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Masculinity, Carework and Fatherhood in the United States

BY

CATHERINE RICHARDS SOLOMON
Quinnipiac University, Connecticut, USA

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India – Malaysia – China

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CHAPTER 1

THE LANDSCAPE OF FATHERHOOD AND STAY-AT-HOME FATHERING

Images of fathers providing care for their children abound in popular media in the early 21st century. Sociological research has shown that, indeed, fathers spend more time with their children than they did 50 years ago (Sayer, 2005) and fathers and mothers agree that both should be equally involved in carework (Galinsky, Aumann, & Bond, 2011). There are some differences among men, however. Shows and Gerstel (2009) found that men in blue-collar jobs were more likely to provide care for their children than men with professional jobs (see also Williams, 2010). Many working-class fathers work in alternate shifts from their wives to provide childcare while their wives work (Shows & Gerstel, 2009). These men are intimately involved with their children's day-to-day lives and provide hands-on care, what Shows and Gerstel call "private fatherhood" (2009:175). In contrast, professional men perform what they term "public fatherhood," attending and engaging with their children during public events, such as

recitals, games, or school events (2009:172) but doing little to no hands-on care. It seems that some professional, highly educated men only espouse egalitarian beliefs about parenting and do not practice it. Thus, they say they want to be as involved, or ought to be as involved, as their wives are, but their behavior resembles that of traditional fathers (Cooper, 2002; Harrington, Van Deusen, & Fraone, 2013; Williams, 2010). Men in highly masculinized professional careers report "silencing" work/family conflict as their desire to be involved with family life counters hegemonic masculinity and can threaten their professional success (Berdahl & Moon, 2013; Cooper, 2002:19; Rudman & Mescher, 2013). Therefore, despite their desire to be more involved with their children, the tenets of masculinity and breadwinning hinder their willingness to do so.

However, other evidence exists that highly educated fathers with egalitarian gender beliefs are involved fathers (Cooper, 2002; McGill, 2014; Yoshida, 2012), with some men assuming primary responsibility for childcare when they come home from paid work. Some professional men significantly cut their work hours for childcare and use flexible work schedules to provide care for their children (Gasser, 2017; Noonan, Estes, & Glass, 2007). These men use their privileged status to increase their involvement with their children and their family lives, instead of abiding by traditional notions of masculinity and fatherhood, with their sole reliance on the importance of breadwinning.

Regardless of class, men tend to be more involved with their children if they see themselves as capable parents and if they, not their children's mothers, are the ones who determine their level of involvement with their children (Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005; Jacobs & Kelley, 2006; Pragg & Knoester, 2017). Wives' working hours do have a positive relationship with husbands' involvement – the more hours

that women work for pay, the more hours husbands contribute to childcare (Hook & Wolfe, 2012). These changes are in line with the evolution of ideals about what makes a "good" father – a shift from the traditional breadwinner to the involved father (Daly, 1996; Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997; Risman, 1998).

Involved fatherhood entails an involvement in the hands-on daily work of parenting that goes above and beyond the traditional father who plays with his children in the evenings and on the weekends (Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997). Involved fathers are ones who feed their children, give baths, help children get dressed, read bedtime stories, and transport children to their activities; however, not every involved father does *all* of these activities (Lamb, 2000). Involved fathers, however, work for pay so their family work does not counteract hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, 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, and also to masculinity (Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck 1997; Sayer, 2005; Whelan & Lally, 2002). They argue that breadwinning continues to occupy the base of fathering because men's wages still outpace women's wages in most occupations (Lamb, 2000; Pleck & Pleck, 1997; Sayer, 2005; Whelan & Lally, 2002).

In Coltrane's (2000) review of the division of household labor among married heterosexual couples, it was evident that men did not contribute equally to housework as women did. Fast forward ten years and men feel they should spend more time in family care (Harrington et al., 2013) *and* actually have increased the time they spend in housework, compared to men in previous generations (Galinsky et al., 2011). Such an increase seems related to an increase in the acceptance of and the expectation of egalitarian family relationships between husbands and wives, particularly among well-educated men

and women (Kaufman, 2005). However, men in dual-earner families still contribute significantly less to housework than their wives do, regardless of how many hours their wives work for pay (Galinsky et al., 2011; Whelan & Lally, 2002). Thus, even with significant time and energy demands on their wives' days, men still are not as equally involved with the care of their family as women are. This illustrates that gender norms from the 20th century still hold sway.

