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Abstract

Work-Related Parental Absence (WRPA) is common in contemporary family life. Industries such as aviation, fishing, logging, mining, and petroleum extraction all require the employee to work away from family from short to significant periods of time. In Canada's petroleum industry, work schedules that involve parental absence are especially common. There has been ample research conducted on the impact of military deployment on families, some research on how mining families are impacted by WRPA, and a small amount of research on the effects of WRPA among offshore European petroleum workers and their families. However, there is no research currently available that investigates the impact of WRPA on Canadian oil and gas petroleum workers and their families. In this article, we share the results of a qualitative study that examined the experience of WRPA through interviewing 10 heterosexual couples. Use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis identified a tripartite thematic structure consisting of positive, negative, and neutral aspects of the WRPA experience, which in turn were shaped by specific adaptive strategies undertaken by families. The results of this research provide important insights into a common, yet poorly understood, lifestyle within the Canadian employment landscape.

Keywords

Paternal Absence, Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis, Families

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Work-Related Paternal Absence among Petroleum Workers in Canada

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Work-Related Parental Absence (WRPA) is common in contemporary family life. Industries such as aviation, fishing, logging, mining, and petroleum extraction all require the employee to work away from family from short to significant periods of time. In Canada's petroleum industry, work schedules that involve parental absence are especially common. There has been ample research conducted on the impact of military deployment on families, some research on how mining families are impacted by WRPA, and a small amount of research on the effects of WRPA among offshore European petroleum workers and their families. However, there is no research currently available that investigates the impact of WRPA on Canadian oil and gas petroleum workers and their families. In this article, we share the results of a qualitative study that examined the experience of WRPA through interviewing 10 heterosexual couples. Use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis identified a tripartite thematic structure consisting of positive, negative, and neutral aspects of the WRPA experience, which in turn were shaped by specific adaptive strategies undertaken by families. The results of this research provide important insights into a common, yet poorly understood, lifestyle within the Canadian employment landscape. Keywords: Paternal Absence, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis, Families

Work-Related Paternal Absence (WRPA) is a prevalent feature of present-day family life. Industries such as aviation transportation, fishing, and various types of migratory and military employment all involve work away from family for significant periods of time. While both men and women are employed in industries that involve travel for extended periods of time, the focus of the current research is on the specific experience of fathers who work away from home on a rotational basis within Canada's petroleum industry.

Specifically, at 142,200 square kilometers of land, the Alberta oil sands is one of the world's largest oil producing territories. In 2016, it was estimated that 136,000 Canadians were employed in Alberta's energy sector (Alberta Energy, 2018), thus indicating that thousands of Canadian families experience WRPA. Due to its relatively remote location in Northern Canada, the vast majority of individuals employed in the petroleum industries must commute long distances and are employed on rotational work schedules that range from a week to months away from home. A surge in oil and gas development in Alberta, combined with declines in the forestry, fishing, and manufacturing sectors, has attracted large numbers of Canadian workers to the Albertan petroleum industry (Haan, Walsh, & Neis, 2014; Newhook et al., 2011).

Literature Review

Fathering and the Effects of Father Absence on Child Development

Existing research that addresses the effects of paternal absence on men and their families can be categorized along two lines: (1) those that examine the effects of paternal absence for any reason (e.g., divorce, incarceration) and (2) those that examine the effects of paternal absence due to employment that involve lengthy periods of time away from home. Most work related paternal absence research addresses commuting patterns that involve long periods of work, usually from three to six months, alternating with similar periods of leave (e.g. seafaring, offshore oil, and military deployment). A significant gap in the literature involves shorter-term absences such as those commonly experienced within the Canadian petroleum industry. One Canadian study (Wray, 2012) did examine this trend, focusing on the effects of the commute on residents of a post-industrial mining town in Cape Breton, Nova Scotia. The effects of the commute were highly concerning in this study; the author reported a high incidence of family stress and breakdown, as well as negative effects on children, particularly in school. However, Wray's (2012) study was small and hampered by a very poor response rate. In fact, Wray changed his recruitment strategy from interviewing family members themselves to interviewing counsellors at a family service agency. Wray reported that for this agency, "out of a case load of 3,103, 53% (1,645) involved issues caused by separation" (p. 150). This research suggests a need for further investigation, particularly regarding the impact of father absences on child development and family processes.

General Research on Father Involvement and Absence

Researchers have examined the effects of father absence and father involvement on the development of children and adolescents. As a whole, this body of work offers some fairly robust findings upon which to base further research and policy.

The positive effects of paternal involvement are well-documented. In their summary of longitudinal studies on this subject, Sarkadi, Kristiansson, Oberklaid, and Bremberg (2008) highlighted general effects related to improved social and emotional functioning in childhood and adulthood, decreased behavioural problems in adolescence, and better educational outcomes. Similarly, in their review of the effects of father involvement, Allen and Daly (2007) cited an impressive amount of research pointing to reduced psychological distress, more positive peer relations and social experiences, and better lifespan developmental outcomes for children with involved fathers.

Not surprisingly, it seems clear from extant research that father involvement is important for child development. Such findings are undercut by variability in how father absence is defined: it can signify absence through death, separation, incarceration, or neglect (East, Jackson, & O'Brien, 2006). Similarly, there is no widely accepted definition of father involvement (Card et al., 2011; Willerton, Schwarz, Wadsworth, & Oglesby, 2011; Wilson & Prior 2011). Many studies point to the child's perception of the father's commitment as being more important than his actual presence (Nixon, Greene, & Hogan, 2012). Allen and Daly (2007) suggested that "the most crucial mediating variable for child development outcomes for children with non-residential fathers is the quality (not quantity) of the father's relationship with the mother and child" (p. 17). Interestingly, these authors reported poorer family functioning and less effective parenting where parents worked non-standard schedules.

