

## “I Feel Like a Rock Star”: Fatherhood for Stay-at-Home Fathers

*Since the 1970s, fathers have experienced a new set of expectations for their role. Fathers are now expected to be more involved with the hands-on daily caregiving of their children. Perhaps because of these changing expectations, more men are choosing to be stay-at-home fathers than in previous generations. Very little sociological research exists about stay-at-home fathers' ideas about fatherhood in the U.S. In particular, how do such men conceive of their status as stay-at-home fathers and of fatherhood? I explore these questions through in-depth interviews with men from locations across the United States. My study shows that stay-at-home fathers enact fatherhood in ways that may be starting to transform traditional and new ideals of fatherhood.*

**Keywords:** Stay-at-home fathers, involved fathering, nontraditional families

Since industrialization, breadwinning has comprised many fathers' contributions to family work, with hands-on involvement solely the domain of mothers (Lamb, 2000). However, the standards for fathers have evolved to expect more engagement with the day-to-day work of caring for children (Daly, 1996; Risman, 1998). Since these changes in the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more men are staying home to care for their children. The number of stay-at-home fathers increased in the United States from 105,000 in 2002 (Fields, 2003) to 189,000 in 2012 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013a). Latshaw (2011) argued that these figures under-represent the number of stay-at-home fathers by close to a million because the Census Bureau does not count men who report other reasons for being out of the labor force or

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\* Quinnipiac University.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be sent to Catherine Richards Solomon, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Mail Drop CL-AC1, Quinnipiac University, 275 Mount Carmel Avenue, Hamden CT 06518. Email: catherine.solomon@quinnipiac.edu.



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who have been out of the labor force for less than a year as primary caregivers. In 2009, 22% of men who were not working for pay said they were out of the labor force because they were “taking care of home/family,” up from 1% who gave that response in the 1970s, according to Current Population Study (CPS) data (Kramer, Kelly, & McCulloch, 2010).

In addition, some research points to an increase in positive portrayals of stay-at-home fathers in the media (Riggs, 1997; Vavrus, 2002) and “how-to” guidelines for families transitioning to the stay-at-home father/breadwinning mother model (Gill, 2001). In the U.S., more representations of stay-at-home fathers appear in television shows such as *Up All Night* on ABC and *Parenthood* on NBC. Filmmaker Michael Schwartz made a documentary about Baltimore stay-at-home fathers, called *Happy SAHDs*. Such developments perhaps signal growing societal acceptance of stay-at-home fathers. As this is a new phenomenon, little research in the United States has been conducted to date. Although fewer fathers stay home full-time to care for children compared to mothers who do (about 5 million mothers stayed home full-time in 2012; U.S. Census Bureau, 2013b), studying stay-at-home fathers will help scholars understand the attitudes and experiences of men who prioritize care work. Understanding their attitudes and experiences could increase societal support for other men who want to leave paid work in order to care for children. Moreover, it may illustrate ways in which the societal meanings of fatherhood are evolving and how fathers take up these meanings, as Yarwood (2011) notes that fatherhood can be a dynamic status. In her study, Yarwood illustrates how fathers in the UK take up various discourses about fathering to make sense of their experiences as fathers. Thus, they do not draw on just one discourse (i.e., the traditional father or the involved father) but rather draw bits and pieces of both to construct their fathering identities. This is similar to my work on male professors with children (Solomon, 2010). Although not a discourse analysis, through my research I show how stay-at-home fathers use ideologies about fathering to construct their fathering identities and, I argue, shift societal ideas about fathering to one of “engaged fathering.”

### RESEARCH ABOUT FATHERS

Two veins of research about fathers have held sway since the 1980s: one about fathers’ increased involvement with their children and one about the sustained importance of breadwinning to fatherhood (Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Involved fatherhood entails involvement and responsibility for the hands-on aspects of parenting that goes above and beyond playing with children in the evenings and on the weekends (Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Involved fathers are also accessible to their children for times of sharing and for engaged interactions. Involved fathers are ones who feed their children, give their children baths, help their children get dressed, read bedtime stories, and transport children to their activities, among other duties. However, not all involved fathers do *all* of these activities (Lamb, 2000). Men tend to be more involved with their children if they see themselves as capable parents (Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005; Jacobs & Kelley, 2006). Wives’ working hours have a positive relationship with husbands’ involvement—as wives’ work hours increase, so do the number of hours husbands contribute to childcare (Jacobs & Kelley, 2006).

However, paid employment is still assumed for involved fathers. Their dual engagement with paid work and family work is why some scholars have argued for the continued importance of breadwinning (in some form or another) to fatherhood (Gerson, 1993; Lamb, 2000). Indeed, some research has shown that although ideals about fathers have moved to-

wards a prescription for more involvement, fathers' time with their children is usually in recreational activities rather than hands-on childcare tasks (Yeung et al., 2001). Some fathers consider breadwinning their primary contribution to parenting (Yarwood, 2011). Yet an increasing number of men report conflict between work and family, wishing they could spend more time with their children (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011). Although breadwinning may still be an important piece of fatherhood, more and more men seem to be feeling the pull of caregiving as a central component of fathering (Daly & Palkovitz, 2004). Many men seem to wrestle with these two ideologies of fathering.