Many fathers see themselves as their wives' "helpers" or "backup" parents instead of as primary caregivers (Craig, 2006:275; Solomon, 2011). Because some men do not see themselves as primary caregivers, their time with children is often spent doing fun recreational activities (Milkie, Simon, & Powell, 1997; Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001). The continued focus on breadwinning may be because masculinity depends on men's engagement in the labor force and their financial support for their families (Connell, 1987, 2005; Cooper, 2002; Gerson, 1993; Shows & Gerstel, 2009; Townsend, 2002; Williams, 2010). Thus, some men continue to focus on those aspects as they relate to fathering. Many professional men see fatherhood as "both caring for my child and earning money to meet his/her financial needs" (Harrington et al., 2013).

Despite this variability in men's family work, an increasing number of men report conflict between work and family, wishing they could spend more time with their children (Galinsky et al., 2011). Although breadwinning may still be an important piece of fatherhood, more and more men are feeling the pull of family (Daly & Palkovitz, 2004; Harrington et al., 2013; Whelan & Lally, 2002).

Since the 1970s, more men are leaving the labor force 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 199,000 in 2015 (U. S. Census, 2016). Twenty-two percent of men who were not working for pay in 2009 said they were out of the labor force because they were "taking care of home/family," up from 1 percent in the 1970s, according to Current Population Study (CPS) data (Kramer, Kelly, & McCulloch, 2015). In addition, some research points to an increased number of positive portrayals of stay-at-home fathers in the media (Riggs, 1997; Vavrus, 2002) and "how-to" guidelines for families transitioning to a stay-at-home father/breadwinning mother model (Gill, 2001). In the United States, more representations of stay-at-home fathers appeared 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. Stay-at-home fathers embody a significantly different role from the "powerfully symbolic" one many fathers occupy (Lareau, 2000:423) because their activities with children are strikingly different from most fathers in the United States (Yeung et al., 2001). 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 2015 (U.S. Census, 2016)), studying stay-at-home fathers will help scholars understand the attitudes and experiences of men who prioritize carework. Understanding their attitudes and experiences could increase societal support for other men who want to leave paid work to care for children. In addition, 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 identity. Stay-at-home fathers are, by definition, "highly involved fathers."

Thus, I hope this study about their experiences will illuminate ways in which American families are continuing to evolve.

SCHOLARSHIP ABOUT STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS

Sociologists in the United States are just beginning to study these men's family experiences (Chesley, 2011). Chesley's couple-level analysis of 13 current stay-at-home fathers and their wives in Wisconsin examined the negotiation of gender roles in parenting. Several studies have been conducted in other countries: one in Belgium with 21 men (Merla, 2008) 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 (2006a); her body of work included stay-at-home fathers ($n = 70$) as well as single fathers.

According to this small body of research, men seem to become stay-at-home fathers for a variety of reasons: because of the impetus of a job "shock" (e.g., loss of a job, relocation), 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 (Chesley, 2011; Doucet & Merla, 2007). Despite being the primary caregiver for their children, men often saw their wives as the most important caregivers (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2009) and stay-at-home fathers in Canada saw mothers and fathers as inherently different (Doucet, 2006a). These fathers discussed how their style of interaction with their children was more rough-and-tumble than their wives (Doucet, 2009). Some wives even limited their work hours to provide childcare, despite their roles as primary breadwinners (Chesley, 2011).

Men sometimes focused on sports and physical activities with their children, which could be a coping mechanism to deal with challenges to masculinity (Doucet, 2006a, 2009). Men often felt guilty about not providing financially for their families (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004, 2009) and took on specific "masculine" activities around their houses (e.g., home repairs) and in their communities (e.g., coaching sports) to compensate (Chesley 2011; Doucet, 2004, 2006b). In addition, men and women struggled with the loss of the men's breadwinner identities, and thus the men worked part-time to contribute economically to their families and to live up to masculine ideals (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004). Engaging in masculine home activities or maintaining a foothold in the labor force may be a mechanism for men to maintain a sense of masculinity.

There were instances in which stay-at-home fathers experienced disapproval from others for being out of the labor force (Doucet, 2006b, 2009). Perhaps contributing to the idealization of the mother-child relationship, men felt that others viewed them as incompetent parents, second to their wives (Doucet, 2009). Men in Belgium and Canada described their struggle for acceptance in their social circles and their exclusion from playgroups (Doucet, 2006b; Doucet & Merla, 2007). Some Belgian men reported that they were accused of financially exploiting their wives because their family role was so different from the traditional breadwinner father role (Merla, 2008).