Industry-Specific Research on Father Absence Due to Work

In contrast to general research findings on fathering, studies that have examined military service workers, offshore oil workers, and seafarers have generally found few negative results, at least on the children (Card et al., 2011; Kaczmarek, & Sibbel, 2008; Parkes, Carnell, & Farmer, 2005; Willerton et al., 2011). As Card and colleagues (2011) noted, studies on child adjustment show great variability depending on how child adjustment is measured. Nonetheless, while it appears that the periodic absence of a father might actually foster resilience in his children, the nature of the absence and the mediating effects are in need of further investigation. Cabrera, Fitzgerald, Bradley, and Roggman (2014) critiqued the shortage of dynamic, multidirectional models that are sensitive to mediators and moderators of father involvement in light of the great diversity of family structures in the modern West.

Indeed, few studies have examined the effect of such work on spouses, boomtowns, or home communities. Reports in the literature suggest mixed findings regarding elevated rates of depression, alcoholism, and anxiety in the spouses of absent workers. Parks, Carnell, and Farmer (2005), studied the effects of commute employment on the spouses of offshore oil workers in the United Kingdom (UK) and noted many positive effects. Within the Canadian context, Wray, (2012) presented the possibility that couples exhibit different patterns of adjustment based on length of time in the relationship and whether there are children.

Nonetheless, industry-specific research on father absence provides a cursory glance into the effects on workers, their spouses, their children, and their communities, and important cultural and theoretical considerations have emerged from this body of work. For example, research indicates that it is important for fathers to invest in an authoritative role with their children, rather than spend time exclusively on enjoyable tasks, such as going to the movies (Allen & Daly, 2007). However, identity management is an important issue for fathers who work in industries that promote hegemonic masculinity, only to return home to a subordinate role in the domestic sphere (Thomas & Bailey, 2006). The question of masculine identity management carries several implications for family life around issues such as discipline. Some fathers do not like to do it from afar, and even have a hard time doing it at home (Willerton et al., 2011); whereas, others use discipline as a way of asserting their authority and masculinity (Thomas & Bailey, 2006).

Purpose of the Study

While research has been conducted to evaluate the effects of father involvement on child and adolescent development, as well as the effects of father absence on families and communities where the father commutes to a remote work site for long periods of time, the differential effects of WRPA on the families of those working in Alberta's petroleum industry are currently poorly understood. The purpose of this qualitative study was to yield new insights into the emotional, behavioral, and systemic effects of WRPA on family life within Canada's petroleum industry through richly described, and interpreted, personal accounts of this experience. The following question was used to guide our study: In the context of Canada's petroleum employment sector, how do families experience short term work-related paternal absence?

Method

An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) methodology was used to guide all facets of this research. Interpretative phenomenological analysis, developed by Johnathon Smith in the mid-1990s (Smith, 1996), is a qualitative research approach whose theoretical

base includes hermeneutics and phenomenology, and whose epistemological position is largely ideographic and inductive. The goal of IPA is to furnish in-depth understanding of personal and social experiences. As its name suggests, IPA is interpretive in that the researcher strives to make sense of participants experiences, who in turn are trying to make sense of their own experiences; Smith refers to this as the double-hermeneutic.

Participants

As with many qualitative approaches, IPA researchers use purposive sampling as means to identify participants who are able to provide rich, detailed accounts of the phenomena being investigated. Consistent with Smith, Flowers, and Larkin's (2009) recommendations, our purposive sample consisted of 10 heterosexual couples living in Alberta, all of whom had at least one child over the age of 1.5 years and all of whom had one parent who worked a rotational work schedule (e.g., ten days off, ten days on). For all but one of the couples, it was the father who worked away from home. The one instance of maternal absence (i.e., the mother worked away from home) was included as an outlier, which, according to McPherson and Thorne (2006), is a means to furnish rigour through exposing important contextual differences that likely warrant additional study. Additional demographic characteristics of our sample are provided in Appendix A. Participants were recruited through social media (an online mothers' support group) and snowball sampling (i.e., colleagues familiar with our research gave our contact information to potential participants). For families to be eligible to participate, a parent must have worked in the Northern Alberta petroleum industry on a rotational work schedule for at least one year, and the family had to have at least one child over the age of one.

Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the data source for this research. Each couple participated in a single interview, and were then interviewed together (i.e., both were present during the interview). Interviews, which lasted between 1-1.5 hours, were conducted by one of the three authors, either in person or using video-conferencing. Interview data was audio-recorded and later transcribed verbatim.

Data Analysis

Data was analysed according to procedural guidelines provided by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009). According to Smith et al., data analysis is both iterative and inductive. Iteration involves recursively moving between the various steps in the analytic process (this versus a linear, or step-wise, progression); whereas, induction aims to arrive at general knowledge claims through detailed exploration of individual cases. Following Smith et al., our analytic process involved the following steps. First, we undertook initial noting to identify significant descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual content within the transcribed interviews. This was followed by an exploration of connection, interrelationships, and patterns across initial notations. From this analysis, emergent themes were identified, first within each interview (as a means to retain IPA's ideographic focus), and then across interviews. A framework/structure was then developed to display and highlight thematic relationships. Finally, a narrative account (commentary), with supporting participant excerpts was created to guide readers through the interpretive account of the data. Prior to commencing this research, we devised protocols and procedures to ensure the ethical care of our participants. These protocols and procedures were reviewed, and deemed acceptable, by our institution's Research Ethics Board. To protect confidentiality, pseudonyms, chosen by the researchers, are used throughout this paper.

Results

Our thematic analysis revealed 21 themes. Of these, 16 were fit within a tripartite organizing structure (see Table 1), and then were further interpreted through an explanatory model consisting of one superordinate theme and four subthemes. First, we will describe and comment on the 16 themes and accompanying tripartite structure; following this, we will explicate the explanatory model.

