

FATHERS WHO MOTHER
A STUDY OF STAY-AT-HOME FATHERS
IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN FAMILIES

by

Ann M. Duffett

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Sociology in
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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation research explored the general topic of gender by taking an in-depth look at parenting—a particularly gendered activity—through the eyes of married fathers in two-parent families where the mother is the primary breadwinner and the father is the primary parent. It employed qualitative research methods to provide a richly detailed account of the day-to-day lives of stay-at-home fathers, including: the social, economic, and cultural factors that make it possible for men both to become stay-at-home fathers and to continue serving in the role; the social constraints and challenges they face and the strategies they use to overcome them; and the ways they interpret, respond to, and give meaning to the experience of stay-at-home fatherhood. The fathers with the most success at legitimizing their stay-at-home-father status are the ones who degendered their responsibilities by altogether de-linking them from gender, thus eliminating the feminizing or emasculating stigma associated with them. In effect, they occupationalized at-home parenting by

conceiving of it as an essential job that must be done to achieve a successful family life and good outcomes for their children. By separating at-home parenting from traditional gender ideology, they constructed a new reality where tending to children in this way was perceived as parental as opposed to maternal behavior. The findings were based on 35 in-depth, open-ended telephone interviews with stay-at-home fathers from across the country.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1979, my father, a union laborer, found himself physically unable to work due to a chronic illness. He was 44 years old. My mother, a registered nurse, became the sole breadwinner for a family of six—two adults, two teenagers, a pre-teen, and a toddler. As a result, the traditional gender roles they had inhabited for 15 years of marriage were altered profoundly. Neither was ever truly comfortable with his or her new role; neither embraced the identity that came with their new circumstances. Although the daily reality of life had changed, their notions about the roles they played within our family had not.

Looking back, I can see that my dad was especially uncomfortable. For him, to be a success as a man meant being a good provider to his wife and children. After he stopped working, he withdrew a lot, spending less time in social settings and more time in isolation. After several years, he insisted that we move from our Bronx, New York neighborhood, where we felt like we knew everyone, to the country, where an acre of trees protected him from any perceived slights or questioning glances from neighbors.

I know, however, that my father actually liked being home with us. He was good with children and was patient and attentive to our natural curiosities and interests. He was also tidy around the house, a good cook, and well able to get us out to school in the mornings and to help with our homework in the afternoons. By all

accounts, he fared exceptionally well when it came to mastering his new responsibilities. Yet, he was conflicted about being an at-home father.

Statement of the Problem

Fathers who stay at home full-time to take care of children, like my own, have taken on the quintessentially feminine gender role in a society where men's status is privileged, where masculinity is largely defined in opposition to things feminine, and where the worth of a man is often gauged by his salary. While a confluence of social, economic, and cultural forces have made it more possible than ever before for fathers to consider the stay-at-home option, the choice remains fraught with obstacles and challenges.

Men who adopt nontraditional gender roles—whether in the home or the workplace, whether by choice or circumstance—violate social norms. Married men with children who do not work for pay are perceived as extreme violators. Whether these men are intentionally defying traditional gender roles or not, one consequence of this behavior is social stigma. Christine Williams's case studies with men in predominantly female professions showed that they are often questioned by others about their masculinity (*Still*). Levine, too, found that men in “a nontraditional family structure” provoked strong feelings among others and assumptions not only about their parenting abilities but also about their masculinity (*Who Will Raise* 134).

For stay-at-home fathers, stigma comes in similar forms: raised eyebrows from the neighbors, awkward social situations, accusations of laziness, and

speculation about their masculinity, to name but a few (Hoffman; Lawlor; Marin; Medina). From one perspective, stigma even of this subtle kind is an effective device for keeping men (and women) in their rightful place and maintaining the smooth functioning of society, with men and fathers playing their appropriate instrumental role and women and mothers their appropriate expressive one (Parsons and Bales). From another perspective, social stigma deprives men of the opportunity to be full-time, hands-on, nurturing parents and thus limits their options with no regard for their individual capacities or desires (Epstein, “Changes”; Epstein, “Protean Woman”).

Role conflict—defined as “when a person defines his or her role in one way while those in related roles define it differently” (Ambercrombie 363)—is characteristic of the stay-at-home-father experience. The result is an unmistakable tension between actual behavior and social expectations. The stay-at-home father is constantly presenting his role in social interactions that construct and refine his identity, for himself and others, through managing impressions and the “definition of the situation,” “performing” his “parts,” and selecting the appropriate “fronts” and “settings” in order to establish his masculine authenticity for his “audience” (Goffman, *Presentation* 22-34). Performance is especially demanding for a stay-at-home father who, stigmatized for taking on this unusual role, is forced to adapt to interactions where his identity may be derided or under attack (E. Anderson).

To a large extent, one’s perspective on the positive or negative impact of social stigma is a function of one’s perspective on gender differences. There are two overarching schools of thought that explain gender differences. One posits that

women and men are essentially different, with various explanations for why: early childhood socialization and experiences (Chodorow); biological or genetic differences (Rossi); distinctly gendered social roles (Parsons and Bales); and different orientations and perspectives toward nurturance, morality, and justice (Gilligan).

Any time men or women step outside of their traditional gender roles, whether as a result of personal choice or due to external circumstances, they provide a clear challenge to the essentialist approach to understanding gender differences. An alternative explanation is characterized by a belief that what may appear to be natural distinctions between the sexes is often a result of social forces at work. This alternative school of thought proposes that gender is a social construction, the product of social institutions, the micro-interactions of everyday life, and the subtle social controls that make it difficult to deviate from the norm. According to this social constructionist perspective, rather than being natural and fixed, most gender distinctions may change over time, vary across societies, and are a product of human culture (Connell; Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions*; Kimmel, *Manhood*; Lorber, *Paradoxes*).

According to the social constructionists, one of the weaknesses of the essentialist perspective is its “focus on the small differences between the genders rather than on the large similarities found in human behavior” and thus its erroneous conclusion “that men and women are essentially different” (Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions* 14). Essentialist theories are also flawed, social constructionists suggest, because they assume two distinct genders, with no room for the “enormous ranges of

female-ness and male-ness” (Kimmel, *Gendered Society 2*) that actually exist within an individual (Connell; Lorber, *Paradoxes*; M. Mead). The social constructionist perspective challenges essentialist explanations, showing that “one problem is that such theories usually assume a continuity of behavioral styles and personality preferences throughout life” and also “that the same person may display passive and subordinate ‘femininity’ in a love affair yet be a tyrant at the office” (Risman 2). Most importantly, the essentialist approach does not sufficiently take into account “that the two genders are not at all homogeneous categories” (Lorber, *Breaking the Bowls 7*) and are deeply intertwined with other characteristics such as race, ethnicity, class, religion, gender identity, and age (Amott and Matthaei; Connell; Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions*; Kimmel, *Gendered Society*; Lorber, *Breaking the Bowls*).

The power of social controls to influence so-called natural gendered behavior cannot be overstated. Rather than allowing individuals to choose their own roles, “most societies tend to exaggerate biological potentials by clearly differentiating sex roles and by defining the proper behavior of men and women as opposite or complementary” (Gilmore 23). Women and men do not simply act their roles, they are expected to internalize their assigned gender—and face serious repercussions for noncompliance (Epstein, “Protean Woman” 160). As a result, virtually all societies have been characterized by a sex/gender division of labor fostering an ideology that purports women’s preference and talents for home and children and men’s lack of interest in and inability to take care of these things.

But, despite social stigma and other internal and external barriers, human beings have a history of transgressing gender boundaries. Whether they do so intentionally or not, the transgressors often lead the way to social change. Stay-at-home fathers are only one of many examples of gender norm violators. Others include married women who choose not to have children (Ireland; Veevers); gay and lesbian couples who choose to have children (Reimann); women who pursue male-dominated professions such as law (Epstein, *Women in Law*); men who choose female-dominated professions such as nursing (C. Williams, *Gender Differences*); and transgendered and trans-sexual people (Bornstein; Garfinkle; Lorber, *Paradoxes*).

The very existence of stay-at-home fathers, even in small numbers, also poses a significant challenge to normative gender roles. Many men are functioning as full-time parents against many odds, they are doing it well, and they are finding the time spent tending to children to be extremely rewarding (Hartlaub; Bellows; Risman). As a result, these men help to diminish some venerable stereotypes about fatherhood and masculinity—that “good provider” is synonymous with “good father,” that men by their nature lack the capacity to nurture and bond with young children, and that a father’s preference is always for a full-time career over full-time parenting. At the same time, they also are making it more possible for other men to consider at-home fatherhood as an occupational option.

There are widely divergent estimates of the number of stay-at-home fathers in the United States, ranging from approximately 100,000 to more than two million. Much of the discrepancy stems from differing definitions of “stay-at-home.” For

instance, an article published in 2001 in *Business Week* reported a leading expert on “at-home dads” estimating “the total number of dads with primary responsibility for children in dual-earner households” at 2.5 million (Conlin). But there is reason to believe that this number is overstated in that it includes both fathers who do not work outside the home for pay as well as fathers who are employed outside the home for pay but who also provide “the primary childcare arrangements for their children under 15 years old while their spouses were at work” (Fields, *Children’s Living Arrangements* 9). The U.S. Census, in an attempt to put these numbers into context, began to collect data that distinguishes between those fathers who are out of the workforce, those whose primary reason for being home was to tend to children, and those who also had wives who worked full-time outside the home. To that end, *America’s Families and Living Arrangements: 2003* reported that there were approximately one million married fathers with children under age 15 who were out of the labor force in 2003. Among these non-working fathers, approximately 160,000 said their main reason for being out of the workforce was “to care for home and family.” To whittle it down even further, about 100,000 of these fathers who were out of the labor force caring for home and family had wives who were full-time employed in the workforce (Fields, *America’s Families* 11-12).

The general public is becoming more aware of the prevalence of stay-at-home fathers in communities across the country. A national public opinion poll reported by *Newsweek* in 2003 found that more than half of American adults personally know couples where the woman is the major wage earner and the man’s career is secondary

or where the woman works and the man has taken on the child-care responsibilities (Tyre and McGinn).

Perhaps the most compelling societal change that has made it possible for men to even consider the unconventional occupation of stay-at-home father is the remarkable shift in public sentiment about fathers' involvement in their children's daily lives. Although mothers continue to do the greater part of housework and child care in American homes (Bianchi et al. 193-196, 208-209; Seron and Ferris; Warner; Wille), fathers today often are expected to do such things as change diapers, put children to bed, or attend parent-teacher conferences. A national public opinion survey of parents in 1999 found that almost eight out of ten fathers said they were more involved in their children's lives than their own fathers were (Farkas, Johnson, and Duffett). Another, conducted in 2000, found almost nine in ten parents—mothers and fathers alike—agreeing that fathers are as capable as mothers in terms of caring for the needs of young children (Farkas, Duffett, and Johnson).

The women's movement of the 1960s and 1970s—in tandem with advances in birth control and the legalization of abortion—also transformed women's choices and society's perceptions about motherhood, work, and family. Sociologists have described women's entry into the economic arena during this period as “the basic social revolution of our time” (Hochschild and Machung 239). The number of women and especially mothers in the workforce grew substantially, as did their access to higher education and the professions. These changes ultimately changed men's lives,

too, calling on them “to become more attentive husbands, more informed lovers and more involved fathers” (Geller 178).

Changes in the economy also have had a significant impact on the roles of men and women in this country. The shift from a manufacturing to a service economy during the last quarter of the twentieth century caused men’s wages to decline and jobs for women to be easier to find (Elison; Reskin and Roos). Laws against sexual discrimination in employment helped level the economic playing field to some extent, and women have increased access to jobs with higher pay and prestige. Still, on average, men continue to out-earn women—a full-time employed woman in 2002 earned 77 cents for each dollar her male counterpart earned (Weinberg 11)—but there are exceptions. For example, in 2004, the percent of wives earning more than their husbands in married-couple families was 25 percent, almost 8.5 million wives.*

Research Questions

For a variety of social, economic, and cultural reasons, more men are taking part in child care, and, although still small in number, a new model of the traditional nuclear family where men are the primary caretakers of children and women are the primary breadwinners is becoming increasingly familiar. It is unusual for an individual in a socially superior category to take on the attributes of someone in a

* “Table F-22 Married-Couple Families with Wives’ Earnings Greater Than Husbands’ Earnings: 1981 to 2004 (selected years).” U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Survey.

subordinate class. It is for this reason that stay-at-home fathers offer such a compelling subject of investigation.

My research question is: “How do men construct at-home parenting as a legitimate occupation?” Three sub-questions will be explored to discover various aspects of the legitimating process: 1) What are the facilitating factors that make stay-at-home fathering possible? 2) What are the social constraints stay-at-home fathers face in taking on such a nontraditional gender role? 3) What approaches do stay-at-home fathers use to justify at-home parenting as a legitimate occupation?

Review of the Literature

This study explored the lives of a sample of stay-at-home fathers, defined as married men with children whose households are characterized by a father who stays home full-time to tend to the children and a mother who works outside the home full-time to provide financially for the family. It uncovers the various facilitating factors in society that make it possible for men to consider stay-at-home parenting as a lifestyle choice, social constraints that continue to make it difficult for men to consider it, and the approaches such men use to legitimize their nontraditional status. It builds on a larger body of work on men in nontraditional occupations. Included in this literature review are the following topics: the effect of the devaluation of women’s work; the strategies used by men in nontraditional occupations to differentiate what they do from what women do; the concept of degendering; and an account of the history of male parenting and its impact on outcomes for children.

Stigma of the Feminine: The Devaluation of Women's Work

Male-dominated societies tend to devalue what is feminine; qualities associated with men and masculinity are more highly regarded than those associated with women (C. Williams, *Still* 1-22). For many men, their sense of masculinity is derived in part from “not doing the things that mothers do” (Coltrane, “Household Labor” 473). American society is characterized by androcentric thinking, which is the belief that males are more valuable than females and that the male experience is somehow gender neutral and normative for all people (Risman 2). According to Hochschild and Machung, the traditional sex division of labor results in women being assigned lower status and less authority than men, whatever the job (254, 261). Statistical data document how the overall status and pay of occupations wane as the percentage of women increases (Reskin and Roos 47).

Pay and prestige are especially low in the “caring professions” where women dominate, such as nursing, teaching, and child care (C. Williams, *Still*). And, when men do “women’s work,” the work itself may become more highly valued. Williams found that it is not uncommon for employers to focus on recruiting men as an explicit strategy for raising the status and pay in female-dominated occupations such as nursing, teaching, library science, and social work (*Still* 24). According to Williams, the reason more men do not pursue jobs in female-dominated professions such as nursing is simple: Men do not want those jobs—they see in them less pay, little prestige, and low status (*Gender Differences* 124). In Epstein’s study of telephone workers, some men chose not to have a job at all rather than work inside the office,

which was where women employees predominated. To quote Epstein: “The *maleness* of a job has an impact on both the women who avoid taking on such work or who are made to feel they somehow violate themselves when they do, and men who have a stake in preserving the definition since it roots their identity. Similarly, the *femaleness* attributed to a job causes discomfort to men who choose such work” (“Changes” 137). In addition, one of the main findings in Coltrane’s cross-cultural study of nonindustrial societies was that increased levels of fathers’ participation in childrearing were positively associated with increased levels of women’s participation in community decision making and women’s access to positions of authority (“Father-Child Relationships”).

One particularly illustrative example of how ideological justifications are used to determine proper gendered behavior at work can be found in the U.S. Marines. Williams found that male Marines needed something to define themselves against and, to that end, determined that if a woman could do any given task, then the standards for that task were too low (*Gender Differences* 66-67).

Strategies Men Use to Legitimize Doing Women’s Work

Some might explain the unconventional choice of men who choose to pursue a career in an obviously female-dominated profession by assuming they are effeminate or gay or have personality traits that are excessively feminine compared with “normal” men. In fact, men in women-dominated occupations work hard to assert and maintain a sense of masculinity both at work and in their private lives (C. Williams,

Gender Differences). More often than not, these men are aware of the stigma attached to their actions and put considerable mental energy into distancing themselves from it.

One strategy men in nontraditional occupations use is to differentiate themselves from their female coworkers. Williams documents this type of behavior in *Still a Man's World: Men Who Do Women's Work*. The male nurses she studied, for example, were much more likely to pursue (and reach) management or administrative positions than their female counterparts and thus were able to distinguish themselves from the rank and file. Another strategy was to highlight the more physical or technical aspects of their job. Williams found that male nurses in a psychiatric ward accomplished this relatively easily—a lot of physical restraining of patients was needed in psychiatric wards. Similarly, male librarians structured their careers around the high-technology aspects of their work. Another tactic Williams found was renaming what they do to make it sound more masculine. A social worker, for example, called himself a “psychotherapist” and a teacher said he was “in education” when people inquired what they did for a living (128). Yet another strategy was to disassociate from the work itself, for example, when a teacher says he is teaching so he has something to fall back on if his other pursuits do not work out. Finally, Williams found that many men who worked in predominantly female environments removed themselves from activities associated with the jobs that they believed were too feminine, such as serving on committees or organizing social events.

The experiences of trans-gendered people may offer some understanding of the challenges that men in women-dominated occupations face. Garfinkle's ethnomethodological study concerning Agnes, a biological male who lived life as a woman, illustrates many of the strategies men use to maintain their gender identity in unconventional situations (116-85). Agnes was a man who was trying very hard to be a woman; she spent several years living and passing as a woman and eventually had a successful sex change operation. The strategies she used to pass—careful attention to her appearance, to the sound and tone of her voice, to her manners and the way she carried herself—showed the remarkable level of awareness that Agnes had about her own masculinity and how her behavior was being perceived by others around her. The parallel between Agnes and men in nontraditional occupations is that both were required to exert tremendous energy and vigilance in their public display of gender to maintain their own sense of a gendered self.

The concept of “doing gender” (West and Zimmerman) articulates a sociological approach to understanding the concepts of sex and gender that delineates the differences between the two and highlights the intense interactional work that is necessary to be a gendered person in modern society (Lorber, “From the Editor” 123-24). West and Zimmerman argue that gender is less about who you are but rather what you do, and that gender itself is not merely individual sex attributes but an enduring characteristic of society. According to this analysis, people do gender—manage their public behavior so that the outcome can be viewed plainly as either gender appropriate or inappropriate—in order to maintain an acceptable status in the

world in which they live. While it is individuals who do gender, the gendered behavior itself is notably social in nature, as West and Zimmerman describe it, “carried out in the virtual or real presence of others who are presumed to be oriented to its production” (126). Thus it matters what other people think and expect, and so success at doing gender requires fitting one’s behavior to the expectations of others. “Doing gender consists of managing such occasions so that, whatever the particulars, the outcome is seen and seeable in context as gender-appropriate or, as the case may be, gender-inappropriate, that is, *accountable*” (West and Zimmerman 135).

Unlike doing gender, which reinforces so-called gender appropriate behavior, degendering is characterized by the separation of gender from one’s behaviors and actions. In *Breaking the Bowls: Degendering and Feminist Change*, Lorber writes that degendering means “freedom from gender restrictions” (176), with the ultimate goal being equality. Equality, according to Lorber, will be reached not in highlighting the differences between the two sexes, but rather in removing gender altogether from the structures of society; in a degendered world, people would act and be expected to behave based on attributes other than gender, for example, their interests, their education, their talents, or their age.

In practice, degendering works to blur gender boundaries by making visible the similarities of men’s and women’s abilities and capabilities (Lorber, *Breaking the Bowls* 8). It requires paying attention to the role gender plays in the allocation of tasks in all aspects of society—at home, at work, at church, at war—and making a decision not to assign tasks by gender in our everyday lives. Lorber offers many examples of

ways to do this: refrain from grouping school children by gender; choose gender-free words to describe relationships, such as “sibling” or “significant other”; begin presentations by saying “colleagues and friends” rather than “ladies and gentlemen”; and, most especially, “stop comparing children by gender” and never saying things like “boys will be boys” or “just like a girl” (33).

When more men take on activities that women traditionally have done, and as women continue to take on traditionally male roles, it becomes more difficult for members of society to sustain the belief that one or the other gender is more suitable for any given activity or role. In effect, the activity or role becomes gender-free. We see this happening when a woman in the military is identified simply as a soldier (and not a “female” soldier), or, as James A. Levine, director of the Fatherhood Project at the Families and Work Institute, says, when the term “working parent” conjures up an image of a father as readily as that of a mother (qtd. in Lorber, *Breaking the Bowls* 40).

The world will be degendered, Lorber argues, when “gender no longer determines an infant’s upbringing, a child’s education, an adult’s occupation, a parent’s care, an economy’s distribution of wealth, a country’s politicians, the world’s power brokers” (169). She suggests that degendering allows us to imagine questions such as, “What if we did not divide people by gender?” “What if we did not divide household tasks and child care by gender?” “What if we did not allocate positions in the workforce by gender?” (7). Thus, there emerges the possibility of a world where men, for example, would be encouraged to routinely care for children and where

“men as well as women would develop the valued qualities of nurturance, relatedness, and emotional expression” (161). Lorber makes the case for individuals to practice deliberate degendering in order to challenge and eventually change the gendered (and thus unequal) status quo. But she also acknowledges that the act of shared parenting, even when not intended as an act of rebellion, “has important implications for the gendered structures of our social worlds. By suggesting the interchangeability of women and men...in a domain as central to people’s lives as caring for infants and raising children, shared parenting challenges one of the major gender divisions on which so much of modern society is still based” (68).

Male Parenting

Fathers as sole or primary caregivers to children are unusual but not unprecedented. In many societies, across cultures and over time, it has been common for men to have very close relationships with their children and to participate regularly in direct daily care for their infants and toddlers (Coltrane, “Father-Child” 1064; Coltrane, *Family Man* 29-31). Margaret Mead, in her studies of “primitive” societies, found it was normal for men to take part in the care of their infant children (65, 94-95). Similarly, among the Efe and the Aka African pygmy tribes, both mothers and fathers provide direct care to children; in these cultures, cooperative parenting is the norm, with virtually interchangeable roles between the sexes (Morgan).

In modern society, industrialization brought about separate spheres for women in the home and men in the marketplace. But prior to industrialization, mothers and fathers often shared parenting responsibilities (Tilly and Scott); just as the adults on the farm or in the family business shared in contributing to their livelihood, it was common for them to share child care as well (Gill 2). Moreover, according to Joan Williams, fathers were more apt to be involved because market work and family work were not yet so geographically separated, not to mention that the care of children was perceived to be too important to be left to women, who were considered to be intellectually and morally inferior to men (*Unbending Gender* 3). It was only after industrialization that father's role became tantamount to breadwinner.

Furthermore, the high rates of maternal death in childbirth prior to the twentieth century strongly suggest that "there must not always have been enough women, even in extended-family situations, to carry on child care, and fathers were probably much more often involved than we can document from this historical distance" (Pruett, *Nurturing Father* 20). Even in contemporary times, there are inevitably millions of fathers who are intimately involved in home and child care in a variety of different ways but whose contributions may go unnoticed by others outside their immediate families (Epstein, *Deceptive Distinctions* 194-95; Mahoney 183).

