
Blazing a New Frontier
Matthew B. Drake
Colorado State University

My life changed drastically two years ago when my daughter was born. My wife and I prepared for parenthood as well as any other couple by attending parenting preparation classes, reading books, and talking late into the evenings. However, we were exploring the additional elements of uncharted gender roles. Now two years later, I am a stay-at-home father (SAHF).

I am one of the many men across the United States taking on this new and unfamiliar frontier. The roles of men and women have been changing rapidly in today's communities, especially how they relate to division of family labor in the home. Like me, many fathers are choosing to stay at home and raise the children while more women are staying in the work force. The U.S. Census Bureau (2002) reported an 18% increase in fathers who stayed at home from 1994 to 2001. Furthermore, the 2006 Census estimated that 159,000 men remained out of the labor force for at least one year to be the primary caregiver to a child while their wives or partners worked (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006).

Despite the growing trend of fathers staying home to be with their children there is very little research in this area. This paper will address the challenges that this new frontier is presenting both men and women and I will draw from the current literature and my own personal experience.

I never expected part of my identity would be a SAHF. Growing up I identified with both the masculine and feminine narratives of my culture. I understood society had norms and prescribed behaviors for standards of masculinity however they were never a concern. I valued my own ability to determine what becoming a man meant and identified with men role models who were masculine yet comfortable expressing emotion. This high level of ease with emotional content was a big contributor in the decision to take on uncharted parenting roles. This sentiment is echoed in a qualitative study performed by Rochlen, Suizzo, McKelley, and Scaringi (2008a) that sampled 14 stay-at-home fathers who described feeling acutely aware of the importance of connecting with and caring for their children by expressing affection and being responsive to their needs.

For most men the transition to parenthood is a critical time for gender roles to influence the dynamics of a relationship. Men typically begin to work more and women begin to cut back assuming traditional roles. These prescribed gender roles tend to dictate how men and women behave and respond to others (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2005). But when men and women anticipate a role that is contradictory to the norm it is difficult to plan.

Making the decision to be a SAHF was difficult. My clinical practice was beginning to have success but my wife's income was substantially more than mine with health benefits. Most of all she enjoyed and identified with her work. SAHFs typically reinforce this thinking by mentioning their partner's employment in a rewarding profession with good career prospects and security helped shape their decision to stay at home. Rochlen et al. (2008a) reported half of the SAHFs in their study stated their wives identity was strongly consumed in work. Further

research continues to support the idea SAHFs tend to base the new arrangement on the practicality of the mother's salary and benefits (Zimmerman, 2000). My wife and I also believed it was extremely important to have at least one parent in the home to avoid daycare if we could. Rochlen et al. (2008a) discovered 12 of the 14 dads had the same sentiment. The shared value and commitment placed on at least parent in the home is a binding commonality for SAHF families.

After three months of maternity leave we made the transition and soon thereafter the assimilation into our new roles began to consume our identities. I quickly realized my role as a SAHF was challenged with a range of judgments and negative consequences (Martin & Mahoney, 2005). My experience confirmed what I had read about people holding more negative attitudes toward nontraditional parents than their traditional peers (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2005). SAHFs are confronted with remarks and negative reactions throughout the day serving as a constant reminder that they are engaged in an inappropriate role (Merla, 2008). SAHFs are sent the message that they are not masculine, that they are slackers both inside and outside of the home (Merla, 2008), and that they are the objects of confusion and fascination (Zimmerman, 2000). Research consistently demonstrates that the stay-at-home parent role is inherently viewed as low in status and the role of SAHF is perceived to be the worst parent and the lowest in social regard as compared to career fathers, career mothers, and stay-at-home mothers (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2005).

Ultimately, I began to have tremendous empathy for career mothers juggling everything. I watched my wife struggle to balance work and her mothering instincts while vocalizing frustration with the incongruence of roles. Her plight was not unique. Career mothers report feeling a personal tug-of-war between the financial responsibilities of working out of the home and their desire to be at home with the children (Zimmerman, 2000). They also report feeling judged for not being with their children while working full-time (Zimmerman, 2000). Parenting is sacrifice and choosing to live off one income, have one parent stay at home, and go against societal norms is challenging and stressful. In fact, the majority of career mothers reported the belief that their job added stress to the family dynamic (Zimmerman, 2000).

Having a baby in a traditional family with traditional roles is difficult enough. The introduction of a child creates major changes in a marriage often for the worse. In the first year, 70 % of wives experience a plummet in their relationship satisfaction (Gottman, 1999). John Gottman, a leading researcher within the field of marriage and family, suggests mothers relationship dissatisfaction with their partners doesn't have to do with the temperament of the child or the child's sleeping habits, he believes it has everything to do with whether her partner experiences the transformation into parenthood with her. With unhappiness and relational discord abounding in traditional role couples it is unique that most SAHF couples report satisfaction with their decision and their relationships (Merla, 2005; Rochlen et al. 2008a; Rochlen, McKelley, Suizzo, & Scaringi, 2008b; Zimmerman, 2000).