Table 1: Tripartite Thematic Structure

Positive Valence	Negative Valence	Neutral Valence
Net Time (concentrated time)	Loneliness	Schedule Predictability
Money as Motivator	Missing out on life	Perception of the Other
Relational Enhancement	Single Parenthood	Distance Travel
Relational Trust	Questioning Beneficence	Interpersonal Communication
	Work Safety	Work-Life Environment
	Return/Leave Adjustment	Understanding the Lifestyle

Understanding Valence

Valence, as a psychological concept, was first introduced within Lewin's (1938) field theory. Simply stated, valence refers to the subjective value that individuals place on an entity or experience; we, as humans, are drawn towards those with a positive valence, away from those with a negative valence, and neither away nor towards for those with a neutral valence. This concept has demonstrated wide appeal and utility in psychology. Valence has been used by researchers investigating decision-making, motivation, learning, and cognitive appraisal processes. When striving to understand, and render understandable to others, the thematic results of our research, it struck us that our themes could logically be categorized within the three types of valence. This structuring of our thematic findings also gave rise to an explanatory model that identifies an additional theme, that of *Responsive Adjustment*, which helps elucidates interrelationships between the themes clustered within the three types of valence.

Positive Valence Themes

Net Time. The belief that a rotational work schedule ultimately equals more family/recreational time than a typical 5-days-on and-2-days-off work schedule. The theme Net Time represents a common sentiment expressed by our participants that the WRPA work schedule ultimately provides more opportunities for families to engage in activities together than would be possible if both parents stayed at home and worked a traditional 40-hour work week. In the following excerpt, one of our participants describes this reasoning when recounting a conversation she had with her brother-in-law:

[Couple 4, Wife] I sat with him [her husband] and with my brother-in-law and did the math about, basically, okay, Marvin's away fifty percent of the time and

he's home fifty percent of the time. But that time he's home, like I said, he's fully home. So when you did the math based on what Bill did, his 7 am to 5 pm weekly, Monday to Friday job, and then the weekends he'd be busy doing a few other things around the yard and whatever. How much quality time did he actually have with his kids? Dan outshone it hugely.

The wife in this excerpt argues that in terms of the summative time when her husband is at home, "the math" favours his rotational work scheduled over that of a traditional work schedule. Participants similarly noted that being home for lengthy periods of time provided increased flexibility to engage in parental roles and activities that are typically difficult to undertake when working a traditional work schedule (e.g., helping at a child's school during daytime).

Money as Motivator. Substantially increased earnings influences the choice to work away from one's family. It is widely held that working in the Canadian petroleum industry is very lucrative. Participants routinely cited high earnings as a reason for choosing the WRPA lifestyle. As one participant quipped, "You're either making 40 bucks an hour in a shop, say, or \$1,200 bucks a day in your pocket at Fort Mac." While some participants indicated that they also found value in their work, ultimately handsome remuneration was often the deciding factor.

Relational Enhancement. Being apart for extended days enhances the couple relationship. An unanticipated finding from our research was that rather than diminish the couple relationship, having one partner work away from home for a protracted period of time seemed to have a beneficial impact on the union.

[Couple 2, Husband] I think—I honestly think it's good because it's like, she was saying, there's lots of times you see people and they always say, oh, they're always fighting because they always see each other every day. And some people always say, oh, it's nice to take a little break. Well, I always get a break, you know what I mean? Every six days I—I can just leave, right? If we have disagreements, or whatever, in some ways it's good because you can separate and can just think about yourself and you don't have to be in an argument about it.

In this instance, time away from one another provided participants the opportunity to interpersonally detach, calm down, and reflect on the conflict had occurred during their time together. In conventional employment situations, where one partner does not leave the family house for extended periods of time, it would likely be difficult, and perhaps anomalous, for couples to detach in this way.

Time apart also led to an increased sense of longing for one another. The wife in this next excerpt uses an easily-recognized adage to make her point. [Couple 9, Wife] "I think, well, I don't know. It sounds so corny, but just that absence makes the heart grow fonder. We certainly had that, right?"

Relational Trust. The presence of interpersonal trust between partners. Trust, widely held as an integral feature of any intimate, committed interpersonal relationship, was similarly identified by participants as an important constituent of their partnership. Some participants spoke of trust in terms of fidelity, whereas others spoke of trust as form of confidence that when apart, each partner would make sound decisions and act on behalf of the best interest of the family.

[Couple 1, Wife] Yeah. I guess if you're husband's working away from home, trust has to be an issue. But that goes both ways. He's got to trust, like I'm at home and what am I doing?

[Couple 4, Wife] But that's the thing, I just, I trust him and I trust what he's doing up there and I have to. Because again, I'll drive myself nuts if I think about what could be happening.

[Couple 2, Wife] You need to have one hundred percent trust, because really not only is he leaving me for two weeks, but I'm by myself for two weeks. So we're both in a position where, if you don't have that trust and you don't have a solid relationship foundation, I mean, that can be compromised very easily.

Notably, in the interviews where trust was mentioned, it was, in every case, the woman who broached this topic. In doing so, the man, in every case, appeared to endorse his partner's viewpoint.

Negative Valence Themes

Return/Leave Adjustment: Family challenges during the return/leave transition. Work related paternal absence necessarily involves recurring return/leave transitions. The transition intervals for those we interviewed ranged from a week to months. A common work rotation in Alberta's oil patch is ten days on, ten days off. Participants uniformly talked about struggles associated with the return/leave transition. Such struggles involved both disruption within the couple dyad and within the parental-child relationship. Managing, or adjusting to, routines (first excerpt that follows) and children's' emotional responses (second excerpt that follows) were central within the participant accounts.

[Couple 1, Husband] I mean, yeah, it just takes a couple days of, you know, when I get back, just to settle in again. You don't want to start, you don't want to rock the boat too much. You know, as you've alluded to, Maggie's got her own routines and stuff like that, so you kind of, I just try and fit in with what she's kind of doing as easily as possible. And then, as a couple days, you know, I find only takes a couple days and then you're just right back into the swing of things.

[Couple 5, Wife] my kids are both in love with their dad, and it is really, really hard on them. My oldest will quite often spend a good part of the time crying, the day that he leaves, which breaks my heart, because she knows. She knows that this is what he has to do in order for us to be able to live here and do the things that we like to do. And she understands that in her head, but in her heart it still she misses him.

Participants noted that an adjustment phase occurred both at the time of departing, and the time of returning: "There was an adjustment of him not being around and an adjustment of him being around."

Loneliness: Feeling lonely due to extended paternal absence. Not surprisingly, being apart for extended period of time engendered feelings of loneliness for both the parent remaining at home (first excerpt that follows), and the parent away at work (second excerpt).