### RESEARCH ABOUT STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS

Stay-at-home fathers embody a significantly different role from the "powerfully symbolic" one many fathers occupy (Lareau, 2000, p. 423). Their activities with children are significantly different from most fathers' activities in the United States (Yeung et al., 2001). In theory, they exemplify Lamb's (2000) construct of involved fathers: they are engaged with their children, they are accessible to their children, and they are responsible for their children. Psychological research exists about stay-at-home fathers (Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008; Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley & Scaringi, 2008; Rochlen, McKelley, & Whittaker, 2010), but sociologists in the United States are just beginning to study these men's family experiences (Chesley, 2011). In 2008, Chesley conducted a couple-level analysis of how 13 current stay-at-home fathers and their wives in Wisconsin negotiated gender roles in regards to parenting. She found that men seem to become stay-at-home fathers by circumstance and not by choice. Men became stay-at-home fathers because of job "shocks" (e.g., loss of a job, relocation), and thus, they saw themselves as temporarily staying at home. Despite being the primary caregiver for their children, men in Chesley's study saw their wives as the most important caregivers, and their wives limited their work hours to provide childcare. Men and women in her study struggled with the loss of the men's breadwinner identities, and over a third of the stay-at-home fathers in her sample worked part-time to contribute economically to their families.

Several studies have been conducted in other countries: one in Belgium (Merla, 2008), one in Portugal (Wall, Aboim & Marinho, 2007), and Doucet's groundbreaking study in Canada (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009). Between 2000 and 2003, Doucet interviewed over 100 Canadian fathers who self-identified as primary caregivers (2004, 2006a, 2006b, 2009); her body of work included stay-at-home fathers ( $n=70$ ) as well as single fathers. Research on men in Canada and Belgium found that men stayed home for a variety of factors, including: their wives were professionally successful, their wives encouraged them to become more involved with family care, the couple valued home care over paid child care, the couple found combining paid work and child care difficult, and paid child care was prohibitively expensive (Doucet & Merla, 2007). Doucet found that stay-at-home fathers experienced disapproval from others for being out of the labor force as well as some exclusion from playgroups (2006a, 2009; also Doucet & Merla, 2007; Merla, 2008).

As in Chesley's study, men in Doucet's study saw mothers as having special connections with their children, even though the men were the primary caregivers (2009). Perhaps contributing to the idealization of the mother-child relationship, men felt that others viewed them as incompetent parents, second to their wives (2009). Stay-at-home fathers in Canada thought mothers and fathers were inherently different, and they discussed how their style of interaction with their children was more rough-and-tumble than their wives' (2009). In addition, men focused on sports and physical activities with their children (2006a, 2009).

Similar to Chesley's work, men in Doucet's study felt guilty about not providing financially for their families (2004, 2009; also Doucet & Merla, 2007) and took on specific "masculine" activities around their houses (e.g., home repairs) and in their communities (e.g., coaching sports) to compensate (2004; 2006a). In addition, of the 70 stay-at-home fathers, 30 men were engaged in part-time paid work, and 28 were on a "break" from paid employment but planned to go back to work and/or were furthering their education for future work (2004). Doucet wrote that stay-at-home fathers were "adamant ... to distinguish themselves as fathers, *not* as mothers" (p. 292, italics in original). Thus, it appears from Doucet's work, stay-at-home fathers' experiences at the beginning part of this century were shaped by the traditional ideal of fatherhood, and they made concerted efforts to adhere to its doctrine.

Since 2003, many cultural and economic shifts have occurred in the United States. The economy in the U.S. plunged into a recession with many families accruing major debt with credit cards and home equity loans, in addition to inflated mortgages (Baca Zinn, Eitzen, & Wells, 2011). At the same time, men and women's wages have remained stagnant since the 1970s, which further taxes families' resources for food, clothing, education and other necessities (Baca Zinn, Eitzen, & Wells, 2011). These economic changes have made two incomes a priority for most families' standard of living in the United States (Baca Zinn, Eitzen, & Wells, 2011). Women's incomes have increased in the last forty years, and one in four dual-income families have wives who are the biggest earners (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). In married couple families, the percent of women who out-earn their husbands has increased from 18% in 1987 to 29% in 2009, according to Current Population Study data (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013).

However, men's income continues to provide the bulk of income to dual-earner families, and women only make 82% of men's wages (U.S. Department of Labor, 2013). Given these financial factors, the time is apt to provide an in-depth sociological examination of men who choose to be stay-at-home fathers in the United States. Whereas men in Chesley's study did not characterize becoming stay-at-home fathers as a choice, and 38% of her sample worked for pay, as I discuss below, data in this paper show that there are men who discuss being stay-at-home fathers as a "choice." Their identities as stay-at-home fathers makes them different than other unemployed men and from previous generations of men who have been laid off. In previous generations, men who were laid off from their jobs did not take up carework to replace paid work (Rubin, 1994). Currently, many men who lose their jobs take on service sector jobs to continue to economically provide for their families (Baca Zinn, Eitzen & Wells, 2011). The stay-at-home fathers in my sample offer an interesting perspective on men who have left the labor force (i.e., are no longer looking for paid employment) to become primary caregivers. In my study, I examine how such men make sense of their familial experiences and of fatherhood.

## METHODS

To explore my research questions, I developed a qualitative research project. The use of qualitative methods is appropriate to study stay-at-home fathers because they allow for complexity, an emphasis on meaning and processes, and deep and detailed information (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1994). Qualitative research seeks to understand human behavior and phenomenon from participants' perspectives, which allows researchers to see the complexity of the social world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). Qualitative data can tease out these complex experiences, rather than reducing them to flat categories. In-depth interviews also allow participants to share their "interior experiences" as they navigate this

complex terrain (Weiss, 1994, p. 1). Thus, using qualitative methods allows for an in-depth and nuanced understanding of stay-at-home fathers' familial experiences.

