

1-1-2004

An Exploratory Study Of At-Home Fathers' Perceptions As Primary Care Providers

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This research is a product of the graduate program in [Family and Consumer Sciences](#) at Eastern Illinois University. [Find out more](#) about the program.

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AN EXPLORATORY STUDY OF AT-HOME
FATHERS' PERCEPTIONS AS
PRIMARY CARE PROVIDERS

BABIARZ

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An Exploratory Study of At-Home Fathers' Perceptions as
Primary Care Providers

(TITLE)

BY

Mary Babiarz

THESIS

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS
FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Science

IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL, EASTERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY
CHARLESTON, ILLINOIS

2004

YEAR

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Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks and appreciation to the following individuals for their contribution, help, and support:

April, thank you for giving me the confidence in pursuing my goals. You never let me give up and supported me since day one.

Carrie and Katie, thank you both for teaching me that shopping can be considered a hobby. Also, for helping me acknowledge the fact that shopping releases a lot of stress when having to work on a thesis.

Dr. Slavik, thank you for all your support, encouragement, and expertise throughout this study. I really enjoyed having the opportunity to have you as my thesis director. I especially liked being informed about what the weather was going to be like during the week.

Dr. Meadows, thank you for all of your support and encouragement throughout this study. I am especially thankful that you allowed me to be your graduate assistant, especially since the child development lab is where the inspiration of this study came from.

Dr. O'Rourke, thank you for brightening up the revisions on my thesis with all of your colored pens. The array of colors encouraged me to work on my technical writing skills. Your encouragement also helped me keep motivated in finishing my thesis.

Dr. Ozier, thanks for letting me decorate your door. Your door decorations made waiting for meetings with Dr. Slavik a lot more pleasant.

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine at-home fathers' perceptions of being a primary care provider of their children. An exploratory descriptive research design was used for this study. The sample consisted of 9 at-home fathers. Five of the fathers were current at-home fathers, and 4 of the participants were past at-home fathers. The participants were asked to complete a 21-item questionnaire that was developed by the researcher. The fathers were asked for demographics, reasons fathers remained home with their children, perceptions of at-home fathers as the primary care provider, and how others react to at-home fathers.

The mean number of months that the participants remained home as at-home fathers was 36.7 months the majority of the participants chose to stay home as at-home fathers.

Four factors determined why at-home fathers remained home with their children:

(a) chose to stay home, (b) had a disability, (c) lost his job, or (d) forced to be the primary care provider.

The majority of the participants felt that working a full-time job is more stressful than being an at-home father. Also, the majority of the participants did not feel that their roles as at-home fathers threatened their masculinity or caused others to question their masculinity. A majority of the participants were not reluctant to inform people about being an at-home father. While an at-home father, most of the participants believed that their self-esteem remained the same or increased. The participants also received support from their relatives and friends.

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Chapter One

Introduction

The traditional view of the family structure strongly influences the process of child rearing. Traditionally, women have remained home with their children while men worked outside of the home. As parents, each would have different roles and responsibilities according to gender. The family structure continues to change and both parents are more commonly sharing responsibilities of rearing children (Frank, Kromelow, Helford, & Harding 1998). It is not only the mother serving as the primary care provider, as in past years. Fathers are being viewed as capable and are more willing to stay at home to care for their children.

Traditionally, the average household would have the mother in the role of the primary care provider, while the father fulfilled the role of the economic provider. However, the traditional family structure has changed in terms of the rising number of fathers staying home to care for their children. The United States Census Bureau (2002) reported that there were 105,000 full-time stay-at-home fathers in 2002. Restrictive criteria included fathers who stayed home with their children full-time and were not working outside of the home. Utilizing less restrictive criteria through an estimate based on information from the U.S. Census Bureau, Cooper (2000) indicated that there were about two million fathers staying home with their children on a full-time basis. The criteria of the two million included: full-time stay-at-home fathers, fathers that are either the primary provider at night or during the day; and fathers who have custody of their children.

There may be stereotypes attached to fathers who are the primary care provider of their children. Society and local communities may not be aware of this increasing trend of fathers as primary care providers. In an interview of one at-home father, he stated that his sister sent him a scripture stating, "the male should be the breadwinner and the house is the woman's place" (Zimmerman, Northen, Seng, & Grogan, 1999, p. 53). According to Frank (1998), primary care giving fathers do not fulfill the identical role of the traditional mother, but rather combine aspects of the roles of both traditional mothers and traditional fathers.

Researchers have found that there are a few well-documented reasons as to why more men are becoming at-home fathers. The *Congressional Quarterly* (2000) reported that in some cases, fathers stayed home because there were no other choices after losing outside employment. This report also mentioned that some fathers are now staying home with their children by choice. In a study of 370 stay-at-home fathers, Frank (1998) found that fathers chose to stay home to avoid putting their children in day care or because their wives' incomes were higher.

In recent years, fathers have been more vocal about their opinions of caring for their children. According to Zimmerman et al. (1999), a men's movement is encouraging men to go beyond occupation in defining male identity while also encouraging reinvestment in families, homes, and communities. This movement may be the inspiration as to why fathers are more willing to voice their opinions and choose to stay home with their children as a full-time care provider.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to examine at-home fathers' perceptions of being the primary care provider of their children.