[Couple 2, Wife] So I mean, it gets lonely in the evenings. I guess, if you want to get down to the nitty gritty. You know, by the time the kids go to bed and you're ready to go to sleep, it gets lonely.

[[Interviewer] So you had ten to fifteen years there, where there weren't computers, there wasn't that ease of...

[Couple 9, Husband] So lots of TV. I mean, you're, you come back, you eat, have a shower, you go to bed. And just do it over and over and over. The years just rolling together.

Missing out on life: Important family events, opportunities, and milestones are missed during time away at work. Inevitably, being away from home for extended periods of time will entail missing out on family events (e.g., weddings, birthdays), opportunities (e.g., coaching one's child's team), and milestones (e.g., witnessing a young child's first steps).

[Couple 9, Husband] It's almost like having dementia where you're missing certain parts of your life that you—I missed a lot of that as the kids were growing up.

[Couple 2, Husband] That's what I miss. Like you can't really go and volunteer to be a coach somewhere, or even to be more physically active myself. I can't go and join a basketball team or a hockey team because you don't know—my schedule is always the same, but when you go join those teams they always expect you there every week. So I can't do that kind of stuff. So that's the kind of thing that really sucks.

[Couple 7, Husband] Still hard being away for his birthday and stuff like that, or when he learns something new or something it's hard being away, not seeing it.

Such absenteeism brought forth feelings of longing, guilt, regret, sadness, and, at times, resentment for the parent who worked away from home.

Single Parenthood: Struggles associated with single parenthood when one's partner is away at work. Parents whose partner worked away from home often described experiences akin to being a single parent. In some instances, this was explicitly stated.

[Couple 9, Wife] I wanted him home. I was just tired of being a single mom and kind of being a married single. Like you know, you couldn't really have much of a social life because, he couldn't because he was working but I couldn't either because either I was by myself with couples or I didn't want to hang out with singles because they would go places I didn't want to go. So I was just, I will not go out. That was a little challenging.

Temporarily experiencing life as a single parent, however, is not tantamount to the experience itself. Relief comes when one's partner returns home, though as will be noted in Return/Leave Adjustment theme, such relief is mediated by the quality of the transitional phase when the parent working away returns home.

Questioning Beneficence. Parents wondering whether paternal absence will be harmful to one's child/children. The parents in this research tended to question, and sometimes worry,

whether WRPA would be harmful to their children. In the first excerpt, one of the mothers directly questions whether her son will endure long-term negative effects due to WRPA. In the second excerpt, a father questions his father-daughter bond.

[Couple 7, Wife] We feel bad and you struggle with knowing if this is the right thing for our family. Or you know, if this is going to affect him in a negative way forever. Or if it's going to be okay, if we're doing the best we can do.

[Couple 4, Husband] And it is weird, because I'm in and I'm out and sometimes I worry, I mean, do they really, do they still need their dad sometimes?

Interestingly, some parents in this research believed that younger children were most vulnerable to possible or imagined ill-effects of WRPA, whereas for other parents the converse was true.

Work Safety: Concern and worry from the stay-at-home parent related to real or perceived safety concerns associated with one's partner's place of work. Many of the jobs associated with Canada's petroleum industry are inherently dangerous. Depending on a petroleum company's approach to plant and worker safety, associated risks will vary accordingly. Contract workers among our participants (i.e., those who are not directly employed by petroleum companies) tended to identify greater work-related risks than regular full-time employees

[Couple 4, Wife] I've never been up there on site. I've seen a few pictures that he brought home, so I don't know what the plant's all about, but I heard that there's been explosions or whatever at plants. And then when I don't hear from him my mind starts, okay, what's going on? How come he hasn't called yet? What's happened? There's been a big accident again up on the highway and he's having to deal with it. Whereas he, he had to drive into Lac la Biche, I haven't heard from him, what's going on? So from this end too, that big separation of not really knowing what's going on up there. Yeah. That's tough.

Neutral Valence

As indicated earlier, themes with a neutral valence had characteristics that, depending on context, could assume either a positive or negative valence. All of the remaining themes, excluding Responsive Adjustment, could be placed within this positive-negative continuum.

Distance Travel: The influence of one's employment-related commute on individual and relational functioning. The nature of one's travel to and from the work site significantly affected the familial experience of WRPA. In some instances, petroleum employees were required to drive for lengthy periods of time in harsh weather, and without adequate rest. Such conditions were arduous for the one commuting, and highly worrisome for family members back home.

[Couple 7, Wife] So he's driving like at midnight in the middle of snowstorms, blizzards, things like that, so that was scary. Like to know, like he would call me be like, hey, I'm leaving now, and then there's no cell reception... So I'm waiting up all night, even though I have to work the next day, but I'm waiting because I don't know how long it's going to be or how bad the roads are. Um, that's a big challenge.

Some petroleum companies would provide paid accommodation to employees, so that they would not need to make a long drive home coming straight off their shift. Notably, participants in this research often chose to drive home without rest, not wanting to spend a precious day off travelling.

On the positive valence side of this theme, some participants were flown to and from work, with a short commute to the airport being the only time on the roads. Such participants described their travel experience as better than when they did not engage in WRPA.

[Int.] So how long is your commute, then?

[Couple 4, Him] An hour and a half. And if we're flying the big fast birds, an hour. Like so, it's been, it's actually been really nice...I mean, here it is, and I don't drive. I don't get stuck in traffic and I don't—like it's, yeah, that's one of the weird things, I find, is that I get back home and, to go out and drive—I mean, I drove for twenty years, as an emergency medical technician Calgary and I can't stand traffic now. I just, it's quite nice, yeah. I drive early in the morning. I drive in the middle of the afternoon. And I go home and get out of the rush hour because it's stupid.

Interpersonal Communication: The quality and quantity of intrafamilial communication. Interpersonal communication among our participants ranged from connected and effective to disconnected and ineffective. Navigating time zones, shiftwork, and poor, or nonexistent, access to technology was associated with poorer communication between the parent working away and families at home. Poor communication was especially evident among those who worked in the petroleum industry prior to the ascendancy of the internet and wireless communication technologies. In the following excerpt a couple discusses how prior to the advent of cell phones their communication was very infrequent.

