

# Transitions Into and Out of Work: Stay-at-Home Fathers' Thoughts and Feelings: A Brief Report

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## Abstract

This qualitative study explored how stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) think and feel about transitioning back into paid employment. Findings from a thematic analysis on interviews with 21 SAHFs in the United Kingdom revealed that many of the SAHFs expected to return to work. However, most of the fathers suggested that this would be part-time, or self-employment, which would allow them to remain highly involved in caregiving, representing their commitment to moving away from the traditional gender roles that are largely evident in parenting. Some fathers expressed a desire to return to the paid workforce whilst others showed apprehension, indicating tensions over negotiating work and care. These findings have practical implications for fathers who are highly involved in caregiving.

## Keywords

stay-at-home fathers, employment, primary caregiving, fathering, masculinity

Stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) are defined in different ways but are largely understood to be fathers who are the primary caregiver for their children and are not in full-time paid employment (Stevens, 2015). This is opposed to a more “traditional” organization of labor in the household, where the father would be the breadwinner. Over the past few decades, there have been considerable changes in women’s engagement with work, with a significant increase in the proportion of women employed in the UK, including amongst mothers (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2019). Fathers’

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employment behaviors are changing too; one in twenty fathers in 2019 said they decided to work fewer hours due to childcare (ONS, 2019), alongside a broader trend of increased father involvement and greater emphasis on more active parenting by fathers (Oláh et al., 2018). Yet there remains a lack of information on many aspects of highly involved fathers' lives, particularly on whether these men plan on occupying the primary caregiving role for an extended period. The current study aimed to fill this gap in the literature.

Within the existing body of literature on SAHFs, most studies found that the decision to become a SAHF was due to economic factors, such as job loss, their spouse's higher earning potential or the high cost of childcare (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004; Lee & Lee, 2018; Rochlen et al., 2010). However, this is not true of all SAHFs and some fathers report that they became a SAHF by choice (Fischer & Anderson, 2012; Lee & Lee, 2018). Nevertheless, given that much of the research points to the economic necessity of these fathers being a stay-at-home parent and the importance of external circumstances on these men's decisions over care and work, it is of interest to explore whether these fathers envision being in the primary caregiving role temporarily, or for an extended length of time. Also, little is known about whether the fathers' experiences of being a primary caregiver have influenced their ideas on how to arrange work and care in the longer term.

In Doucet's (2004) study of Canadian primary caregiving men, SAHFs' descriptions of ideal work and caregiving arrangements placed either one parent working from home or both parents working part-time. Similarly, Chesley (2011) found that US SAHFs discussed only wanting jobs that would allow them to remain at home. Also in the US, Helford et al.'s (2012) quantitative investigation compared SAHFs to stay-at-home mothers (SAHMs) and found that fathers rated themselves as more concerned about re-entering paid employment than SAHMs did. In contrast, a recent UK study reported that primary caregiver fathers were more interested in engaging in additional paid work in the future than were primary caregiver mothers (Pinho et al., 2021). However, the quantitative nature of this research somewhat limited the extent to which in-depth insights could be obtained about the fathers' reasoning behind their desire for working more. It is important to note that factors that have been found to contribute to SAHFs' experiences of their role have been found to differ between the US and the UK. In particular, differences in attitudes toward fathers, masculinity, and conceptualizations of fatherhood (Randles, 2018) have been found to differ alongside structural differences such as differing availability and affordability of childcare (Petts et al., 2020). Therefore, it is important to explore in-depth the experiences of SAHFs in the UK separate to men in the same position in the US.

Finally, the experiences of SAHFs are best understood within the context of ideas on masculinity. According to Connell (1987), the dominant form of masculinity, hegemonic masculinity, emphasizes that there are different roles for men and women and encourages a patriarchal structure. An important aspect of the traditional masculine role is being the primary financial provider within a family (Hunter et al., 2017). Hence, SAHFs are often viewed as resisting or deviating from masculine norms. However, this may be advantageous, as upholding traditional views of masculinity can

hinder gender equality and harm men who do not adhere to masculine norms, and can also harm women (Elliott, 2015).

In line with Connell's (1987) conceptualization that there are many types of masculinity, recently greater attention has been afforded to feminist perspectives on masculinities. Elliott (2015) proposed the concept of caring masculinities, which reject the ideals of traditional masculinity, such as domination, and instead embrace caring values and appreciate interdependent relationships. This has the potential to significantly contribute to gender equality through encouraging a more equitable division of primary caregiving between mothers and fathers. Some studies suggest that SAHFs actively adopt caring masculinities because of their experience of being a primary caregiver; Lee and Lee (2018) found this to be the case for a sample of US SAHFs. The fathers enjoyed the emotional, caring aspects of parenting and these qualities became part of their masculine identity, rather than being opposed to it.