Research Objectives

The objectives were to:

1. determine factors that influenced fathers to stay home with their children,
2. explore at-home fathers perceived role as the primary care provider, and
3. identify if reactions of others to at-home fathers are generalized stereotypes.

Research Questions

There were three research questions that guided this research study. The questions were:

1. What factors influenced fathers to stay home with their children?
2. How do at-home fathers perceive their role as the primary care provider?
3. What are the reactions of others to at-home fathers?

Delimitations

A delimitation of this study was the sample size. The study consisted of a small sample. There were 22 potential participants. Only 9 participants returned the questionnaire.

Definition of Terms

For the purpose of this study, the following terms were defined:

At-Home-Father - a father who stays home with his children on a full-time basis and does not work outside of the home.

Househusband - husbands actively engaged in a role reversal with their wives

(Lutwin & Superstein, 1985).

New Family Structure - the idealization of family life is through roles that are shared by men and women (Frank, 1996). Participation in parenting is balanced equally between the parents.

Primary Care Provider - person who stays home with the children at least 30 hours or more a week (Frank et al., 1998).

Traditional Father - "an individual whose role is that of the breadwinner. Authority who sees no need to express concern about practical childcare" (Book & Penttinen, 1996, p. 262).

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

Throughout the years, parental roles have developed to reflect the changing needs of the family structure. During the first part of the twentieth century, fathers were expected to provide financially for their families (Atkinson & Blackwelder, 1993). While fathers worked, the mothers were at home with the children. Presently, the traditional structure of the family is changing. With this change, fathers are increasingly taking on the role of being the nurturer and care provider of the children, whereas in the past, mothers were mainly seen as the nurturer and care provider of the family.

The Changing Family Structure

In past years, usually the mother's role would be to stay home and take care of their children while the father's role was to hold a full-time job outside of the home to financially provide for the family. Many researchers have been suggesting that role reversal occurs when a father decides to stay home as the primary care provider and the mother has a full-time job. According to Lutwin and Siperstein (1985), husbands that stay at home as the primary care provider are actively engaged in role reversal with their wives. This concept would reflect the image of the traditional family structure.

Through research done with at-home fathers, Frank (1996) introduced a concept other than role reversal. According to Frank, the traditional gender roles of mothers and fathers were prescribed by society. Frank introduced the idea that the emerging family structure can be viewed as new and unique and is not the reverse of the traditional

family structure. Frank et al. (1996) described his new concept of the changing family structure as:

The primary caregiving father provides a strong male influence with his nurturing abilities. The working mother continues to exhibit strong nurturing ability and also brings new experiences related to her working outside the home. The primary caregiving father family model facilitates the active participation of both parents in the care of their child (p. 4).

Both parents are active in sharing the family roles and responsibilities together. The father provided his nurturing abilities and new experiences as an at-home father. At the same time, the mother exhibits nurturing abilities to her children and brings new experiences as a working mother into the home.

Fathers as Nurturers

Today it is more common to observe fathers being more nurturing of their children. However, the idea of fathers as nurturers has not been consistent through the years. One research study examined articles from popular, general, women's, and family magazines. Atkinson and Blackwelder (1993) analyzed these articles for the distribution of the ratio of articles defining fathers primarily as nurturers. Atkinson and Blackwelder further stated that fathers were 2.5 times more likely to be defined as nurturers in articles in the year 1940. The ratio of articles referring to fathers as nurturers dropped to the ratio of 1.3:1 during the 1950s. It was also noted that by the seventies, the ratio of articles defining fathers as nurturers compared to fathers as providers, soared to the ratio of 3.3:1 and then the number of fathers being observed as nurturers in articles slightly decreased to the ratio of 2.8:1 during the 1980s (Atkinson

& Blackwelder, 1993). Through the years, the ratio of articles defining fathers as nurturers rather than as providers has fluctuated.

Fathers as Primary Care Providers

As fathers continue to assume the role of nurturers, they too are embracing the role of being the primary care provider of their children. As noted by Casper (1997), there was an increase in care provided by fathers between 1988 and 1991. The increase in care by fathers is attributed to the loss of jobs. Between the years 1991 and 1993, the rates of fathers as primary care providers began to decline because of the increase of childcare programs, nursery schools, and preschools.

Reasons Why Fathers are Staying Home

There may be many reasons as to why more fathers are staying home with their children rather than working full-time outside of the home. According to Gardyn (2000), there are a growing number of fathers who have chosen to assume more initiative in child rearing. Also, there is a growing core of men who have chosen to remain home with their children while their wives work (Wentworth & Chell, 2001).

Through interviews, Kinnon (2003) found two reasons why most men become at-home fathers. One reason is that fathers do not want a third party raising their children, and the other reason is that their wives earn higher salaries. More fathers are willing to stay home with their children rather than working outside of the home on a full-time basis.

Stereotypical Views

At-home fathers continue to be subject to negative reactions, positive reactions and stereotyping at different societal levels in their role as the primary care providers of

their children. Murray (1996) noted, "The man who crosses over into a female-dominated area upsets the gender assumptions embedded in 'women's work.' Almost immediately they are suspected of not being a 'real man' " (p. 9).

In an interview of one at-home father, he reported that his siblings stated, "Why doesn't your wife quit her job? Why don't you get a real job?" (Zimmerman et al., 1999, p. 53). During these interviews, a wife of an at-home father's relative stated, "How can you stay married to a man that doesn't take care of you?" (Zimmerman et al., 1999, p. 53). Zimmerman et al. also noted that fathers may be labeled as a "sissy," a "woman," and a "loser." These quotes serve as examples of the negative stereotypes assigned to at-home fathers as the primary care providers. At-home fathers who have received positive reactions from others reported that common responses were envious and flattering.