I interviewed 32 men from locations across the United States. This paper includes data on 26 of those men, as 6 of the 32 participants viewed their familial situation as temporary arrangements. All men were interviewed in 2012. Participants were recruited using snowball sampling, an announcement on a stay-at-home fathers' group's website (<http://www.athomedad.org>), announcements to professional listservs, and posters placed at local play centers (e.g., Rascals, My Gymboree), libraries, coffee shops, and other venues where stay-at-home fathers are likely to go.

### **Sample Characteristics**

Participants had a child or children under the age of 18 living at home with them. Only three men did any work for pay, and they averaged much less than 10 hours a week (one was a fiction writer, one was a photographer, and one led a fathers' group one evening a month). All men were married, heterosexual and white, like Kramer, Kelly and McCulloch's study, which relied on CPS data (2010). Twelve percent had been stay-at-home fathers for 14 years, 31% had been stay-at-home fathers between 5 and 10 years, 27% had been stay-at-home fathers between 2 and 4 years, and 30% had been stay-at-home fathers for a year. No men in this study had been stay-at-home fathers between 11 and 13 years. Men's ages ranged from 27 to 51 with the mean age of 33 years old, similar to the CPS data (Kramer, Kelly, & McCulloch, 2010). Ten participants had one child, 10 men had two children, and six participants had three children. The youngest child was 5 months old, and the oldest child was 17 years old. Fifteen men had one or more child(ren) under the age of 5; three men had at least one child under the age of 5, and seven men had children who were all over the age of 5. Only one man in my sample was caring for an infant; he had two older children as well. The ages and number of children differ from national 2009 data, which showed that men who stay home to care for children do so only when their children are over age 5 and usually only have one child (Kramer, Kelly, & McCulloch, 2010). The fact that most of these men had very young children (who require more hands-on care) illustrates that perhaps they were very dedicated to being stay-at-home fathers.

Similar to Kramer et al.'s (2010) data, all participants had a college education, and most were married to wives with at least a college education (many husbands and wives had post-graduate education). My sample, although similar to national data, is limited in that it includes only middle and upper-class straight white males, who do not experience discrimination based on race, class, or sexual orientation. Future research should focus on the experiences of less privileged men to understand the dynamics of race, class, masculinity and fatherhood for stay-at-home fathers from less privileged backgrounds.

I asked participants about a variety of topics, such as the process by which they became stay-at-home fathers, their daily schedules and activities, and their feelings about being stay-at-home fathers. Using questions modified from Doucet's work (2006b), I also asked participants their ideas about mothering and fathering. Although I had questions in mind, I used this list as a guide; that is, aside from the first question, the questions were not asked in any particular order or format. This strategy was used so interviews flowed similar to conversations (Weiss, 1994). I followed up on participants' comments as they arose to gather information about the areas of interest and unanticipated but relevant topics. Interviews ranged from 1½ hours to 2½ hours. I interviewed 25 men via Skype and one participant in-person. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

The 25 participants who were interviewed via Skype lived in locations for which airplane travel would have been required to conduct in-person interviews. My research funds were not sufficient to pay for 25 separate airplane tickets to do in-person interviews. I chose to conduct interviews over Skype instead of over the telephone after my experience with one telephone interview with a stay-at-home father (the data for which are not included in this paper). Due to the lack of visual facial cues and other body language, it was difficult to assess how the participant seemed to be feeling during the interview, as well as if the respondent was finished speaking. I found that both the respondent and I would speak over each other and interrupt each other during the interview. Thus, Skyping with participants proved to be a beneficial mode of interviewing individuals in distant locations because we could read each other's body language and facial cues during the interview. I found it much easier to gain rapport with participants this way as well.

Data analysis of qualitative data usually occurs in stages (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). It is a reiterative process that involves extensive reading and rereading of interview transcripts and observation notes, returning multiple times to the relevant literature to inform analysis of transcripts and notes, and continually (re)conceptualizing key themes and codes. During the interviewing stage, I wrote memos to myself about consistent topics and ideas that arose in the interviews. Once the interviews were completed, I read the transcripts, looking for these topics and ideas as well as new ones that I did not note during the interviewing stage. These topics and ideas represent the important "codes" that illustrate these men's experiences (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). I then grouped these codes into larger themes that best represent the various dimensions of fathers' experiences as stay-at-home fathers, and, for the purpose of this paper, their ideas about fatherhood. In this paper, quotes are representative of participants' comments unless otherwise noted.

## RESULTS

Reoccurring themes related to fatherhood in this sample were: emotional closeness with children, positive reactions from others about staying at home, and the importance of family work. Before I turn to these themes, let me describe the reasons these men gave for staying at home. How they describe these factors is interesting because they illustrate how men may be changing societal ideas about fathering and the perhaps shrinking connection between breadwinning and fatherhood.

### The Decision to Stay Home

For the men I spoke with, decisions to become stay-at-home fathers seemed to be playful ones and driven by a mixture of factors. These include wives' high salaries, job issues for the men, promotions and/or relocations for the wives, and desires for one parent to be the stay-at-home parent. For six of the fathers I spoke with, they were able to stay at home because of their wives' high salaries. These men spoke about their wives earning as least six figures—many in the "high" six figures. These high salaries meant that the men were able to quit working and still live fairly comfortable lifestyles compared to many Americans. However, 20 of the men were solidly middle class, some even lower-middle class. These men spoke at length about the financial strain their family arrangement created and how they had to be very frugal with their finances.