However, other researchers argue that it is too simplistic to suggest that these fathers completely reject the traditional notions of masculinity (Hunter et al., 2017). Rochlen et al. (2008) found that SAHFs engaged in simultaneous rejection and adherence to traditional masculinity. This is understood to be a *negotiation* of masculinity (Hunter et al., 2017; Rochlen et al., 2008), as such emphasizing the tension fathers often experience when reconciling their fathering identity with different forms of masculinity, old and new. Given that these fathers stand at the intersection between traditional and new conceptualizations of masculinity and fatherhood, it is not surprising that they present many different, often contradictory, aspects of masculinity. Yet little is known about how masculinity, in its many forms, influences SAHFs' decisions regarding how long they would like to be a primary caregiver.

## Method

### *Participants*

The participants were 21 men who were SAHFs at the time of interview. The fathers were aged between 27 and 56 years-old ( $M=43.59$ ,  $SD=7.06$ ) and they had between one and three children, with at least one child aged between 3- and 6-years-old. The fathers had generally attended higher education, with 17 holding a university degree. The average length of being a SAHF was 4.29 years ( $SD=3.04$ ). Twelve of the fathers reported becoming a SAHF for financial or employment reasons (57%), seven due to a combination of wanting to become a SAHF and financial reasons (33%), and the remaining two fathers because of a desire to become a SAHF (10%).

### *Measures*

Data were obtained on sociodemographic characteristics and fathers' reasons for becoming a SAHF at the beginning of the interview and through a questionnaire administered to all participants.

*Interview about experiences of being a stay-at-home father.* The semi-structured interview included questions about their child's adjustment, parent-child relationship, and their marriage. For the present investigation, one section of the interview was analyzed covering fathers' thoughts about whether there was anything about their caregiving/employment arrangement that they would like to change. Based on the fathers' answers, flexible follow-up questions were asked, including whether they thought they would be employed full-time in the future, whether the couple would change who the primary caregiver is, how they felt about this potential transition, and whether it would change anything at home. The exact questions asked to each participant varied due to the nature of the semi-structured interview, however in all cases the interviewer ensured that sufficient detail was obtained from each participant.

### **Procedure**

The participants are a sub-sample of a larger study of families in the UK with young children in either single or dual-earner households. To recruit participants, the primary researcher sent information about the study to schools, nurseries, and playgroups, and posted an advert for the study online on social media groups. Inclusion criteria included the father being in their role as a SAHF for at least 6 months, their wife or partner was the primary wage earner and worked at least 4 days a week, or the equivalent in hours, and at the time of the interview the fathers were not engaged in consistent paid work. The fathers were interviewed alone at home. Before the interview, written informed consent was obtained from the fathers and the study received ethical approval from the Cambridge Psychology Research Ethics Committee. The interview was audio recorded and transcribed verbatim afterwards.

### **Analysis**

The analysis followed the six phases of thematic analysis outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), which was deemed an appropriate method for the small sample size. Thematic analysis is a qualitative approach that seeks to identify patterns or themes within a dataset (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis draws upon inductive and deductive approaches and tries to be "grounded" in the data, such that the data is used to inform an understanding of the sample studied (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The aim of the analysis was to investigate SAHFs' thoughts and feelings about how they arranged work and care in their family. The two researchers who conducted the analysis both familiarized themselves with the transcripts. The secondary researcher then coded all the transcripts, and subsequently a data audit began with the primary researcher, enabling a discussion of whether the codes adequately represented the fathers' accounts. Then, themes were developed and refined, with continual discussion between the researchers on the suitability of each theme and agreement was found between the researchers.

The process of data auditing was chosen as it allowed reflexivity in the generation of codes and themes, so that procedures were critiqued and improved, and clarity and

consistency of codes was established (Seale, 1999). Braun and Clarke's (2006) checklist outlining criteria for good thematic analysis was also followed.

### *Positionality of the Researchers*

The primary researcher, who conducted most of the interviews, and secondary researcher, identify as female, and are not parents. Hence, in many ways, during the data collection and analysis the researchers occupied an "outsider" status (Bourke, 2014) in terms of gender identity and experiences of parenting. While the primary researcher's status as a non-parent was not explicitly made clear to the participants, it was expected that due to her age, the fathers would assume that they were not talking to a parent, and perhaps thus not "judged" by another parent. Hence, the answers to the interview questions may have differed if the research was conducted by a differently positioned researcher, such as a parent, or by a male researcher. In the analysis, the researchers acknowledge that whilst they were not positioned alongside the fathers in many aspects of their identities, they shared a joint interest in the fathers' thoughts about their role and their experiences of fatherhood and are experienced in family research. The researchers appreciated the way in which their own experiences may have shaped their understanding of the fathers' accounts, and hence reflected on this throughout the analysis of the data, to be cognizant of the many influences on interpretation of qualitative research.