References to the Male Primary Care Provider

Since very little research has been completed on the topic of at-home fathers, the terminology referring to at-home fathers has not been specifically defined. Some of the popular literature has labeled at-home fathers as "househusbands." For instance, one popular literature article referred to at-home fathers as, "the househusband, who for at least a few years takes on the role traditionally filled by housewives..." (Gabor, 1995, p. 46). "Househusband" was also used in the title of Gabor's article. Popular literature referred to fathers who remain home with their children as "homemakers". One popular literature article referred to at-home fathers by stating, "Men are increasingly becoming primary homemakers..." (Crispell, 1994, p. 59). Some of the popular literature articles also used the term "stay-at-home dad" or "at-home father." One reference made by an

at-home father during an interview for a popular literature article was, “being a stay-at-home dad...” and used the term “stay-at-home dad” consistently through out the article.

In peer-reviewed journals, many of the researchers labeled fathers that remained home with their children as “at-home fathers” and as “stay-at-home dads.” One author used “at-home father” in this manner, “mothers with the support of at-home fathers ...” (Zimmerman et al., 1999). A few researchers from peer-reviewed journals labeled fathers who stay home with their children as “househusbands.” One article used “househusband” in this manner, “the role expectations for househusbands and housewives...” (Wentworth & Chell, 2001, p. 639).

The terms “primary care provider” and “primary caregiver” were used interchangeably in reference to at-home fathers. For instance, one article used the term “primary caregiver” in this manner, “The study of fathers who are their children’s primary caregiver...” (Frank, 1998, p. 1). Both popular literature and peer-reviewed articles used the two terms in the same manner.

Theoretical Applications to At-Home Fathers

There were two theoretical applications that were relevant to at-home fathers. The theoretical applications were symbolic interaction theory and feminist family theory.

Symbolic Interaction Theory. One theoretical approach that applies to at-home fathers is symbolic interaction theory. Symbolic interaction theory is focused on how people define situations based on their own personal experiences and sense of self (Ingoldsby, Smith, & Miller, 2004). Two themes focus on the individual aspects, such as behavior and self-concept. A third theme focuses on the social aspects of society.

Symbolic interaction theory includes applicable concepts of social norms, roles, salience, and identity.

Symbolic interaction theory can be applied to better understand individuals and their roles in society. This theme expresses the idea that individuals are influenced by society. Ingoldsby et al. (2004) gave an example of the changing nature of fathering behaviors. For instance, “it was unusual for men to show physical affection to their children, it is now common for this to take place in today’s families” (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p. 85). Society is gradually changing its perceptions of what is expected from a father.

One central part of symbolic interaction theory is the concept of social norms. Interactions teach us social norms. Social norms can be defined as expectations about how to act in a given situation (Ingoldsby et al., 2004). For instance, are the behaviors of at-home fathers the same as fathers who have full-time jobs? The behavior of an at-home father will likely be different than the behavior of a father who is working full-time.

Role is another concept of symbolic interaction theory that is applicable to at-home fathers. Role is defined as “a set of social norms for a specific situation, or ‘part’” (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p.85). Examples of roles are a son or a daughter, brother or a sister, and a husband or a wife. Other examples would be a father as a financial provider or an at-home father.

Another central part of symbolic interaction theory that applies to at-home fathers is the concept of salience. Salience is defined as individuals choosing which roles are most important and devoting the most time to those roles. Salience also gives the idea

that, even though individuals define behaviors that are associated with a role that was chosen, there are social norms or expectations for the roles. Most importantly, roles undergo change. For example:

Traditionally dads were responsible primarily for the financial support of the family while mothers were responsible for the care of the house and children. This is changing in today's society as more women enter the workforce and more men become involved with the children (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p. 85).

Identity is another concept of symbolic interaction theory that is applicable to at-home fathers. Identity is defined as roles that most likely define an individual's identity (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p. 85). Events determine behavior of others and will determine future behavior of people. Within the traditional family structure, fathers were identified as the financial provider of their family. Today, although numbers are still low, more fathers are identified as at-home fathers. The identity of being an at-home father continues to become acceptable within society.

Feminist Family Theory. Another theory that is applicable to at-home fathers is the feminist family theory. There are different branches of feminists. One branch, which is most applicable to at-home fathers, is the radical feminists branch. Radical feminists proposed, "that individuals should not be limited by masculine or feminine traits but should strive toward androgyny (a combination of both masculine and feminine traits)" (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p. 187). For instance, at-home fathers may demonstrate "feminine traits" as a primary care provider of his children while the mother demonstrates "masculine traits" as an economic provider. Traditionally, men would have the "masculine trait" as an economic provider, while the women would have the

“feminine trait” of being the primary care provider of their children. Both parents are sharing androgynous traits.

One assumption of feminist family theory that is applicable to at-home fathers is that gender is a socially constructed concept. “Gender refers to the social meanings of masculinity and femininity that are produced through social processes and interactions that produce ‘men and women’ ” (Ingoldsby et al., 2004, p. 189). For example, men are still commonly viewed as “breadwinners,” who pay the bills and are not as nurturing of their children. Women are viewed as “primary care providers” of their children, with responsibility for the housework and are nurturing of their children.