Several studies of men and contemporary parenting have focused on the meaning men give to what they do when they engage in routine child care. For most men involved in daily infant or child care, the doing of it enables them to develop intimate relationships with their children and become more aware of their children's

emotional needs. In his study of co-parenting families where mothers and fathers split the child care equally, Coltrane found that “maternal thinking” developed in fathers as well as mothers (“Household Labor” 489). Similarly, Gerson found that men’s “participation in parenting promotes emotional attachment and growing attachment makes involvement more pleasurable” (176). So too, a study of fathers who were abandoned or widowed showed that these men assumed “mothering” work when they were put in a position where they had to do it, that is, when there was no woman available to do it for them (Risman 8). As a result, these “reluctant” primary care fathers cultivated warm, satisfying relationships with their children in a way they would not have imagined. Like Coltrane’s co-parenting fathers, these men developed both a sense of so-called maternal thinking as well as an ideological commitment to equality. According to Risman, they took on “a version of masculinity that integrates strength, warmth, and nurturance” and “rejected the hegemonic masculinity embodied by John Wayne; they do not believe that real men must be tough, dominating, competitive, or macho” (126).

A nurturing or engaged father today may not share equally with his partner in terms of child care, but he does demonstrate a capacity and willingness for involved parenting to a much larger degree than previous generations of fathers. According to Gerson, men who routinely took part in the physical care and nurture of their children began to see themselves in “less stereotypically masculine ways” (167). What these studies show is that gender, as powerful a component of society as it is, is a far less

satisfactory explanation for parenting behavior compared with parenting role (Risman 67).

In the small number of studies about families where the father is the primary child-care provider, the findings suggest that fathers tend to do the same types of family labor as at-home mothers do, for example, feeding, bathing, dressing, and playing with children (Frank, "Research"), although in these families there is a more equal balance of parenting responsibilities than in co-parenting or traditional male breadwinner/female homemaker families (Frank et al.; J. Williams, "Why Moms"). According to Levine, men who choose to stay home as "homemaker-fathers" share certain attitudinal characteristics, such as the belief that a parent at home full-time is preferred over other child-care arrangements; flexibility of gender roles; equality of spouses; and that "the child-caring function [is] on a par with the income-producing one" (*Who Will Raise* 127). One of the more common reasons for fathers to be home full-time with children is that the father feels strongly that he should be the one to be home; other prominent reasons include lack of work on the part of the father, better health benefits on the part of the mother, and strong feelings on the part of the mother about working outside the home (Gill 22-32).

Impact on Children

There is little scientific evidence that men in general are less competent or caring compared to women in the bringing up of children (Mahony 188). The academic research on children raised by their fathers suggests that there is little or no

difference between the outcomes for children raised primarily by divorced, widowed, gay, or co-parenting fathers compared with those raised in traditional families (Mahony 183-189). In fact, outcomes for children might be even better if fathers were the ones to stay home full-time as the primary parent. According to a *New York Times* op-ed by sociologist Joan Williams, the actual amount of parental time spent with the children when a father stays home full-time “may be less affected because employed mothers typically are less willing to consign all child care to the stay-at-home spouse,” and as a result children with stay-at-home fathers “may well receive more parental attention than children in households with stay-at-home mothers” (“Why Moms”).

The research thus far provides evidence that human beings, regardless of their gender, have the capacity to parent equally effectively in terms of taking care of children’s physical needs and raising healthy children. Nevertheless, there is a body of research that suggests that mothers and fathers interact with their children differently. Kyle D. Pruett, for example, in his books *The Nurturing Father* and *Fatherneed*, lays out the myriad of ways women and men parent differently and the corresponding impact on children. For example, he reports on the science indicating that fathers, compared with mothers, appear to spend more time with children involved in toy-less play that encourages exploration, to encourage their children to tolerate frustration and to master tasks on their own before offering help, to stimulate children both emotionally and physically, and to discipline less with shame and disappointment and more with genuine consequences (*Fatherneed* 8).

In contrast to the observable differences between mothers and fathers in the ways in which they interact with their children, the instincts that fathers and mothers have toward their newborns have been found to be more alike than different (*Fatherneed* 22-23). Pruett goes on to describe research showing that, for example, the yearning to feel emotionally connected to one's offspring is the same for men and women (although they may express it differently). Also, both fathers and mothers are equally able to interpret and respond to their own infants' behavioral cues indicating hunger, pain, or sleepiness; likewise, research on the biological responsibility of men and women to infants in distress shows no gender differences in their heart rate, respiratory rate, or skin temperature. Moreover, the physiological facility to distinguish their newborn from others in the hospital nursery appears to be similar for mothers and fathers. Pruett's review of the developmental research about the biological relationship between fathers and their offspring also suggests that not only are babies born with a drive to find and connect to their fathers, but that fathers have the instinct to respond (*Fatherneed* 25-26).

Finally, children with highly engaged fathers have been found to enjoy several advantages over other children, such as slightly above-average social and emotional development (*Fatherneed* 9), benefits in terms of school readiness (*Fatherneed* 9), and a greater ability to take initiative (Levine, *Working Fathers* 41). Additionally, for adolescents, fathers' involvement reduces the likelihood of drug use, juvenile delinquency, and teen pregnancy (Levine, *Working Fathers* 41).

Outline of the Dissertation

In this chapter I have provided an assessment of the social and cultural context surrounding the phenomenon of the stay-at-home father, and a review of the literature on men in nontraditional occupations (including male parenting). Chapter 2 provides a detailed description of the research methods. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 report the research findings. Chapter 3 covers the facilitating factors that make stay-at-home fathering possible. Chapter 4 concentrates on the obstacles stay-at-home fathers confront and addresses the social constraints stay-at-home fathers face in taking on such a nontraditional gender role. Chapter 5 delves into the dynamic aspects of parenting and the approaches these men rely on to legitimize and give meaning to what they do. My conclusions, including limitations and suggestions for future research, are provided in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 2

METHODOLOGY

Operational Definition of Stay-at-Home Father

Thirty-five in-depth, open-ended interviews with stay-at-home fathers were the primary method for gathering data for this research. Interviews took place throughout the years 2003 and 2004. A stay-at-home father was defined as a married man who was the primary child-care provider to his minor children and whose wife worked full-time outside the home as the family breadwinner.* Gay couples and single fathers (divorced, widowed, never married) with custody of their children were excluded from the sample, as were fathers in marriages where child-care responsibilities were equally shared between both parents.

Study Design

The data were collected primarily through the use of in-depth, open-ended telephone interviews; additional demographic data were collected using a short written questionnaire that consisted of both closed- and open-ended questions. There were two main justifications for relying on a qualitative approach to this study. First, I was interested in learning how these subjects made sense of their lives; I was not

* The 35 subjects in this sample served as the primary parent to their children, however, there were eight minor exceptions with regard to household earnings, marital status, and wife's working status. For instance, four contributed appreciably to household income (e.g., through self-employment or severance). Also, two were not legally married—one was living as married and one was separated but still living with his wife. One lived next door to his ex-wife, who was the mother of his children, but he was married to a different woman. Finally, one had a wife who did not work due to a chronic illness.

attempting to document the prevalence of this small group of fathers within the general population of fathers. Open-ended interviews provide an opportunity for research subjects to think about their answers and clarify their views rather than force them into either/or responses that are characteristic of quantitative surveys. While qualitative research of this nature does not provide the luxury of statistically significant data for cross-tabulations and sub-group comparisons the way a quantitative survey would, it does provide depth of feeling and explanations for points of view in a subject's own words, as well as useful indicators of potential trends taking place in the larger population.

The second reason for relying on qualitative methods for an examination of stay-at-home fathers is that this sub-group of the population is relatively obscure and thus not easy to locate. One of the reasons there is so little current scholarship on stay-at-home fathers is the difficulty in reaching a sound sample of this population. What little academic research that exists focuses on at-home fathers culled from self-selected respondents or respondents from geographically limited areas (E. Anderson; Frank, "Research"; Levine, *Who Will Raise*), or from fathers who participated in formal associations or support groups of stay-at-home fathers (Hall; C. Anderson; Pruett, *Nurturing Father*). Thus, for the purposes of this dissertation research, conducted by a sole researcher with limited funds, it was more feasible to focus vigorously on a small sample and to concentrate on depth rather than breadth.

Data Collection

This study is based on the responses from 35 stay-at-home fathers who completed both the short demographic questionnaire and the in-depth telephone interview. Nineteen out of 35 fathers were reached through a random sampling process based on a sample frame created from a series of national random sample telephone surveys of parents.* A total of 166 households were identified as families where the father provided the primary child care, that is, where the respondent answered “Dad” when asked, “In your family, who takes care of most of the day-to-day needs of the children—is it Mom, Dad, is it equally split between the two of you, or is it someone else?” Table 1 at the end of this section describes each unique sample disposition.

To recruit participants, I attempted to contact each identified household by telephone. Out of the 166 identified households, 36 indicated that there was a stay-at-home father in the household and so were eligible for participation in the study. The remaining sample dispositions included: 45 no contact (busy, no answer, number not in service or disconnected); 40 not qualified (no stay-at-home father in the household); 40 soft refusals (e.g., no response to several messages left describing the study); and five hard refusals (hang-ups).

When I reached a potential participant by telephone, I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the research, asked questions to make sure the father met my

* These surveys were conducted between the years 2000 and 2004 on behalf of Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research and education organization. I served as a primary researcher on each of these surveys, which were commissioned for purposes other than this dissertation research.

operational definition of a stay-at-home father, and invited the father to participate in the study. If he agreed, he was sent a letter via U.S. mail explaining the project and informed consent (Appendix A). The envelope also included a one-page questionnaire (Appendix B) for the men to complete, and in some cases several follow-up telephone calls were made to encourage the men to return their questionnaires. Upon receipt of a questionnaire, I called to schedule an interview at a time that was convenient for the participant. Most interviews took place during typical working hours, although several were conducted in the evening, in the early morning, or on a weekend.

To buttress the sample, I employed a snowball approach. I spoke about my research and my quest to find stay-at-home fathers to family, friends, colleagues, and neighbors. I sent an e-mail to acquaintances describing my research and asking for referrals. I also asked the stay-at-home fathers I had already interviewed if they knew other at-home fathers who might consider participating in the research. In total, 16 stay-at-home fathers were referred, all of whom completed an interview. Of the 16 participants who were found using the snowball approach, 13 were referred by family, friends, or colleagues, one by a stay-at-home father recruited in the snowball sample, and two by stay-at-home fathers recruited in the original random sample.

One of the first indications that my topic held wide appeal was the interest on the part of people to help locate stay-at-home fathers to interview. Almost a dozen people I knew quickly provided me with at least one name, and many went to great lengths to facilitate the process. In one case, a friend of a friend—a woman I had met

only briefly and only one time—tracked me down at my place of employment to provide the name and phone number of a stay-at-home father in her community.

Table 1

Sample Dispositions

<u>Random Sample Dispositions</u>	(n)
Total Potential Random Households	166
Eligible	36
No contact (busy, no answer, not in service)	45
Not qualified	40
Soft refusal (no response to messages)	40
Hard refusal (hang-ups)	5
<u>Snowball Sample Dispositions</u>	
Total Potential from Snowball Sample	16
Referrals from friends, colleagues	13
Referrals from random sample	2
Referrals from snowball sample	1
<u>Completed Interviews</u>	
Total Completed Interviews	35
Completes from random sample	19
Completes from snowball sample	16

Telephone Interviews

Each interview was conducted by telephone and audio taped in digital format. At the beginning of each interview, I reiterated the confidential nature of the research, assured each participant of anonymity, and ascertained each participant's consent. The conversations were extremely candid. My perception was that the respondents were eager to discuss the topic and were engaged and comfortable throughout the process. I used an open-ended interview guide (Appendix C), and my approach was conversational rather than formal. Typically, I began the interview with a broad, general question and then let the research subject lead the discussion. The interviews averaged 42 minutes in length.

Because body language and other visible cues are not present, interviewing over the telephone offers some barriers to establishing rapport. My interviewing style was purposeful yet friendly. I strove to develop a connection with the fathers by using a conversational tone of voice, active listening skills, and an open-ended interview format that allowed their answers, for the most part, to lead the discussion. My inclination was to "believe the interviewee" and to accept accounts of their own experiences as true and accurate from their perspective (Reinharz 27). To the extent where there were inconsistencies in answers—a rare occurrence—I probed for clarification. In-depth interviewing of this kind "offers researchers access to people's ideas, thoughts, and memories in their own words rather than in the words of the researcher," a significant advantage of a feminist approach to research (Reinharz 19).

As a way of saying thank you, I offered to send participants a summary of the findings at the conclusion of the research study. Also, in June 2005 (the first Father's Day after completion of all the interviews), I sent each one a homemade, personalized Father's Day card to thank him for participating and to let him know the status of the research. I received several warm responses in reply, including a lovely card from one father that began, "Thanks so much for the father's day card and so good to hear from you. I didn't know if I'd ever hear from you again," and continued with updates on the status of his children.

There was other evidence of participant engagement in the topic. Many stay-at-home fathers expressed willingness to be contacted again if I had more questions, and all follow-up telephone calls and e-mails were responded to in a timely manner. During the interviews, there were two instances where the conversation was interrupted due to immediate needs of children, and in both cases a second interview was re-scheduled without delay. A few had spoken to their wives about the interview, and one wife e-mailed me months later expressing interest in the research and asking for information about outcomes for children in stay-at-home-father families. In another case, as one interview was finishing up, the stay-at-home father on the telephone told me that my questions and our conversation had made him start to think about a lot of things and reminded him that he had wanted to start a journal about his time at home, which he was now re-motivated to begin.

In the verbatim quotes used in the narrative of this research, names, locations, and other identifying information were changed to ensure each participant's anonymity and confidentiality.

Data Analysis

This empirical research is grounded in a symbolic interactionist approach to the study of gender. This method required me to focus the analysis on the interplay of individual agency in the face of powerful social constraints as these men interpreted and gave meaning to their experience. According to the symbolic interactionist approach, meaning itself derives from social interaction; individuals are not merely spectators to their lives but active participants in their environment who contribute to the social reality in which they find themselves (G. H. Mead). This is a useful approach for qualitative research because it takes on the persistent battle that exists between structure and agency. It emphasizes how an individual has the capacity to shape her or his own environment and to change social structures, yet at the same time acknowledges the reality of the social world and the constraints—or facilitating factors—society places on the individual.

I conducted in-depth interviews to explore the themes that would emerge from the stay-at-home fathers themselves as they described their life circumstances. To facilitate analysis of this verbal data, I utilized a modified grounded theory approach (Lewis; Grove). I use the qualifier “modified” because, while pure grounded theory requires that all categories and theoretical formulations stem from the field work, I

relied on existing research about male parenting and men in nontraditional occupations, in conjunction with the field work, to help create analytic categories.

The data analysis proceeded as follows. I had six opportunities to listen to and/or analyze each of the 35 interviews: 1) when conducting the actual interview over the telephone; 2) when transcribing the interview from the audio file; 3) when reviewing the typed transcription for typographical errors; 4) when reading each final transcription thoroughly for the first time; 5) when studying the transcripts to find themes and variables; and 6) when summarizing each respondent's individual history. Thus, I had a sound grasp of the data as I analyzed the transcripts and coded the data into thematic categories. I then grouped the appropriate quotes from each transcript into its corresponding category. I also made note of any unanimous themes and documented how often topics came up spontaneously, only if probed, or not at all.

Demographics of the Sample

There is an enormous diversity of values, cultures, and socioeconomic statuses that exist among families in the United States, and the sample for this study reflects it. Table 2 at the end of this section describes the demographic characteristics of the sample.

Participants were roughly split down the middle on income: 19 in the final sample were stay-at-home fathers who described their household finances as either very or somewhat comfortable compared with 16 who described them as "making ends meet" either barely or with "only a little to spare." Twenty-seven stay-at-home

fathers said they were married to women who earned (or had the potential to earn) more money than they did. Wives' professions were about evenly split between those in the caring fields (n=15), such as nursing or teaching, and those in corporate settings (n=14), such as finance or senior management. Another three were employed in other types of occupations. Most stay-at-home fathers reported that, during their at-home-father tenure, they personally earned either no money at all (n=14) or the equivalent of pocket change (n=12). Four indicated that they earned a salary from work (typically through an at-home business), and four were recipients of disability insurance or retirement benefits; one had received a small inheritance.

Thirty study participants described themselves as white and five as African American. Six reported that they had graduate degrees, 17 had bachelor's degrees, nine had some college, and three had a high school degree or less. All had worked full-time for money outside the home at some time during their married lives. The average age of the men in the sample, based on their age at the time of the interview, was 46.7 years old, with a range from 32 to 79 years old. (The oldest stay-at-home father had a 15-year-old son at the time of the interview.) Average tenure as a stay-at-home father was 6.2 years, with a range from four months to 22 years. Seventeen had been home more than two years but less than ten years; nine were home for ten years or more, and nine for two years or less.

Twenty-eight respondents were serving in the role of stay-at-home father at the time of the interview. The remaining seven had taken on this role at a time in their recent past and had since returned to the workforce. Large majorities were at-home

fathers during the time when their children were preschool age (n=25) or elementary or middle school age (n=28); 13 were at-home fathers when their children were high school age. Twenty-one of the stay-at-home fathers who participated in this study felt they themselves made a choice to be home full-time compared with 14 who felt they had no choice. Finally, 27 of the study participants indicated that the quality of their marriage was good, and seven indicated that theirs was a struggling marriage.

A question that naturally arises in a study of stay-at-home-father families is whether such households are primarily a luxury for only those families that can afford it. The sample for this research included men from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds, and the data suggest that household income or socioeconomic status would be insufficient for explaining the stay-at-home father phenomenon. A qualitative comparison of the responses between those who could be categorized as “higher income” (reporting their household income as “very comfortable” or “somewhat comfortable” [n=19]) and “lower income” (household income as “having only a little to spare” or “barely making ends meet” [n=16]) showed few indications of difference in experiences or attitudes; the same was true when comparing the responses of African American (n=5) and white (n=30) stay-at-home fathers. Of course, due to the small sample size and the nonrandom nature of the sample, these comparisons are anecdotal and subject to interpretation; they are not conducive to tests of statistical significance.

Table 2

 Characteristics of the Sample

	(n)	(%)
<u>Income</u>		
Very comfortable	5	14
Somewhat comfortable	14	40
Only a little to spare	12	34
Barely making ends meet	4	11
<u>Wife's Earnings Higher</u>		
Yes	27	79
No	7	21
<u>Wife's Job</u>		
Caring	15	47
Corporate	14	44
Something else	3	9
<u>Stay-at-Home Father's Earnings</u>		
Some income from work	4	11
Disability, retirement	5	14
Pocket change	12	34
None	14	40

Table 2: Characteristics of the Sample *continued*

	(n)	(%)
<u>Race/Ethnicity</u>		
African American	5	14
White	30	86
<u>Education</u>		
Graduate degree	6	17
Bachelor's degree	17	49
Some college	9	26
High school or less	3	9
<u>Age</u>		
32-38 years	8	23
40-49 years	16	46
51-56 years	8	23
61-79 years	3	9
<u>Number of Years at Home</u>		
Less than or equal to 2	9	26
More than 2, less than 10	17	49
10 or more	9	26
<u>Stay-at-Home Father Status</u>		
Currently at home	28	80
Formerly at home	7	20

Table 2: Characteristics of the Sample *continued*

	(n)	(%)
<u>Age/Stage of Child When Home</u> (multiple response)		
Preschool (includes infants)	25	71
Elementary/Middle school	28	80
High school	13	37
<u>Feeling of Choice to Be Home</u>		
Choice	21	60
No choice	14	40
<u>Quality of Marriage</u>		
Solid	27	79
Struggling	7	21

NOTE: Sums do not always total to 35 due to missing data; percentages do not always total to 100 due to rounding.

Methodological Assumptions

My identity as a feminist greatly influenced this work. Feminism as a doctrine advocates equal opportunities for both sexes; it does not privilege one over the other. The feminist point of view asserts that, because ours is a patriarchal society, men's status is perceived as superior, powerful, dominant. In choosing to take on a role that is perceived as feminine, weak, or dependent, stay-at-home fathers appear to be choosing an inferior status. As a result, they become a notable topic of study for feminists and sociologists in that these men are challenging gender roles and norms in profound ways. Reinharz describes the debate in the field about a positivist, scientific, and so-called objective approach to research in contrast to a feminist approach that relies less on close-ended interviewing and more on openness and a commitment to understanding between those doing the research and those being researched (46). Throughout the interviewing process for the current study, I was acutely aware of my own efforts to balance my role as an objective social scientist who does not want to bias the respondent with my belief in the usefulness of self-disclosure about my own family life, my own interests in pursuing this research, and my own favorable views toward stay-at-home fathering.

Still, it did occur to me that my being a woman may have influenced responses (C. Williams, *Still* 193). It is possible that some fathers would have answered questions differently if they were talking to someone they considered to be a peer, for example, a man, a father, or another stay-at-home father.

CHAPTER 3

FACILITATING FACTORS

A new model of the traditional nuclear family where men are the primary caretakers of children and women are the primary breadwinners is becoming increasingly visible in the United States today. A confluence of forces—economic, personal, cultural, and ideological—have made the option of stay-at-home fathering a more viable one than ever before for American males. Some of the facilitating factors that emerged from the interviews were motivating forces, that is, conditions that made it possible for men to consider and ultimately choose the stay-at-home-father option. Other facilitating factors were pertinent in that they made it possible for men to continue in the role despite countervailing forces that could have otherwise deterred them. Table 3 lists the facilitating factors that arose in the interviews with stay-at-home fathers.

Table 3

 Factors that Facilitate Stay-at-Home Father Status

<u>Economic</u>	Wife's superior economic and job prospects
	Lack of paid work (unemployment, disability, poor health)
	Expense of child care
<u>Personal</u>	Second-time father
	Experience with own father
	Preference to be home with children
	Support of spouse
<u>Cultural</u>	Social approval and support
	Community norms
	Low expectations
<u>Ideological</u>	Value having one parent at home full-time
	Lack of trust in nonparental child care
	Egalitarian mind-set

Economic Factors

Wife's Superior Economic and Job Prospects

Improvements in women's earning capacity and opportunities in the public sphere are significant and noteworthy structural changes that have affected the institution of family and the roles individual members play in families. According to U.S. Census figures, one in four working wives earned more than their husbands in 2004.* Not surprisingly, wives' capacity to earn higher income than their husbands is a foremost motivating factor for the existence of the stay-at-home-father household. An economically depressed economy characterized by a decrease in male-dominated manufacturing jobs and an increase in jobs in the female-dominated service sector also contributes to this trend. Many stay-at-home fathers interviewed for this study said that the main reason they could even consider being at home full-time is because their wife had a good job that either provided a high salary, offered necessary health benefits, or both. Specifically, 27 out of 35 participants said their own wife either earned, or had the potential to earn, a higher income than they did.

Several spoke about how their wife's financially advantageous position in the workforce was a facilitating factor that paved the way for their stay-at-home-father status. Ralph, a former banker, described his wife's progress in banking and his awareness that her career would hold larger financial potential for their family than

* "Table F-22. Married-Couple Families with Wives' Earnings Greater Than Husbands' Earnings: 1981 to 2004 (selected years)." U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Income Tables—Families. Income Surveys Branch, Housing & Household Economic Statistics Division. <<http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income/histinc/f22.html>.>

his own. He stated, “I recognized the actual value, that’s a way of saying it, of her job to our family.... She was quickly, in our professional relationship, she was bringing in more money than I was. That really wasn’t a problem, and I recognized just from an economic point of view, as far as family was concerned, hey, if push came to shove, if her job took her somewhere else.... I would not have had a problem with, hey, let’s go.” Two professional bankers, either one of them could have been a more-than-adequate family breadwinner. But, as Ralph pointed out, it soon became evident that, in terms of earnings, she was going to be more successful than he was. By saying that “if her job took her somewhere else” he would have been willing to move, he acknowledged the reality of his wife’s career opportunities and her role as the chief provider. In pointing out that this “really wasn’t a problem” for him, Ralph indicated the unconventional position that he found himself in as the lesser-earning husband of a high-earning wife.