In addition to wives' salaries, many of men experienced job "issues." Job issues included either getting laid off from work or being dissatisfied with their work lives and wanting to

stop doing that particular type of work. Many of the men's wives earned promotions that led to job relocations or finished their graduate education and got jobs that led to relocations. For both circumstances, these men quit their jobs and followed their wives. Finally, all the men spoke about wanting to have one parent stay at home with their child/ren because they (and their wives) believed it was better for children's development and well-being.

Although their wives' jobs might have led to relocations or they might have been laid off by their employers, these men said they chose to leave the labor force by not looking for other work, and they decided to be primary caregivers for their children. The vast majority of participants talked about staying at home as a "choice" they made. For example, this quote from Theo illustrates how he chose to leave the labor force to focus on his family. He, like many men in my study, espoused the ideal of one parent at home and spoke of supporting his wife's career. He said at another part of the interview that he could easily find work in his field but he really wanted to be at home: "And actually right after I was laid off, I did talk to another firm. I was even offered a position there and decided against it because even though they kept assuring me that they respected work/life balance, I just know the nature of [work]. It's very demanding.... very tight deadlines, expectations, and I really didn't want to get into that type of environment." He said about staying at home,

I was really at the point where when I was working I was feeling very foolish because for the last decade I was constantly working really hard and I put in a lot of hours.... I always felt that something had to change between our family life where [my wife] can't work a high-demanding job and I work a high-demanding job, and take care of our family.... So when that transition came, when I got laid off, I wanted to take care of [my wife] when she went back to work and take care of [my daughter] entirely.

Some men said they and their wives discussed which of them would be the one to stay at home. Derek said this about when he and his wife were first married, "We would almost, maybe a little competitively, [talk about] who wants to stay home and spend more time with the kids?"

Mark volunteered to stay home so his wife, who was very career-oriented, would agree to have children. He shared, "We had always agreed we didn't ever want to wind up with our kids in daycare. So when me and my wife started considering having kids and she kept putting it off because she didn't want to interrupt her career. Finally I just said, 'Well, I'll just be a stay-at-home dad.'" These decisions reflect our societal belief that it is better for children's development if one parent is out of the labor force and focuses her/his efforts on childrearing (Hays, 1996; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). However, unlike previous generations, these men used that belief as the basis for *the husbands* leaving the labor force, instead of negotiating with their wives for them to leave the labor force, as it seems many families with stay-at-home mothers do (Hays, 1996; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004). Indeed, Mark mentioned feeling somewhat offended when others assumed he was a stay-at-home father only because he lost his job and not by choice. He said,

I've had people ask, "Well how did you lose your job?" As if that was the only reason I would become a stay-at-home dad, is if something bad happened in the economy.... I just tell them straight up that it was a choice and that I'm glad I get to do it.

Many men said that they had always wanted to be stay-at-home fathers. They were glad to have the opportunity to fulfill that “secret” wish after being laid off. Josh said he had wanted to stop looking for work after a layoff to be a stay-at-home dad. However, he didn’t want to upset his wife because he knew she wanted to be the stay-at-home parent. He shared their process:

She asked me if I would want to stay home full time.... I would never have approached her with the idea because she was jealous a little bit.... I think that she was a little bit sad that she wasn’t the one.... She hoped it would be her or pictured it being her, but like I said, I waited—*I kind of hoped it would happen*, but I never stopped looking for a job or things like that until she came to me one day and asked me. (italics added)

Because women traditionally have been the ones to step out of the labor force to be primary caregivers (Hays, 1996; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004), as that move reifies expectations for mothers, Josh was hesitant to challenge his wife’s supposed status as primary caregiver. Mike shared a similar story, “I didn’t have it all mapped out. But I think in the back of my mind I sort of knew. *I was hoping that it would get to this*. I didn’t know how it would or what the process would look like. But it all kind of directed us towards this. And I’m glad that it did.” (italics added). These hidden wishes to be the stay-at-home parent demonstrate a shift towards increased engagement in men’s ideas about fathering.

Other men left prestigious jobs in finance, science, or private industry to become stay-at-home fathers. For example, Patrick said he had an epiphany 14 years ago after the funeral of a slightly older family member who had two young children. He realized that he should quit his well-paid, high-status job to stay at home with his children. He said,

I was looking out the window [of the airplane] and I was like, “What the hell? What the hell am I waiting for?”.... I was thinking of my young kids. And I just decided I’m going for it.... My boss was floored but he said to me that he always suspected that I might do that because years earlier, I had lots of revelations during that [work retreat]. Here they are supposed to be cultivating you to be a better employee [for agency] and work with people and I am thinking: “God, you know what I would really like to do is be a stay-at-home dad to my kids.”

That these men give up such jobs shows a decrease in the adherence to belief that breadwinning is central to fathering.

Participants attributed their desires to be stay-at-home parents not only to wanting one parent at home but also to their personalities. They said, compared to their wives, they were better suited to being stay-at-home parents. For example, Luke passed up a job opportunity and then quit his job because he wanted one parent to be at home with their son, and he was the parent more suited to that kind of work. He said,

There was a position within the agency available. My wife and I were both well experienced and overqualified for the job. We talked amongst ourselves and asked, “You know, who wants to do what?” And she said, “I don’t know if I can go to the library, and story time, and play group and talk with the moms and play around and things like that, I don’t know if that’s really for me.” And I said, “I can *totally* not work. I can *totally* stay at home and do all that.”

Family background encouraged some men to make the choice to stay home. Karl was one such example. He shared how he and his wife's backgrounds differed, and he chose to stay home while she got a tenure-track academic job. He shared,

I think that I'm probably more wanting to stay at home than she. My background was I had a stay-at-home parent, my mother was a stay-at-home for most of my growing up so that resonates with me, coming home and always having my mother there was how I was brought up. And my wife, on the other hand, both of her parents were working parents ... she went to daycare from very early on. So when we first thought of putting them in daycare I was the one that was kind of like: "Not daycare!"... so I'm probably more predisposed.

