develop and act upon new caring and emotional sensibilities. But at the very same time, fatherhood can also create a gender role “constriction” due especially to cultural pressures around breadwinning and limited parental leave and flexible work options. Because of this divide, fathers feel conflicted and make appeals to personal and marital compromises so as to minimize dissonance between their gender identity and role behaviors.

**WFRN - *Can you tell me about how your research might help individuals or families develop effective personal strategies?***

**Casey** - My research helps to determine what resources and strategies can help new parents cope with an ever-growing variety of stressors. In my work on parent bloggers, I emphasize how digital technologies afford the ability to exchange advice, mobilize knowledge, develop support networks, and promote equity, inclusion, and well-being. Without question, social media does also generate new challenges, but they are still increasingly indispensable tools for personal reflection, effective family communication, and the dissemination of information. Moreover, my current interview-based study will help to pinpoint the types of mental health issues that are most pressing for fathers today. Especially because male gender norms tend to encourage the bottling up of feelings, I highlight ways that boys and men can redo masculinity to support healthy relationships and behaviors. Through analyzing fathers’ narratives about practical and emotional struggles, I also plan to develop evidence-based policy recommendations for

how social systems can better support the psychological welfare of new fathers, in particular, and families, in general.

**WFRN - *How do you integrate work-family topics in your teaching and/or training? Do you have an assignment or approach that is especially effective?***

**Casey** - I have integrated work-family topics into courses on social psychology, gender identities, mass communication, and, of course, the sociology of families. As a sociologist, I place considerable focus on the dialectic of the individual and society, emphasizing the perpetual negotiation of human agency in the face of social constraints. One way that students can come to recognize the struggle of agency versus constraint is through personal reflections about work-life balance. In these assignments, I will have students illustrate formal and informal constraints associated with their job (or associated with being a student, if they do not work) and consider whether job demands impede their agency at home by, say, intruding on them after work hours, dampening their quality of time away from the workplace, leaving them exhausted, or in any number of other ways. This exercise can encourage students to think about practical suggestions for how to protect the well-being of workers across various sectors and contexts. It is also an exercise that is empowering for all students because it enables them to personally relate to the course and learn material through reflecting on their own lived experience.

**WFRN - *What advice would you give to graduate students or those early in their professional careers?***

**Casey** - In thinking about what advice I would give to graduate students, I recall a suggestion that I received from a mentor in the midst of my PhD program. You should make a habit of taking a step back and periodically asking yourself: “do I enjoy what I’m doing?” To grapple with this question, you should try to carefully evaluate the extent to which you find academic work to be fulfilling or burdensome. Your answer may change over time, which is why it is beneficial to ask yourself this question every so often. In a career that is so labor intensive and often filled with precarity and rejection, finding joy or purpose in what you do can be a necessary buffer to the myriad of work-related stressors. If you eventually find that the spark has dulled, that is perfectly alright. Putting yourself first is what is most important, which sometimes requires some introspection.

To provide more concrete advice, I would say that having a tight network of peers is invaluable—and not only for professional reasons. In fact, I would recommend finding some colleagues who you share non-academic, creative interests with. What is nice about being with these types of colleagues is that there is a mutual understanding about

work, but you are not restricted to only doing work together. In my case, I have formed close bonds with colleagues who share interests in sports and music, and on occasion, we have leveraged our shared interests into collaborative projects. So, having past-times with similar others is a really great way to take breaks from work and those breaks may provide unexpected opportunities to expand the scope of your research agenda.

## **ABOUT THE WFRN**

The Work and Family Researchers Network's mission is to facilitate virtual and face-to-face interaction among academic work and family researchers from a broad range of fields as well as engage the next generation of work and family scholars. The WFRN welcomes the participation of policy makers and workplace practitioners as it seeks to promote knowledge and understanding of work and family issues among the community of global stakeholders.

To learn more about the WFRN, please visit our website [WFRN.ORG](https://wfrn.org). To become a member, please click on this link <https://wfrn.org/become-a-member/>.