Summary and Conclusion

There is a new family structure emerging in today’s society. Both parents are more frequently sharing parental roles, rather than the roles being reversed. Studies are showing a gradual increase of fathers demonstrating more nurturing behaviors towards their children. Fathers are also increasingly choosing to assume the role of being the nurturer and the primary care provider of their children. At-home fathers still continue to be subjected to negative reactions and stereotyping as the primary care provider of their children because individuals and society remain largely embedded with the idea that men should only be financial providers.

Chapter Three

Method

The purpose of this study was to examine at-home fathers' perceptions of being a primary care provider of their children. The study investigated the following questions: (a) how do at-home fathers perceive their role as the primary care provider; (b) what factors influenced fathers to stay home with their children; (c) what are the reactions of others to at-home fathers?

Design of the Study

An exploratory descriptive study design was used for the purpose of this study. These methods allowed for descriptive analysis of participants' self-perceptions as at-home fathers. Twenty-two questionnaires were distributed to the participants; nine questionnaires were completed and returned, yielding a 41% response rate.

Sample

The participants for this study were nine married at-home fathers. The sample consisted of fathers who were either current at-home fathers, or who were at-home fathers in the past. Five participants were current at-home fathers and four participants were at-home fathers in the past. Participants were selected through the process of snowball sampling.

Data Collection Instruments

The survey instrument used for this study was the At-Home Father Questionnaire (AHFQ). This questionnaire consisted of 21-items and was developed by the researcher (See Appendix A). Questions were based on a review of related literature and questions used in empirical studies. The researcher of this study created majority of the questions.

This questionnaire was designed to explore how at-home fathers perceive their role as the primary care provider, determine factors that influenced fathers to stay home with their children, and identify if reactions of others to at-home father are generalized. The items pertained to demographics, reasons fathers remained home with their children, perceptions of at-home fathers about their role as the primary care provider, and perceived reactions of others to at-home fathers. The instrument included open-ended, forced-choice, and descriptive questions.

Two questions pertained to gender, ages of the participant's children, and the number of children of the participant's. Three questions explored factors that influenced fathers to remain home with their children as the primary care provider. Four questions referred to self-perceptions of at home fathers. Eight questions addressed information of how others react to at-home fathers. Demographic data were gathered in four questions on the questionnaire.

Since the researcher newly developed this instrument, the content validity was evaluated and reviewed by a panel of three Family and Consumer Sciences university professors who have expertise in the area of family relations and child development. Face validity was determined by two non-participants. The two non-participants reviewed the questionnaire so that the researcher could determine if the questions on the questionnaire would be valid.

Procedure for Data Collection

The surveys were distributed using the snowball sampling approach. There were 10 participants who were contacted through referrals. These participants were given a self-addressed stamped envelope to return the completed questionnaire. Nine of the surveys

were mailed to the participants. These participants were mailed a questionnaire with a self-addressed envelope to return completed questionnaires. The participants were allotted a 2-week time period to return the questionnaires. The researcher administered three of the questionnaires verbally to three participants who had requested for the researcher to read the questions to them. There was not an allotted time limit set for the verbally administered questionnaires. Of 22 questionnaires distributed, nine questionnaires were returned.

Data Analysis

Numerical counts of frequencies and percentages were hand-tabulated by the researcher for the responses to the forced-choice, descriptive, and open-ended questions. For the data analysis, nominal and ordinal measurements were used.

Chapter Four

Results and Discussion

The researcher distributed 22 questionnaires and nine (41%) were returned. The instrument consisted of 21-items. Questionnaire items pertained to the demographic information, reasons fathers stayed home with their children, self-perceptions of the at-home fathers as the primary care provider, and reactions of others to these at-home fathers.

Sample Analysis

The sample consisted of nine fathers who are or were full-time care providers for their children. The ages of the fathers ranged from 25 to 54 years of age. Of the nine fathers, four (44%) were ages 25 to 30, two (22%) were ages 31 to 36, two (22%) were ages 37 to 42, and one (11%) was 49 to 54 years of age.

The participants stayed home as primary care providers between the range of 10 months to 16 years (192 months). The mean number of months the participants remained at-home fathers was 36.7 months. During the range of 10 to 20 months, three (33%) participants remained home as primary care providers. Throughout 21 to 31 months, two participants (22%) remained home as primary care providers. One (11%) participant remained home as the primary care provider for 32 to 42 months, one participant (11%) remained home as the primary care provider; for 43 to 53 months, one participant (11%) remained home as the primary care provider; and one (11%) of the participants remained home as the primary care provider for 192 months (16 years).

Children who received care from their fathers ranged from the ages of 8 months to 13 years old. Of the nine at-home fathers, four (44%) fathers primarily cared for three children while remaining at home, three (33%) fathers cared for one child, and two (22%) fathers remained home to care for two children.

Past employment status of fathers who were currently at-home fathers are as follows: two (22%) worked as business managers; two (22%) worked in construction; and one (11%) worked as a farmer. The current employment status of the four fathers who were at-home fathers in the past were as follows: one (11%) was retired from truck driving; one (11%) was a farmer; one (11%) was a university instructor; and one (11%) was a heavy equipment operator.