Other men described leaving the labor force so their wives could focus on their careers because their wives had the potential to be family breadwinners and earn more than the participants could. For example, Chad said,

She was going into surgery; she was doing so well in medical school. It was kind of silly to make her stay home. It makes sense—A: we wanted one of us to stay home. It seemed silly for us to pay someone else to raise our children. My wife works 70-80 hour weeks, and I was working probably 60 hours a week teaching. So we would never see our kid, essentially. And B: when it came down to financial sense, doctors, surgeons, made a lot more money than teachers. It's a financial decision.

Wives of 10 men earned in the six figures (or would earn once done with school). Given the desire to have one parent at home, these participants saw their wives' high earning potential as allowing them to stay home. Thus, their wives' salaries allowed these men to "buy out" of being a traditional father with its tenants about breadwinning and wives' secondary employment status. Sixteen of the men were solidly middle class, however. These men spoke at length about the financial strain their family arrangements created and how they were on strict budgets. These men saw their parenting ideals as more important than having a dual-income, although it would have helped them financially.

Another factor that helped these men choose to be stay-at-home parents was that most of them saw themselves as interchangeable with their wives. They did not think that they and their wives were polar opposites in parenting styles (as in previous literature on stay-at-home fathers (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2009)). To them, parenting was a gender-neutral task.

To me it's just as a parent, you love your child, you are there to support them, to nurture them, to educate them, to bring them up, and [to] instill in them right and wrong. I don't see the huge distinction between the mother and father. To me, it's parent. (Mike)

So I'm not standing up trying to redefine gender roles or anything like that ... if I'm doing laundry, I'm cleaning the house. That's just work. I've never really cared or got into the distinction of- this is girl work, this is guy work. That's just stupid. I've always thought that was just built on pure ignorance. Work is work. (Craig)

Although for some men this lack of distinction between mothers and fathers was conscious and for some it was not, the end result is that because “it was just parent,” either the mother or the father could be the stay-at-home parent. This belief supports the other factors that enabled these men to become stay-at-home parents. The belief that one parent should be out of the labor force acting as the primary caregiver, a desire to be a stay-at-home parent, personality traits, and family background were driving reasons that these men were stay-at-home fathers. Of the 26 men I interviewed, not one man said he was a stay-at-home father because he could not find work. These other reasons were the ones given as the basis for their family arrangements. Although masculine “pride” could have influenced my participants to say they could find work if they wanted to, they seemed to embrace being stay-at-home parents.

### **Affection and Intimacy Are Key**

Unlike previous research which described stay-at-home fathers’ style of parenting as more “rough and tumble” and physical (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2006a, 2009), men in my sample focused on gentle physical affection, emotional intimacy, shared leisure and being in tune with their children’s emotional needs. This was true of men with young children and men with older children, including teenagers. Chad described the closeness he had with his daughter, who was a toddler. He said,

I’m “her” person ... and she loves her mom. But even at home at night, if we’re both laying in bed and she wakes up from like a bad dream or something, she goes to me, she doesn’t go to her mom. My wife might even go pick her up out of the crib and bring her into the bed and she immediately goes to me, and just goes to me and falls asleep on my chest.

Chad feels he has established a bond with his daughter that is similar to ones between moms and children described by stay-at-home fathers in Chesley (2011) and Doucet’s (2004, 2006, 2009) work. Thus, it appears that some stay-at-home fathers do see themselves as the most important caregivers for their children and as more emotionally connected to their children than were their wives. Indeed, research about fathers as attachment figures has shown a change from fathers as secondary to mothers in terms of children’s attachment (e.g., Cohen and Campos, 1974). Recent research has shown that when fathers are more involved with the caregiving of their children, starting from infancy as the fathers in this study, children have a more secure attachment to their fathers, which mirrors mother-child attachment (Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2012; Brown, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2010; Coyl-Sheperd & Newland, 2013).

Participants with older children described feeling very close with their children as well. Patrick described how he and his three sons talk about “everything.” He said, “You gotta be a certain kind of dad to want to stay at home and do this. And it’s not always fun: the dishes and the laundry, the house, the lawn care, the home improvements and the shuttling. But as a result, I have a fantastic relationship with my boys. There is very little that we don’t talk about: drugs, sex, whatever.” Despite the work of being the stay-at-home parent, Patrick feels rewarded with an intimate relationship with his sons. Timothy had older children as well and described his relationship with his children, both of whom were boys. This quote demonstrates both the close attachment and the emotional closeness these fathers felt with their children. He shared,

And I feel like I have a close relationship with my sons. They have always come to me first if they were hurt. When they were little if they woke up with a scary dream they would call out for dad. They would run to me first with their skinned knees. My sixth grader will still reach up and hold my hand when we're out in public. And to me, having that relationship with my sons, makes me feel like I'm doing something right as a man and *as a father*.... And even my thirteen year old, he'll put his arm around me in public and lean on me; physically lean on me and emotionally lean on me. But to me, to have that kind of a close relationship with my children means that I'm doing something right. (emphasis added)

For Timothy, being a good father meant emotional closeness and physical affection, characteristics that are in line with ideals of involved fathering and differ from traditional fathering (Lamb, 2000). In addition, paternal sensitivity has been shown to increase over time if fathers remain involved with caregiving (Brown, Mangelsdorf, & Neff, 2012). These fathers' sensitivity to their children clearly demonstrated that.