A similar sentiment was evident not only among white-collar fathers such as the banker mentioned above, but among blue-collar fathers as well. Patrick, a former truck driver, said: “She had a career, and I had a job. She made a lot, lot more money than I did.... In our financial situation, [my staying home] was the best choice. We weighed it forwards, backwards, up and down, and we just wouldn’t be able to make it on my salary. And she had the benefits and everything else, so that’s a large chunk of it.” For Patrick, the decision to be at home with his son was made easier when he looked at the facts of his own and his wife’s respective working lives and that their standard of living could not be sustained on his salary. The option of being a stay-at-

home father was made possible only by the fact that the wife in this situation had a career, earned substantially more money, and had benefits provided by her workplace. Minus these factors, this husband would not have had the luxury of weighing “forwards, backwards, up and down” the decision to be home full-time as a father.

As it becomes more prevalent for wives to earn as much as or more than their husbands, the potential emasculation associated with being a lower-earning husband or an at-home-father husband becomes less pronounced. Drake, a Ph.D. and father of three girls, said, “I’ve joked about it, so that’s a sign that there’s probably some latent thing in there deep down, but I don’t think I’ve ever really felt any kind of inadequacy or anything like that. I joked with my male friends about what a great deal I have, I’ve got this wife providing for me.” Another father, Reggie, whose two children were not yet in school, said, “It just depends on the individual man. I think a lot of it has to be how comfortable they feel with their wife being the wage earner in the family.... It has never bothered me that much because.... To be quite honest, I’ve been much more comfortable financially since I married my wife. Just because she makes so much more money than I have, and she is so much better at handling the money than I ever was.”

These two fathers show a considerable level of comfort with their respective spouse’s superior earnings. For instance, Drake never felt inadequate because of it and Reggie was explicit that it did not cause him any concern whatsoever—in fact, he made it clear that it made his life better. Still, they also both acknowledged that a role reversal in terms of earning ability was something that they felt any man would need

to overcome. For example, Drake admitted that “there’s probably some latent thing in there deep down,” and Reggie said plainly that for most men it would depend on their comfort level with having a wife who was the major breadwinner.

Many stay-at-home fathers in the study indicated not only a strong level of comfort with their wives’ earning prowess, but also gratitude for it, because it gave them the luxury (as they saw it) of staying home with the children. Anthony, for example, stated that he was “fortunate enough in my life that my wife makes enough dough that we don’t have to worry...which is a huge caveat, it is a huge thing.” Artie, too, had a similar point of view: “Even when I was earning a pretty good amount, she was still earning three times what I was, so it still made sense.... If she weren’t making a really good salary, then I’d certainly be working. And so we definitely view it as a real privilege that we can live this lifestyle.” Anthony’s wife “makes enough dough” so that his family doesn’t need to be overly concerned about finances, and so he can be an at-home parent. Similarly, Artie’s wife earns the type of salary that affords them the “real privilege” of having one parent at home. In both of these cases, it was evident that the wife’s earning ability was a necessary factor in making it possible for the man to be an at-home father.

Each of the stay-at-home fathers quoted above is part of a larger trend of American men becoming more comfortable with the idea of partnering with women whose paychecks will rival their own. An op-ed article by *New York Times* columnist John Tierney points out that today’s modern man has “come to appreciate the value of a wife’s paycheck” and cites a finding, from the National Survey of Families and

Households, that the average single man under 35 years old is willing to marry someone who earns “much more” than he does and would be “especially reluctant to marry a woman who was unlikely to hold a steady job.”

Lack of Paid Work Due to Unemployment, Disability, or Poor Health

Many stay-at-home fathers relied on their wives to be the family providers not because the wife necessarily had a more lucrative career or job but instead due to job loss, disability, or ill health on the husband’s part. In this study, there were several cases where the fathers, who had been accustomed to being the main or sole provider in their families, were forced to cede that role to their wives due to circumstances beyond their control.

For some, it was a direct result of disability or ill health. One father became disabled due to a work-related fall off a ladder that resulted in “a disability that keeps [him] at home” with his 9-year-old son while his wife, a customer service representative, worked full-time. But, he told me, it used to be “the opposite way,” where he was the one who “made the money and she was really at home.” Another father, an ex-military man who at the time of the interview was employed part-time by “parks services” in his community, said his job was flexible and “tolerates” his disability but that he knew he did not “have a future there” and therefore was “stuck.” He and his wife had switched roles, and he became the primary parent and housekeeper while his wife worked full-time as a restaurant manager. He told me that his wife “wears the pants in the family” and that when it comes to his being the

primary parent to their two young children, “I don’t mind taking that responsibility at all. That’s what I do.”

Some of the stay-at-home fathers interviewed were compelled to be home not because of their own health but due to the illness or disability of a child or spouse. Tony had a bedridden wife and a mentally disabled son; he was primary caregiver to both. Another stay-at-home father found himself in the role of primary parent mainly as a result of “the dreaded 4:00 a.m. call”—his teenage son had been in a serious car wreck, leaving him paralyzed. His injuries required round-the-clock care. At the time, this man had been out of work for several years (drawing on a severance package) and was on the brink of beginning a serious job hunt; his wife was gainfully employed in a lucrative career. Their respective employment statuses made it relatively easy to decide that he would be the one to stay home.

Others were laid off from work and found it difficult to find suitable employment. Mitch’s was a typical scenario—a working father with a stay-at-home wife, he lost his job due to company downsizing and relocation. With no other positions on the horizon, his wife was compelled to return to the workforce after spending several years as a stay-at-home mother. Mitch indicated that he felt lucky because his wife was “successful on her own”—she was a math teacher—and thus their family was not devastated by his job loss.

Expense of Child Care

The cost of quality child care has an impact on a man's decision to become a stay-at-home father as well. When mothers decide to stop working and stay home full-time with the children, it is typically perceived as gender appropriate behavior. But the experiences of these stay-at-home fathers indicate that the decision to have an at-home parent may be more likely a factor of earnings than adherence to normative gender behavior. Many of the fathers in this study were married to women with better jobs than they had, either in terms of salary or benefits or both. When they were working outside the home, these fathers considered their own salary—the smaller one—as the salary allotted to paying for child care; this consideration also is common among wives who earn less than their husbands (Hirshman). Thus, when determining whether to work or stay home, it was his job—the lower-paying one—that was expendable.

Carmine, father of two girls, described it this way: “I was only really earning in the end maybe \$250 or \$300 a month more into our pile of money. Where my wife is an attorney and makes a big pile of money.... Why would we want somebody else to raise our children if it was just that little bit of money? Just didn't seem worth it, really.” By describing his family budget this way—that it was his salary, not his wife's, paying for child care—Carmine showed how the day care expenses came out of his earnings, and that the cost-benefit analysis simply did not justify his working and paying out for child care when taking care of his two daughters was something he was capable of doing himself.

Dillon, who had three children and had been home full-time with the second two, described a similar scenario: “We were just paying so much money to day care. I made pretty good money, but not as good as my wife, but it seemed like half my salary was going to the day care.... I felt guilty staying at work when my daughter was sick. So we just kind of made the decision that I would stay home.” According to Dillon, the high cost of child care, which was perceived solely to be coming out of his salary, was enough for him to seriously consider and ultimately decide to stay home with the children.

Stay-at-home fathers in this study often alluded to the fact that it made economic sense for the spouse with the lower earnings to be home rather than spend the vast proportion of that person’s salary on child care. For Roger, who had a carpet-cleaning business and who was married to a nurse, the decision for him to stay home full-time came down to dollars and cents. “You’ve got three dollars an hour going to the babysitter,” he said, “and my business was not doing too well. The longer I stayed in business, the more debt I went into. Finally, we just looked at how often we were going out to eat, and how many pizzas we would buy because no one was home to cook, how trashy the house looked because no one was cleaning it,” and the decision to stay home became an obvious one. Bradley, himself a certified public accountant, told me it was “probably the first real accounting decision” he made, to “do it myself” rather than continue working “and hire somebody to watch the kids.”

The seeming lack of traditional gender ideology as a factor in making the stay-at-home-father decision is worthy of note. To a large extent, it is a direct

consequence of women's and mothers' higher workforce participation and of the increasing potential among some groups of wives (e.g., professional or highly educated ones) to out-earn their husbands.

Personal Factors

Second-time Fathers

That a wife has the capability to earn a family wage is one of the most critical components of the stay-at-home-father decision; the importance of a wife's earning ability cannot be overstated. But there are other factors, based more on personal experiences, which also contribute a great deal to men's ability to make this determination. One is the experience of getting remarried and starting a second family. A 2005 *Boston Globe* article featured "do-over dads"—older men in their 50s, 60s, and 70s marrying younger women and starting second families (Hempel). These men perceived themselves as being much better at parenting the second time around, as well as much more satisfied with the parenting role. Gerson came across several of this type of father in her research and showed how divorce and remarriage opened the door to a more satisfying and child-centered fatherhood experience (261). Similarly, in her interviews with male attorneys, Epstein found that those on their second set of children spent far more time with them than they did with their first set ("Border Crossings" 336).

This study found that having a second chance to be a father was often a factor in the decision to choose stay-at-home fathering. For some, finding themselves in the position of starting a second family reminded them of what they might have missed in not being involved more intimately with their first set of children. In addition, some had already had a career or job where they had achieved success and so proving themselves at work was no longer a pressing goal for them. Also, they tended to marry women younger than themselves who were in their prime earning years and also their prime childbearing ones.

Four out of 35 stay-at-home fathers in this study reported that their current marriage was not their first, and the children they were raising at the time of their interview were a second set of offspring. They expressed regret about the lack of involvement they had with their children during their original marriages and indicated that they would like it to be different this time. As one second-time father said, “That’s probably one of the reasons why I wanted to be with these ones more, too. With the other ones, I was always working and away from home and stuff, so it was kind of, I really wanted to be close to these ones.” This father acknowledged that one contributing factor to his at-home-father status was because he wanted to spend more time with these children. With his first family, he worked too much, which meant that he had missed out on things, and so he made it a point not to do so again. Another stay-at-home father, Carl, talked about how “the first time around, I failed.... It’s that simple,” and how he consciously started his own business so that he could be home with the children during the day “because I knew I had failed before. And I didn’t

want to work every night, nights, nights, nights, and my wife work days, days, days, and not have that time with the children.” Carl’s words show the regret he had for not spending more time with his first family and how, by becoming the primary parent during the day to this second set of children (he and his wife had adopted and were raising her biological grandchildren), he made it a point not to repeat what he considered to be a mistake.

Experience with Own Father

Quite a few stay-at-home fathers in the sample, when looking back at their childhoods, acknowledged that their fathers did not spend as much time with them as they would have liked, and they did not want to repeat this with their own children. As a result, they chose to parent differently in comparison with their own fathers. This behavior is not uncommon; Braun Levine found that fathers who were very involved with their children’s lives were partially motivated by a conscious decision not to be like their own fathers (96).

Carl, the stay-at-home father quoted above who felt that he had failed as a father in his first family, said, “I wish my father would have been home more. He worked shift work at an oil refinery. I didn’t see him a real lot. We went to car shows together, not a lot, but enough that I knew my dad loved me.” Carl was trying, at least with his second family, not to repeat the behavior of his own father and to give to these children something he himself did not get. Other stay-at-home fathers remembered their own fathers in a similar fashion—as parents who loved their sons

but were too busy with or too focused on other things to really be involved in their young lives. Frank, when he became a parent himself, made it a point to “spend more time with my children than my parents did with me. My dad was a psychologist, and my mother was a concert pianist who became a music teacher.... They were really busy with their lives. But I—consciously—knew that I was going to spend more time with my kids than they spent with me.” Salvatore, too, characterized his own involved parenting as a direct result of his father’s benign neglect: “I can’t say that I didn’t have fun with my father—he knew how to have fun when he could, and when he did it wasn’t as much as I wanted him to—but I try to spend more time with my kids. I played a lot of sports when I was younger. I wanted my father to get involved. He didn’t. I am.”

All three of the stay-at-home fathers cited in the above paragraph—Carl, Frank, and Salvatore—indicated that they wanted to give to their own children something that they did not get from their own fathers. This desire, to be more involved in their children’s lives than their fathers were in their own, was one of the facilitating factors that encouraged them to consider becoming stay-at-home fathers. Carl, Frank, and Salvatore are examples of men who chose to behave differently as a parent than their own fathers did; they recalled something they did not admire and chose not to emulate that behavior.

In contrast, there were several examples of men in this study whose decision to be full-time at-home fathers was facilitated by something their own fathers did, rather than did not do. Several described growing up in households where their

fathers participated in child care and house chores, and as a result, they grew up tending *not* to view parenting or household work in gendered terms. Terrance described his growing up years and how his father served as a role model during that time as follows: “My mother went back to work when my brothers and I got older.... It just worked out that my mother kind of took on a career, so my father was the person that was home earlier, so he started taking over the cooking and the shopping and all that. I kind of took his cue there that there’s really no reason to assign a gender to this or that.” Because his own father did things like cooking and shopping, Tim’s perception about housework was not influenced by normative gender expectations. Instead, he took his father’s “cue” and grew up believing that these were acceptable behaviors for a father to do, which, at some level, helped pave the way toward his at-home-father status.

Preference to Be Home with the Children

When fathers are responsible for the routine activities of child care—be it changing diapers, watching frequent episodes of *The Wiggles*, reading the same children’s book over and over again, or getting the children washed and fed and dressed and undressed on a daily basis—the behavior is notable simply because it is men who are doing it. Common gender stereotypes about men and masculinity encourage assumptions that men, by nature of their gender, are neither interested in such behaviors nor competent at doing them. But, stay-at-home fathers counter these stereotypes. Many in this study felt that their own personalities were well suited to

full-time parenting—sometimes more so than their wives—and many expressed a strong desire to be a hands-on parent, pleasure in taking care of their children, and confidence in their childrearing abilities. All of these feelings play a part in maintaining the role of stay-at-home father.

For instance, Anthony—married to a woman who had a lucrative position in the financial industry—felt his own aptitude for childrearing was superior to his wife’s. He commented, “Although she’s a great mom, I actually think my personality is better suited to the repetition of being the parent of toddlers.... I think she would go nuts in about a week.” Just by virtue of being a stay-at-home-father/working-mother couple, Anthony and his wife counter sex role stereotypes. In Anthony’s case, not only does his behavior go against the grain but his self-concept does so as well in that he perceives himself as “better suited” to parenting young children compared with his wife who, he felt, would “go nuts” if she had to be home full-time. Scott described a similar situation in his household: “[My wife] knows that I [have] a calming effect on the kids and the house and everybody. I just don’t get riled up about anything. It is just better. She appreciates that. She’s a lot more excitable and a lot more high strung.” This stay-at-home father, in focusing on his own parenting-friendly personality traits versus his wife’s less parenting-friendly ones, recognized that he was the better fit for the role of full-time parent in his household, gender stereotypes notwithstanding. Both Anthony and Scott relied on the fact that they were better with children than their wives were as a factor in their continuing the stay-at-home-father lifestyle.

A personal desire to be home with their children also makes it possible for stay-at-home fathers to remain in the role. Sam, who left his career in social work to be home with his young sons while his wife built her career as a professor, said that he “just wanted to stay with them, to be on top of it. I wanted to be the one to take care of them.” This self-description, if spoken by a mother, would be unworthy of comment, but spoken by a father, it contradicts conventional gender stereotypes. Roy, who shared Sam’s sentiments, described how he and his wife willingly changed roles because of his desire to be home with his daughter and her desire to work outside the home: “I really wanted to be with my daughter, because I hadn’t seen her regularly every day in months. And I wanted to be with her every day because she was 10 and new things were coming into play, and I wanted to be part of the process of her growing up. So it wasn’t like [my wife] had to drag me. She was tired of staying at home. And I was tired of not being there for my daughter.... So that’s when I started taking care of the house and my daughter, and she went to work.” Roy’s choice of words showed that he not only had a strong desire to take on the at-home-parenting responsibilities in his family, but also that he was a man with genuine nurturing qualities—a father trying to be in tune to the needs of his pre-teen daughter and a husband trying to be in tune to the needs of his wife.

A third facilitating factor that stems from stay-at-home fathers’ nurturing personality traits and their desire to be primary caregiving parents can be seen in the confidence they expressed as they became increasingly competent in their parenting abilities. One stay-at-home father commented about his parenting skills, “I think mine

are better than [my wife's], because she really is not real interested—she loves the kids and everything—she's not as interested in that sort of thing. She has always depended on me to do it.... I think my parenting skills are as good as any mother's." Another stay-at-home father, oozing confidence, said, "Never, never, ever. Never even occurred to me that I couldn't do this." Both of the stay-at-home fathers quoted here used language that showed they were secure in their parenting abilities, and this confidence inevitably played a part in their decision to continue in the role of stay-at-home father.

Support of Spouse

In the 1970s, during the peak of the women's movement, it was common to find women "grateful to their husbands for allowing them the freedom to pursue their career goals" (Risman 94). While none of the stay-at-home fathers interviewed for the current study talked about being "grateful" to their wives for "allowing" them to be an at-home parent, several pointed out that success was heavily dependent upon having a supportive spouse. Don, whose wife was extremely encouraging of his decision to be a stay-at-home father, speculated about how men without this support might feel. He commented, "Unless your spouse...is supportive enough to have you stay home and make you feel comfortable enough with that.... You're screwed. You're going to have all these ideas going through your head. Am I doing the right thing? Am I satisfying? It is probably going to be hard to raise the children too, maybe, I don't know, I'm not in that situation. But I think it would be." In this quote,

Don showed a deep understanding of the importance of a wife's support in the maintenance of the stay-at-home-father household; quite plainly, he said that men who do not have their wives' encouragement are "screwed." Another stay-at-home father interviewed for this research, Mitch, shared Don's assessment—albeit using less indelicate language. He said, "I have a wife who's successful on her own and who's very understanding and—I can't even say forward thinking—but whose liberal thinking makes this possible.... I guess the stars all lined up correctly this time."

Cultural Factors

Social Approval and Support

Several cultural forces contribute to the phenomenon of stay-at-home fathers. Nowadays, men are expected to be involved in their children's lives to a much larger degree than their own fathers were. True, men's increased role in the private sphere has not kept up with women's in the public realm, but it is no longer socially acceptable for men to take no part in child care, housework, or other family commitments. Thus, stay-at-home fathers can rely on cultural precedent in terms of taking over some of the traditionally female roles with children and home.

Men who choose childrearing as their full-time occupation are challenging conventional gender norms in a very obvious way, and support and approval on the part of extended family and friends eases their adjustment to this unconventional role. Many of the stay-at-home fathers who participated in this research shared stories

about the positive feedback they received about their decision, particularly from their own parents. Patrick, one of the few stay-at-home fathers in the sample who quit his job for the sole reason of being home full-time with his young son, described the response of his mother and father: “My situation was great.... My situation was fabulous. My family was behind me. A lot of places, you won’t get that...my mother, my father...really backed me when I decided to do it. And they were always there for me if I ever needed anything, any help.” In his interview, Patrick made it clear that he was aware of the gender-bending nature of his decision to be at home and that unlike his own situation, where his parents supported him, other men who choose to do what he did might not be as lucky. Sam, a former social worker and father of three boys, said he thinks his mother “respects” him for his at-home fathering, and that she told him, “Man, there’s not too many guys that would do that.”

Scott was of the impression that other fathers he came across tended to approve of what he was doing. “Most of the dads I saw at the park or spoke to, most of the dads, I found, said that they just personally couldn’t do it, but they thought it was great that I could do it.... Everybody really thought it was good.” In discussing his situation with fathers who worked outside the home for a living, Scott received social approval from male peers. Although “they just personally couldn’t do it”—an acknowledgement that at-home fathering challenges normative male behavior—Scott got the message that other fathers thought it was a good thing, and he did not feel negatively judged by them for his decision.

Community Norms

Liberal community norms that are accepting of a wide variety of family structures also facilitate the decision-making process for fathers who are considering the at-home-father family. When just one man in a community or one father from a school is an at-home father, his presence is noteworthy because it is outside the bounds of expected behavior. He becomes a conspicuous example of a man who is not following the masculine gender script. Whether or not he is comfortable in his role or with his status is irrelevant to whether others in the community know what to make of him—and chances are many people would view him as odd or themselves feel uncomfortable or ill at ease (Goffman, *Presentation* 212). But when there are several primary-parenting fathers, and neighbors and other parents in the school or on the block can say, “Oh, yeah, Brian (or Andy or Evan), I know that guy, nice kids,” stigma gradually dissipates and the behavior becomes increasingly socially acceptable. This is part of the slow process of social change, where notions of appropriate gender roles are put into flux, and it is here where we see cultural norms and expectations change and the social construction of gender at work (Merton).

Many of the stay-at-home fathers in this study described living in communities where the cultural norms and expectations were tolerant of lifestyles that transgress traditional gender boundaries. Two stay-at-home fathers pointed to the college-town environment where they lived as a kind of protection for virtually any type of person or family living in a nontraditional way. Sam described his town: “There are a lot of professors, and it is a big mish mash. It has got about 14,000 in it,

and there are a lot of different situations, from two women living together raising kids to college students. There are people from all over the world. I think there's a lot of leeway.... If it was a working class town.... I'm sure that I would be—I would feel really weird.” Because of where he lives, according to Sam, persons like himself—and even “two women living together raising kids”—are accepted. At the same time, he admitted that if he were to live in a town characterized by lower socioeconomic status, his experience may not be so positive.

Similarly, Evan, who is married to a college professor, said, “There are two communities that we are in. One is the university community that my wife is part of and that most of our friends are in, and then there's the non-university community, and I think a lot of people that we interact with from the non-university community are a little more surprised by the fact that I am a stay-at-home dad.” Like Sam, Evan was aware that receptivity to his lifestyle varies greatly depending on the community. In this case, there seemed to be class issues at play, with those of lower socioeconomic status (“the non-university community”) seemingly less comfortable about his being a stay-at-home father compared with those affiliated with the university.

Urban areas also came up as places that tend to be tolerant of unconventional gender behavior. One stay-at-home father, Jack, said, “It is pretty urban, diversified in how people live down here. Had I been maybe in a smaller town or maybe a more rural setting, then people may have been talking behind my back or things of that nature. But I never felt any eyebrows [being raised].” Jack was aware that the area

where he lived was more accepting of stay-at-home-fathering men than others might be, and he recognized that the “diversified” nature of the way people lived in his city helped to shield men like him from potential social ostracism. Another urban stay-at-home father described it similarly, saying, “I don’t think that in the communities that we’ve lived in it has been difficult at all...very highly educated, very liberal, professional families, where it is just kind of accepted. I haven’t felt myself to be the victim of any kind of stereotypes about stay-at-home dads.... Most of our friends, people our age, particularly those who are parents, just take it all in stride.”

Low Expectations

Cultural beliefs about men’s incapacity to handle the ins-and-outs of hands-on child care serve, in a subtle way, as a facilitating factor to keep men in the role of stay-at-home father. Because expectations for fathers are often so low, even the most routine and simple aspects of child care result in inordinate praise. Drake, for instance, spoke incredulously about the praise his mother and mother-in-law lavished upon him—and about his discomfort with it. He recalled: “My mother, my mother-in-law, they tend to be very shocked by how much time I spend with the kids and how I do these things. They are constantly telling me what a phenomenal dad I am and how great it is that I’m spending all this time and that I’m willing to do the child care and all this kind of stuff. My wife and I often joked about her mother, because her mother would think I was some kind of saint every time I changed a diaper. To me, I would think, how ridiculous. And of course, the times when my wife was home and she’s

doing all this stuff, she got no notice at all, that's just what mothers are supposed to do. That was always just kind of funny, how I got unbelievable credit for doing everyday things that every mother would always do.”