Research about stay-at-home fathers has demonstrated that stay-at-home fathers face considerable exclusion from others in their communities. Stay-at-home fathers tend not to know any other stay-at-home fathers and tend to socialize less, overall, than stay-at-home mothers (Whelan & Lally, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). In addition, they often experience feelings of stigma (Rochlen, McKelley, & Whittaker, 2010)

and criticism about their parenting behaviors (Zimmerman, 2000). In addition, in Doucet's study about stay-at-home fathers, she found that men felt that others saw them as sexual predators or, more mildly, as suspect males, and thus had to carefully self-monitor their behaviors, particularly around their daughters' female friends (Doucet, 2006b). Some research demonstrated that these negative experiences led to high levels of psychological distress, loneliness, and boredom for stay-at-home fathers (Whelan & Lally, 2002; Zimmerman, 2000). Thus, even though media portrayals of stay-at-home fathers tend to be positive and in praise of men staying at home (Riggs, 1997; Vavrus, 2002), the reality of stay-at-home fathers seems to be quite different.

Doucet wrote that stay-at-home fathers were "adamant … to distinguish themselves *as men* . . . as masculine, and as fathers, *not* as mothers" (2004:292, italics in original). Men in her study "remain connected to traditionally masculine sources of identity … [and] the long shadow of hegemonic masculinity hangs over them" (2004: 279). Thus, it appears from Doucet's work that Canadian stay-at-home fathers, at the beginning of this century, were bound by ideas of hegemonic masculinity and found ways to shape their experiences to its doctrine. Given that paternal leave policies exist in Canada and Belgium that encourage father involvement with children (Wisensale, 2001), the societal context in which these studies took place is strikingly different from the United States. Such countries offer more support for father involvement at the policy level than the United States, and thus their findings may not be easily translatable to U.S. fathers.

Since Doucet conducted her study, many cultural and economic shifts have occurred that have altered families and family life. The U.S. economy 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). In addition, 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 et al., 2011). These economic changes in our society have made having two incomes a necessity for most families' standards of living in the United States (Baca Zinn et al., 2011). Furthermore, men's income continues to provide the bulk of income to dual-earner families. Given these financial factors, and the importance of two incomes, the time is appropriate to provide an in-depth sociological examination of men who choose to stay out of the labor force to be primary caregivers 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, men with whom I spoke described being stay-at-home fathers using "choice" language. These men discussed becoming stay-at-home fathers as conscious choices. Although it could be argued that they become stay-at-home fathers because of changes in the economy, their identity 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); instead they often plunged into depression and turned to substance abuse to self-medicate. Currently, many men who lose their jobs take on service sector jobs to continue to provide economically for their families (Baca Zinn et al., 2011). The stay-at-home fathers in my study offer an interesting perspective on men who are out of the labor force and become stay-at-home parents.

I use a gender perspective when examining these men's experiences. Fatherhood is entwined with ideals of masculinity. As Townsend (2002) illustrated in his work,

being a father and a breadwinner has been the basis by which men consider themselves having achieved the status of "men" (see also Connell, 2005; Ferree, 1991). Yet in the later part of the 20th century, a "new masculinity" has emerged (Cooper, 2002:5) which supports men's simultaneous involvement in childcare and paid work. For men who follow the doctrine of new masculinity, being an involved father is more important than having a high-powered career (Cooper, 2002; Solomon, 2010). These men shape their careers around their family lives, although they do not opt out of paid work entirely. They are still full-time workers. The presence of the involved father ideal, the breadwinner father ideal, and different types of masculinities illustrate the dynamic nature of gender in men's lives.

CHAPTERS IN THIS BOOK

In the subsequent chapters, I examine five aspects of stay-at-home fathers' lives: the reasons they became stay-at-home fathers, their identities as fathers, their responses to challenges to masculinity, their contribution to housework, and their community involvement. Chapter 2 describes my methods of this study and the reasons why men chose to become and remain stay-at-home fathers. In Chapter 3, I describe how stay-at-home fathers enact fatherhood in ways that may be starting to transform ideals of fatherhood. The focus of Chapter 4 is on the challenges to masculinity experienced by the men in my study and the ways in which they responded to those challenges. Through this chapter, I show that a new definition of masculinity is emerging to support such men's engagement in family life. I examine how men are contributing to housework in Chapter 5, illustrating that although men's childcare resembles stay-at-home mothers,

their investment in housework continues, by and large, to lag behind. Finally, in Chapter 6, I describe how because stay-at-home men occupy roles that are in opposition to traditional masculinity and fatherhood ideas, others do not always let them integrate in their communities.