The spouse's employment status of the participants were as follows: two (22%) were employed as business managers; two (22%) worked in the education field; one (11%) was a university instructor; one (11%) was a school counselor; one (11%) was a waitress; one (11%) was a physical therapist; one (11%) was an anesthesiologist; and one (11%) was a bank teller.

Results

The purpose of this study was to examine at-home fathers' perceptions of being the primary care provider of their children. The study investigated the following objectives: (a) determine factors that influenced fathers to stay home with their children; (b) explore at-home fathers perceived role as the primary care provider; and (c) identify reactions of others to at-home fathers. The study was also designed to answer the following three questions:

1. What factors influenced fathers to stay home with their children?

2. How do at-home fathers perceive their role as the primary care provider?
3. What are the reactions of others to at-home fathers?

Objective 1: To determine factors that influenced fathers to stay home with their children

Objective one determined factors that influenced fathers to remain home with their children and addressed research question one of this study. Question four on the instrument asked the participants what factors influenced them to remain home with their children as the primary care provider. The participants were given four response choices. The choices were: (a) chose to; (b) laid off; (c) forced to, and (d) other. The results indicated that 45% (n=4) of the participants chose to stay home as the primary care provider. Thirty-three percent (n=3) of the participants chose the option of "other;" 11% (n=1) chose "laid off;" and 11% (n=1) chose "forced to." The second half of question four asked the participants to briefly elaborate on their response.

Forty-five percent (n=4) of the participants indicated that they chose to stay home as the primary care provider. One father chose to remain home with his children because he wanted to spend time with them while they were young. Another father chose to stay home because it was the best option for both he and his wife since his twins were premature babies. One father chose to be the primary care provider of his children because he received an offer from his employer for a voluntary separation to leave. This father took advantage of the opportunity and decided to return to work. Another father stated that when his wife returned to work, he decided to quit farming to raise his children.

Thirty-three percent (n=3) of fathers chose the option “other” for question four. Two of the father’s explanations as to why they had become at-home fathers were because of disabilities that prevented them from working full-time jobs outside of the home. Eleven percent (n=1) of the participants felt they were forced to be the primary care provider of their children. One father replied to the second part of question four by noting that he was a farmer so he always had to be with his children while his wife was working. One at-home father answered question four with the response that he was an at-home father because of being laid off from work. At the time of data collection, this participant had returned to work.

Question six of the instrument asked if the participants felt that being an at-home father was rewarding. Eighty-nine percent (n=8) of the participants thought that being an at-home father was rewarding. One father responded to this question with this statement: “It’s very rewarding being able to see my children grow up. I have been home since our twins were 10 months old, and it’s rewarding to know I can take care of them at a young age.” One father reflected on his experience as a past at-home father: “I was able to teach my children work ethics, right from wrong and the importance of family. It was rewarding to know that I took part in raising my children to be good people.”

Objective 2: To explore at-home fathers’ perceived role as the primary caregiver

This objective was designed to explore at-home fathers’ perceived role as a primary care provider and addressed research question two of this study. Questions 7, 8, 9, 14, 15, and 17 related to the participants self-perceived role as a primary care provider. Question seven asked participants whether being home with their children

was more stressful than working a full-time job outside of the home. Seventy-eight percent (n=7) believed that it was more stressful working a full-time job outside of the home than being an at-home father. The other 22% (n=2) believed that being an at-home father was more stressful than working a full-time job outside of the home. One response from an at-home father was as follows: "Staying home is definitely more stressful. Having twins is more work and more stress. I managed resorts and had over 200 employees, but two children are harder to control."

Question eight asked fathers about the primary responsibility of the housework. The question defined the meaning of housework as washing the dishes, washing the laundry, and cleaning the house. One open-ended question asked the participants if their role as a primary care provider included housework such as washing dishes, cleaning, cooking, etc. The results yielded three different responses. Fifty-six percent (n=5) of the at-home fathers had stated that they typically assume primary responsibility of the housework while their wives are working outside of the home. Another 33% (n=3) shared the responsibility of the housework with their wives. One participant did not assume any of the housework because his wife did the housework.

Question nine asked participants if the role as an at-home father threatened their masculinity. Eighty-nine percent (n=8) of the participants did not feel that their roles as at-home fathers threatened their masculinity. Eleven percent (n=1) of the former at-home fathers did feel that his role as a primary care provider of his children threatened his masculinity. His response to question nine was: "I felt like a loser."

Question fourteen asked the participants if they felt reluctant to tell people about being an at-home father. This question also allowed for explanation and elaboration as

to how the participants felt about their role. Seventy-eight percent ($n=7$) of the participants were not reluctant to inform people about being an at-home father. One response was: "Most people are envious that I am able to and have the patience to take care of my children." One former at-home father responded with this statement: "I am proud of what I did and I would do it all over again." Eleven percent ($n=1$) was reluctant to inform people. One response was: "I think it's embarrassing." An additional 11% ($n=1$) sometimes felt reluctant to inform people about being an at-home father. One at-home father reported that he was sometimes reluctant to tell people about his role. He responded to the second part of question fourteen with this statement: "I don't mind telling people what I do. It usually just ends most conversations because people are surprised or uninterested."

Question fifteen asked the participants if their self-esteem had increased, decreased, or remained the same as an at-home father. Fifty-six percent ($n=5$) of the participants thought that their self-esteem remained the same. Thirty-three percent ($n=3$) thought their self-esteem had increased while being an at-home father. An additional 11% ($n=1$) of the participants thought that their self-esteem had decreased.