In contrast to the Gottman (1999) research presented above, SAHFs have no choice but to share in the profundity of life change within the relationship with their partners and their newly discovered gender roles. Furthermore, a cooperative spirit and strong communication skills are prevalent in stay-at-home couples (Zimmerman, 2000). One of the strongest predictors of marital satisfaction is equality within a couple's relationship and the sharing of power and division of labor (Zimmerman, 2000) which is prevalent in SAHF couples. And as a result SAHF couples

report higher self-esteem than their counterpart stay-at-home mother couples (Zimmerman, 2000).

Despite expressing relationship satisfaction the difficulty of being a SAHF can be overwhelming. This experience has been the most isolating endeavor of my life and research supports my sentiment with SAHFs reporting the most feelings loneliness and boredom as compared to other parenting roles (Zimmerman, 2000). Merla (2008) discovered public spaces are almost exclusively occupied by women and that the presence of a man in these environments can seem strange. This added visibility reminds men they are taking on a role that others may have difficulty with and may lead to SAHFs feeling disconnected with the community. Merla (2005) reported three factors preventing SAHFs from integrating into women's groups: women's resistance to men joining their groups, fear that their attempts to join would be considered seduction strategies, and difficulty adapting to conversational topics that they were not used to and uncomfortable. Furthermore, relationships with other stay-at-home mothers are often considered to be sexual by friends and neighbors (Merla, 2005) virtually eliminating any desire to make friends with women.

Having some kind of support network is critical for the adjustment into the new role of SAHF. Wester, Christianson, Vogel, and Wei (2007) found social support plays a role in reducing the negative consequences associated with certain aspects of gender role conflict. A social support network provides a man with a safe environment in which he may grow beyond social norms and masculine constraints. Web sites like rebeldad.com can link new SAHFs to others and create a sense of community and brotherhood. Literature also suggests men who feel supported by friends, are confident in their overall parenting skills, and secure in their ability to foster independence in their children are more likely to report higher levels of psychological well-being (Rochlen, et al., 2008b). In addition, men who feel supported by their spouse and endorse less traditional masculine norms report higher overall life and relationship satisfaction in their new role (Rochlen, et al., 2008b). My experience supports these findings. When I am frustrated questioning what I am doing as a SAHF the support of my wife and those closest to me helps me remember the vision of our decision.

Being at home has given me time to reflect and see the world through the eyes of a child. It has been humbling yet the role is transitory. Zimmerman's (2000) research discovered most mothers listed stay-at-home mother as their occupation whereas only four of the SAHFs listed it as theirs suggesting they may not be completely comfortable within the role and that it is temporary. Zimmerman (2000) also reported most friends and co-workers of SAHFs described the arrangement as temporary. Many fathers begin doing supplemental work to give them a sense of purpose beyond home. For me, having a small private practice and attending graduate school has been of the utmost importance.

The topic of SAHFs is limited in today's research and with the U. S. Census Bureau (2002, 2006) data showing more and more men choosing to be SAHFs there is a tremendous need to produce more. These men and their families are trailblazing new territory, morphing stereotypical gender roles, and raising children. There is no doubt that SAHFs understand the importance of their responsibility to father and transmit values of strength, confidence, independence, and curiosity to their young children. I remind myself every morning of the extreme privilege I have caring for our daughter. I have spent more hours with her than some men spend with their children in a lifetime. However, I watch my wife struggle to give her a kiss

and walk out the door for work. I wrestle with my own manhood, frustration, and doubt. I am not unique. I am a modern day pioneer, a part of a group of men blazing a new frontier.

References

- Brescoll, V.L., & Uhlmann E.L. (2005). Attitudes Toward Traditional and Nontraditional Parents. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 29, 434-445.
- Gottman, J.M. & Silver, N. (1999). *The Seven Principles for Making a Marriage Work*: Three Rivers Press.
- Martin, C.K., & Mahoney, A. R. (2005). *Moving Beyond gender: Processes that create relationship Equality*. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, 2, 235-246.
- Merla, L. (2008). Determinants, Costs, and Meanings of Belgian Stay-at-home Fathers: An International Comparison. *Fathering, Vol.6, No.2*, 113-132.
- Rochlen, A.B., Suizzo, M., McKelley, R.A., & Scaringi, V. (2008a). "I'm Just Providing for My Family:" A Qualitative Study of Stay-at-Home Fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 9(4), 1-14.
- Rochlen, A.B., McKelley R. A., Suizzo M., & Scaringi, V. (2008b). Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction, Psychological Well-Being, and Life Satisfaction Among Stay-at-Home Fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 9(1), 17-28.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2002). *Children's Living Arrangements and Characteristics: March 2002 (Current Population Reports P20-547)*. Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2006, June 12). Father's Day: June 18. *Facts for Features: June 2006*.
- Wester, S.R., Christianson, H.F., Vogel, D.L., & Wei, M. (2007). *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, 8(4), 215-224.
- Zimmerman, T.S., (2000). Marital Equality and Satisfaction in Stay-at-Home Mother and Stay-at-Home Father Families. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 22(3), 337-354.