Here, Drake distanced himself from the excessive praise he received from women in his family and talked about how absurd it was to him that he was getting so much credit for doing what he considered to be his job. He also acknowledged that mothers—his wife included—were simply expected to do the things for which he was being celebrated. Rick, too, described an incident where he was applauded and his sister was ignored for the same parenting behavior. He said, “I went to my parents’ fiftieth anniversary. I took a bus, a man with three girls.... The minute we got up there, my aunts, they just took my kids under their wing. ‘Oh.... You’re just such a wonderful father for bringing them up here like this.’ And my sister’s going, ‘Hey, I brought my kids along too, how come I don’t get any of this treatment?’”

Although many of the stay-at-home fathers who experienced these undue compliments laughed about them and did not take them seriously, praise is a strong incentive. Receiving praise and admiration for what they do, whether inordinate or inappropriate, may encourage stay-at-home fathers by helping them feel comfortable and thus enabling them to continue in the role of primary parent. Interestingly, there is a parallel between stay-at-home fathers who take on the “mothering” role and men who take jobs in predominantly female professions. In *Still a Man’s World*, Williams describes the way token dynamics affect men in female-dominated professions in that they receive preferential treatment in the form of higher expectations, promotions,

and higher pay; Williams deemed it the “glass escalator effect” (108). Similarly, in Coltrane’s study of shared-parenting families, many fathers acknowledged receiving praise for doing things with and for their children that mothers were simply expected to do (*Family Man* 11).

Ideological Factors

Value Having One Parent at Home Full-time

In a year 2000 Public Agenda survey of parents nationwide, 70 percent of parents of children under six years old said the “best” arrangement for the care and development of young children is to have one parent at home (Farkas, Duffett, and Johnson 13). Asked how important it is for one parent to stay home during a child’s earliest years, virtually all parents—94 percent—thought it was important, with 35 percent responding that it was “absolutely essential” (Farkas, Duffett, and Johnson 14). In the United States today, there is an overwhelmingly strong ideology about appropriate parenting that purports the right way to raise children is to have one parent at home full-time, especially when the children are young. But, in fact, relatively few households actually fit this bill. According to U.S. Census data, among those children who lived with both of their parents in 2002, 62 percent were in two-parent-working families (Fields, *Children’s Living Arrangements* 9).

Among the stay-at-home fathers interviewed for the current study, most—20 out of 35—professed an ideology of parenting characterized by the importance of

having one parent at home, and this ideology contributed to their decision to become and remain stay-at-home fathers. Anthony is an illustrative example. He and his wife talked about it before they had children: “It was of paramount importance to me, and secondary to [my wife], that there be somebody at home to raise the kid.... Almost all of the people we know that we really get along with now as adults were raised by a parent until they went off to grade school at the very least. So that was important to us.” This stay-at-home father was fully convinced of the “paramount importance” of having one parent at home with the children. By drawing on his experiences with his own circle of friends, he determined that the kinds of people he and his wife liked to be around and respected were the ones who grew up in stay-at-home-parent families, a reality that fueled his commitment to continue staying home with his own daughters. Anthony went on to say that because “there’s no reason to think” that his wife won’t continue to earn a good living, he had no plans to return to the workforce any time soon.

Lack of Trust in Nonparental Child Care

The widespread cultural value that one parent should be devoted to child-rearing is associated with a strong disinclination toward nonparental child care. The stay-at-home fathers in this study were in line with the national trend on this front. Among parents of children under six years old nationally, 90 percent agree (including 66 percent who strongly agree) that “If a family can afford it, it is almost always best for the children if one parent stays home with them full-time” (Farkas, Duffett, and

Johnson 44). Similarly, 71 percent agree (including 43 percent who strongly agree) that “Parents should only rely on a day care center when they have no other option” (Farkas, Duffett, and Johnson 44). In Frank’s study of primary caregiving fathers, 65 percent said they were the at-home parent in their family because they did not want to put their child in day care (Frank, “Research”). Other research conducted with mothers and fathers of young children also corroborates a widespread resistance to day care (Hays 139; Cobb).

For stay-at-home fathers, the aversion to day care centers or nonfamilial babysitters was fueled by fear that children would be physically harmed or abused in those arrangements, and this fear was extremely effective in enabling men to continue in the role of stay-at-home father. “To be honest, it was two weeks before our oldest was supposed to start day care,” one stay-at-home father explained. “There were a lot of things going on in the area we lived in. You heard about day care workers beating the kid.... And it was just like, do we want our children in that type of environment? Is it necessary?” This father decided to stay home with his newborn himself. By the time of the interview, he and his wife had had a second child, and he had maintained his stay-at-home-father status for ten years, with no immediate plans for change.

For several of the at-home fathers, their initial negative disposition toward nonparental child care was confirmed by personal experiences with a child-care provider. To some extent, this was what solidified their initial decision to stay home and then to continue to do so. Bradley described how he and his wife tried a babysitter when their first child was born and “just ended up getting someone that

was really not good at all—I think she was actually drinking the night before. I mean, that’s a sign of everybody. We’re saying, wow, that’s one person, can you imagine her watching our kid?” For Bradley and his wife, suspicion that their child-care provider may have had an alcohol problem caused them to be wary about leaving their son in the hands of anyone other than themselves. By the time of the interview, Bradley and his wife had a son and a daughter, and Bradley had been their primary parent for five and a half years.

Reggie, father of two, quit his job to be home full-time just before his first child was born. He and his wife decided, ostensibly, that he would be the one to stay home because his earning capacity was considerably less than hers. But they were also ill disposed to nonparental child care. As Reggie put it, “I’ve really enjoyed being with my children and raising them. We also decided that we didn’t want to have child care and that it would be better if one of us could stay home, and it seemed that I was the obvious choice for that because of the income situation.”

In Gerald’s case, there were several significant factors that came together to make his decision: a wife who didn’t want to stay home and who made more money, combined with a mutual disinclination to rely on day care. Gerald recalled: “We lived in a real nice apartment...[but] they didn’t allow children there. We knew, when she got pregnant, that we had to get a place away from there. Then we talked about putting her maybe in a nursery place, a child-care center. We knew other people who had done that, and we weren’t too excited about that. We wanted to raise our own kid. So she said, well, I don’t want to stay home. She said I don’t like to do housework, I

don't like to cook and all that kind of stuff. And she was making more money than I was. It kind of all worked out, it worked out better for me to stay home.”

There is a great deal of information being shared in the above quote. The most important sentence uttered by Gerald was, “We wanted to raise our own kid.” He and his wife knew of other parents who had used day care, and they were disinclined to try it for their own daughter. Since Gerald's wife wanted to work, earned more money than he did, and actively disliked the idea of staying home, it became an obvious decision that he should be the one to be the primary parent. And he did so with all three of his children, the oldest of which was in her twenties and the youngest a 15-year-old at the time of the interview.

Egalitarian Mind-set

An ideology of gender equality was prevalent among the stay-at-home fathers interviewed for this study. The overwhelming number of fathers in the sample, 29 out of 35, indicated a predisposition toward gender equality and an egalitarian approach to marriage and childrearing. One characteristic of the egalitarian mind-set was that these men and their wives did not allocate household chores or family duties to one or the other parent because of their gender, but instead they were of the opinion that both parents were expected to be responsible for children and that old-fashioned notions about gender roles would not curtail father involvement in their families.

One stay-at-home father talked about how he and his wife, both academics, made a conscious effort toward fairness. “We talked about dividing child care as best

we could evenly and not trying to privilege one of our careers over the other. And I think we've pretty well succeeded in that. In some sense it feels like we're taking turns. She works for five years, and then I work for five years, and then we'll see what happens." In this family, both parents had the opportunity to experience at-home parenting as well as family breadwinning by "taking turns" doing each role. This turn-taking approach highlights the underlying belief that gender did not predispose either of them to one or the other role. Also, the fact that this couple made a deliberate effort not to "privilege one of our careers over the other" was another example of an egalitarian ideology that makes it possible to maintain the at-home-father family.

Salvatore—a certified public accountant who worked from home while serving as the primary parent to two young boys—showed disdain for traditional gender roles in family life. He said, "The old husband and wife thing where a man does this and a woman does that doesn't work any more. It is a partnership. And in a partnership anything is possible.... As far as I am concerned, I don't make a distinction between a man and a woman at all any more." Salvatore's predisposition toward gender equality and an egalitarian approach to marriage was apparent in his belief that marriage "is a partnership" and that when it comes to family responsibilities he no longer thinks in terms of male responsibilities and female responsibilities. Later on in his interview, he talked about how he and his wife "divvy up" most tasks, for example, he does most of the laundry and the house cleaning; she does the food shopping. Also, she gets involved in the Parent Teacher Organization at

their sons' school; he stays on top of their homework and their extracurricular activities. Neither assigned responsibilities based on gender—according to Salvatore, that kind of thing simply “doesn't work any more.”

CHAPTER 4

SOCIAL CONSTRAINTS AND STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING THEM

The Concept of Stigma

Men in female-dominated professions are often stigmatized for their unconventional choice of work, perhaps an inevitable occupational hazard for any persons transgressing conventional gender boundaries in the workplace. Not surprisingly, stay-at-home fathers—men who have taken on a quintessentially feminine role—face social stigma as a result of their uncommon behavior. Social interaction is an essential component of stigma, and this relational component is fully observable in the interplay that exists between stay-at-home fathers and the others they come in contact with—teachers, shopkeepers, other parents, friends, in-laws. Although the forms that stigma takes are often subtle, that does not mean that the stigma is less powerful. According to Goffman, “failure to sustain the many minor norms important in the etiquette of face-to-face communication can have a very pervasive effect upon the defaulter’s acceptability in social situations” (*Stigma* 129). This chapter will address the social stigma and stereotypes that stay-at-home fathers feel, as well as the strategies they use for reducing the stigma associated with their status. Table 4 lists the barriers and strategies that emerged from the interviews with stay-at-home fathers.

Table 4

Barriers to Stay-at-Home Fatherhood and Strategies for Dealing with Them

Barriers

Attachment to the provider role

Social ostracism due to nonworking status

Sex role stereotypes

Social disapproval

Negative response from parents and in-laws

Questions about work ethic

Reactions of male peers

Hostility from strangers

Low status of women's work

Time boundaries

Lack of support from the workplace

Lack of socialization or experience in parenting

Negative impact on marital relationship

Loss of financial power in the home

Boring nature of the work

Strategies

Accepting

Inoculating

Discrediting

Barriers to Stay-at-Home Fatherhood

Attachment to the Provider Role

The importance of paid work in the life of American men is extremely salient. Paid work is connected to feelings of power, pride, accomplishment, and status, and is a central source of masculine identity (Parsons; Kimmel, *Manhood*; Collinson and Hearn; Gould; C. Williams, *Still*; J. Williams, *Unbending Gender*). The ability to earn a good living also is a key asset for a man seeking a mate and a valuable bargaining chip in negotiations around household division of labor (Mahony). For fathers, breadwinning is a “unifying element” that shapes their sense of what it means to be a man (Griswald 2). In *Stay-at-Home Dads: The Essential Guide to Creating the New Family*, Gill cautions fathers who decide to stay home to “recognize that your feelings about personal power, control, self-worth, and security can be all wrapped up in your earning power” (72).

This linkage between masculinity and breadwinning is a recurring theme in the sociology of gender. In American society, providing is without question one of the defining characteristics of masculinity and successful fatherhood. “Virtually the only way to be a real man in our society is to have an adequate job and earn a living. It is perhaps not too much to say that only in very exceptional cases can an adult man be genuinely self-respecting and enjoy a respected status in the eyes of others if he does not ‘earn a living’ in an approved occupational role,” wrote Parsons almost 50

years ago (271). Even in contemporary studies, researchers continue to find a deep connection for men between the male gender role and the provider role (Brennan, Barnett, and Gareis; Townsend).

It is important to note, however, that not all men have the opportunity to be providers. Historically, structural barriers such as discrimination in employment and education made it difficult, especially for men of color and working class or poor men, to be the sole providers for their families (Wilson). Similarly, some men may simply have a preference for employment in occupations in which income is unsteady or low, such as art, teaching, or even fishing. Also, the breadwinner role is extremely dependent on larger economic circumstances. While the family wage in the 1950s, for example, made it possible for a working husband to adequately provide for wife and children, today's family wage more likely requires the combined salaries of two working parents (Brennan, Barnett, and Gareis).

Research shows that masculine identity through work is especially salient for working class men. In *Worlds of Pain: Life in the Working Class Family*, Rubin studied men who relied primarily on their jobs to give their lives meaning and dignity. This was evident despite the fact that many found their work to be unfulfilling. Rubin's analysis described how boys in working class families were raised to find jobs, to work hard, and to play by the rules. For working class husbands, more than for those higher on the economic scale, it was a badge of honor when their wives did not "have" to work. Yet the reality is that most working class families require two salaries in order to have a decent standard of living.

Stay-at-home fathers, too, are familiar with the cultural norms that prescribe the breadwinner role to fathers and stigmatize fathers who do not work (Levine, *Who Will Raise* 126, 134-35; Parsons and Bales). In a society where a man's worth is often judged by the size of his paycheck, it is not surprising that ceding the role of breadwinner is a monumental challenge characterized by a sense of emasculation (Gill 67). Some of the at-home fathers who participated in this research found it almost unbearable. Their comments were characterized by concerns about loss of pride, self-identity, and power.

The following quote is from Walter, a 54-year-old father of a school-age boy. Walter had become disabled due to a work accident. Here he described his initial experience adjusting to being home full-time rather than working for pay: "They tried to rehabilitate me for a year, but I couldn't do the job that I was doing. Public service said that they couldn't find no work for me to do with my limitations. And they turned me loose. They retired me. After then I tried to work a couple of jobs, and I found out that I really couldn't do it, and that just brought me down, down, down, down, down, down, down, down.... And I mean, being left in this house alone, crying to myself. And cursing people. And [saying], 'Nobody is going to tell me what I can and can't do.'... And not being able to do it. Very big adjustment." When Walter recalled that period in his life, he focused on the depression he felt as it slowly became obvious to him that he was not going to be able to work again. In losing his ability to support his family, he had lost his self-identity as a man and was overcome with feelings of powerlessness and even shame. Although he was describing a feeling that

he had experienced several years earlier, the words he chose and his tone of voice remained emotionally charged.

Jason, too, was at home full-time with his son as a result of a disability, and his wife was the breadwinner of the family. He described this situation as “kind of rough” on him because he was used to working and “never planned to be here with kids at all.” The hardest part for him, he said, was “not getting a very good paycheck.” He also said: “I don’t think no man should stay home. I think every man should work.... I think a man is supposed to go to work to take care of his family.... I believe in helping his wife, but not take over the whole full thing.” In this response, Jason was communicating his adherence to the culturally accepted roles for men and women. He made it a point to say that his being home full-time was a matter of necessity, not choice—he knew that the “right” thing is for the husband to work—and he expressed socially appropriate discomfort that his household was not structured accordingly. The importance he placed on paid work was especially evident in the fact that the hardest part for him was not bringing home a paycheck. He offered a nod to changing gender roles in saying that he believes in a husband “helping his wife” but that men “should not take over the whole full thing.”

An inability to provide financially for their families caused some stay-at-home fathers in this study to view themselves as personal and professional failures. Roger was an at-home father extremely committed to the rearing of his young son. Yet, he perceived himself as a failed businessman and described a difficult adjustment in giving up his carpet-cleaning business and its accompanying paycheck. “I think

there's a lot of them [stay-at-home fathers] out there like [me]. Because very few men—at least in my generation, I'm 47—would have woke up in the middle of the morning and said, 'I'm going to stay home all day.'" Roger also told me that he "makes it a point not to tell people" and decided to write a novel so that he would have something to say when the topic of what he does for a living comes up. I asked Roger what he thought would change if he were to receive a hypothetical advance for his novel—even if he were to be paid, I pointed out, he would still be an at-home father. He replied: "Inside, gosh, yeah, wow, I'm a man again. It's a weird feeling. If I were a woman, it would be like, 'That's gravy.'" Roger's belief in the idea of husband as provider, and the concomitant shame because he was not, were evident in this response. The fact that he purposely does not share his at-home status with others was an indication of embarrassment about his role, as well as about the loss of status associated with not working outside the home. He was seeking a sense of accomplishment—his decision to take on the writing of a novel was an example of this—because being an at-home father did not provide him with a sense of pride or success. In saying that receiving compensation for his book would make him feel as if he were "a man again," he implies that he had lost that part of his identity when he gave up his paycheck.

Social Ostracism Due to Nonworking Status

When family, friends, neighbors, and even strangers say things that can be construed as rude or insulting, it takes a psychological toll on stay-at-home fathers.

Several of the men who participated in this research described the need to use a substantial degree of mental energy to deflect what they viewed as ignorant—although probably not mean-spirited—comments about their work status. Terrance, for example, tended to laugh it off and refrain from discussion. “There are things that aren’t spoken sometimes that are the strongest messages,” he said. “I have a neighbor.... And when I told him what I was doing, as soon as the economy started to turn around a bit, he routinely would ask me, ‘Now that the economy is turning around, are you going to go out and look for a job?’ So I am quite certain he had the impression that I was sitting around watching TV most of the time. He never said that openly, but I’m quite certain that he didn’t really approve of what I was doing. And I just kind of chuckled to myself and made it a point never to cross that with him, wasn’t going to try to explain that to him.”

Society’s message is unequivocal: married men with children who do not play the provider role are deviants, and, like Terrance, many stay-at-home fathers are keenly aware of the social stigma their status confers. Peter, a lawyer, also indicated awareness of his deviant status. “The worst part is the feeling of lack of standing or of respect in dealing with the rest of the world...that I am nobody, that people aren’t really counting or depending on me for anything.... It’s that feeling of marginality.” When this stay-at-home father sees himself through others’ eyes, he sees himself as inferior or with a “lack of standing” stemming from his nonworking status.

One of the more awkward social situations experienced by stay-at-home fathers is the inevitable small talk that arises in social gatherings and the unavoidable

question: So, what do you do? One father who was especially uncomfortable in his role as an at-home parent told me, “I never say I am a stay-at-home dad. I never say that.” Others said they typically use the word “mom” when describing themselves, a proactive approach rather than waiting for someone else to joke about it. For example, one father said, “I say I am a house mom.... They don’t know how to deal with that.” In resorting to these types of responses—either hiding the fact or putting others on the defensive—these fathers indicate awareness that their at-home status conflicts with conventional social norms about appropriate masculine behavior.

Scott was unusual compared with other fathers in the study in that he had not had the experience of being a breadwinning father before becoming a stay-at-home father. Although he had worked during the pre-children years of his married life, he had found neither a career nor a job that he loved. His status as at-home father began immediately upon his graduation from college, which happened to coincide with the birth of his first child. Thus, Scott, from the very beginning of his status as father, did not equate his sense of identity as a man, a father, or a husband with the size of his paycheck. According to him, because he had never been career driven, his sense of masculinity was not dictated by what he did for a living. In responding to a question about why there seem to be so few stay-at-home fathers, he pointed out that for most men, their work was their identity, which he thought explained why so few choose to do what he does.

Sex Role Stereotypes

Strong societal beliefs and fixed ideas about appropriate gender roles work to deny men the opportunity to be full-time parents. When family and friends resist, or marginalize, or become uncomfortable about a man's at-home-parent status, traditional views about gender are often at the root of it. The rules of accepted social behavior, when broken, result in obvious discomfort for those involved, as attested by the experiences these stay-at-home fathers recounted. The findings suggest that stay-at-home fathers themselves view the at-home-father household as an unfeasible option for most families. The blame for this, according to stay-at-home fathers, lies in longstanding sex role stereotypes that limit individual behavior. In all but two of the 35 interviews, I posed some version of the following question: Do you think there will come a time when stay-at-home-father families are as common as stay-at-home-mother families? Eighteen stay-at-home fathers said no, and 14 said yes. Noteworthy, however, is that many of the affirmative responses included caveats, for example, that it depended on the individual man's personality, on his comfort with his wife earning more than him, or on the availability of jobs in his line of work.

Despite their own seemingly successful transgressions of the rules of acceptable sex role behavior, many stay-at-home fathers pointed out that society's views of men's and women's roles are extremely resistant to change and so serve as a considerable barrier to the formation of more stay-at-home-father families. Reggie, married to a woman who worked in the financial industry, willingly quit his job to be home full-time. Still, he thinks that stereotypes about men's and women's appropriate

roles stand in the way of this becoming a widespread trend. He said: “It’s just the stereotype. People are just more comfortable in the roles of the man being the wage earner and the mom staying home.... It’s not so much that people look down on dads who stay home, but it’s just they think of moms being the nurturing ones.” Another stay-at-home father described it as follows: “Oh, I think there’s subtle, I don’t know if the word is opinions or not, but I think there are attitudes that the husband is supposed to be quote ‘breadwinner.’ I think these are social mores, well established or at least longstanding any way, that the man is supposed to be out there working.” Jack, father of three who thoroughly enjoyed his at-home years and felt fortunate for having had the experience, remained under the impression that, “a lot of men feel that there’s still a social stigma that, if the man is not working, there’s something wrong with him. They probably feel a stigma personally in themselves.”

As stay-at-home fathers, all three of the men quoted above were evidence that individuals have the capacity to overcome the barrier of sex role stereotypes. Nevertheless, they themselves point to stereotypes and social mores about men’s and women’s appropriate roles as powerful constraints for keeping men (and women) in their place.

Social Disapproval

For some stay-at-home fathers, social networks of family and friends nurtured their plans—recall Patrick who felt lucky because his parents were so supportive—but this was often not the case. Negative attitudes—attitudes that tend to be based on

sex role stereotypes—contribute to an environment in which stay-at-home fathers may feel belittled, out of place, inadequate, or stigmatized. Stay-at-home fathers are especially vulnerable to stigma. Not only are they violating the father-as-provider norm but also other norms associated with appropriate masculine behaviors. This section will discuss four areas of social disapproval that emerged in the interviews: negative attitudes from close family members; questions about one's work ethic; unsupportive responses from male peers; and hostility from strangers.

Negative Response from Parents and In-Laws

Several stay-at-home fathers described feeling disapproval—from mild to relatively severe—from their own parents or in-laws. For example, Reggie said his in-laws “think it’s a little strange that their daughter is supporting the family” while he stays home with the children. Another stay-at-home father, Carmine, described his parents’ reaction as follows: “My dad and step-mom weren’t so keen on it.... ‘Well,’ they said, ‘Are you sure you really want to do this? You are going to be stuck at home with the kids.’... They had more of that old school—the man has got to earn some money—attitude.” Reggie’s in-laws and Carmine’s parents shared a belief in the cultural norm that says: You should not do this (be home full-time with the children) because you are a man, and real men work to provide for their families, they do not stay home to take care of the children. Reggie’s in-laws found it “strange” and Carmine’s parents felt that he was “going to be stuck at home with the kids”—apparently, it occurred to neither group of parents that these men may have been

happy with their situation and were comfortable with their decision to be at home and not in the workplace.

For some stay-at-home fathers, the disapproval from their own mothers was particularly severe. Roy and his wife mutually decided to switch roles—he wanted to spend more time with his daughter, and his wife was tired of staying home full-time. But this decision was not well received by his mother, which disturbed Roy greatly. He said, “It really upset me. I’m going to say it really pisses me off, that people would look at you like: ‘Why aren’t you working? You’re a man, why aren’t you working? What are you doing here?’ My mother actually even told me that.” Andy had a similar experience with his mother: “The other extreme is ribbing not in a good-natured way, which I get quite a lot of from my mother, who very explicitly says to me, ‘What you are doing—a man doesn’t do what you are doing.’”