Question seventeen asked participants where they go for support or who do they go to for support. This question was an open-ended question. One response was: "I go to a place where I'm socially accepted and my opinions are respected and I respect the opinions of others." Another at-home father stated: "as far as I know there are no support groups for at-home dads." Fifty-six percent ($n=5$) of the at-home fathers said that they went to their family members for support.

Objective 3: To identify if reactions of others to at-home fathers are generalized stereotypes.

Objective three was designed to identify if reactions of others to at-home fathers are generalized stereotypes and answered research question three of this study. Four forced-choice questions addressed research question three. Two of the questions included additional comments from the participants.

Question ten on the instrument asked if participants felt that being an at-home father would cause others to question their masculinity. This question resulted in 100% (n=9) of participants not feeling that being an at-home father would cause others to question their masculinity. One participant felt that women who knew about his role as an at-home father usually responded to him with praise. This at-home father felt that these responses "feed the male ego." Another at-home father stated: "Everyone was very supportive. Personally what other people thought did not matter, it matters how I feel." One participant thought that he was too much of a "guy" to think that others would question his masculinity.

Question eleven asked participants if their family members supported their decision to be an at-home father. When the participants were asked if family members supported their decision about being an at-home father, 89% (n=8) reported that they had their family's support. Eleven percent (n=1) of the participants did not have their families support.

Question twelve asked participants if they had relatives or friends who teased them about being the primary caregiver of their children. The choices were "Yes" or "No" with the option to elaborate on their response. Five of the nine participants responded to

question twelve. Results indicated that 56% (n=5) of the participants were teased.

Forty-four percent (n=4) of the participants were not teased by either friends or family members.

Question thirteen asked participants how they felt when they were teased. There were five choices: (a) angry; (b) embarrassed; (c) did not care; (d) offended; and (e) other. Of the 56% (n=5) of participants who were teased, 60% (n=6) of the at-home fathers "did not care" about being teased. One father (20%) was offended and one father (20%) felt embarrassed when he was teased. One participant noted that when he was teased, "it was for fun, and people were never serious." Another participant commented that when he was teased, he was called "Mr. Mom." This is an example of how stereotypes are used by other people referring to at-home fathers.

References to At-Home Fathers

Question eight-teen on the questionnaire asked the participants if a particular term was more comfortable for them when being referred to as a father who provided primary care. The choices were: (a) househusband; (b) homemaker; (c) stay-at-home dad; (d) at-home father, and (e) other. Forty-four percent (n=4) of the participants felt comfortable being referred to as a stay-at-home dad. Thirty-three percent (n=3) preferred to be referred to as an at-home father. For those choosing the option of "other," 22% (n=2) of the participants preferred to be referred to as a father.

Factors that Influenced Fathers to Stay Home

Forty-four percent (n=4) of the participants reported that they chose to stay home with their children as the primary care provider. This finding addressed the first objective and the first research question of this study. This finding is comparable to the

findings of other studies. Congressional Quarterly (2000) reported that, "a decade ago, many fathers stayed home because they had no choice after being laid off. Now more fathers are doing it by choice." Through previous studies on at-home fathers, Frank (1995) found that fathers chose to stay home to avoid putting their children in day care or because their wives' incomes were higher. The rewarding experience of staying home with their children was an additional factor in influencing at-home fathers.

Perceived Role as the Primary Care Provider

The following findings addressed objective two and research question two of this study. Seventy-eight (n=7) percent of the participants believed that it was more stressful working a full-time job outside of the home than being an at-home father. One at-home father reported, "I think working a full-time job is more difficult. You don't always get the appreciation from work as you do at home with your children." Fifty-six percent (n=5) of at-home fathers reported that they assume primary responsibility of the housework while their wives worked outside of the home.

When the participants were asked if their masculinity was threatened as an at-home father, 89% (n=8) did not feel that their roles threatened their masculinity. Of the 9 participants, 78% (n=7) were not reluctant to inform people about being an at-home father. Cobb (1998) found in a study on at-home fathers that research on men's definition of fatherhood shows that their roles are directly linked with their ideas about masculinity and based on their interactions with others, specifically their spouse, children, and colleagues.

When the participants were asked if their self-esteem changed, the majority of the participants believed that their self-esteem remained the same. Thirty-three percent

(n=3) of the participants believed that their self-esteem increased, and eleven percent (n=1) felt that their self-esteem decreased. Their self-perceptions influenced how they felt about being an at-home father.

Reactions of Others to At-Home Fathers

The following findings addressed objective three and research question three of the study. Participants were asked if they felt that being an at-home father would cause others to question their masculinity. All 100% (n=9) of the participants felt that being an at-home father did not cause others to question their masculinity. One father commented, "...everyone was very supportive. Personally what others thought didn't matter, it matters how I felt." Also, 89% (n=8) of the participants had their family's support for the decision to be an at-home father.

The participants were asked if relatives or friends teased them about being the primary care provider of their children. Of the participants that responded 56% (n=5) of the participants were teased by friends and family. When the fathers were asked how they felt when they were teased, five of the nine participants responded. Sixty percent (n=3) of the fathers were not bothered about being teased. One father felt embarrassed when he was teased and another father felt offended.