[Couple 9, Wife] Oh, we often went quite a long time without talking.

[Couple 9, Husband] Yeah.

[Couple 9, Wife] Sometimes it would be well over a week.

[Couple 9, Husband] Not normally though, like normally, like as soon as we got cell phones in the later part.

[Couple 9, Wife] Yeah then it was a little bit better.

[Couple 9, Husband] Then we talked a lot more. But before that it was a collect call from your husband, or whatever.

Conversely, the wife in this excerpt tells how WRPA actually increased the quantity, and presumed quality, of her intrafamilial communication.

[Couple 10, Wife] We Facetime each other more. We talk on the phone more. We text more. Where before, like when we lived, when we lived together full time, you know, you rarely even talk. You just come home, you're tired, I'm tired, and you're doing your own separate thing.

Many participants shared being more purposeful, planned, and efficient with their communication, both when both parents were together at home, and when one was away. It was also common among participants to communicate daily.

Work Life Environment: Features of the workplace that bear upon one's contentment with being away from home. Participants' descriptions of their work life environment while away from home ranged in quality. Not surprisingly, those who described a very comfortable existence while working away from home (e.g., the availability of good food, comfortable housing, access to recreation) tended to describe their life at work in very positive terms; whereas, the converse was true among those who lived in humbler, limited, and sparse settings. This husband describes life on the positive end of the valence spectrum.

[Couple 4, Husband] We played hockey last week. It was just like they actually have—it's enclosed. So some nights it's colder inside than it is outside, but it was minus twelve and the ice was just—I mean, you go back out, you get the cold toes like you did when you were a kid and there's twenty guys out there just having a ball, playing basically shinny hockey. And that's, so that's fun. I got, I mean we have fitness instructors up there, so I can do anything from a spin class to any type, they have all that, catered well to us that way. Although, with the roll back in oil prices, we've just lost one person in that regards. So there's some cutbacks coming. Food's good. The lodging's fantastic. I'm in the same room every time. I have all my stuff. Literally I grab a back pack with my stuff and go up. I don't have to bring anything home. Yeah. So the working conditions are good.

In stark contrast to this participant, other participants lived in very basic accommodations with little or no access to recreation or other creature comforts; this, of course, represented the negative side of the valence continuum.

Schedule Predictability: The degree of schedule predictability for rotational workers. As indicated in the following excerpt, greater schedule predictability was viewed much more favorably than unpredictability.

[Couple 1, Wife] You could look ahead in the calendar for the year and you could know when he was going to be home. So if we wanted to plan vacations – because for a while there his schedule was so unpredictable we couldn't, you couldn't plan a trip. Or to get tickets to go to a concert or a sporting event or something, the next think you know he wouldn't be home.

Predictability allowed for advanced planning of activities and events, and also helped facilitate improved transitions, both to and from work. Regarding the latter, participants shared their perception that greater predictability helped children anticipate and, thereby, adjust to the impending return or departure of their parent.

[Couple 7, Wife] But with the oil field now, and the economy the way it is here, it's really hard because we never know when he's going to go or when he's going to be home. So that makes it really hard because we can't really prepare him. And we try to prepare him the best we can, and tell him like three days in advance, and when Dad's coming home, and we try to make ideas of what we're going to do when he comes home. And try to make it, I guess, as easy on him as we can.

Perception of the Other: Contemplating/evaluating one's partner's experience when absent. Being away from one another, in very different contexts (i.e., the oil patch vs. being home), raises the possibility that each member of a couple can perceive the experience of the other in varying ways. In our analysis, we noticed that in some instances the away parent either envied or appreciated the at-home parent, whereas in other instances it was the opposite. Feelings of envy tended to bring forth additional feelings of resentment, while feelings of appreciation supported gratitude and indebtedness. In the first excerpt, below, the couple is striving to understand and appreciate each other's experience of WRPA. In the second excerpt, the exchange between the couple highlights feelings of envy that can arise when each person perceives the other's situation as more favorable.

[Couple 7, Wife] He has to remind me that this is his week off. Right? And I do. Because I don't think of it that way. I think of it as, well, I have to do it all, so when you're home you should have to do it all, and then go back to work for two weeks. Um, so it is, it's a lot of reminding each other how it feels to be on the other end. It's hard to like, understand each other's perspectives all the time. So for me, it's like, well, I have to work too. And I work long days. Like, I work eleven-hour-days. And then put him to bed and make him supper and do everything else. And I'm like, you get to go and have food made for you and eat whenever you want to, right? So it's hard, but I guess we just try to make each other see the other side of it.

[Couple 9, Husband] So it was lonely and I think some aspects where I was kind of jealous because she's here with the kids. And I wanted to be here with the family all the time, right? So it really, really gets to you that way.

[Couple 9 Wife] I was kind of jealous, too, because I wanted to be in a hotel room by myself, with no children, for a few hours.

In general, participants highlighted the importance of how each perceived the other's WRPA experience, and this ranged from positive and empathic (positive valence) to negative and unempathic (negative valence).

Understanding the Lifestyle. The degree to which other people understand and accept the WRPA lifestyle. Participants in this study tended to differentiate between those who understood and accepted their decision to have one parent work away from home (positive valence), and those who held prejudicial or biased beliefs toward it (negative valence). The presence of prejudicial or biased beliefs engendered feelings of guilt for some participants.

[Couple 6, Husband] It seems like you've let them down. And it feels that way sometimes, depending on the reaction that you get from the people that live here all the time, when you do come home. And it's uh, you feel guilty. Because you, you've traded uh your family life for the dollar, right?

There were also accounts of how paternal absence families would more readily support one another by virtue of their shared understanding of the WRPA lifestyle.

[Couple 1, Wife] We know other rig families. And they get it. Other people will try and understand, but don't really understand. But if you know other rig families in your life, they really understand. And so when he's away, if one of

the other husbands is at home, if I need anything, you can call, or the other moms will call.