The power of social norms and expectations to influence an individual’s behavior—especially an individual’s ability to resist—was evident in the anger expressed by both Roy and Andy toward their mothers. Roy was “really upset” and “pissed off” by implications that he was lazy or had some other nefarious reason for choosing to be a stay-at-home father, and Andy was certain that his mother was not just teasing him when she pointed out that he is a man doing women’s work. Despite this disapproval, however, both men continued to do what they thought was right for their families.

Other research corroborates these findings that fathers in nontraditional caregiving roles encounter disapproval from parents and in-laws. Levine found that

his primary caretaking fathers ran into “doubt, skepticism, and some rejection from all but close friends” and also concern on the part of in-laws that their daughters had married weak men (*Who Will Raise* 134, 136). Coltrane, too, found that the parents of shared-parenting couples had negative responses to the division of labor in their adult children’s households—and much of it had to do with a fundamental concern surrounding their son’s or son-in-law’s provider responsibilities (“Household Labor” 488).

Questions about Work Ethic

Many stay-at-home fathers felt that their work ethic was questioned and that they had come to be viewed as lazy because they were not employed outside the home. These men seemed to be especially vulnerable to the charge that they were living off their wives. For example, Roger described how his father-in-law “had a hard time” with his staying home: “He thinks I’m lazy. He thinks I’m just taking advantage of my wife. That I’m just having a great time, like a vacation.... ‘Yeah, man, you’ve got it really easy. You’ve got it made.’ And that’s how a lot of men feel—and...what a lot of men think without saying what they think.” Roger is the stay-at-home father who makes it a point not to tell anybody about his at-home status and who took up writing a novel so that he could, in all honesty, say that this is what he does for a living when people ask him about it. In this quote it was evident that Roger’s father-in-law made him feel uncomfortable and maybe somewhat defensive about his status, which may explain his reluctance to share it with other men.

Frank is another example of a stay-at-home father who was taken to task with negative assumptions about his work ethic. It is interesting, however, that as soon as Frank returned to work, he felt that these negative assumptions disappeared. According to Frank: “There were a lot of people [who] just figured I was lazy. ‘You let your wife [work]. You should be out there making money providing for your family.’ . . . I got that [attitude] from some of my wife’s relatives. . . . It started to change a little bit when they saw the relationship [with my kids], and then of course when my wife got laid off from [major corporation], and then I went to work, and it was like transformation, and they said, ‘Well, gee, he’s not lazy, he’s going to work.’” In his interview with me, Frank described a very active life as a stay-at-home father with a high degree of involvement in the lives of his two young children. If the description of his typical day was any indication, he was far from lazy. Still, despite his hectic schedule, his taking care of the home, and his active involvement in his children’s lives, Frank’s work ethic was questioned during the time he was an at-home father, but not when he was perceived as a full-time worker/family provider.

Reactions of Male Peers

Some stay-at-home fathers encountered outright antagonism from their male family members. One recounted that his brother-in-law—who he described as an amazingly hardworking and successful blue-collar fellow—once held a lot of respect for him, but now “he practically doesn’t even talk to me.” Another father said that his younger brother “just thinks that this is wrong,” and focuses solely on the fact that he

is not working. “But does that necessarily mean that I’m not taking care of them and I’m not providing because I’m home making stew?...He just doesn’t get it.”

On the whole, however, stay-at-home fathers indicated remarkably little change in their relationships with other men as a consequence of their stay-at-home status. Those who had regular activities with the guys, such as playing soccer or golf, continued to do so. Some acknowledged that they were teased by friends, but mostly it seemed to be good-natured ribbing as opposed to hostile or distancing. Walter, who had been an at-home father for several years, said that to this day, “I still get teased.... I still hang around with guys.... I just say, ‘Well, I’m well trained’ [when they say] ‘You better get home so you can make dinner. Did you clean the house yet?’ Stuff like that.” But more common were stay-at-home fathers who, like Anthony, said that, “Nobody has ever said to me, ‘Hey, so why don’t you get a job?’”

Hostility from Strangers

A handful of stay-at-home fathers talked about receiving openly hostile reactions from others. Roger, for example, felt that he was under intense scrutiny all the time, even from neighbors he hardly knew: “One thing I learned...is that you have to pay really close attention, if you are going to be a stay-at-home dad, to your grooming, to the kind of shoes you wear when you are walking around your house, to the kind of car you drive. Just things like that, because people, they will judge you. You are already in the dog house. So if you do anything that is sloppy, or you don’t shave, or whatever, you wear old beat-up tennis shoes—shoot, where am I going?”

Who do I need to impress?” Because his behavior was far outside the norm for the suburban, family-oriented community in which he lived, Roger’s perception was that his daily habits and even his personal grooming were grist for the gossip mill. The consequence for him was a deleterious impact on his self-esteem.

Low Status of Women’s Work

The low status conveyed upon the work that women do inevitably serves as another barrier to the stay-at-home-father lifestyle. At-home parenting, neither a profession nor an occupation, has no formal rules of behavior, no formal requirements for entry, no formal measures of performance, and no salary—all of which are components of paid jobs in the public sphere. Several fathers in the study were clearly convinced that their at-home status and the “mothering” responsibilities they had taken on were a challenge to their masculinity.

Andy, who said he never publicly identifies himself as a stay-at-home father, commented: “I find it’s an emasculating job.... In the most obvious way, all the models in your life who have done something like this are women. Or at least in my life. So that if I find myself doing this—and I try to fight it, that I do this—it leads to the conclusion that I am doing something that women do. That [fact] challenges the ways I try to be masculine, which, in my opinion, is also shaped by the fact that masculinity is defined by what men in your life have done or do.” Of all the 35 men interviewed for this study, Andy was the only one who used the word “emasculating” and who explicitly said that he tries to “fight” the fact that he is “doing something that

women do” because it conflicts with his own concept of masculinity. Although devoted to his two young children, Andy viewed children as part of the world of women, an effeminate world where he sees himself as an outsider and in fact does not want to belong.

Time Boundaries

A major barrier to stay-at-home fathering is a lack of community infrastructure, which is connected to expectations about time norms. Time norms make it difficult for men to both make the decision to become an at-home parent and to continue in the role. With the exception of retirees and college students, most men who are at home during the day—especially if they are at home taking care of children as opposed to working from home—are transgressing normative time boundaries (Epstein, “Border Crossings” 322-23). Notions about time, the norms attached to work, and how these interact with sex roles caused uneasiness for many stay-at-home fathers and also for the people they interacted with. Several spoke about feeling the need to explain themselves to stay-at-home mothers in the neighborhood, women who seemed to be questioning their ability to handle the job of at-home parent.

Dillon described being constantly asked by stay-at-home mothers questions like, “But what do you do during the day?” Typically, he said, he would “just tell them I do everything that you guys do. I have to have a routine like everything else. Get the kids ready for school, get some laundry done, do some cleaning, and then do

what I have to do around the house to get things done.” He told me: “I actually had one mother who was like [he must have made a face that said ‘Are you kidding me?']. I go, ‘I *do* this.’.... And they are kind of like in shock, like you’re kidding me, and I said no, I said I stay home, I take care of the kids. And then they see what I do around the house.... They can’t believe it.” Dillon was an example of a stay-at-home father who felt pressure to explain himself to disbelieving others, in this case stay-at-home mothers who seemed ceaselessly curious about a man staying home with the children. The mere presence of a man in the neighborhood during daytime hours seemed to push stay-at-home mothers out of their comfort zone, which forced fathers like Dillon into the position of having to convince them that he indeed was capable of doing the job of an at-home parent. This curiosity on the part of stay-at-home mothers works to reinforce the stigma associated with at-home fatherhood and calls attention to its deviant status.

Several stay-at-home fathers also talked about feeling unwelcome by the stay-at-home mothers they came across. “Try to get someone to talk to you” at the local park, Patrick commented. “Ninety-nine percent of the time I was the only man there. So the women were off talking—it wasn’t like I would be included.” Again, while it might be commonplace on a Saturday or Sunday afternoon, Patrick’s presence at the park with his children during daytime hours on weekdays was an anomaly, an event to be curious about or possibly even suspicious of. Patrick did not vocalize any effort on his part to become accepted by the women at the park, but he was clearly aware that they made no friendly efforts towards him. Other fathers spoke about feeling

ostracized at “Mommy and Me”-type classes that were available in their communities. “I went to a group where I was the only dad,” Reggie said. He got the feeling that he “was probably the first dad that had ever been there” and “felt a little bit unwelcome at that point.... They didn’t really talk to me, and also I felt a little bit like they were looking at me, giving sidelong glances, like, ‘What are you doing here?’” In attending a group that was geared towards mothers and their babies, this stay-at-home father had trespassed into extremely gendered territory. From his perspective, the mothers isolated him by not including him in their conversations and making him increasingly aware of his outsider status.

Stay-at-home fathers also faced symbolic treatment that called attention to their differential status from other people they interacted with during daytime hours who were taken aback when presented with a father rather than the expected mother. For example, several reported being treated dismissively at their child’s school or at the pediatrician’s office, places where professionals would be more accustomed to dealing with mothers. Walter, for instance, described a typical conversation that he said takes place almost every time he deals with institutions concerning his son: “They aren’t used to seeing a man show up without his wife. It’s like, ‘Where’s his mother?’ ‘Is his mother home with him during the day?’ and so forth. Why do I have to explain?... I felt myself explaining so I wouldn’t have to go through this again,” which often put Walter “on the defensive.” Walter is the father who was home as a result of a workplace injury and who found it to be “a very big adjustment” from provider to stay-at-home father. Persistently being put in the position of having to

explain himself for acting on behalf of his child inevitably contributed to the difficulty he had in becoming comfortable with his at-home status.

Mitch, a father in his forties who had been laid off from his job in the communications field, had similar experiences of being asked questions like “Is the child’s mother here?” leading him to believe that people “didn’t expect the father.” He described going to his daughter’s preschool to pay tuition: “They said, ‘Is her mother here?’ and I said, ‘Oh, no, I’m her dad, I’m here to take care of that.’ The woman’s voice was like, oh, she was let down, it just seemed like she didn’t know how to, maybe she has dealt with so many women in the past that she just expected [a woman], and I threw her a curve. And it just seemed very cut and dry when I was talking to her. That’s another thing that I found, the cut and dryness, they don’t get into detail with you, people who expect the mother figure. Usually it’s me asking more questions, what time, what do I have to do, how much medication.... You’ve got to pull it more.... I definitely feel that people just think that it’s very odd that it’s me and not her.”

For Mitch, interactions that should have been routine and unremarkable had become interactions that he had to manage. In the anecdote Mitch shared, it was clear that he was astute to the fact that as a father he was not expected to be at his child’s preschool during the day and that his presence made the woman accepting the tuition money feel uncomfortable—in Mitch’s terms, he “threw her a curve.” From his perspective, the woman was then unfriendly towards him—in Mitch’s terms, their interaction became “cut and dry.” This incident is quite illustrative of the kinds of

barriers that stay-at-home fathers face as a result of being visible in the private sphere during a time of day when they, as men, were expected to be in the workplace.

Lack of Support from the Workplace

Many workplaces profess to offer flexibility to employees, but working men who opt for flex-time often face criticism and ridicule (Epstein et al. 114-15, Hochschild 115-32). Although studies show that working men are interested in such things as flexible work programs and telecommuting, approximately one in three male professionals say it is less socially acceptable for a man to ask for a flexible work arrangement than it is for a woman (“Viewpoints”). By the same token, one could imagine that men choosing to leave the workforce entirely to be home with their children may receive a strong negative response from employers and co-workers. Some of the stay-at-home fathers in this study shared their experiences of what transpired when they informed co-workers that they were leaving to become a stay-at-home parent.

For the most part, their announcements were greeted with incredulity. Patrick, a truck driver, faced outright laughter from his co-workers. He described what happened: “I just went in one day, and I told them that I was quitting to become a stay-at-home dad. The laugh, it was just like unbelievable. They thought I was joking. And I said, no, I’m not joking, I’m going to be leaving here in two weeks to stay at home full-time. The women there were all for me. But the men didn’t understand how I could do that.” The astonishment of Patrick’s male peers manifested in the form of

amusement—they laughed at him, perhaps because they did not know what else to do. In all likelihood, this was the first time they had heard a man openly say that the reason for his quitting was to be a stay-at-home parent. On the other hand, Patrick did acknowledge that his female co-workers were supportive, which was possibly a reflection of their own struggles with balancing the responsibilities of work and family.

Brian experienced the responses of the work world from both ends—first when he decided to leave his luxury car sales position and then, after his son got old enough, when he decided to return to the paid workforce. According to Brian, the original response at his workplace was disbelief. “Nobody could really come to grips with the decision.... Nobody could really understand why I would give up a successful business to do this.... I don’t think anybody professionally saw it as anything but a step backwards.” There was no precedent for what Brian was doing, and no social norms for his co-workers to rely on that would have permitted them to spontaneously show support for his decision. Instead, their responses relied on stereotypes about appropriate masculine gender roles and behavior. Then, when he was considering returning to the workplace, he came across a strong lack of receptivity on the part of others. As he put it: “It was quite difficult.... I realized that after being out of it for four and a half years, it would be very hard to school back up to speed again. I found people were more accepting of a Mr. Mom than they were of a Mr. Mom Goes Back to Work. Everybody had enough of a stereotypical idea of what the Mr. Mom thing was, but nobody could really figure him looking for a career and

starting over somewhere again. It's like, 'Well, didn't you think of that before you quit your job, that you'd have to go back to an entry level thing?' So there was a little bit of a rough landing there."

The potential of a negative impact on their eventual return to the formal workplace weighed heavily on several of the stay-at-home fathers who participated in the interviews. Those in professional white-collar careers worried that their commitment to their fields would be questioned, that they would not be taken seriously at work, or that the time off would in some way hurt their future career trajectory. Peter, a professional and father of two school-age children, said it bluntly: "Okay, here's another thing that I sort of think about and fear, which is: When I go back to looking for work, there's a gap in my resume. How do I explain that? Someone who has not been working is seen as someone who is less serious professionally. Anything other than the consistent focus on one career track is a sign of being a lesser person." Peter's fears were founded on what he had observed of stay-at-home mothers in his position. As a lawyer, he was aware that the legal profession frowns upon those who do not devote 100 percent of their time and energy to their careers and that the result for him, in all likelihood, would be trouble finding a suitable job. These are realistic concerns and serve as strong structural constraints inhibiting more men from considering the stay-at-home-father option even for a short period of time during their children's younger years.

Lack of Socialization or Experience in Parenting

With little if any socialization in the realm of child care, fathers often have limited opportunities to develop their competence or skills in tending to children's needs. As a result, many may begin fatherhood with feelings of incompetence and the expectation that they will be inadequate child-care providers. Artie, a professional and accomplished man with a graduate degree, described how uncomfortable he was at the beginning of his tenure as at-home father simply because he did not know how to do things: "I do think that being a homemaker is a craft to a certain extent," he explained. "It is skills that you learn. And so if you're frustrated, like me, when I first started, I was fairly frustrated in the role, it was hard for me to be comfortable, and if people were critical.... I think it was not that easy. Once you take control of what it is you're doing, and find the value in it, then I certainly am more accepting of myself doing it, makes it easier to deflect or ignore any criticisms or people not understanding what it is you're doing." Because he did not think he had the requisite skills necessary to be competent in the "homemaker" role, Artie experienced tremendous frustration and was hypersensitive to criticism. It was not until he felt that he had mastered his new responsibilities that he was more secure in the role and able to deflect any perceived disapproval. Socialized to be capable, take-charge, and skillful, adult males' lack of experience in the child-care arena validates "a far too frequently affirmed stereotype in men...to feel that they are supposed to know how to do a thing, having never previously encountered or practiced it" (Pruett, *Fatherhood* 176).

Moreover, traditional male sex role socialization in childhood also can be a powerful constraint to any inclination toward stay-at-home fathering. Several at-home fathers in the research specifically pointed to the fact that they were socialized as boys to grow up to become family providers, not family nurturers, and that this was something they had to overcome in themselves in order to be successful as an at-home parent. Sam, a 54-year-old father of three, commented about his own parents' expectations surrounding childrearing: "My mother said that she wouldn't let my father touch us...touch the diapers, or have anything to do with that infant stuff." Such early experiences can serve as a significant obstacle for males in taking on household and child-care responsibilities. Tony, who had been chronically unemployed during his boys' younger years, specifically made the point that, "This isn't something that a man normally does. I think they're trained from birth, so to speak. They're the breadwinners. If you go back to the male history, they're the ones who go out and do the hunting, it's the women who stay home and do the gathering.... For a normal male man to want to stay home and be the homemaker, goes against the normal upbringing that they would have normally received as a child." According to Tony, "normal" men, having been "trained from birth" to be breadwinners (even though he himself had only sporadically served in that capacity in his own family), would not willingly take on child care or housekeeping. Such strongly held and personal beliefs about men's and women's traditional gender roles are an impediment to at-home fatherhood.

Negative Impact on Marital Relationship

Social expectations about proper adult masculine behavior and the concomitant demands on husbands and fathers to be family providers are potent forces on men. Thus, it might be expected that men in marriages where the wife is the primary wage earner would experience marital strain. On the whole, most participants in this study seemed to have positive feelings about the quality of their marriage and did not experience notable strife in their relationship due to the reversal in their parenting roles. In fact, many spoke about having less stress at home and having more time to spend together as a family as a result of the stay-at-home-father household arrangement.

Still, a few fathers indicated that theirs were struggling marriages and that their at-home status was a contributing factor. For example, a handful of study participants sensed that their wives were angry over the fact that they were not working outside the home for pay. Terrance believed that his wife was “quite resentful that I lost my job, in spite of the fact that it was well beyond anything I could control” and in spite of the fact that he was trying to start his own business. He said this had become a “stumbling block in their relationship,” due in large part to the significant decline in their standard of living. Ralph, the stay-at-home father who provided daily care for his paralyzed son, also felt that his wife was dissatisfied with him. “Certainly, there have been instances where that little knife has been turned.... My wife would rather me be out there working. I think she thinks I should be.” Ralph, however, was not convinced that the time was right to re-enter the workforce,

although he acknowledged that the idea became “more feasible” as the intensity of his son’s needs subsided. For Ralph and his wife—in contrast to Terrance and his—it was not an issue of money but more an underlying attitude of “it’s time to get back to work.”

Some stay-at-home fathers talked about the strain that the role reversal put on their marriage. Artie, now speaking with many years of at-home parenting under his belt, recalled that, “There was a lot of tension around ‘I’m a stay-at-home parent, so why haven’t I done the shopping or why hasn’t this been done or why hasn’t that been done?’ [But] those are the skills that you have to learn as a stay-at-home parent.... The responsibilities aren’t set out.... So you have to renegotiate all of that, all of the expectations about who is going to do what and when and that kind of thing. I can’t say it’s been easy, because there’s no real roadmap. The adjustment period lasted a pretty long time.... I would say years.” While the role reversal was an obstacle at the beginning of Artie’s tenure as stay-at-home father, over time this was no longer the case. He emphasized that he and his wife were ultimately successful in transitioning to their new roles because of their strong commitment to the marriage, their genuine concern for one another, and their willingness to communicate. They were able to succeed because their relationship was strong.

Finally, Andy described the detrimental effect that the parental role reversal was having on his relationship with his wife. He said, “The more I think about it, the more I realize it’s just a nightmare.... It’s disastrous. It’s a nightmare. It’s a nightmare waiting to happen, and I don’t see how people don’t realize this before

they get into it.... A man staying at home with the child is a nightmare for the relationship. It destroys it. Maybe I am sounding a bit severe, because I want to get the point across. Effectively, it kills the relationship.” To him, being an at-home parent—taking on full responsibility for the children and surrendering the provider role—challenged something fundamental about his masculine self-perception. Andy blamed the parental “role reversal” for the “emasculatation” and “dependency” he was feeling in his marriage. Role strain—in this case, a conflict between responsibilities as a stay-at-home father and responsibilities as a husband—is undoubtedly a serious impediment to increasing the numbers of stay-at-home fathers.

Loss of Financial Power in the Home

A natural question to ask men who are stay-at-home fathers is whether or not their at-home status had an effect on their influence in family decisions, particularly in the realm of household finances and spending. A handful of fathers out of the 35 interviewed talked about experiencing a loss of financial power in their relationship as a result of their not earning a paycheck. Their stories were extremely compelling and were told with deep emotion.

Andy, the stay-at-home father who talked at some length about the struggles in his marriage, was father of two young children and husband to an academic in the early and hectic years of a tenure track position. In addition to blaming the at-home-dad/working-mom household structure for a decline in his marital satisfaction on a personal level, he also blamed it for a notable power shift on the financial level.

When I asked if he would be less likely to spend money because he is not the one earning it, he responded, “Absolutely, not because it’s not available, but because I feel like it puts me in a dependent position. I *am* dependent financially. But it makes it more obvious.” Our conversation went on to discuss who handled the family bills. He told me that his wife did, but she was “not very good at it,” and that, in fact, he had taken it over for a while. “Her claim was, ‘You are as bad at it as I am; I might as well do it myself.’” But, Andy told me, his wife never would have been able to make that claim if he was a breadwinner. Andy’s discomfort with his financial dependence on his wife, as well as the loss of power he felt as a result, had a profound effect on his sense of masculinity and purpose.

Noteworthy too was Roy. The loss of financial power he felt in his relationship as time went on was an exceptionally painful aspect of his decision to be home full-time with his pre-teen daughter. “When we first got here, in this apartment, it was fifty-fifty. Now, it’s more of a seventy-thirty, with her with the seventy and me on the thirty.” He went on: “Occasionally, I have to assert myself.... I have to remind her of the agreement, and tell her okay, just because we agreed I would take care of the house doesn’t mean I have to do everything in the house. And just because you are working and bringing in all the money doesn’t mean that you have to keep all the money in your pocket. And I don’t mean an allowance just for me. Because I don’t think that’s a grown-up way to do it, giving me an allowance.” In giving up his status as provider and taking on the dependent roles of primary parent and homemaker, Roy’s status seemed to have been relegated to that of a child. He indicated that he felt

as though his wife had put him on “an allowance,” a hint that she no longer considered him an equal partner. As Roy described it, their unconventional gender roles originally provided equal status and influence to both of them, but eventually these became unbalanced in a very traditional way, with the wage earner garnering most of the power at the expense of the at-home parent. For men, socialized to be family breadwinner and “king of the castle,” the possibility that their marriage could result in such a power imbalance serves as a constraint to becoming a stay-at-home father.

Dillon was another stay-at-home father who expressed concern about losing power and influence in family decision making. He described a situation where he had to remind his breadwinning wife that her earnings belonged to him, too. He recalled: “There have been times when we were both making money, if I wanted to buy something, she’d say, ‘It’s *our* money’ [so go ahead and buy it]. Every once in a while...when I started staying home, and...we had a lot of bills to pay, a lot of credit cards we were trying to pay off, and I wanted something, I’d buy it, and she’d say, ‘Oh, that’s part of *my* money’ ...and I’d look at her and say, ‘It’s *both* of our money, remember?’” For Dillon, he felt it was wrong for his wife to suggest that he did not deserve to spend the money that she was earning. He quickly jogged her memory that there was a time when their pot of money was considered community property and that, from his perspective, this continued to be the status quo. Like Roy, Dillon communicated his concern to his wife in an effort to rebalance the power shift.