Discussion

This study addressed three objectives and three questions. Information gathered about at-home fathers, consisted of factors that influenced fathers to stay home, perceived role as the primary care provider, and reactions of others to the at-home fathers. Supportive literature was difficult to find since there was a lack of existing

literature about the subject of at-home fathers. Some of the supportive literature was found in articles about fathers, gender, unemployed fathers, and family.

Some of the results found from the studies within the review of literature were similar to the results found within this study. For instance, past studies have found that reasons why fathers were remaining home were because of job loss, having the choice to remain home, and parents wanted to avoid putting their children in childcare. Findings from this study found the same reasons, with the additional factor of fathers remaining home because of a disability.

Some of the results from this studied also contradicted findings from the studies within the review of literature. Majority of the findings from previous studies done on at-home fathers had found negative reactions and stereotypical views about at-home fathers. Researchers from previous studies have found that majority of the fathers were not receiving support from their families or friends. Also, studies found that individuals have labeled at-home fathers as not being a “real man,” a “women,” and a “sissy.” However, majority of the participants from this study had experienced positive views from others as an at-home father. Findings from this study also found that majority of the participants had support form their family members and friends.

Summary and Conclusion

Fathers are more willing to choose to stay home with their children as the primary caregiver than fathers of past generations. The majority of at-home fathers assume the primary responsibility of the housework. Most of the participants did not feel that their masculinity was threatened, nor did others' perceptions threaten their masculinity. The participants also experienced support from friends and families. With this support, the

fathers were comfortable to inform people about the role of being an at-home father.

When being referred to as a father staying home with his children, the majority of the fathers preferred to be referred to as a stay-at-home dad.

Chapter Five

Summary, Implications, Recommendations, and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to examine at-home fathers' perceptions of being the primary care provider of their children. The sample consisted of nine at-home fathers. Participants were given the At-Home Father Questionnaire (AHFQ), a 21-item questionnaire designed as an assessment of self-perceptions of at-home fathers. The questionnaire consisted of items pertaining to demographics, reasons fathers stayed home with their children, self-perceptions of at-home fathers, and reactions of others to at-home fathers.

This study was guided by the following objectives: (a) to determine factors that influenced fathers to stay home with their children; (b) to explore at-home fathers perceived role as the primary care provider; and (c) to identify if reactions of others to at-home fathers are generalized stereotypes.

There were various factors that influenced fathers to remain home with their children. One factor was economics. Fathers remained home because staying home lessened childcare costs and job related expenses. Fathers also stayed home due to temporary job loss or permanent job loss because of a disability. Also, some fathers chose to be an at-home father. This study found that the majority of the fathers believed it was rewarding to be home with their children.

This study also found that the majority of the at-home fathers did not believe that their masculinity was threatened by their role as a primary care provider. During their time as an at-home father, fathers reported that they felt that their self-esteem remained the same.

At-home fathers are gradually becoming more accepted by society. This study found that there were more positive reactions from others towards at-home fathers than negative reactions. Also, at-home fathers were receiving positive support from their friends and family members. Additionally, findings from this study showed that there is a need for more peer-support groups. For instance, one participant from this study reported that he was not aware of any support groups for at-home fathers. The majority of the participants reported that they seek support from their family members.

The current research literature relating to at-home fathers is limited, so it is important to continue to explore the experiences of these fathers. Further studies of at-home fathers may find less stereotypical views of fathers as primary care providers of their children.

Implications

Findings from this study imply that more fathers have the opportunity and choice in becoming the primary care provider of their children. For instance, a participant from this study commented, "I quit a good job because I realized my children will only be young one time in life which is the time so important for parental guidance, to show them how to be responsible for their actions, words, and relationships." This quote reflects the choice of a father who remained home as the primary care provider of his children. This finding also implies that children at younger ages will experience having their fathers as primary care providers. Children who have experienced having their fathers remain home as a primary care provider may have closer relationships with their fathers.

This study also seems to suggest that fathers have a positive perception of being an at-home father. Based on the findings from this study, the majority of the fathers had rewarding experiences as at-home fathers. Some fathers thought that it was rewarding to see the different developmental stages that their children go through while growing up. Additional fathers thought it was rewarding to have valuable time with their children. Other at-home fathers thought that it was rewarding to be able to be part of their children's everyday activities such as school, homework, and sports.

Also, their sense of masculinity was not threatened and was not in question. Majority of the participant's self-esteems were not affected, and the majority did not have a problem with informing people that they were at-home fathers. Therefore, these findings seem to imply that at-home fathers are having positive experiences as primary care providers of their children.

Recommendations for Further Research

Based on this exploratory descriptive study, five recommendations were developed for future research regarding at-home fathers. The recommendations include:

1. determine if educational backgrounds influence a father's decision to be an at-home father;
2. examine differences and similarities in the parenting role of at-home fathers to at-home mothers;
3. further explore reactions and responses of others towards at-home fathers;
4. identify and examine support systems for at-home fathers; and
5. explore possible correlations as to why at-home fathers could experience having negative perceptions of being an at-home father.

Higher educational backgrounds of fathers may influence them to remain home as at-home fathers. Those with higher-levels of education may have more options available to them. For example, some jobs that require college degrees may offer the option of having paternity leave. It would be important to do further studies on this subject because more individuals are receiving the opportunity to further their education. The more fathers further their education, the more likely society could experience an increase of at-home fathers. There could be an increase of at-home fathers if there is a correlation with their education status and influence of being a primary care provider.