Responsive Adjustment

The theme Responsive Adjustment refers to the initiative and ability of participants to render negative and neutral valenced themes more positive by virtue of their agentive actions and affirming attitudes. Responsive Adjustment is an overarching theme with four subthemes: Common Purpose, Technology Facilitated Communication, Parenting Together, and Bounded Family Time.

Common Purpose/Big Picture). *The shared belief that the WRPA lifestyle serves a greater immediate or projected familial good.* Many of the participants in this research held and promoted the belief that a larger, more affirming, purpose lay behind their reason for choosing the WRPA lifestyle. The excerpt that follows is characteristic of the sentiments expressed by participants and suggests a shared willingness to see through difficult times and find ways to make things work, with a collective vision that doing so would ultimately benefit the family. In a way, Common Purpose seemed to be the motivation behind responsive adjustment.

[Couple 2, Wife] We both are in it for the same reason. We want our kids to have a better life. We want a better life for both of us. And you always want career progression with it. So I mean, you're not just focused on getting in and getting out, making your money and see you later. We really see a bigger picture, and we realize that yes, at this point, it's a positive financially, but at the end of the road you have to look twenty, thirty years down the road. It's not just where your next pay cheque's coming from, you want to know where you're going to end up, and where the family's going to end up. And I did do think that we've both been able to be on the same page for that.

Technology Facilitated Communication: Relational connection facilitated by technology-based communication. The results of this research indicated that participants frequently used technology as a way to maintain and enhance relational connection among family members. Participants routinely spoke of texting, calling, "Facetiming" each other as a way to consult on parenting issues, update each other on the day's happenings, problem solve, and be present for events that were being missed, as in the second excerpt presented below.

[Couple 4, Wife] Technology really is a great asset to our family because Marvin can sit and have breakfast with the children over FaceTime. And so we utilize that as much as possible.

[Couple 4 Husband] At Christmas up north one time, the only Christmas I worked up north, like last year we literally turned the box on and turned me around and put me in the middle of Christmas. I sat there and laughed at them all and they did want to take a look at what the camp looked like and that kind of stuff.

Participants often used technology, especially video-based chatting, in a way that mirrored physical presence. As a form of Responsive Adjustment, technology became the means by which participants, in many instances, were able to ameliorate negative valenced themes and improve neutral valenced themes.

Parenting Together: Striving for a consistent approach to parenting. Prevailing parental wisdom and guidance holds that children accrue multiple benefits when parents strive for consistency in their parenting beliefs and practices. Our participants indicated that the WRPA lifestyle rendered this wisdom all the more applicable.

[Couple 4, Wife] “I think we’re both—we’ve decided with our kids, right from the get go, that we were parenting together. We were going to be on the same page and encourage and love our kids together.”

[Couple 4, Husband] “Our expectations are the same whether I’m here or not. All of those things, that consistency, the level, what we expect on a day to day, is the same. And from one another too. How we handle situations. We have an expectation and so, I think the consistency on how we handle all of life’s situations makes it work.

Being “on the same page” allowed parents to better manage various challenges associated with the WRPA, such as managing the return/leave transition period.

Bounded Family Time (“hermitting”): Limiting external family activities during a father’s time at home. The very nature of WRPA means that one parent, most often fathers, will be away from home for extended periods of time, and will, in keeping with the Missing Out on Life theme, be absent for many highly valued family events and activities. Also in keeping with the Net Time theme, many of our participants calculated a net gain in family time due to the WRPA schedule. Herein, participants were resolved to ensure that when they were home they maximized time engaged with their family,

[Couple 3, Husband] When they were little I would come home and I would go, usually I would get home, whenever it was, if they were up, “Dad, do you want to go play mini-sticks ¹?” And I’d go play mini-sticks for three hours in the basement. And you know, it’s not, it’s good, but there’s lots of other things you’d like to do too, but it’s not, no, I wouldn’t say no, I’m going to watch TV or, you know? That’s what they want to do, that’s what you go do. Go sit and play Lego for two hours.

[Couple 9, Husband] “I think a lot of the commitment too is, any time I’d come home in those first twenty-seven years, there was a hundred percent family. I didn’t have friends, I didn’t hang out—it was Sandra and the kids, that’s all I did. For all that time. I didn’t go rock climbing, I didn’t, nothing. If it wasn’t with my kids and Sandra, then it didn’t happen.”

Two of our participants referred to this practice as “hermitting” – the practice of restricting extra-familial activities as a way to prevent external influences from interfering with family time. Hermitting, however, came at a personal cost to fathers who chose to abandon their social and recreational pursuits in lieu of putting family first.

Discussion

The results of this research foster an increased understanding of the familial experience of WRPA among Canadian petroleum workers. Whereas prevailing normative assumptions

¹ Simulated hockey using small, indoor, hockey sticks.

may cast doubt on the whether it is in the best interest of one's family to embrace the WRPA lifestyle, the participants in this research shared many positive attributes and experiences, and indicated an ability to find ways to offset costs associated with negative attributes and experiences.

The positive valence themes associated with paternal absence are characterized by participant perceptions that this work schedule results in increased family time, attractive remuneration, a stronger spousal relationship, and increased trust within the spousal relationship. Certainly, attractive remuneration is widely associated with remote employment within Canada's resource sector. It is not uncommon to earn a six-figure salary for an entry-level position. It stands to reason, as well, that a rotational work schedule (e.g. 10 days on/10 days off) may lead to both real, and perceived increases in the amount of quality time the away parent can spend with his family. While we were unable to find empirical evidence to quantifiably support this perception, research by MacBeth, Kaczmarek, and Sibel (2012) also found a perceived increase in family time among families where a parent works away from home on a rotational basis.

Furthermore, the timeworn adage, "absence makes the heart grow fonder" rang true in this research, with many couples indicating that time spent apart actually strengthened their relationships. As researchers, we failed to anticipate this finding at the outset of our study. It would seem, that other researchers have attained similar findings. For example, in their research of long-distance committed couples, Dargie, Blair, Goldfinger, and Pukall (2015) failed to find support for their hypothesis that time apart would lead to lower levels of relationship satisfaction compared to geographically close couples. In contrast to Dargie et al., Kelmer, Rhoades, Stanley, and Markman, (2013) hypothesized that unmarried committed couples in long-distance relationships would have higher quality relationships compared to geographically close couples. Results of their study supported this hypothesis; however, it was also found in a follow-up assessment that both groups of participants were equally likely to break up.