## **Results**

Fathers' thoughts and feelings about returning to work can be understood in relation to three themes: the transient nature of the stay-at-home parent role; navigating gender role expectations and caregiving; and apprehension surrounding changing roles.

### *Transient Nature of the Stay-at-Home Parent Role*

Most fathers stated that they were planning to return to paid work. Given that many of the fathers became stay-at-home fathers due to financial reasons, such as the high cost of childcare, then it was perhaps not surprising that around half of the fathers reported that they would be looking to return to paid work when their children were either in nursery, school, or school and after-school clubs. A minority of fathers reported looking for work soon; these fathers described needing to find employment as a financial necessity. For example, one father reported that he was planning on returning to formal employment soon, saying that: "economically we will need two jobs," explaining that he would "soon need to work a little bit more than zero."

Most of the remaining fathers indicated that they would return to paid work, but this was going to be further in the future. For now, these fathers felt their current arrangement was well-suited to their family, with one father stating that both he and his wife thought that this was "the best way" for their family. Another father expected not to be seeking work soon as he and his wife were anticipating having more children, and that

they were “really happy with how things are.” He further stated that: “This is my role and my job for now.” A minority of fathers reported that they were planning on always being a SAHF.

### *Navigating Gender Role Expectations and Caregiving*

A dichotomy emerged between fathers who expressed a desire to engage in some paid work whilst remaining highly involved in caregiving, which made up most of the sample, and fathers whose attitudes toward work and care signified a desire to be a breadwinner. These different views are all encompassed within the theme “navigating gender role expectations and caregiving.”

The majority of fathers who anticipated going back to work discussed part-time work or jobs that would allow flexible hours. These fathers cited several reasons for not wanting to restart full-time employment, including needing to be around for their children, being able to do the school run, and not wanting to put finance over family time. Fathers also showed interest in working from home, with these fathers citing various business ideas that would allow them to do so. This indicates a move away from traditional ideas of the father's role and suggests that their experiences of being a SAHF have encouraged them to have different priorities in the long-term. Highlighting this, one father said that he thought “the most important thing for family, for both [wife] and me is caring for our children and making sure that they are loved.” Another father echoed this attitude, stating that: “we're valuing our time and I guess quality of life rather than additional money.” Many of these fathers did not expect to swap positions with their spouses and planned that they would remain the primary caregiver for their children, even if they ended up working full-time hours in the future. One father, whilst explaining this, stated that: “it is [wife]'s turn for the more senior sort of employment.” It seems that these fathers were in pursuit of a more gender egalitarian approach to negotiating work and care within their families.

A minority of fathers wanted to move to splitting the caregiving equally. One father expressed that he hoped a return to part-time work would lead to a “more equal share of, you know, managing the house and the kids.” Another father said “we do things very old fashioned-ly at the moment in terms of I'm the one staying at home so I clean up, I cook the meals, and I do things like that; those things would have to be shared out a bit more,” representing a move away from the breadwinner/caregiver binary for these families and toward a role-sharing arrangement.

In contrast to many of the fathers who expressed wanting to prioritize caregiving even while working, some fathers expressed a desire or “need,” as it was described by some fathers, to engage in paid work. One father said that “as a man I feel like I need time to be doing something that is mine, that is. . . constructive” and a few expressed similar sentiments over wanting to provide for their family and “to make more of a financial contribution,” indicating a desire to take on a more traditional fathering role. Fathers occasionally alluded to the difficulties they experienced in leaving paid employment, such as one father confiding that “It just does feel like I've given up who I was” and that regarding returning to work that he felt that “I need it, I need it.”

## *Apprehension Surrounding Changing Roles*

The SAHFs all navigated a mother-dominated space and now many were looking to integrate back into the paid workforce. Some fathers expressed worries about returning to paid employment and concerns about the transition from being a highly involved parent to being part of the workforce again. One father suggested that he was nervous about going back to work as: “the set of demands by a parent are so different from the set of demands of somebody in an office.” Similarly, another father reported “I think initially for me it would just be difficult getting back into work” and he commented that “after working full-time it’s definitely become more relaxed for the kids and for me.”

The fathers who perceived they would enter full-time jobs expressed worry over being able to see their children and the culture of long working hours. When thinking about needing to commute, one father expressed “it’s terrifying especially because you hear of a lot of parents who don’t see their children on the weekdays.” Regarding the long working hours expected of many parents, one father thought that there was “no way of really managing that unless you change the whole of the culture of the whole of the country to do more sensible hours and that’s unlikely to happen.” This indicates the wider societal issues around work and care that would need to be addressed for many of these fathers to achieve their desired balance between employment and caregiving.