Note, too, that the anecdotes shared by Andy, Roy, and Dillon suggest that their wives were also navigating the uncharted waters of gender role reversal that had taken place in their marriages, and these women may have been having some difficulty adjusting to the status of breadwinner. In the interviews, I asked a variety of questions to ascertain—admittedly, from only a husband’s perspective—the degree to which these stay-at-home fathers thought their wives were uncomfortable being married to men who were not providers in the traditional sense. One father shared an anecdote and acknowledged feeling ashamed when, during the occasional dinner in a restaurant, his wife hands him money to pay the bill. “She just hands it to me before [the check comes]... It is very humiliating. It really is. She’s, ‘I’ll let you pay, I’ll let you do the honors.’ Believe me, I’ve had to live with this humiliation, and it’s tough. It’s really tough. But she’s really good about it. It’s just that, gosh, it would be nice to make some money again.” This husband was not complaining about a disdainful wife or one who was embarrassed by his at-home status; on the contrary, this quote describes a thoughtful spouse trying to minimize her husband’s potential discomfort. It was his own feelings of insecurity that served as a threat to his masculinity.

It is important to reiterate, however, that most fathers who participated in this study did not report feeling a loss of power in the home or a decrease in marital satisfaction as a result of their at-home-father status. Most indicated that their marriage, particularly when it came to decisions about money, was an equal partnership. Virtually all had joint bank accounts and made shared decisions about major purchases, and few fathers seemed hesitant to spend money on themselves or to

feel that the money coming into the home was somehow not “his” because he was not the one earning it. Most stay-at-home fathers who participated in this research—with the exceptions already noted—indicated that any reluctance to spend money on themselves or any concerns about household finances were due to an overall awareness of family spending or to a lack of discretionary income, not to a loss of power in decision making because of the role reversal in their marriage. As Jack put it, “It wasn’t like, gee, my self-worth was diminished because I wasn’t hunting the deer.”

Boring Nature of the Work

One other barrier for men continuing full-time, at-home parenting is the common perception that the work of child care is tedious and boring. Although it was not a prominent complaint in the interviews, occasionally there were comments from stay-at-home fathers about the mundane aspects of taking care of children and doing housework. One father told me that “for the first couple of weeks it seems like a vacation, and then the monotony of it sort of sets in a little bit.” As much as he delighted that he was home full-time with his daughters, the words he used to describe parenting were not particularly enticing: tiresome, annoying, frustrating, patience-testing. Another suggested that he sometimes felt guilty about how little he had to do, saying that he was actually “a little bored” and did not “really have enough to do.” The often dull, repetitious, and time-consuming nature of its tasks is in all likelihood a serious deterrent to more men wanting to be full-time, at-home fathers.

Stay-at-home mothers, similarly, report feelings of boredom and exhaustion as a result of meeting the demands of children all day long (Hays 37). But women who stay home with the children, in contrast to men, are acting in accordance with the prevailing cultural values and expectations about appropriate gendered behavior.

Strategies for Addressing Social Constraints

When taken separately, each of these constraints and their accompanying stigma seem relatively small scale, but the accumulated weight necessitates some serious adjustments. Stay-at-home fathers relied on several strategies for overcoming the stigma and other social constraints that are associated with the stay-at-home-father lifestyle. These strategies call on mechanisms of both accommodating and resisting. All of the men who participated in this research had resisted social barriers to some extent by virtue of the fact that they had taken on the unconventional status of stay-at-home father, and, simultaneously, all of them also found ways to effectively accommodate their lifestyle to the reality of the social world around them. The three predominant strategies that stay-at-home fathers used to counter social constraints were accepting, inoculating, and discrediting.

Accepting

Implicit in the tactic of acceptance is an underlying belief on the part of the stay-at-home father—sometimes consciously, often not—that at-home fatherhood is a

status that one must begrudgingly come to terms with, because it is not a position that a normal man would willingly choose. In effect, it implies an acknowledgement of deviant behavior.

Accepting is the simplest and most straightforward strategy used by stay-at-home fathers to make sense of their at-home status. Stay-at-home fathers such as Walter and Jason, who were quoted at the beginning of this chapter, both of whom found themselves unwillingly at home with children, are likely to make use of this tactic. As Jason said, “I know my condition, and I know I can’t do it, so I come to face it.... I have to be that way. What can I do? I can’t fight it. What can I do? I can’t do nothing about this.”

It is important to note that just because a stay-at-home father relies on acceptance—a tactic that implies acknowledgement of deviance—does not mean he is sluggish or reluctant about his parenting role. Jason described how in the mornings he has to “get the house warm for them, heated up, to get them ready for school” and went on to say that his kids “are the most important to me.... That’s my whole life.... I live for my kids.” Similarly, Walter talked about doing homework with his son, coaching him, and making sure he takes his fluoride mouthwash in the morning since the tap water in his community is not fluorinated. He described being home with his young son as “the ultimate gift” and said that he “wouldn’t want it to be any other way.” Both Jason and Walter were well able to articulate specific routine behaviors they performed in their capacity as stay-at-home father. Both also articulated that they do these things willingly out of love for their children.

Inoculating

Inoculating is a more complicated strategy. Similar to acceptance, inoculation is utilized when there is an underlying belief that the status of stay-at-home father is something that a man must account for, an implicit acknowledgement of deviant behavior. When stay-at-home fathers used the strategy of inoculation, what they were doing was preparing for criticism by having an alternative explanation at the ready. They did not take on the rightness or wrongness of the claim of deviant behavior, but instead they provided a compelling reason to justify what they do or at least to imply that at-home father was not their master status.

Inoculating can take many forms. Bradley, one of only a few study participants who seemed highly uncomfortable with his primary parenting status, utilized this strategy when answering a question about whether his own father, who had been a traditional breadwinning father, would consider Bradley a success. His response was: “We’re in a house, we own a house. We’re doing basically the same things—in the end we have the same things that my father had. So I guess in that way he would see me successful. My wife is making more money than me, and she has the better benefits, so we have to save her job. That’s very important.” In pointing out that his wife earned more money and is the one whose job provides health benefits, Bradley was inoculating himself against any charges that he would prefer to be home rather than out working. This statement revealed Bradley’s awareness that what he

was doing is unacceptable behavior for a man; it also appealed for understanding of his extenuating circumstances.

Peter, an at-home father who was devoted to his two children and deeply connected to them, inoculated himself from criticism by focusing on his son's special needs. In explaining the circumstances that led him to be a stay-at-home father, Peter said, "I had some pressing concerns related mostly to my son's educational disabilities. He's been having reading problems that caused a sufficient crisis to make it highly desirable that I be home in the afternoons to work with him on homework, and be available to do a lot of taking him to evaluations, various kinds of tutors." Peter positioned himself, at the very beginning of his interview, as a father whose decision to stay home rested on special circumstances surrounding his son's learning needs. He also relayed to me that he had taken time out of the workforce to attend law school and to study for the state Bar exam during his at-home-father tenure. In other words, he was not "just" a stay-at-home father. He had other responsibilities as well. By initiating the interview this way and framing it accordingly, he was taking a proactive approach to protecting himself against potential negative judgment on my part.

Victor, father of a toddler and a newborn, appeared comfortable in his role as stay-at-home father. Nevertheless, he emphasized several times during our interview that he had been unhappy in his job, that the timing was perfect for him to resign, that he and his wife were committed to having one of them take care of their baby, and that he always planned to go back to work. He told me: "We had to face the time

when we both had to decide what we were going to do about her care. And we felt that she was too young to be somewhere else, or with somebody else's care. She was about six or seven months at the time. So we decided that I'll quit and stay home and then later we'll figure out what we do after that. But basically the plan was that I would try to go back to work, and it would be then my wife's turn to stay home." This stay-at-home father inoculated himself from potential disapproval by pointing out from the start that he never intended to be home full-time, that it was a stop-gap measure in between jobs. From his perspective, the actual timing and circumstances of his staying home were dictated more by his and his wife's work situation than by any deviance on his own part.

Discrediting

Unlike accepting and inoculating, which are characterized by tacit acknowledgement of deviant behavior, the strategy of discrediting information is distinguished by an underlying sense of righteousness and a rejection of the deviant label. It is sometimes conscious and sometimes not, but by utilizing this strategy of resistance, stay-at-home fathers, in effect, defend their lifestyle by emphasizing the wrongness of viewing it as abnormal and discrediting the information that contributes to the stigma.

For example, if a friend or neighbor or even a stranger suggests disapproval or negative curiosity about his situation, a stay-at-home father might respond with pride about his status, which would show categorical rejection of negative judgment. In an

effort to validate his choice, he may also allude to the great quantity of quality time he spends with his children, the positive outcomes they are reaping, or the stronger bonds he shares with his offspring compared with so many of his peers. Stay-at-home fathers with longer tenures are more likely to use the discrediting strategy.

Patrick's case is an illustrative example of owning his own identity. After several years as an at-home father, Patrick eventually became comfortable even in the face of what he saw as demeaning or ignorant comments, such as being called "Mr. Mom" or "babysitter" or "househusband." He told me that while those kinds of labels did arise, they "don't even faze" him any more. "That's what I am," he said. "And I'm real proud of it.... In the beginning.... I was like 'Oh my, what did I do? I should be out there being the breadwinner.' And then I realized that I am doing more at home than most guys do at their jobs." Note the last sentence—Patrick's mind-set is one of certainty that he is doing the right thing by his child and for his family, so he is confident and comfortable in his status and roles. Although by his own acknowledgement he did not always possess this state of mind, he eventually was able to express pride in what he does. Similarly, Carmine described his response to what he perceived to be derogatory labels as "water off a duck." After several years of at-home fathering, he learned to respond by "goofing on" the people who made obnoxious comments or letting them know "I'm here all over it every day." Like Patrick, Carmine's comfort level developed over time until the point that potential negative judgments from other people no longer registered with him.

The strategy of discrediting is characterized by a willingness to ignore negative perceptions and to deflect social approbation. Not caring what other people think served them well and made it easier for them to frame what they do in their own terms, in this case in terms of “What is best for my family?” as opposed to “What is my neighbor going to think?” Many of the stay-at-home fathers in this study expressed an “I don’t care what they think” attitude regarding the possible negative impressions they may have been leaving with others. Salvatore, at-home father of two, described himself this way: “There are times where I think people have that perception [that I am taking the easy way out, living off my wife]. In the beginning it bothered me, now I could care less. I am in my mid 40s now, I don’t really—that’s their problem, not mine.” Anthony, a stay-at-home father of two young daughters, had a similar sense of self. As he described it: “If my soccer buddies are talking behind my back like ‘what a good gig he has,’ nobody says it to my face. And I’m arrogant and ignorant enough that I don’t really care what they think.” And Ken, an at-home father of five children, one still in diapers, told me bluntly that he is “not someone who really cared much about what people thought.”

In the same vein, other stay-at-home fathers actively viewed themselves as nonconformists, a finding corroborated by Levine in his study of primary parenting. Levine found that “Men who choose to stay home as homemaker-fathers tend to be independent thinkers, willing to buck the norms of our society” (*Who Will Raise* 126). In the current study, Terrance exemplified this way of thinking when he said, “I think there’s a certain percentage of people that would be overly concerned what other

people think about [a man who is a stay-at-home father]. I've always been a maverick in that regard, in that I've always beat a different path anyhow. I knew I didn't have everyone's support, and I never really worried about that too much."

CHAPTER 5

DOING GENDER, RECONCEPTUALIZING GENDER, AND DEGENDERING

Three Approaches to Legitimization

This chapter explores three approaches that men use to construct at-home parenting as a legitimate occupational choice. One approach is characterized by the way men “do gender,” that is, the behaviors men exhibit that reinforce social norms about acceptable and appropriate masculine behavior (West and Zimmerman). Another method is reconceptualizing gender, which is when men revise their thinking about appropriate masculine behavior to incorporate “maternal thinking” in order to maintain their sense of masculinity while doing so-called women’s work (Coltrane, “Household Labor” 489). The third approach, degendering, is when at-home fathers de-link their behavior from gender altogether, in effect removing gender from the equation and constructing a new framework for making sense of their lifestyle choice (Lorber, *Breaking the Bowls*). The data suggest that men who utilize the degendering strategy are the most comfortable with the legitimacy of at-home parenting as an occupational choice. The transformative nature of the degendering process results in benefits to stay-at-home fathers, such as enhanced self-esteem, a high level of personal contentment, and intimate relationships with children. Table 5 lists the three approaches to legitimization and the characteristics associated with each.

Table 5

Approaches to Legitimizing Stay-at-Home Father as Occupational Choice

Doing Gender

- Managing behavior so others will perceive actions as appropriate gender behavior
- Making efforts to minimize the tension between social expectations and the reality of nontraditional gender behavior
- Emphasizing responsibilities and interests other than child care and parenting, e.g., home improvement or creative writing; physical labor such as yard work
- Examples of “doing gender” include: emphasizing stereotypically masculine conduct (e.g., telling off-color jokes, playing sports, or going out for beers with the guys); refusing to do “feminine” chores or claiming not to be good at them.

Reconceptualizing Gender

- Doing the routine work of “mothering” so that “maternal” thinking develops; changing the meaning of the tasks so that they are redefined as masculine
- Integrating stereotypically female activities associated with home and child care into masculine self-identity
- Examples of reconceptualizing gender include: pointing out value added when family has stay-at-home father; considering professions in stereotypically feminine fields such as teaching; showing more concern with family needs than with work.

Table 5: Approaches to Legitimizing Stay-at-Home Father as Occupational Choice

continued

Degendering

- Making an activity gender neutral by eliminating reference to gender or sex
- De-linking a particular role, status, or activity from the ideology that one sex is more appropriate for it compared with another
- Producing new understanding of a routine activity such that when people come across it, it is no longer perceived as distinctly masculine or feminine
- Taking ownership of the parenting role only as a result of the absence of gender from it; defining the job of at-home parent as simply one of many occupational choices for either parent to choose
- Components of degendering include: occupationalizing, investing, planning, and rewarding.

Doing Gender

When men do gender appropriately, they are in effect managing their public behavior such that others will perceive their actions as fitting the socially expected norms of masculinity. For stay-at-home fathers, the goal would be to deflect any stigma—subtle or overt—by behaving in socially acceptable masculine ways so as

not to call attention to their unconventional status and roles. In this way, they maintain a positive standing in the eyes of others (for example, family members, teachers, neighbors, in-laws, other parents, and friends). The concept relies heavily on Goffman's interactionist approach to social phenomena and his view that every social interaction is an opportunity for individuals to construct and refine their identity (*Presentation*). In the case of stay-at-home fathers, this would include working to minimize the tension between social expectations and the reality of their own nontraditional gender behavior.

Many of the stay-at-home fathers who participated in this research described instances of doing gender in their everyday lives. For example, one father told me he "could tell off-color jokes just as good as anyone, and get a kick out of them," too. Another said, "I'm actually very male oriented with baseball and things like that, and so I can sort of relate with my son a lot more. We play baseball together or soccer or any physical game." Some distanced themselves from what they perceived to be the feminine nature of at-home work, for example, by refusing to do certain chores or claiming not to be good at them. One father, for instance, said he sometimes wakes up his wife in the morning to ask her to "pick something out" for the kids to wear, because "she's better at picking out the outfits...I'm not too good at that." Another does laundry for himself and his two boys but not for his wife, because he says he is "not really good at some of her gentle cycle stuff." These men, in emphasizing stereotypically masculine behaviors such as telling dirty jokes or playing sports are effectively saying: Hey, I might be doing women's work, but I'm still a normal guy.

Notice that the father quoted above did not conceal the fact that he does the laundry; instead he left the impression that he just throws it in and pulls it out but does not carefully tend to the details (the way a woman would).

Further, several research participants disassociated from their at-home status by talking about the things they do during the day other than taking care of the children. Home improvement and creative writing were the two most common alternative explanations for their at-home status. Dillon, a father of three, described his situation as follows: “I wasn’t your typical stay-at-home father, either. Some of the houses that we lived in, I was rebuilding them at the same time, and taking care of the kids. Diaper changes....cooking, doing their homework, helping them out, *and* fixing up the house.” Dillon emphasized that although he was tending to the children, he was also responsible for the real work that needed to be done in his home, work that required a man’s skill, such as rebuilding the house.

Carl described a recent occurrence that emphasized the masculine nature of his staying home. “We have a tree that’s been partly cut down out here in our yard,” he said. “My chore now is to get the cut-down part to the tree down. There’s no way [my wife] can do that. Number one, she physically cannot do that. Number two is I’m not sure she’d want to do it...whereas I just put the trailer on the back of the truck.... So it’s very advantageous to me to do that. A lot of these projects, if I worked eight hours a day, and then I came home at night and had to move the tree out there, I’d probably be a real grump.”

Both Carl and Dillon stressed the literal heavy lifting they do around the house—things that they believed would simply not get done if a man was not at home during the day to do them. Dillon acknowledged the quintessentially female responsibilities of child care that he took on—diapers, dinner, doing homework, for instance—but he made sure to let me know that there was a lot of masculinity going on in his home as well. For Carl, his use of the description of the removal of the tree from his backyard had the intent of emphasizing that in his family, despite the role reversal, the man was still the man, the woman still the woman.

Some stay-at-home fathers informed me that they were writing novels or taking on some other major writing project, for example, finishing up a dissertation or crafting magazine articles. For Reggie, it was a matter of pride and validation that he finish the book he had started writing. “I’m also in the process of trying to write a novel,” Reggie told me. “I feel that I need to prove it to myself and to my wife and to my family, our extended family, that I could actually do this and get it published. That would be my goal to do that before the kids get into school full-time.... I’d feel like it would kind of validate my [continuing] staying home.” Reggie acknowledged that completing his novel would “validate” his being at home as a primary parent. In sharing that his “goal” was to write and publish a novel, he was making known his masculine attributes of ambition and talent.

When stay-at-home fathers highlight the other things that they do, they are attempting to define themselves as masculine men by showing that they are not merely doing what women do, that is, “just” taking care of the children. Rather, they

are providing for their families, albeit in unconventional ways. In effect, this is what they do to pass. According to Goffman, “because of the great rewards in being considered normal, almost all persons who are in a position to pass will do so on some occasion by intent” (*Stigma* 74). For stay-at-home fathers who utilize the strategy of doing gender to legitimize their at-home status, it is imperative that they give the appearance of being family providers in order to minimize their stigmatized status; hence, writing a novel or rebuilding the house. This is reflective of the relational aspects of stigma.

Reconceptualizing Gender

Another approach stay-at-home fathers use to legitimize their staying home full-time with the children is reconceptualizing gender. Here the idea is that the routine work of “mothering”—the changing of diapers, the helping with homework, the cooking of meals, the putting to bed—develops “maternal thinking” in men which they incorporate into their own self-concept of manly or masculine. The concept relies considerably on Coltrane’s study of co-parenting fathers where he found that the fathers’ lives were transformed by their interactions with their children, resulting in their ability to construct images of fathers as sensitive and nurturing caregivers (*Family Man* 83). According to Coltrane’s findings, “the simple fact of routine performance of housework and child care by men” changes society’s meaning of what it means to be a man (234).

The data show several examples of stay-at-home fathers who, after taking on their new family responsibilities, seemed to seamlessly integrate the stereotypically female activities associated with home and child care into their self-identity. Here's Mitch describing his day: "The day was full. I had errands to do, I had post office, I had the doctors, I had to go up to my son's school, my daughter's school, to go sign them up for basketball camp and stuff. So I know that your day doesn't go as smoothly as planned. And I am at the point where I can do it all, almost efficiently, 100 percent, where I feel comfortable at the end of the day when they come home and everything's done and ready for them. It sounds kind of gay—I don't mean that in the sexual sense—but it seems that that's what I want to do during the day. I like doing that stuff." Mitch had been laid off from work only several months before this interview took place, so he was a relatively new stay-at-home father. Still, the way he described his day—"full" with "errands to do" and things to take care of for the children—along with the sense of accomplishment he got from it—"I am at the point where I can do it all, almost efficiently, 100 percent"—shows a man unencumbered by gender role conflict. By saying "It sounds kind of gay," Mitch was acknowledging his awareness of what others might consider inappropriate gender behavior (and perhaps contributing to another gender stereotype about men who mother—that their sexuality is in question). Nevertheless, he indicates that he enjoys doing these things, thus showing it has become a part of who he is.

For some men, it took more time to integrate the female-identified aspects of their new role into their self-concept. For Ralph, it developed over time. He said, "I

do all those things that stereotypically a woman would do. I do. I do the wash. I clean this house. I do the shopping. I do the carpools for the kids at school. I do all those things. Once upon a time I did them maybe begrudgingly. Now, I almost hate to say it, I enjoy doing them. It is a contribution, all right, it's a contribution to the overall health of the family, if that's the way to say it. Those things need to be done. She's off working all day long, damn sure it's not her job to have to come home and have to do all those things." Ralph, who had been an at-home father for 11 years at the time of the interview, acknowledged that he might have done it "begrudgingly" at first but that he overcame his negative feelings about the untraditional nature of the work. Still, the fact that he "almost hates to say" that he enjoyed doing this indicated a continued awareness of the stigma associated with a man taking on the homemaker role. The evidence that he has reconceptualized gender as a way to legitimize what he does is most apparent where he points out the value of his responsibilities to his family and, speaking of his wife, that it was "damn sure" not her responsibility to do those things at home after a hard day's work.

Men who reconceptualized gender also started to imagine futures in professions that are stereotypically feminine; teaching is an example. Dennis, who had no intentions of returning to the corporate world, said: "If I decided to work I wouldn't mind being a teacher where my hours would be wrapped around theirs, or work for somebody who would understand the importance of being home for my boys." Similarly, Brian's son at the time of the interview was 16 years old, but back when he was in elementary school, Brian found volunteering there "terrifically

rewarding” and eventually established a new career as a special education educator. Prior to being an at-home father, Brian had been a high-end car salesman.

All four of the fathers quoted above—Mitch, Ralph, Dennis, and Brian—experienced a change in self-concept characterized by more concern with the traditionally feminine domain of family and less with the stereotypically masculine domain of work, and all attributed this change to their experience as at-home fathers. None provided any sense of being uncomfortable or feeling less manly with their new selves, indicating that they had incorporated these feminine characteristics to positive effect. The shift in social expectations about father’s role from breadwinner to involved father, along with an increase in the number of two-parent-working families, also makes it possible for men to reconceptualize gender. The thinking goes: As more men take on domestic chores, beliefs about what is “expected, reasonable, and fair for men to contribute to the maintenance of their home” adjust accordingly (Bianchi et al. 219).

Degendering

Degendering is the third way men construct at-home parenting as a legitimate occupation. In essence, degendering is the process of making an activity gender neutral by eliminating reference to gender or sex. In *Breaking the Bowls*, Lorber writes about the degendering process as one that purposefully blurs gender boundaries (8). The result is that a particular role, status, or activity is de-linked from the ideology that one sex is more appropriate for it compared with another.

A real-world example of a common activity that has been degendered is cigarette smoking. Years ago, smoking would have been generally perceived as a conspicuously masculine behavior, and it would have been scandalous to come across a woman puffing a cigarette in public. Today, smoking is a gender neutral behavior—it is no more notable to see a woman smoking than to see a man. True, the consequences of smoking and the targeting of cigarette advertisements may have gender implications, but the act of smoking no longer does. What degendering did was produce a new understanding of this activity such that when people come across it, it is no longer perceived as distinctly masculine or feminine.