Of the five negative valenced themes, three (Loneliness, Missing Out on Life, and Single-Parenthood) reflect features inherent to having one parent work far away from one's home. From our research, it was difficult to ascertain the degree to which feelings of being a single parent vis-à-vis the WRPA experience resembles actual empirical accounts of single-parent families, due to the large, complex, and nuanced nature of this body of research. Indeed, single-parent families take on a multitude of forms, and a comparative review of them all was beyond the scope of the current discussion (Smock & Greenland, 2010). Future research is needed to help distinguish features associated with the stay-behind parent in WRPA and those associated with various types of single parent families (e.g., divorce, widowhood, single-parent adoption). Experiences of loneliness, as noted in the participant experience quoted earlier, appeared to be heavily influenced by one's access to technology and the amount of time away from home. Those who were away from home for longer periods of time, and those with limited or no access to digital communication technology, tended to express more loneliness than those with ample access to such technologies. Similar findings were achieved by Parkes et al. (2005) in their research of off-shore UK petroleum workers, and by Zvonkovic, Solomon, Humble, and Manoogian, (2005), whose qualitative research examined family experiences among commercial fishermen and long-haul truck drivers. The theme Missing out on Life certainly weighed heavy on many of the participants, wherein missed events and milestones were, in most instances, completely out of their control and difficult, if not impossible, to re-schedule. This theme contributed to the theme of Questioning Beneficence, the worry being that paternal absence during family events and milestone might be experienced as a difficult loss for children to overcome.

Parents, regardless of employment type or schedule, will at times question whether their lifestyles and parenting practices have a net positive effect on their children's well-being and development. The results of this research, however, suggest that this apprehension increases when a parent is working a non-traditional work schedule, far from home. To date, there is no available research to suggest that WRPA is associated with poorer developmental outcomes. Research that examines the effects of paternal absence on children due to reasons other than WRPA indicates that the quality of the parent child time together is likely more important than the actual amount of time spent in close proximity (Allen & Daly, 2007; Sarkadi et al., 2008).

Work safety is one of the few negative valenced themes that could not be readily influenced by Responsive Adjustment. Even though many large petroleum companies expend considerable resources on employee safety, such efforts vary from across companies and employment status (e.g., contract versus permanent positions) and do not typically mitigate safety concerns related to long-distance travel.

Negative features associated with Return/Leave Adjustment, were offset by families who engaged in various strategies, such as modifying family schedules and routines, censoring discussion about travel details, and providing parental alone time, to ameliorate difficulties associated with the return/leave cycle. Similar results were found by Parkes et al. (2005) who noted that the wives of the offshore petroleum workers they interviewed frequently developed "coping strategies" (p. 421) to manage leave/return transitions.

Three of the neutral valenced themes (Schedule Predictability, Distance travel, and Work Life Environment) were directly related to features inherent to working away from home in Canada's petroleum industry. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to provide an in-depth commentary with recommendations, these three themes provide insight into measures petroleum can take to foster safety and satisfaction among their employees.

The valence of Inter-Personal Communication was, as noted earlier, heavily influenced by access and use of current digital communication technologies. This finding will be addressed further when discussing Technology Facilitated Communication as a form of Responsive Adjustment. Perception of the Other captures the ways in which participants came to view their partner, vis-à-vis their respective position within the WRPA dynamic. As noted earlier, depending on one's perception, this practice could advance or hinder the quality of the couple relationship. Helping couples to empathically perceive each other's life experience is common within many popular couples counselling approaches and is backed by substantial empirical evidence (Sened et al., 2017). Understanding the Lifestyle brings to the fore elements of Western social discourse which shaped the assumptions, and resulting comments, made by individuals in response to the WRPA lifestyle. Although parental absence, due to work activities, has existed in various guises throughout history (and arguably dates back to hunter-gatherer times), it is far from the status quo, and with negative messages associated with father absence in general (e.g., the "dead-beat dad" stereotype) it is not surprising that participants in the research at times felt unduly judged for living a WRPA lifestyle. It would seem that the bias against WRPA is based on the assumption that time away from one's family will create hardship for one's partner and negatively affect one's child(ren). At this time, empirical evidence does not exist to support either of these two contentions. Additional research along with the emergence of more positive representations of WRPA, may help recast this family/work lifestyle in a more affirming light.

Responsive Adjustment, as the name suggests, denotes the tendency for the families in this research to find ways (often creative) to adapt to, or ameliorate, negative, or problematic, aspects of the WRP experience. This theme reveals its kinship with the existing, and very robust literature, on family resilience, which asserts that families have "the capacity to withstand and rebound from disruptive life challenges" (Walsh, 2016, p. 313). While it might be a stretch to name WRPA as a "disruptive life challenge," the participant accounts in this research did

attest to significant struggles associated with their chosen family lifestyle. In keeping with resilience theory, the families in this research found ways to “withstand and rebound” when faced with challenges, and the ways in which they accomplished this align with components of family resilience, such as those identified by Walsh. Table 2 illustrates the congruence between the Responsive Adjustment themes found in this research and aspects of Walsh’s family resiliency framework.

Table 2: Resilience Responsive Adjustment Comparison

Walsh’s Key Process in Family Resiliency	Responsive Adjustment Themes
Transcendence and spirituality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Larger values, purpose • Transformation: learning, change, and positive growth from adversity 	Common Purpose/Big Picture <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The shared belief that the WRPA lifestyle serves a greater immediate or projected familial good
Communication/problem-solving processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clear, consistent messages, information • Clarify ambiguous situation; truth seeking 	Technology Facilitated Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relational connection facilitated by technology-based communication.
Organizational processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Varied family forms: cooperative parenting/caregiving teams • Couple/co-parent relationship: mutual respect; equal partners 	Parenting Together <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Striving for a consistent approach to parenting
Organizational processes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Rebound, adaptive change to meet new challenges • Reorganize, re-stabilize: continuity, dependability, predictability 	Bounded Family Time <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limiting external family activities during a father’s time at home.