Some men said they did not have a need for rough play with their children because they were with their children all day. Interestingly, they mentioned their wives engaged in that kind of play when they came home from work as a way to establish closeness after long workdays. Luke said, about him and the fathers in his dad's group,

A number of these other dads have said that they find what I'm about to say similar. That I'll be home with the kid all day and dad doesn't—myself included—doesn't have typical father-kid or father-son play with the kid. That we don't wrestle with our kids because we don't have that need, we don't have to squish play into a two-hour period between the end of a workday and bedtime. So you don't have that intense quality play with your kid. And on the flip side, that mom will get home after a long work day and mom in an uncharacteristic way will walk in the door and will want to wrestle on the floor with the kid and have this very tactile intense power play, engaged play which the dad is like, "Wow, I've never really seen this before. Where is this coming from? Because I wouldn't have expected this." I have to consciously think, "I should wrestle with my son."

Pride in their close relationships was clearly evident in these men's interviews. Three of the men showed their emotion by tearing up during the interviews, as Brendan did:

To have the opportunity to not just be a father, but to be a primary caregiver, —I don't know, what did I do to deserve that? It's amazing ... And out of all the low-paying, demeaning jobs I've ever had that caused me to work like a million hours a week, this is by far the best one I've ever had [starts crying and wipes eyes and face with handkerchief].

These men's relationships with their children deviate from traditional fathering in that they are caregivers for their children (and not just engaged in recreational activities) and report closeness and intimacy as the most important part of being a father (Lamb, 2000; Yeung et al., 2001). Because emotional closeness is not a hallmark of traditional fatherhood, this is another avenue in which fatherhood seems to be transformed for stay-at-home fathers.

## Reactions to Stay-at-Home Father Status

Men in my sample experienced a plethora of positive comments and support from others in their communities. Such reactions are an important aspect of these men's fathering because it supports their non-traditional familial roles. Because previous research had shown stay-at-home fathers to be negatively received by others (Chesley 2011; Doucet 2006, 2009), I was expecting that to be the universal theme among my participants. Yet, positive comments from family and friends, even strangers, outnumbered negative comments. Eric said he often gets comments from older people complimenting how involved he is with his children. He said, "We just went to Costco and got a bunch of groceries, I handled the kids, I get a lot of the old women saying, 'Oh it's so nice you're out with your kids. I like men that are engaged with their families.' You know? Like you have no idea how engaged I am." Some men mentioned feelings of envy from other men—usually older men who wished they could have stayed home with their children. Chad said, "I actually get a lot more guys coming up to me now and telling me how lucky I am and how they would rather have stayed home. And the weird thing is, a lot of those guys are older guys. Guys in their fifties, I found, or even older. And telling me how lucky I was and how much they missed [when their kids were growing up]."

Not only did strangers respond positively, but family members and friends also provided support. Kevin shared,

[My wife]'s mom was really, really super supportive. Her sister didn't say a whole lot. Her dad was supportive. What else? Most of the women that found out were like: "Oh, that's awesome." Because it's kind of rare and the older folks were kind of like, "Oh that's kinda cool." I had a friend that I saw this weekend, he's like: "I know you're a great dad, I can tell you're a great dad," which is really cool to hear. And he said "If I could do that I would have done it in a heartbeat." And that's kind of cool to hear.

Participants' fathers, in particular, were supportive. Most men did not mention any outright disapproval from their fathers. Troy said,

I guess I got support in places I didn't expect to. So my dad, who is sort of a blue collar worker, kind of detached, not the most affectionate person in the world, we get along great, we have a great relationship. Being a grandfather has sort of broken that down a little bit and has changed him in a lot of ways. He's much more affectionate, at least with [my son], but even with me than he has been in the past. And when we first started thinking about it and I mentioned it to him, one of the most surprising things he's ever told me, because he got laid off when I was maybe six and my brother was like two. And he said if he had to do it all over again, "When I got laid off, I would have just taken time off and stayed home. And I'm sad that I missed that opportunity." So that support from him was shocking to me. I sort of expected the opposite response from him.

Men described support from their fathers with a great deal of emotion in their voices. Being approved of by their fathers was perhaps important as it affirmed their place among fathers despite their non-traditional role. This approval of fathers is interesting also in that older generations of men would supposedly react more negatively to their sons staying at

home given that breadwinning ideals of fatherhood were the dominant standard for previous generations. Yet the fact that older men supported this new type of role and expressed wishes for having had more time with their children indicates two things. One, it demonstrates that perhaps previous generations' ideas are shifting with society's ideals. Two, it suggests that previous generations of men perhaps felt the traditional models were lacking but felt less agentic to change their roles given the lack of other supports, such as wives' higher wages and the involved fatherhood model.

These positive comments and reactions made men feel like "special" parents, like exceptional fathers. Greg perhaps put it best when he said, "For me, I feel a little bit like a rock star walking through downtown with a baby on my chest. I was doing it, my wife was doing a talk back at [work] the other day and I was killing time until she was done. And I was walking down the street and I walked past a cop and he kind of half laughed at me, but at the same time he said, 'That's awesome.'" These participants felt that the benefits of being stay-at-home fathers outweighed any negative aspects, particularly because they had such emotionally close relationships with their children. The positive comments received from others lent support to these men as they engaged in family work that differs from what most fathers in the United States do (an average of 5 hours a day [Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011]). The experience of receiving accolades for father involvement mirrors other research about father involvement, particularly for men who work for pay. In particular, I demonstrated how colleagues positively viewed male professors when they took time off work to spend with their children (Solomon, 2010). In addition, other research about academics has shown similar results (Drago, Crouter, Wardell, & Willitis, 2001; Jacobs, 2004; O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005), and men in female-dominated occupations are often on a glass escalator of gender privilege because colleagues view them positively (Williams, 1992). In addition, most working men report supervisor and co-worker support for their family demands (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011). Given these shifts, moving out of the labor force may not be considered such a socially unacceptable choice as it used to be.