In the case of stay-at-home fathers and degendering, it is the absence of gender from the parenting role that allows stay-at-home fathers to take ownership of it. Unlike doing gender and reconceptualizing gender, both of which are characterized by responses to stigma, men who degender parenting do not deplete their mental energy by perpetuating traditional masculinity or proving to others that they are genuinely masculine articles. In effect, when men construct at-home parenting in this way, they release themselves from the stigma associated with transgressing traditional gender boundaries. By placing themselves outside the box, the boundaries do not apply. Because they are no longer compelled to fit into a prepackaged structure, they have the freedom to create a new one. Moreover, once the status and roles associated with at-home fathering are de-linked from expectations of normative gender behavior, legitimizing it becomes easier.

The stay-at-home fathers who degendered their at-home status, for the most part, were the ones who did not think of what they were doing as feminine or unmasculine. In fact, their words suggest that they did not seem to be considering gender at all when they spoke about their lives as stay-at-home fathers; they were simply doing what any good parent would do—putting children’s needs first. Some stay-at-home fathers conveyed surprise that the gender of an at-home parent would be a matter of concern at all in today’s society, which they viewed as more enlightened in terms of gender roles. Rudy’s comments were relatively typical. He said, “I guess I’m kind of surprised that people now blink an eye.... Where somebody doesn’t have the means to only have a one[-parent] working household.... I would question it. How do they survive?... [but] I would never question it in terms of the man or the woman.”

For those who utilized the degendering approach to legitimize their behavior, the job of an at-home parent simply became one of many occupational choices for either parent to choose. Rudy said that when he sees a family where one parent is at home he wonders about it in terms of finances but that he would not bat an eye whether it is the mother or the father who stays home. What this type of mind-set shows is that the degendering approach to legitimizing stay-at-home fatherhood is strongly associated with—possibly even a direct result of—the social, cultural, and economic changes that have taken place in American society regarding the roles of women and mothers. Without the corresponding changes in behavior, experiences, and attitudes concerning women, the concept of degendering would not be possible.

Essentially, stay-at-home fathers degender their at-home status by turning what they do into an occupation. One stay-at-home father used the occupation metaphor to explain at-home fathering: “It’s just a learning process. Just like you start a job. How do you learn how to be good at the profession that you are? You continue to do it, you continue to learn the vocation, and you become more equipped at dealing with everyday situations. It’s no different than somebody having a 9-to-5 job that they go to an office and deal with problems. We have the same type of dynamic in a home environment. It’s just that you are not being paid thousands of dollars.”

Today, the fact of having a job or a career is a nongendered activity. Most people work for pay for at least some part of their adult lives. The type of job a person does may be gendered, and the reason a person works may be as well, but the act of working is not. Hard work, achievement, and pursuit of a job well done are regarded as virtues and signs of excellence in the modern American workplace (Henslin 46). Stay-at-home fathers who utilize degendering as a way to legitimize their behavior consider their own at-home parenting in this light—they see it as a job, as a responsibility to the well being of their family, and as something to take seriously.

In the next sections I discuss three routine occupation-related activities that stay-at-home fathers do in their “job” as stay-at-home parent—investing, planning, and rewarding. These are all components of the degendering approach to stay-at-home parenting. I describe the nongendered nature of these behaviors as they are currently perceived in society and show how stay-at-home fathers apply them in

meaningful, nongendered ways to their at-home-father experience. The result is the degendering of at-home fatherhood and ultimately the construction of it as a legitimate occupational choice for adults who are parents—fathers and mothers alike.

Investing

Human beings invest in all kinds of things. For example, we invest in relationships, in education, in real estate, in the stock market, and also in our jobs. Certainly, there was a time when investing in any one of these things would have been distinctly in man's bailiwick, but that is no longer the case. Today, in America, the act of investing in and of itself is not linked to sex or gender. Employees invest in a company's products, services, or reputation; parents who stay home—mothers and fathers—invest in the family unit.

One of the ways stay-at-home fathers invest in their families is to conceive of the family as a team where each person does his or her part for the good of the whole. For example, in summing up his attitude about being an at-home father, Carmine described it as “try[ing] to think of us as a team, as Team [Surname].” Artie, too, alluded to the team metaphor: “My wife works really hard. Why shouldn't I work hard also to support the family? I've got to be doing my part. If she's going to be spending hours and really spend a lot of her psychic energy supporting the family, then I should be doing my part too.” In both instances we see investing in the at-home status as a component of family teamwork. The mind-set is: We are in this together to

get the job done, and just like on a job, each individual is responsible for handling his or her load.

Investing was increasingly evident in the way stay-at-home fathers talked about taking responsibility for tending to their children—for the “rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty” kind of parenting that they described. It was this aspect more than any other that illustrated the degendering process, showing how it is not a case of men simply doing women’s work, but rather men doing what any primary parent would do. Neither their sex nor their gender stood in the way. For instance, Walter learned by doing when his son was an infant. He described some of his early learning experiences with his baby: “It’s called trial and error. I got wet a couple of times. I got poopy on me a couple of times. I guess I couldn’t make the diaper, the Pampers, tight, because the legs were so skinny.... That was a lot of fun and it was hard too.... Because my wife was still working, but then she—after post natal she was tired. I was the one who had to get up in the middle of the night and so forth.” Walter learned by investing in his infant son’s care. As a result, he became proficient at the tasks associated with at-home parenting and, perhaps to his surprise, found that he enjoyed them, too.

Several of the fathers in this study had been married previously and had children from their first marriages. One of these fathers described how he had invested in breadwinning with his original family but had invested in parenting with his second. He said that, at one time, being a good father meant: “To be able to furnish their needs, financial needs and stuff, a home and clothes and all that sort of

thing. Doing the things that fathers do. But now, since I've had these children, why, there's much more to it. I probably didn't pay as much attention to the first family as I did to this family. Although I loved them as much and I still do and everything. But I was working, and a lot of times I wasn't there when I would have liked to have been. Where, with these ones, why, every little cold or anything that's ever been wrong with them physically, or mentally, I've been here to take care of that problem. So I feel like I'm probably a little bit closer to these children." For Gerald, there was no self-consciousness about the role he was playing with his second set of children; he saw it simply as normal parental behavior for the parent who is at home. He invested in his second set of children to such a degree that "every little cold or anything that's ever been wrong with them" he was a part of fixing. With them, he was on top of his game and paid attention to detail; he invested his time and energy with the intention to provide them with fuller lives.

To summarize, investing is a routine, nongendered activity that takes place in most paid occupations and is one of the activities that stay-at-home fathers do as part of the process of degendering and occupationalizing at-home fathering. Among the stay-at-home fathers in this study, investing was illustrated in the ways they conceived of the family as part of a team, and also the ways they took responsibility for hands-on parenting and ownership over the responsibilities that are associated with child care.

Planning

Planning, for the purposes of this research, is much more than simply the act of scheduling one's day. Rather, it encompasses the behavior of a stay-at-home father who takes time to think about how his behavior affects others, puts the welfare of others before his own, and conducts his parenting duties with a sense of meaning and purpose. In effect, it is the type of behavior exhibited by any person who has a thoughtful approach to what they do and who takes their responsibilities to others seriously. While putting the needs of others first may in some circles be considered feminine behavior, in fact there are a myriad of instances in society where this type of "planning" behavior is expected from both males and females. For example, marriage is one arena where planning—putting the other first, thinking about how one's personal behavior will have an impact on another person—takes place. Spouses—wives and husbands—are expected to demonstrate this type of thoughtful and conscious conduct towards one another in order to reach the goal of having a good marriage. There may be stereotypes about which party is more proficient at doing it, but both sexes are expected to do so in a modern marriage. Another example is a manager in a company, who must always consider the impact of his or her actions on employees in order to maintain a productive working environment. Being concerned about how one's words or actions will affect subordinates is neither a masculine nor feminine characteristic but rather one of good management.

For stay-at-home fathers, planning manifested in several ways, characterized by the meaning they placed in their status and roles vis a vis their children. One

manifestation was the degree to which stay-at-home fathers worried about children's safety. Several spoke about not letting their children out of sight or being constantly aware of the potential dangers that may befall them. Salvatore found himself thinking about his sons' welfare and the possibility of some catastrophe happening and his not being readily available to handle it because he had taken time to do something for himself. "Being out on the golf course two weeks ago...(and) thinking one of my kids is sick and I'm not going to be home, and I'm going to get a phone call," he explained. "Or that this is going to be the one time when he runs into the wall and breaks his nose, and who are they going to call now? That type of thing does concern me. It might sound corny, but when you are a father and you have been at home for six years, it's kind of, you don't take that stuff for granted. It just becomes part of you."

Salvatore's heightened sense of responsibility towards his children went so far as to let his imagination run away with him, causing him to worry about potential mishaps even when he knew they were unlikely to happen. An innocent few hours of golf during the day, for this stay-at-home father, fueled notable anxiety. This hypersensitivity to children's safety and well-being was documented in the book *From Deadlines to Diapers: Journal of an At-Home Father*. The author described the anxiety he felt upon driving his newborn daughter home from the hospital: "I had never been so nervous behind the wheel.... I had a family depending on me to keep them safe.... I was a brake pedal away from panic. Every other car was a threat" (47).

Many fathers talked about sacrificing their own needs for the benefit of their children. Rick recalled how difficult it had been to get up in the middle of the night to feed his infant children, but he also reminisced about it fondly: “I loved it when they were babies. When I had my first two kids, and they were little babies, my wife wouldn’t get up in the middle of the night, it was like she couldn’t hear them crying, which I think most times was an act. And I hated to get up because I knew I had to be at work at 7:00 in the morning, but it was like some of the best times, getting up at 2:00 in the morning, making them a bottle and just sitting there in the chair, holding them, feeding them, and rocking them. Invariably, while I was there holding them, burping them, they’d fall asleep, and I’d fall asleep holding them. And that was just kind of like a major bonding time for me.” For Rick, getting up during the night, knowing that in just a few hours the alarm would go off to wake him for work, was “some of the best times” for him. An example of only a small sacrifice—lost sleep in exchange for important bonding experience—still, it serves as an illustration of planning behavior.

Another example of planning among stay-at-home fathers was the level of detail they shared about the day-to-day lives of their children and the degree to which they structured their time around their children’s needs. They described—sometimes down to the minute or the hour—the arrangement of a typical day, the name of a favorite TV show, the days of the week a child has particular activities, and the like. Here is Scott, father of a six-year-old daughter (as well as a teen-age son), describing his daughter’s typical after-school routine: “We just talk about the day, sign papers,

see what you did today and stuff. And then we can call a friend, or there's a little friend next door she plays with, so we play with her. So that's how it kind of starts out. And then she could watch an hour of TV a day. And so...she gets out at like 3:00, at 4:30 her favorite show is *Arthur*...so she watches *Arthur* at 4:30. *Clifford* is on after *Arthur*.... That's kind of her routine.... Then supper's ready right after *Clifford*." Scott planned child-paced afternoons for his young daughter. It is evident that he put thought and planning into it by his allusions to the routine, e.g., first we do this, then she does that, etc.

Another father, when asked to describe a typical school day in his family of a wife and two boys, began with the sound of the alarm clock: "Okay, 6:30 in the morning the alarm goes off. My wife has the alarm. I get up. Wake the kids up. Get their clothes out. My wife gets up. She has to take a shower, she has an 8:00 class. I get the kids lunch. I get their breakfast; I get their lunch if they need one for school. Get them ready to go out the door, kiss mom and dad, out the door.... So my wife leaves at 7:30, the kids are out waiting for the bus at 20 after 7.... Then laundry needs to be done two to three times a week so I will do our laundry.... Check my e-mail. Check my voicemail. Start doing work. I have [x] to do today.... Pick the kids up, actually they get dropped off, normally at about quarter to 4, get their homework done. Today the younger one has karate at 5:15. I'm going to have to make them dinner, take them [to karate]. Their mother is working until after 5. She will pick him up, go grocery shopping. Be home for 7:30." The level of detail that this stay-at-home

father related was extraordinary and illustrates the point that this is a man committed to his role.

The act of bringing home a paycheck may be the preeminent culturally accepted way for men to provide for their wives and children. But what lies beneath a paycheck simply may be a human desire to take care of loved ones. At-home fathering does fulfill that need to protect, to take care of, to provide for, and it is not gendered. When men plan their stay-at-home fathering in the ways described above, they continue to acquire the positive feeling that conventionally is attributed to being the financial provider but may in fact apply to a much broader definition of providing.

In summary, the planning behavior exhibited by stay-at-home fathers is characterized by consideration of how one's actions affect others, putting the welfare of others above one's own, and conducting one's duties with a sense of purpose. Examples of this include worrying about children, waking up in the night to feed them even when tired, and structuring one's day around children's schedules and needs.

Rewarding

The third aspect of occupationalizing at-home fatherhood through the degendering approach is seen in the way stay-at-home fathers create their own system of rewards. In a conventional job, a paycheck is the ultimate remuneration. In years past, this would certainly have had a gendered aspect to it—men, predominantly, worked outside the home and were rewarded with wages, whereas women, mostly,

worked inside the home and were rewarded in less concrete terms, possibly by a sense of accomplishment or the good feeling that comes with taking care of loved ones. Today, however, there is nothing inherently masculine or feminine about the act of being rewarded with money for doing work; in fact, it is expected. True, rewards may differ considerably based on sex and gender, but the expectation of being rewarded monetarily for your work is no longer the domain of men.

At the workplace, the reward system is formally set up—a given job comes with its own potential for remuneration in the form of promotions, raises, number of coffee breaks per shift, etc. But at home, one must create one's own system. Stay-at-home fathers, generally speaking, have created two types of rewards for themselves, extrinsic and intrinsic.

The extrinsic rewards are the positive outcomes that stay-at-home fathers believe their children get as a result of having an at-home father. Ken shared a particularly moving anecdote about the sense of accomplishment he felt as a result of the compliments his children receive from others. "I was in the gym about a month ago," he told me. "I was in the locker room—and this guy came up to me.... He doesn't have kids. And he lives close by in our neighborhood. And he said, 'Ken, your girls.... They were over at our neighbor's house and they came over to see our cats.... I just had to tell you that they were so wonderful. How gentle they were with the animals.' And how courteous and all that kind of stuff. And when somebody tells me that, that's my company car. That's my sales trip to Bermuda. That's all there is, basically." Ken's reward for doing his parenting job well was to hear from other

adults that his children are likeable and well behaved, that they are good human beings. This is a positive outcome for his children that he credits to his staying home.

Gerald, too, evinced pride when he spoke about his 15-year-old son and how highly regarded he is by his teachers. Gerald said: “He’s in high school, and he’s doing very well. He makes straight A’s. He’s in the ROTC and that sort of thing. Everybody respects him and likes him and thinks he’s a real good kid. The teachers never have anything but good things to say about him.” For Peter, the reward comes in the form of seeing his daughter develop into a clear thinker and an interesting and inquisitive person: “Certainly in my relationship with my daughter, from an early age in reading with her and talking with her, I was always telling her about history and politics. And now every morning we fight over who gets what section of *The New York Times*, and we go to movies together and have big political discussions about things.” The fact that his daughter’s intellectual life is prospering, for Peter, is the extrinsic reward he gets for being a stay-at-home father.

The intrinsic rewards that stay-at-home fathers get come in the form of the overall good feelings and joy they get out of spending time with their children and taking care of their families. One stay-at-home father reflected on how good it makes him feel when his son turns to him for comfort: “When he wakes up in the middle of the night and he calls for someone, he called for dad. I don’t know if most kids do that—I think the primary caregiver is probably the one, that when the child is in duress, that’s who the child is looking for. I found that to be terrifically rewarding. Not that I was trying to keep my wife from having that experience, but I found that to

be terrifically enriching that when he was sick, Dad, hold me, Dad, cuddle me. That's probably most of it right there." The idea of being needed by his child, and knowing that he could comfort his child, was an intrinsic reward.

The delight these stay-at-home fathers take just being with their children is another intrinsic reward. Comments like this one from Rudy showed the degree to which some stay-at-home fathers truly loved spending time with their children: "Frankly, I had never, prior to being laid off, had the opportunity to even bring them to school, nonetheless go in and meet their teachers and be seen in the school. And last spring I had the opportunity to do that, which was great, I really loved that, every single day, it was amazing. I felt it more fulfilling than going to work at the time." Another stay-at-home father whose stay-at-home status was a result of being laid off told me, "You have no idea how gratifying it is" to be able to spend this time with his girls; at the time of the interview, he was working on starting his own business rather than returning to the outside workforce. The joy and pleasure these fathers got from being part of their children's lives were more rewarding to them, at this stage in their lives, than going to work for money.

This positive feeling is the intrinsic reward that motivates a stay-at-home father to continue doing what he is doing, much like the positive feeling one gets from cashing a paycheck. Peter provides another example: "When I'm reading with my son, I used to do it when I was reading to my daughter too, for me it would be just this wonderful, wonderful time to be just really intimate with the child, and we'd both be absorbed in the book and usually a nice snuggly environment in bed. It would feel

like, to me, it would be sharing the same time and space with my child and to be with them so close and intimately there.” Both Rudy and Peter found great pleasure in doing routine, everyday things like dropping off and picking up from school or reading stories before bedtime. These became meaningful experiences that provided them great personal fulfillment—their “paycheck” for doing their job.

In summary, stay-at-home fathers create their own system of reward for the job of stay-at-home father. Rewards come in two forms—extrinsic and intrinsic. An example of extrinsic rewards is acknowledgement from others that their children are likeable, well-adjusted, and interesting human beings. Intrinsic rewards are characterized by the pleasure stay-at-home fathers get from spending time with their children, even while conducting everyday activities.

Transformative Nature of the Degendering Process

In the first two approaches to legitimizing stay-at-home fatherhood, doing gender and reconceptualizing gender, the individual was reacting to a social situation, that is, to society’s views about appropriate and inappropriate gendered behavior. In both of these, stay-at-home fathers spend more of their psychic energy on presenting themselves as masculine men than on being present in their lives. They are limited by gender constraints and as a consequence miss out on the benefits of a full range of relationships and feelings. Agency, as a result, is confined to a response that perpetuates society’s gender norms. Degendering, in contrast, provides each individual man with the opportunity to shape his own reality. When stay-at-home

fathers degender parenting, they construct a new framework for making sense of what they do that is free from traditional gender boundaries. Thus, degendering is a more effective approach for legitimizing at-home parenting than the alternatives, because it is not simply about manipulating people's perceptions (doing gender appropriately) or redefining the masculine role to include something different (integrating "mothering" tasks into one's masculine self-concept). Rather, it is a transformative process that eliminates gender from the equation and leads to the construction of a new reality where at-home fathering is perceived as appropriate *parental* behavior (for men) as opposed to inappropriate *maternal* behavior (for men).

When stay-at-home fathers utilize the degendering approach to legitimize their at-home status, they are asserting agency in a profound way. Degendering provides an example of agenic behavior in that it allows men to construct their own world that includes many of the most important and profound aspects of the human condition: work, sacrifice, self-expression, reward, and love, all by their own volition and not in reaction to social stigma or social conventions that may in fact limit their true selves. The ultimate pay-off for these stay-at-home fathers is access to things that had always been available to them but that required degendering to achieve—the overwhelmingly positive experience that comes with having close, intimate, mutually-satisfying relationships with offspring and also the positive self-esteem and general well-being and contentment that are by-products of creating a successful lifestyle for one's self and family.

These stay-at-home fathers described the enjoyment and pleasure they get from their children—a critical factor in the transformative process of degendering. Asked to describe the best part of being a stay-at-home father, the most common response, overwhelmingly, was along the lines of being there for the children, developing strong ties with them, enjoying their company. Walter, the stay-at-home father who was reluctant at first but who eventually felt a great sense of accomplishment, said the best part of being home for him “is the relationship I have with my son. It’s so many things.... It amazes me to sit across the table from my son now, and I look into his face, and I still can remember the day when I held him in my arms and I said to him, ‘I can’t wait until we can communicate.’ I still remember that day.” Similarly, Lou, who was the primary parent at various times during his daughter’s young life and who spent a considerable amount of time chauffeuring her around to various sporting events, said: “I guess the point is that she’s a bright enough kid that you can always [enjoy her company] and talk to her like an adult. The 20 questions that she used to ask in the car...were always interesting questions. So she’s always good to be around from that standpoint.” These are just two examples of fathers who looked at their children in amazement, sought out their company, found their children to be interesting creatures, and chose to spend time with them.

Perhaps the most convincing evidence of transformed thinking was the number of stay-at-home fathers who continued to act in the capacity of at-home parent even when their lives could have taken another direction. This corroborates Gerson’s finding—and possibly the experience of many centuries of mothers—that

actually doing primary child care engenders emotional attachment to children, which in turn makes the doing of it more satisfying (176). Rudy felt he could have moved back into the workforce if he had so desired: “Frankly.... I believe I could get a job very quickly if I wanted to. But at this point I haven’t been that motivated. I kind of like being at home.” Also, Anthony, a stay-at-home father of two biological daughters who was in the process of adopting a third daughter, talked about a recurring conversation where he finds himself defending his lifestyle choice. His sister-in-law had been encouraging him to start his own personal training business to make use of his experience as a health club manager. His response was, “I don’t understand what the upside is. I get to spend time with people who are wealthy and who can pay for their own trainers.... Why would I want to do that? The most important thing in the world is taking care of my kids to me, and I can do that now, and it makes me really tired, and it’s not like I have a lot of extra hours, so why would I want to do something else?” In the end, whether their initial venture into at-home fathering was characterized by reluctance or eagerness, and despite the many barriers that they may come up against, these fathers would choose the occupation of at-home father over any other.

CHAPTER 6

DISCUSSION

Summary of the Research Questions and Methods

In this final chapter, I present a summary of the research findings about stay-at-home fathers and a discussion of implications for American families. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research conclude the chapter.

This dissertation research explored the general topic of gender by taking an in-depth look at parenting—a particularly gendered activity—through the eyes of stay-at-home fathers in two-parent families. It employed qualitative research methods to provide a richly detailed account of the day-to-day lives of stay-at-home fathers with a focus on facilitating factors, constraining factors, and the ways these men interpreted, responded to, and gave meaning to the experience of stay-at-home fatherhood. The findings were based on 35 in-depth, open-ended telephone interviews with stay-at-home fathers from across the country.

The objective of this research was to deepen our understanding of gender as a social construct by exploring the experiences of men who have taken on the quintessentially feminine gender role in a society where “being a man” is strongly linked to breadwinning and where masculinity is largely defined in opposition to things feminine. By navigating gender identities and carving out a niche of their own, many of these fathers redefined for themselves what appropriate parenting can be and, in effect, have contributed to the legitimization of at-home parenting as an

acceptable occupational choice for men. Although the number of stay-at-home-father families will, in all likelihood, continue to remain small relative to other household arrangements, an increasing number of married men with children are playing the role of primary parent. Each at-home father exemplifies an individual's capacity to challenge normative expectations of gender, making stay-at-home fathers an interesting topic of investigation.

The primary research question this qualitative study set out to answer was: "How do men construct at-home parenting as a legitimate occupation?" Three sub-questions were explored to obtain a fuller understanding of the legitimating process: What are the facilitating factors that make stay-at-home fathering possible? What are the social constraints stay-at-home fathers face in taking on such a nontraditional gender role? What approaches do stay-at-home fathers use to justify at-home parenting as a legitimate occupation?

Summary of the Findings

Several important factors contributed to men's ability to make the decision to become stay-at-home fathers. Some of the most prevalent factors were economic in nature and included a wife's superior earnings or job prospects; a husband's lack of paid work due to unemployment, disability, or poor health; and the high cost of nonfamily day care. Still, there were other factors besides economic ones. For some, the decision to be an at-home father was due to distinctly personal circumstances, for instance, a man who was married for the second time and who wanted to be a more

involved father this time around. More than one man reflected on his own father's involvement in his young life and, finding it lacking, consciously chose to be more engaged in the life of his own children. Finally, cultural trends contributed to the stay-at-home-father decision. For example, most stay-at-home fathers felt that they were expected to be intimately involved in their children's lives and garnered considerable social approval and support for behaving accordingly. In some instances, liberal community norms about appropriate roles for mothers and fathers also facilitated the decision-making process.