Of the four Responsive Adjustment themes, Technology Facilitated Communication warrants additional discussion. It was clearly evident within the participant interviews that those who could avail themselves of current digital communication technologies used them regularly to facilitate ongoing communication with their families. They did so for instrumental reasons (e.g., planning, scheduling, informing, consulting) as well as relational reasons (e.g., using technology to foster interpersonal connection as if they were actually present). Indeed, these technologies are revolutionising how individuals, especially families and loved ones, create negotiate, and sustain relationships. While there is evidence to suggest that such technologies can potentially have deleterious effects (Zheng & Lee, 2016), in our research they were decidedly positive.

Limitations of Research

This research fosters an enriched understanding of WRPA among Canadian petroleum industry families. Use of the IPA methodology facilitated the development of twenty richly described, nuanced themes, set within a tripartite interpretive structure. As with any social

science research, the findings of this research are limited by the chosen methodology and accompanying research design decisions. The ideographic nature IPA research lends to the use of small sample sizes, with 10 participants representing the higher end of the range (Reid, Flowers, & Larkin, 2005). Use of a small sample size allows interpretations to be set within contextual influences that illuminate meaning through difference (Reid et al., 2005). Herein, as qualitative analysts we were able to detect how and why our themes manifested in some participant accounts, yet not others. For example, Technology Facilitated Communication did not manifest for our participant who began working in the petroleum industry prior to the advent of cell phone and personal computer use. This depth of understanding associated with IPA comes at the expense of breadth. A greater number of participants may have led to increased variation across experiences, which may have resulted in additional or different themes.

The findings from this research may not fully transfer to other WRPA contexts. The unique features associated with various paternal absence contexts may differ across various WRPA industries in general, and across various Canadian resource sectors, specifically. It should also be noted that our sample was quite broad, including individuals with various amounts of time working in the petroleum industry, families of various compositions (different ages of children, etc.), and partners at home with various life circumstances (e.g., some worked outside the home; others did not). These differences could conceal important nuances across participants, the types of which additional research might fruitfully address to provide a more complete understanding of this experience. Finally, our sample is likely biased towards favorable accounts of the WRPA experience. The couples who chose to participate in this research were intact (i.e., still together) and had seemingly already found a way to adapt to whatever struggles were associated with this employment situation. If we had purposely, or by happenstance, interviewed couples who were no longer together, or who no longer lived the WRPA lifestyle, we would have undoubtedly received quite different experiential accounts.

Future Research

The paucity of research within WRPA in Alberta's petroleum industry affords considerable room for additional studies. Little is known about families and couples who, for various reasons, struggle with this lifestyle. Anecdotal accounts of infidelity, substance abuse (among the person working away from home), and other personal/interpersonal struggles suggest that additional research into deleterious effects associate with WRPA is warranted. With respect to infidelity, research has shown high incidents of this experience among those serving in the military (Balderrama-Durbin et al., 2017; Riviere, Merrill, Thomas, Wilk, & Bliese, 2012); however, such findings cannot be generalized readily to WRPA in Canada's petroleum industry.

Qualitative or quantitative researchers might also undertake comparative research to better understand a range of developmental and psychological outcomes associated with the paternal absence lifestyle. To the degree that our couples may have censored elements of their experience because they were interviewed together, interviewing only one half of the dyad would likely allow for a freer expression of one's experience. This, too, would be a helpful research area to pursue. The noted similarity between Responsive Adjustment and family resilience suggests that it would be valuable to examine WRPA through a resilience framework to gain a better understanding of how it manifests within this work-family lifestyle. Given that digital communication technologies played a significant role in the participants' ability to adapt to various aspects of the WRPA in the current study, it would be helpful to conduct research that specially focuses on how families and couples use technology to accommodate various aspects of this experience.

Finally, the outlier case included in this research (i.e., the one couple where it was the mother who worked away from home) did produce a noteworthy finding. While many of this couple's experiences were very similar to those where the father worked away from home, it was found that the father who stayed at home as the full-time parent experienced a form of prejudicial bias when attempting to participate in parent-child activities typically associated with motherhood.

[Int.] Todd, have you had any unique challenges or surprises with being a stay-at-home dad in this situation?

(Him) Trying to find things to do with him. Trying to get into play groups. Nobody even wanted to hear from me. And I can only speculate as to why, but I'm assuming it's a bunch of females and this dude sends them a message, "Hi, I'd like to come." You know. I can understand as why, but I really struggled when, especially when he was around four and five and six months old, where he was getting more active, we wanted to get him to socialize, and I could not find a play group to get into.

This account suggests that while less common than WRPA, work-related maternal absence also deserves scholarly attention, both to further understand the general characteristics of this phenomenon and to situate it within the larger discourse related to gender, family, and employment.

To conclude, in this paper we presented IPA research that examined the experience of WRPA among Canadian petroleum workers and their families. The findings of this research suggest that there are positive, negative, and neutral themes related to this experience, the latter two of which were positively influenced by families' adaptive strategies and attitudes. These findings highlight, and to a degree question, some of the normative assumptions regarding father absence and family well-being, while highlighting the ways that family adapt and flourish through a variety means. The results of this research, although certainly preliminary in nature, should be of interest to a broad range of professions and services united by a shared commitment to understand and support families of all types.

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Appendix

	Years Together as a Couple	Number of Children	Years Working in the Petroleum Industry	Occupation
Couple 1	10	1	13	Night Manger on Drilling Rig
Couple 2	12	2	5	Well Service
Couple 3	11	7	3	Well Interception Engineer Specialist
Couple 4	20	2	4	Occupational Health Nurse
Couple 5	17	2	8	Pipeline Maintenance
Couple 6	38	2	8	Electrician
Couple 7	8	1	.5	Millwright
Couple 8	15	3	14	Welder
Couple 9	32	5	32	Rigger
Couple 10 ²	15	1	4	Field Accommodations

² The maternal absence couple

Author Note

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