### **Pride in Family Work**

Men in my sample said that, over time, engaging in family work became a source of pride. Thus, these men drew on tenets of involved fatherhood to offset the doctrine of breadwinning. Family work for these stay-at-home fathers meant taking care of one's children, one's household, and one's wife. Their family work did not revolve around "masculine" housework or child-centered community work. For example, Eric said,

My son can do division and math, up to double digits. Right now he is six books ahead of his entire class because of his reading proficiency. My daughter, she's the youngest in her class because of the birthday cut-off, yet she can write better than most of the other kids. And these are things that *I've* worked with my kids. I'm seeing these results. So in a way I'm actually getting that legitimacy through *my work*.

Eric seemed to genuinely enjoy nurturing his children's development, which was a departure from his previous work in the military. Josh described feeling similarly,

We got a book on baby sign language ... she picked it all up so quickly. So I really felt like I was making—you could see immediately the results of your efforts. I'm showing her the little please and thank you and she's picking it up and using it even

sometimes when we're not just playing with it. The immediate gratification of your efforts to help them develop and stuff and then just to be there.

Men in Doucet's (2004, 2006a) studies emphasized their engagement in masculine activities around their homes. However, there was little mention of such engagement in the current study. Men in this sample described their household tasks as routinely "feminine": cleaning, laundry, cooking, and meal planning. When I asked, "How do you and your wife divide up housework?" Nick said this:

We don't. I do it. I pretty much do everything. The only thing I don't do is take care of playing the bills.... I literally do everything else around the house: cooking, cleaning, laundry, shampooing carpets, cleaning up poopie diapers, mowing the lawn, taking care of the landscape, plowing snow in the winter. I literally take care of everything. [And then who makes the kids doctors' appointments and things like that?] Me. [Are you the one who takes them to the appointments as well?] Yes. [And then what about scheduling kids activities, like the classes that you mentioned, or any other kind of like structured activity, who is the one that organizes that?] My wife and I both make the decisions as to what we're going to get the kids involved in and then I just take it from there and I make sure that they are there and I make sure that it's paid.

Many of the men I spoke with mentioned the importance of planning healthy meals for their children. For example, Harris shared his thoughts about the benefits of staying at home: "I cook all the healthy meals for us, I love that. We very much value fresh produce and things like that. Eating good quality foods. We see a lot of two-job families where Monday night is pizza night, and by the end of the week you probably are back to pizza night again because you're burned out and nobody feels like cooking."

Providing support for their wives' careers also became an important component of men's family work, as almost every man in my sample mentioned it. Zach said, "[My wife] has said what I do has, in many ways, made her career possible. She doesn't have to take time off work to stay home with sick kids. I can do that. So she doesn't take a hit on that." Harris said similar comments about his wife,

She feels that she is able to advance herself in a professional, rewarding, well-compensated field, help society by being a [occupation] and make the world a better place. And she is constantly giving me props and propping me up. (Geeze, I'm going to get teary here.) [Pauses and wipes his eyes] Because she feels like she couldn't do it without my help. So I *love* that. I love the fact that I can stay home with our kids when they are sick and hurting too. She's never missed a day of work in ten years because of that.

Tobias said that being in charge of housework was important so he could support his wife's career:

I'd be like what would be "expected" of whoever is staying home? He is going to do the home things so that [my wife] doesn't have to be a full-time professor and the meetings and the publishing and also have to do the mom/housework things. So trying to be like: Okay, if that's your job and you're going to take pride in that

and have that be sustainable and reasonable, then I'm going to try and take some pride and responsibility in doing these things.

This aspect of family work is interesting because a wife's traditional role is to be the support for her husband's career. Here, these men adopt this language and take pride in helping their wives have successful careers. Thus, not only are these participants challenging traditional norms of being a husband (and masculinity), but they are also challenging norms of being a wife. That their wives are full-time employed breadwinners, a substantial number of whom occupy high-power, high-ranking jobs, means that their wives are not enacting traditional motherhood just as they are not enacting traditional fatherhood.

### CONCLUSION

The fathering experiences of the men highlighted in this paper demonstrate how men can construct ideas about fathering that significantly differ from traditional fathering and even from involved fathering. As discussed above, involved fathers engage in the hands-on care of their children while continuing their employment (Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Men who fall under this category hold fathering as higher than careers but, unlike the men in my study, they do not leave the labor force to be primary caregivers (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011). This paper focuses on how some men wish to leave the labor force to be primary caregivers, and when presented with the opportunity, readily take up the mantle of stay-at-home parenting. Some of the factors that pushed these men towards home mirror previous research, such as job losses for the men, their wives being professionally successful, and the couple valuing having one parent being the stay-at-home parent (Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007). However, other research found that wives had encouraged their husbands to be stay-at-home parents, the work/family balance was too difficult, and the paid childcare was prohibitively expensive (Doucet & Merla, 2007), issues that were not prominent in my sample.

Unlike Marvin Reed in Lillian Rubin's (1994) *Families on the Fault Line* book who said, "When you get laid off, it's like you lose a part of yourself," men in my study did not say they felt inadequate if they experienced a layoff. Instead, they saw such a transition as an opening in their lives to pursue roles that otherwise seemed unattainable. Some participants even left jobs with excellent pay and prestige to become stay-at-home fathers. Thus, they are not as whetted to the breadwinning father identity as other men are, or as men historically have been.