The most prevalent factors making it possible for men to maintain their stay-at-home-father status were ideological in nature. These included the prevailing belief in society that having one parent at home full-time is the best arrangement for children; the widespread notion that nonparental child care is untrustworthy and might be harmful to children; and an egalitarian mind-set regarding gender roles and parenting. Other men continued in the stay-at-home-father household arrangement for personal reasons, such as having a personality that is suited to full-time child care or being married to a woman who is particularly supportive of the arrangement. Lastly, cultural beliefs about men's seeming inability to perform routine child care resulted in such low expectations from significant others that any attempt at hands-on child care was inordinately praised. Such praise and admiration encouraged stay-at-home fathers by helping them to feel comfortable and successful.

Nevertheless, men who transgressed gender boundaries to become stay-at-home fathers also faced many social constraints. These constraints tended to be

characterized by the stigma associated with men who work in predominantly female domains. The most powerful obstacles were cultural norms that prescribe the breadwinner role to fathers and stigmatize fathers who do not work for pay. Sex role stereotypes about “proper” gendered behavior and the low status granted to so-called women’s work also acted against stay-at-home fathers. Similarly, many of the stay-at-home fathers in this study spoke about the social disapproval they come across, including negative responses from family and friends, criticism of their character or work ethic, and hostility from others. Some pointed to feeling a loss of power in the home and strained relationships with their wives. Lack of socialization and limited experience in taking care of young children also served as obstacles. In addition, structural factors, such as time boundaries and lack of support from the workplace, were significant constraints—as was the tedious nature of the work.

Stay-at-home fathers devised several strategies for dealing with the social constraints that impede their progress: these included accepting, inoculating, and discrediting. Accepting was the simplest of the strategies stay-at-home fathers used, and it was characterized by tacit acknowledgement of one’s deviant status and acceptance of it as something one must come to terms with. Inoculating was a somewhat more complicated tactic. It also was characterized by an implicit acknowledgement of deviant behavior, but in this instance, stay-at-home fathers prepared for criticism by having an alternative explanation at the ready to make clear that at-home father was not their master status. Discrediting, the third strategy stay-at-home fathers used to ward off social constraints, was characterized by a rejection of

the deviant label. With this strategy, instead of acting defensively, stay-at-home fathers took an offensive position by emphasizing the wrongness of the information that contributed to the stigma.

The findings from this study uncovered three types of behavior that men used to construct at-home parenting as a legitimate occupational choice: doing gender, reconceptualizing gender, and degendering. Doing gender refers to the behaviors men exhibited that reinforced social norms and acceptable gendered behavior. In effect, the doing gender approach perpetuates the gendered status quo. An example of doing gender would be stay-at-home fathers' emphasizing the things they do during a typical day other than taking care of the children, such as rebuilding the kitchen or writing a novel. Reconceptualizing gender, the second type of behavior, was when men actually changed their thinking about what constitutes appropriate masculine behavior to include more so-called feminine characteristics—for example, nurturing children and putting family first—such that these became part of their own masculine self-concept. An example of reconceptualizing behavior would be a man who, after taking on the status of at-home father, considers a new profession in a stereotypically feminine field such as teaching; in effect, this shows a renewed concern with family needs than with work needs. Degendering, the last of the three approaches, was when stay-at-home fathers altogether separated at-home parenting from the concept of gender, thus removing gender from the equation and constructing a new framework for making sense of their unconventional status. Components of degendering include occupationalizing, investing, planning, and rewarding.

Those with the most success at legitimizing stay-at-home fatherhood were the ones who degendered their roles and responsibilities by altogether de-linking them from gender, thus eliminating the feminizing or emasculating stigma associated with it. In effect, they occupationalized at-home parenting by conceiving it as an essential job that must be done in order for their family to thrive. By separating at-home parenting from traditional gender ideology, they constructed a new reality where tending to children in this way was perceived as parental as opposed to maternal behavior.

Significance of the Research

This dissertation makes several unique contributions to the field. First, it provides an opportunity to observe the social production of gender in progress. These men opt for the at-home lifestyle for a variety of reasons, including economic circumstances, emotional attachment to children, disinclination toward day care, or preference for being home rather than employed in the marketplace. Some willingly chose to be at-home fathers, others fell into it, and still others felt they had no choice. Nevertheless, in the doing of it, they offer a compelling example of how gender and social stigma are negotiated.

At the same time, this research also sheds light on the power of gender as an institution both to limit and also open people's life choices. In some ways, the stay-at-home fathers of today are akin to the women of the past who found themselves breaking into male-dominated professions. On a macro level, those women

challenged—and ultimately changed—society’s traditional notions about acceptable roles for women. On a micro level, they also challenged and changed their personal beliefs about their own individual capabilities, interests, and aptitudes. As Epstein found in her study of women in the legal profession, traditional views about women’s nature and ability were called into question when people began to see women making meaningful inroads into the law; similarly, individual women also changed their own opinions about themselves (*Women in Law*). This research shows that views about men’s nature and their appropriate roles are similarly shaken when men are given a genuine opportunity to succeed in the domain of home and family.

Finally, much of the academic literature on family issues—child care, parenting, and work-family balance, for example—characterizes these issues almost exclusively as women’s concerns. Ample room exists to make visible the ways they affect and are shaped by men as well. A study of this nature, with its emphasis on fathers and fathering, provides an ideal opportunity to do so.

Implications for American Families

The phenomenon of stay-at-home fatherhood is a subtext of the larger social problem concerning work-family balance. A healthy economy relies on a steady flow of productive workers; inevitably most of those workers will at some point in their work lives become parents; and parents, as one might expect, will often need to tend to their children during working hours. Parents of both sexes are caught in the middle. As more and more women and mothers continue to make progress in the work world,

and as social norms continue to embrace the notion that the best way to raise a child is for one parent to be home full-time during a child's early years, and as attitudes about parenting continue to support the notion that fathers are as capable as mothers in tending to children's needs, then the idea of the stay-at-home-father/working-mother household will become more viable as a solution to the work-family balance problem.

Unlike women in past generations who struggled—both personally as individuals and politically as a movement—to challenge gender norms in an effort to break into the (men's) world of work, there was no sense from this research that any of these stay-at-home fathers chose to switch gender roles with their wives in order to make a political statement or to espouse a feminist point of view. Other research on men who take on typically female roles and responsibilities corroborates this assertion (Coltrane, "Household Labor" 478; C. Williams, *Still* 62-63; Levine, *Who Will Raise* 145). These are not men trying to change the world; rather, they are men who have been changed by the world. The liberal gender ideology and egalitarian mind-set of the stay-at-home fathers in this research, for the most part, are natural consequences of the social, cultural, and economic realities of the times. In the end, the act of being a stay-at-home father is very untraditional behavior being done for very traditional reasons.

My interpretation of these data is that the stay-at-home-father phenomenon is less a return to traditional values—although that is partly true—and more a case of new options in a changing opportunity structure. As long as society is ordered such

that the needs of the public and private spheres are in conflict, parents across the spectrum will find themselves devising the child-care arrangement that best suits their own family's personal and economic realities. There is no room for strict gender roles in this new world. Each of the men in this study had unique needs and personal circumstances; what they had in common, however, was that they all felt they were behaving in the best interest of their own family at that particular moment in time. In this they were acting in normative ways and following cultural expectations of appropriate paternal behavior—protecting their family. But they were doing it under a changed rubric characterized by an opportunity structure that offers fathers more choices about providing for their family rather than simply the breadwinner option. The result is larger numbers of people leading more productive and more meaningful lives. While I do not predict fathers will move into the realm of home and family to the extent that mothers have moved into the world of work, the data suggest that as more fathers publicly take on the private responsibilities for home and family, it will become an increasingly viable option for all men. As more men do it, the stigma and stereotypes will be difficult to sustain.

One of the most interesting results of this research is the variation among the stay-at-home fathers under investigation. It was impossible to paint in broad strokes their motivations or the ways they made sense of what they do. While all of them are defying conventional sex roles, there was no defining characteristic that all of these men shared—except that they all seemed to love and cherish their children. Although it might be easy to conclude that stay-at-home fathering is simply a luxury for white,

middle class men, the data suggest it is more complicated than that. For one thing, this sample included men from a wide variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. This is evidenced by the data they reported on level of education and household finances. Most had college degrees (n=23), although many did not (n=12). Most had wives who either earned more money or had the potential to do so (n=27), but several did not (n=7). Also, on the whole, they were about equally as likely to say their household finances were either “very comfortable” or “somewhat comfortable” (n=19) as they were to say they had “only a little to spare” or were “barely making ends meet” (n=16). One substantive difference in attitude, however, was that those in the latter income groups were more likely to feel they did not have a choice to become a stay-at-home father (n=11), compared with just three in the more comfortable income categories.

Similarly, while the sample was not nationally representative—it included no Hispanic or Asian fathers, for example—it did include five African American fathers whose experiences and attitudes were largely similar to their white counterparts (n=30). One variable where the two groups notably differed was that all five of the African American stay-at-home fathers reported that their wives earned (or had the potential to earn) more money than they did, whereas for white stay-at-home fathers there was more variability, with 22 saying this was true for them and seven that it was not. To a large part, this may be a factor of educational attainment: only one out of the five African American stay-at-home fathers in the sample had a college degree, compared with 22 out of 30 among white participants.

Limitations

As with virtually all studies, this dissertation research had limitations. First, there are some limitations surrounding the use of qualitative data. By definition, qualitative data are not based on precise measurement and cannot be generalized to the population at large. These interviews merely reflect the opinions and experiences of the 35 men who participated and cannot accurately be interpreted as the definitive view of the universe of stay-at-home fathers in the United States today. Still, although the findings and analysis are suggestive rather than predictive, they are valuable as a tool for learning about the views of a small and hard-to-find population, and for generating hypotheses for future research.

A second limitation concerns a deliberate omission in the lines of inquiry. I did not ask the fathers direct questions about their sense of sexual potency or the degree to which the gender role reversal in their family affected the sexual relationship they had with their wife. While I believe this would have been an important and fruitful line of questioning, I chose not to initiate it because of the potential discomfort it might cause for the respondent. After all, I was a stranger—a *female* stranger—calling men in their homes to talk with them about their personal lives in considerable detail over the telephone. One study participant out of the 35 did allude to this issue during our interview, and I have incorporated into an earlier chapter his comments about emasculation and the negative effect his staying home had on his relationship with his wife. Presumably, this included his sexual

relationship. Sex and the stay-at-home father is an important topic and deserving of more in-depth exploration.

Finally, this research was limited by its methodology. With research participants hailing from cities and towns across the country, interviewing by telephone was the most efficient and cost-effective method for gathering information. But a telephone conversation is limiting in that the only senses one can rely on are voice and sound. Similarly, the methodology was restricting in that the unit of analysis was singularly focused on the stay-at-home father himself, and so there was no way to corroborate or verify his perception of the state of affairs in his household.

Suggestions for Future Research

Suggestions for future research include using the findings from this qualitative study to conduct a national random sample telephone survey of parents to determine the actual prevalence of stay-at-home fathers as well as their views and attitudes. In a survey of this kind, the sample would be scientifically selected and the questions would be asked in a systematic manner such that the results could be generalized to the entire universe of stay-at-home fathers in the United States. Thus, it would be possible to ascertain which facilitating factors are most powerful, which stigmas or stereotypes are most constraining, and the degree to which they view stay-at-home fathering as a legitimate occupational choice for men.

Future qualitative research should focus on the intimate relationship between husband and wife in the stay-at-home-father/working-mother couple. To that end,

questions should be asked about the quality of the marital relationship, sexual relations and desire, and the degree to which the gender role reversal affected their lives as a couple. It would be imperative to interview not only the stay-at-home father but also the working mother, thus expanding the unit of analysis to include a focus on the couple rather than the individual.

One additional idea for future research emerged as I discussed my dissertation topic among my own circle of friends and acquaintances, and even with strangers. I discovered, in my anecdotal conversations, that men had a wide range of responses to the topic. Some were completely puzzled by the thought, others were intrigued, some were openly disdainful of the idea, others seemed admiring of it. I began to think it would be worthwhile to do a systematic study of the perceptions and reactions of men other than stay-at-home fathers, including young men who plan to be fathers in the future, older men who now have grandchildren of their own, working fathers in two-career couples and in stay-at-home-mother families, and men who do not plan to have children at all. How do these other men perceive a man who is at home with the children full-time rather than working? Would they socialize or befriend or remain friends with a man like that? What kinds of things would they have in common? What would they talk about in social situations? Stay-at-home fathers, whether consciously or not, are changing societal expectations for what it means to be a man in society today. The findings suggest that the actions of this small group of men are resulting in the creation of new social norms that will afford a whole new world of

options for both men and women. It would be interesting to see the degree to which this has penetrated the male psyche in general.

Conclusion

Given the numerous social, cultural, and economic changes taking place in American society—outsourcing of jobs in traditionally male occupations, increasing opportunities for women in the public sphere, changing public sentiment about father involvement in children’s lives, ever-increasing disdain for day care and attachment to having one parent at home full-time—it is not surprising that the number of stay-at-home fathers is growing. Their very existence, even in small numbers, poses a significant challenge to normative gender roles and serves as an example of the dynamic and social nature of the concept of gender.

It is inevitable that more and more fathers will find themselves in the role of primary parent. Not only is it critically important to study this group of fathers as a harbinger of social change, we must consider the costs to society of denying men the opportunity to play a very important role in their children’s lives. Keeping men out of the private sphere is no less costly than keeping women out of the public. The stay-at-home father offers the possibility of a new definition of successful father—one that allows fathers to “mother” without compromising their masculinity.

My father passed away 11 years ago. I will never know for sure whether he saw his time at home as “the ultimate gift” the way Walter eventually did, or, like Bradley, as just “something you have to do.” In any case, growing up as a teen-ager

in an at-home-father household profoundly affected my life. Whether intentional or not, my parents' gender role reversal provided models of behavior that demonstrated the pointlessness of gender boundaries and the boundlessness of opportunities that were available to me despite my gender. In so doing they gave me a more extensive roadmap to discover who I was as an individual rather than to simply rely on what seemed to be expected of me—first as a girl, and later as a woman.

I would like to end this dissertation with an excerpt from *The Sociological Imagination* that left a memorable impression and stuck with me throughout my graduate work and, indeed, led me to this dissertation topic. Mills wrote: “Know that many personal troubles cannot be solved merely as troubles, but must be understood in terms of public issues—and in terms of the problems of history-making. Know that the human meaning of public issues must be revealed by relating them to personal troubles—and to the problems of the individual life. Know that the problems of social science, when adequately formulated, must include both troubles and issues, both biography and history, and the range of their intricate relations. Within that range the life of the individual and the making of societies occur; and within that range the sociological imagination has its chance to make a difference in the quality of human life in our time” (226).

APPENDIX A

Consent Form**At-Home Father Study**

I am a doctoral student in sociology at CUNY, and I would like to invite you to take part in a study on at-home fathers. In the past __ year/months, someone in this household participated in a national public opinion survey and said it would be Okay to be contacted again.

The topic of this research is to learn about the day-to-day lives of at-home fathers, fathers who are home full-time with a child. We want to learn about the challenges they face and the things that may contribute to making their job as a stay-at-home dad easy or difficult.

When we previously contacted this household, the person we spoke to indicated that an at-home dad lived there. Is this true?

[Continue only if response is yes. If no, thank and terminate.]

If you choose to take part, I will ask you to complete and return a short written questionnaire and also to participate in a telephone interview with me at a time that is convenient for you. The telephone interview will take approximately one hour.

With your permission, the telephone interview will be audio-taped. This recording will be transcribed and used by me for research purposes only. Excerpts from the interview will be used in the writing of the report. Any identifying characteristics will be disguised to protect the confidentiality of participants. Your responses will remain confidential. Your name will never be used in any written materials associated with the study.

To thank you for your participation, I will send you a summary of the results when the study is complete.

Taking part is voluntary. If you choose not to take part, there will be no penalty to you in any way, shape or form. You may choose to stop at any time. There will be no financial cost to you for participating in this study.

If you have questions about the study, please feel free to call me at any time. My name is Ann Duffett. I can be reached at 212-387-8078 or at ampduff@aol.com. Or, you may contact Professor Cynthia Fuchs Epstein, Distinguished Professor at CUNY, who is supervising this research. She may be reached at 212-817-8782 or CEpstein@gc.cuny.edu.

APPENDIX B

At-Home Father Survey: Demographics and Basic Information

As you know, this research is about at-home fathers—dads who do most of the child care in their families. This survey asks you to answer some basic questions about who you are and what you do. Your answers will help me prepare for our telephone interview. Please be assured that your answers are confidential.

1. Which comes closest to describing you?

- I am currently an at-home dad, and I do not do other work for pay
- I am currently an at-home dad, and I *do* some other work for pay
- I was an at-home dad in the past, but I don't do it any longer
- I was never an at-home dad
- Something else _____

2. For approximately how many years/ months have you been an at-home dad?

_____ years _____ months

3. Please write the ages of all your child/ren.

4. Which comes closest to describing your current household finances?

- Very comfortable financially
- Somewhat comfortable financially
- Making ends meet with only a little to spare
- Barely making ends meet

5. What was your line of work before becoming an at-home dad?

6. Is your highest level of education:

- Less than high school
- High school graduate
- Some college
- Bachelor's degree
- Graduate degree

7. How old are you? _____**8. Are you:**

- Married
- Living as married
- Never married
- Divorced/Separated
- Widowed

9. Thinking about your own circle of friends, would you say that:

- You are the only at-home dad
- You personally know other at-home dad(s)
- You have heard about other at-home dad(s)

10. There are many reasons why a father decides to be home full-time with his kids. What was the main reason for you? (Just a brief description will do—we'll talk about this more in our interview.)

11. Please write your name and the phone number that's best for reaching you. If there's a day or time that you would prefer to be called in the month of September, please indicate that as well.

NAME _____

PHONE () _____

BEST DAY _____

BEST TIME _____

Thank you for participating in this research. Please return this questionnaire in the envelope provided. If you wish to contact me: e-mail aduffett@publicagenda.org or phone 212-686-6610 x13. My name is Ann Duffett.

APPENDIX C

Interview Guide

Just want to confirm that you received my letter and you are aware that your participation in this research is voluntary and confidential.

Demographics (review survey of basic demographics and information)

Warm Up

I don't know if this will come as a surprise to you or not, but it is pretty hard to find stay-at-home dads. There's no way to pull them all in a room and say 'hey, what's going on with you?' Why do you think they are so hard to find?

Fathering

- What does it mean to you to be a good father?
- Do you think there's something unique that men bring to parenting? How would you describe your own nurturing qualities—what do you do that you consider to be nurturing towards your child, family, home?
- In what ways do you and your wife differ in your approach? How significant are the differences—is it merely style or substance?
- Many people believe that a mother's bond with her child is the most special of bonds. How would you describe your father-child bond? Stronger, weaker, same as your wife's?
- How often do you doubt your fathering abilities—if at all—when it comes to infant care? Toddler care? Preteen? Teenagers? Do you feel more, less or the same competence with either son or daughter? Did you ever doubt your wife's mothering abilities?
- What kind of effect do you think your staying home will have on your children?

Childhood

- Tell me a little bit about your own childhood—memories of how you were raised? Of your dad? Of mom? Parenting styles you wish to emulate or change? [Probe]
- When you were a boy or teen, did you ever think about being a father? When you thought about fatherhood, what crossed your mind? Did you ever consider not having children, or did you always assume you would have children some day?

Role Conflict

- When I tell people that I am studying SAHDs, it often raises eyebrows. How do you respond if that happens to you?
- Stereotyping makes it difficult for men to choose this kind of work – would you agree or disagree? What types of stereotypes have you come across?

- To what extent does it cross your mind that maybe you should be working outside the house – a conflict between what you are doing and what you feel other people think you should be doing? [“It’s impossible to be a real man when you rely on your wife to support the family”]
- Did you and your wife talk about your being a stay-at-home dad before you got married? Before you had kids? How did the conversation come up? Is it what you expected?
- What do you think your wife expects from you vis a vis your father role? Your husband role? How has your relationship with your wife changed since you are at home? [Probe: Power shift? Complete role reversal? How do you handle money? How do you relate as a couple?]

Household Finances

- In the research, one of the things men who are doing this say is that the hardest thing they’ve had to deal with is not having a pay check.
- How do you and your spouse handle your home finances—do you have a joint bank account, separate accounts or both? Did this change when you started to stay home? Do you feel you have more/less/same control over money decisions? (e.g., about spending for big-ticket items? Who pays the check if/when you go out to dinner? Who pays the monthly bills? Are you hesitant to spend money on yourself now that you are not earning outside the home?)

Initial Decision to Become At-Home Dad

- Some people might think that this is a curious thing for a man to do. How would you describe your reasons for doing it?
- What were the circumstances surrounding your decision to be a stay-at-home father? Did you have a set amount of time you planned to do it for? Have you stuck with that plan?
- Who encouraged you? Discouraged you? [Probe] Wife’s attitude? Own parents and siblings? In-laws? Friends? [If old enough: Kids’ attitude?]
- Before you became an at-home dad, did you know of any others who were doing it?

Likes/Dislikes

- What’s the best part? The worst part? What’s the hardest part of not working? What’s the hardest part of being an at-home father?
- How much pleasure do you take in caring for children? Do you typically turn to your wife for validation in what you are doing, or are you pretty confident in your own skills?

Time Use—how do you spend the day?

- Describe a typical day—who gets the kids up and dressed? To school, etc.? Who gets up in the middle of the night if child is sick? What happens when your wife gets home from work—who does what?

- [If young children] How much baby care do/did you do? How much housework? Other than your wife or older children, does anyone else help with these things?
- What other activities do you engage in—hobbies or sports? Artist or musician? Writer? Volunteer activities? Work at home part time?

Reactions of others

- What do you say when someone asks what you do? How often do you get the “Mr. Mom,” “house-husband,” or “baby-sitter” comments? How do you handle them?
- How do others respond to you: either jealous because you have more “open” time and get to be involved in kids lives, or do you sense negative assumptions about your work ethic?
- Tell me a little bit about your relationships with other men—your father, brothers, friends. Have they changed? How?
- Tell me what it’s like to be a stay-at-home dad in your neighborhood: at school? Day care? Play dates? Playground? Market? Neighbors?

Work, Career, Skills

- [If employed at time of decision] Describe reaction of boss, co-workers.
- How do you keep up with your field? Is this a goal? Do you dabble? Ever plan to go back to full-time work?
- When you went to college/ chose a career/ chose a job—to what extent did you consider your family responsibilities? Ever turn down a job because it would interfere with family, or choose a company for “family-friendly” policies? Did you talk about this on the interview?
- Do you feel differently about yourself now that you stay home full-time, now that you don’t “work” for a living? Probe.

The future

- Imagine a world where this is common. What do you see? Do you think there will come a time when stay-at-home dad families are as common as stay-at-home mom families?
- Would you recommend this as a career choice to other men—even for a short amount of time?
- Where do you see yourself in one year? In five years?

Misc.

- Have you ever sought out other stay-at-home dads, an organized group or Web site, so you could have someone to talk with?

MUST ASK

- Can you refer me to another stay-at-home dad who might be interested in participating in this research?
- Do you think your wife would be interested in participating in this research as well?

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