Finally, some fathers expressed concern that the positive effects on the whole family that stemmed from their current arrangement may be lost if they changed roles. One father said that his wife was a good role model for their daughter of how “women can go to work and can be empowered and can be the primary earners,” which he emphasized could change if he was no longer in the primary caregiving role.

## **Discussion**

Many of the fathers expected a return to work; the transient nature of the SAHF role likely reflects how most of the fathers’ decision to become the primary caregiver was influenced by financial, hence external, factors. This suggests that whilst societal expectations may have relaxed so that fathers were more comfortable with taking on the primary caregiving role, many still did not consider being a SAHF a permanent role in the way mothers have traditionally been expected to be long-term stay-at-home parents (Parke, 2013).

A clear theme to emerge from the fathers’ narratives was their navigation between the traditionally masculine role of the breadwinner and the caring role they currently occupy as the more involved parent. There may appear to be a contradiction that the fathers’ narratives showed a move away from traditional masculinity and the continued influence of masculine norms. However, instead this highlights that the fathers’ negotiation of traditional and caring masculinities (Hunter et al., 2017) is an ongoing process. Whilst the finding that many fathers wanted to remain primary caregivers suggests that they have taken on aspects of caring masculinities as described by Elliott

(2015) and supported by Lee and Lee (2018), and recognize the benefits of embracing a caring identity, fathers in this study show that this is not a complete transition. Societal pressures of traditional masculinity continue to influence fathers to want to contribute financially, but they balance this by considering what is best for their family, which may lead them to the desire to work from home or part-time.

Concerning the apprehension some fathers expressed over returning to paid work, it is important to note that amongst fathers who did express worries, they did not refer to pay and career prospects after caregiving, in contrast to Helford et al.'s (2012) research on SAHMs, perhaps referring to the well-documented "motherhood pay gap" (Grimshaw & Rubery, 2015) and also the lack of opportunities for career development once they have been a primary caregiver (Correll et al., 2007). Future research needs to follow up SAHFs after they have returned to work to understand what aspects of the transition were difficult and to establish whether the pay and career gap for mothers is also present for SAHFs.

There are practical implications of these results; the findings that many of the fathers would prefer part-time or flexible work, and that some expressed worries over returning to the workplace, suggest that researchers and employers need to find ways to support fathers through what may be a difficult transition. As it is less common for fathers to work part-time (ONS, 2019), and research suggests that workplace culture encourages fathers to prioritize work over caregiving (Haas & Hwang, 2019), it may be difficult for these fathers to find suitable employment. Hence, employers need to provide more opportunities for parents through job-sharing or other forms of part-time work. Furthermore, attention needs to be afforded to how all primary caregiver parents can feel supported upon their return to paid work after a period of caregiving, by, for example, having mentors to help them in their return back to paid work.

More broadly, this study contributes to an understanding of how many couples, including SAHF families, are looking for a more gender egalitarian approach to sharing parenting and paid work. However, this process is still in progress and many challenges remain. If men and women can be supported in this, not only by policy but by social attitudes toward men in primary caregiving roles, then highly involved fathers can play a key role in addressing an important aspect of gender inequality in the UK. Another social shift that will be pertinent for researchers to study over time is the increase in homeworking since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. In the UK, the national lockdowns significantly increased homeworking so that it became the norm for many couples and a UK-wide survey found that fathers perceived they benefitted from flexible working regarding being able to spend more time with their children (Chung et al., 2020). Chung et al. (2020) suggested that this will have long-term implications for fathers and their desire to have a better balance between work and care. Hence, whether fathers are more involved parents because of becoming stay-at-home fathers or due to the dramatic changes in work in 2020, it is likely that we will continue to observe widespread patterns of gendered change in employment and child-care in the coming years. This possibility highlights key avenues for future research on fathers.



This study has several limitations that are important to reflect on. The first is the homogeneity of the sample. That the SAHFs were all in long-term heterosexual relationships means the results may not generalize to other SAHFs, such as fathers with different sexual orientations. In addition, 95% of the sample identified their ethnicity as White and most of the fathers had attended university. Hence, future research needs to strive for more diverse samples. A further issue is that there may be a self-selection bias, an issue found in wider research on fathers (Costigan & Cox, 2001), as SAHFs who were struggling more with their role may have felt less comfortable being interviewed about their parenting experiences. Despite these limitations, the present study offers valuable insight into an under-studied family type.

## Conclusion

In summary, this study has contributed to our understanding of UK SAHFs by providing insight into how fathers feel about changing their stay-at-home parent role. Most fathers expected that they would return to work but many stated that this would be part-time, from home or otherwise flexible work, so that they would remain either primary caregivers or very involved parents. Fathers were found to negotiate traditional and caring masculinities, as they balanced expectations of hegemonic masculinity with what was best for their family. The implications of this include policies to facilitate flexible working arrangements and a recognition of how changing gender roles and gender expectations can benefit gender equality in work and care.

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