Not only do these participants' experiences differ from many other fathers in the United States, they appear to be different from prior work on stay-at-home fathers, both in the U.S. and abroad. Unlike prior sociological work in the U.S. (Chesley, 2011), men in this paper discussed their exit from the labor force as a choice. Even if their employer laid them off, they saw this layoff as a positive event and, in most cases, did not have plans to return to paid employment in the foreseeable future. It was not a "break" from paid employment (Doucet, 2004), and all but three did not engage in any paid employment. Those who did were engaged on a *very* part-time basis, illustrating their primary commitment to their families. Indeed, these results illustrate that fathering is evolving to include multiple new aspects of paternal contribution (Aumann, Galinsky, & Matos, 2011; Gerson, 1993).

Participants drew on language of intensive parenting, once considered only to be the doctrine for mothers, to support their familial involvement. Like many stay-at-home mothers (Hays, 1996), these stay-at-home fathers discussed the importance of having one parent in

the home with the primary focus on caring for the home, children, and in the case of participants in this study, spouses. Stay-at-home mothers in Hays's study described their desire to not let other people "raise their children," a common refrain in this paper. The use of this language by both men and women is nothing new—other studies have shown that many men desire one parent to be out of the labor force for parenting (Rubin, 1994; Stone & Lovejoy, 2004; Townsend, 2002). However, the fact that men would use such language as a reason that *they* (and not their wives as in Stone and Lovejoy's work [2004]) are stay-at-home parents points to a development in the conceptualization of fatherhood—away from one of the traditional breadwinner and father and even away from involved fatherhood (with its connection to paid employment). Furthermore, unlike men in Chesley's (2011) study, participants who wanted one parent to be the stay-at-home parent did not see their shift to being the stay-at-home parent as temporary. They saw their "engaged fathering" as a long-term purposeful commitment.

There are other results from the current study that illustrate a development in the idea of fatherhood differing from prior research about stay-at-home fathers as well. Unlike Doucet's study on the embodiment of fatherhood (2009), men in my sample focused on the emotional closeness they had with their children and the routine "feminine" household tasks of which they were in charge. Stay-at-home fathers in this study were not trying to "reinforce" (Doucet 2004, p. 293) traditional gendered fathering. They used different discourses of fatherhood, and motherhood, to construct an identity as a father that made sense in light of cultural norms and their lived experiences. This construct of fatherhood was even more egalitarian than previous work has shown stay-at-home fathering to be (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004, 2006a, 2009).

Participants in my study discussed parenting in gender-neutral terms. That is, they stressed the interchangeable nature of men and women in relation to parenting. This is different from both Chesley's (2011) and Doucet's (2009) work in which they showed men think of their wives and children as having a connection that they could never attain. Risman's (1998) work on gender-neutral parenting in her book *Gender Vertigo* demonstrates that many well-educated men and women ascribe to gender-neutral parenting. Like parents in her work, who try to equally parent their children without differences in activities, the stay-at-home fathers in this paper did not emphasize differences between their wives and themselves. However, the men in Risman's study did not take that interchangeability to the level that stay-at-home fathers do in that, like involved fathers, they were still engaged with paid employment. The families in Risman's study were indeed in transition. Since that study was done in the 1990s, some families have appeared to shift their familial roles even further away from traditional and egalitarian models.

The overwhelming positive responses men received from family members, friends, former co-workers, and strangers illustrate a turn in the tide from when previous scholars examined stay-at-home fathers' experiences. Mainstream culture's portrayal of stay-at-home fathers as capable and responsible fathers in television shows highlights this as well. Men in the current study felt mostly supported by those in their social networks, and this support enabled them to feel pride in their family work. If more men become stay-at-home fathers, this non-traditional role may become simply another accepted variation in family arrangements.

Data in this paper illustrate how norms and practices of fatherhood have evolved, making it easier for men to take on the role of primary caregivers. It appears there is less of a need for them to affirm their familial roles according to traditional ideals. They chose to leave the labor force to be stay-at-home parents (many fulfilling long-held wishes), they

saw mothers and fathers as interchangeable, they emphasized their emotional closeness to their children over more traditional father-children connections, they believed in hands-on caregiving, they saw themselves as *the* primary caregiver in their families, they were supports for their wives' occupations (which had primacy), and they saw paid employment as interfering with their ideal family lives to such an extent that they wanted to stay out of the labor force. Thus, this model of "engaged fathering" entails egalitarian beliefs about mothers and fathers, emotional closeness with children, hands-on involvement in day-to-day routine care, primary responsibility for childcare, a voluntary exit from the labor force, the instrumental support for wives' careers, and a view of family as having primary importance in one's life.

Unlike most fathers in America, who work more hours than men without children (Aumann, Galinsky & Matos, 2011; Glauber & Gozjolko, 2011), these men left the labor force to increase their childcare hours and develop a model of engaged fathering. As many of these men were professionals before leaving the labor force, they also contradict Pleck and Pleck's argument that professional men "are often more involved in their attitudes rather than in their actions" (1997, p. 35). These men wanted to, and became, the most hands-on kind of parent: the stay-at-home one. As Marsiglio (1991) found, emotional father-child bonds men form when they care for their young children become stronger as the years pass. I sensed this to be true for the men in my sample who had been stay-at-home fathers for many years. Their connection to their children was poignant and highlights how fatherhood, for some men, has evolved to one of intense engagement since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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