By examining the differences and similarities of parenting roles among at-home fathers and at-home mothers, the examination could assist with teaching individuals that every at-home parent has different parenting roles within their households. It is important to further examine the parenting roles of the at-home parents so that society will have an understanding of how to work with the functioning of an at-home parent household.

Further exploring reactions and responses of others towards at-home fathers may contribute in determining if there is an increase of acceptance of at-home fathers by society. It is important to explore reactions and responses of others towards at-home fathers because if there is an increase of positive reactions and responses, at-home fathers may become more prominent. If this is the case, society needs to be aware, so that professionals, educators, and families know how to associate with an at-home father.

Further research should also include the examination of support systems for at-home fathers. Support systems include family members, friends, schools, professionals, and society. Further examination of support systems for at-home fathers could help society realize that there may not be enough support systems for at-home fathers. If there is an increase of at-home fathers there will be a need for more support systems.

Further research is needed to see if fathers losing their jobs or being forced to remain home as an at-home father has any correlation to having negative perceptions of being the primary care provider. It is important to find the correlations so that society will know how to work with this type of family structure and know that there is a difference. The family structure of an at-home father who had lost his job or was forced to remain home with his children will be different than an at-home father's family structure of having the choice to remain home.

Recommendations for Practitioners

There are two recommendations suggested for practitioners. Practitioners need to remember that while working with at-home fathers, their family structure is different than that of traditional family structures. For example, the father will be participating in the roles of taking the children to athletic practices, assisting with helping with what some schools would call "room mothers," or making sure dinner is on the table when their family members arrive home. All of these roles would usually be expected from a mother within a traditional family structure. Therefore, parents, teachers, and professionals need to remember that fathers are becoming more involved with their children's everyday activities since more fathers are remaining home as at-home fathers.

Another recommendation would be to assist at-home fathers in establishing support groups. By establishing support groups, at-home fathers can share with other fathers the different or similar experiences that they are going through together. During an interview with Saltzman (1997), one at-home father stated, "They (the mothers) ignored me and never included me ... (p. 71)." Some fathers have a difficult time feeling accepted by other at-home mothers. If there were more support groups for at-home fathers, then these fathers could have a place to go to feel accepted as a stay-at-home parent and receive support beyond family members.

Conclusion

As society and families continue to change, the roles and perceptions of fathers are changing, as well. More fathers are choosing to be the primary care providers of their children. The number of fathers choosing to remain home appears to be increasing with the support of families and society. Further research must be conducted on at-home fathers in order for society to have a better understanding as to why fathers are more willing to be the primary care provider of their children.

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Appendix A

April 28, 2004

I am a graduate student in Family and Consumer Sciences at Eastern Illinois University.

I am conducting a study on the perceptions of at-home fathers for my master's thesis. I would greatly appreciate your participation in completing the questionnaire to the best of your ability. The information from the questionnaire will be completely confidential.

I have provided a self-addressed envelope along with the postage for the questionnaire to be sent back to me. If possible, please return the questionnaire by _____. If you have any questions, please call me at 1-217-345-0584. Thank you for your valuable assistance.

Sincerely,

Mary Babiarz

Dr. Jim Slavik
Faculty Adviser

At-Home Father Questionnaire

Directions: Please respond to each of the questions listed below. Feel free to write any explanatory comments to your responses.

1. How many children do you have?

2. How many boys? _____ How many girls? _____

Ages of your sons _____ Ages of your daughters _____

3. How long have you been or were you an at-home father?

Approximately number of months _____

4. Why did you decide to stay at home with your children? Circle all that apply.

A. Chose to B. Laid off C. Forced to D. Other

4b. Please elaborate on your response to question 4.

5. While an at-home father, are you looking for, or did you look for employment?

Yes

No

6. Do you feel that it is rewarding to be an at-home father?

Yes

No

Please explain.

7. Do you think it is more stressful being home with your child/children or working a full-time job?

Yes

No

Please Explain.

8. Who has the primary responsibility of the housework such as washing the dishes, laundry, cooking, cleaning, etc?

Please explain.

9. Do you feel that being an at-home father threatens your masculinity?

Yes

No

Please explain or give an example.

10. Do you feel that being an at-home father would cause others to question your masculinity?

Yes

No

Please explain.

11. Overall, do your family members support your decision about being an at-home father?

Yes

No

12. Do you have relatives or friends that have teased you about being the primary caregiver of your children?

Yes

No

13. If you were teased, how did it make you feel? Circle all that apply.

A. Angry B. Embarrassed C. Did not care D. Offended E. Other _____

Additional Comments:

14. Do you feel reluctant to tell people that you are an at-home father?

Yes No Sometimes

Please explain.

15. Since becoming an at-home father, your self-esteem has

A. increased B. decreased C. remained the same

16. How would you respond to someone if he or she said, "men are meant to be breadwinners and women are meant to do the housework and take care of the children"?

17. Being an at-home father, where do you go for support, or who do you go to for support when needed?

Please explain.

18. What term is more comfortable to you when being referred to as a father staying home with the children? Circle or fill in one that applies.

A. Househusband B. Homemaker C. Stay at home dad D. At-home father E. Other _____

19. What is your age? _____ Years Old

20. What is your current or previous type of employment? _____

21. What is your wife's/ partner's type of employment? _____

Thank you for taking the time to fill out this questionnaire. Please place the questionnaire in the self-addressed envelope and mail it back to me.