'He's a Mr. Mom': Cultural Ambivalence in Print News Depictions of Stay-at-Home Fathers, 1987-2016

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Abstract:

Stay-at-home fathers challenge norms related to masculinity and gendered divisions of parenting roles. We conduct a content analysis of 94 print news articles about at-home fathers published 1987–2016 in the United States, identifying key themes and comparing results with our earlier research on news depictions of at-home mothers. We also analyze national trends in fathers staying home using Current Population Survey data to understand contexts in which articles were published. Articles were family-centric and disproportionately focused on economic elites, emphasizing their "choice" to stay home, but economic reasons for fathers staying home were described more commonly than in portrayals of mothers. Stigmatization experiences were pervasive in articles, appearing more commonly when staying home was reported as discretionary, but less commonly when staying home resulted from involuntary unemployment in recent periods. Portrayals reflect, reinforce, contribute to, and challenge father-as-provider norms, mirroring changes in masculinity norms over time and revealing cultural ambivalence toward at-home fathers.

Keywords: stay-at-home fathers | fatherhood | masculinities | stigma | content analysis

Article:

While the late twentieth century saw large numbers of women taking on work roles previously reserved for men, men did not similarly move into traditional women's roles, including at-home parenting—even as their wages stagnated and women surpassed them in education—contributing to a "stalled gender revolution" (England 2010; Madrick and Papanikolaou 2007). As part of this stall, after decades of increase, mothers' labor force participation rates plateaued in the 1990s and 2000s (Pew Research Center 2015), giving rise to extensive journalistic interest. Our prior research examined 51 U.S. news articles in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, featuring mothers quitting jobs to stay home with children, finding three pervasive themes: an

emphasis on (1) elite mothers, (2) motherhood over wifehood, and (3) women's "choice" to leave work (Kuperberg and Stone 2008).

Just as these mothers captured journalistic imagination at the turn of the millennium, fathers becoming stay-at-home parents had their newsworthy moment in the early 2010s, a few years after the Great Recession pushed many out of the workforce, at least temporarily (Livingston 2014; Myers and Demantas 2015). We examine portrayals of stay-at-home fathers in 1987–2016 U.S. print news articles, comparing results with our findings on depictions of stay-at-home mothers, and contextualizing portrayals with Current Population Survey (CPS) data on national trends. Examining these portrayals adds to understandings of gendered norms and ideologies about fatherhood, masculinity, and childcare that underlie unequal work and family roles, potentially explaining why few fathers stay home with children. We contribute to gender theory by arguing that portrayals contain contradictions and conditionalities that stem from and reveal *cultural ambivalence* about this role. While stay-at-home fathers are said to be "reshaping American masculinity" (Fetters 2018), our results complicate this understanding.

Stay-at-Home Fathers and Masculinity Norms

Since the 1990s, the modal family has consisted of dual earners, with stay-at-home mothers and especially stay-at-home fathers being atypical (Pew Research Center 2015). In 2016, among mothers of young children, 27.5 percent were home to take care of home/family; among their male counterparts, this role was much rarer, at just 1.5 percent (analysis of CPS data, see below). As with mothers, staying home was more common when fathers had less education, thus facing weaker labor markets, higher unemployment, and lower earnings that might not cover high childcare costs (Harknett and Kuperberg 2011; Kuperberg and Stone 2008; Livingston 2014). Past research found fathers' oft-cited reasons for going home centered on economic factors, including unemployment; earning less than wives; "dead end," unsatisfying, stressful jobs; wives' career opportunities; and financial feasibility, along with intensive parenting ideals, personal preference, negative impressions of day care, and illness (Chesley 2011; Doucet 2018; Rochlen, McKelley, and Whittaker 2010; Smith 1998). Some had achieved career success and economic goals such as paying off debt, and many continued to work part-time, developing careers that allowed flexibility for childcare (Doucet 2018).

While at-home mothers' behavior is atypical, it is normative, but at-home fathers' behavior is both highly atypical and norm-defying—a near-complete role reversal. Men foregoing paid work is a "transgressive act" (Smith 1998), violating masculinity norms encapsulated in hierarchical "hegemonic masculinities," which idealize fathers-as-providers, self-sufficiency, and other characteristics, including a stoic endurance of hardship (Barrett 1996; Myers and Demantas 2015). Hegemonic masculinities permeate society, cultural traditions, and media representations, serving as standards, rarely attained, against which men are judged (Connell 2005; Connell and Messerschmidt 2005; Shafer, Petts, and Scheibling 2021). Ideals can shift over time, as exemplified by the late twentieth-century rise of "caring masculinities," which reject dominant roles, promoting "good fathers" as involved in childcare (Elliott 2016; Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2017), and "hybrid masculinities," which selectively incorporate marginalized and subordinated masculinities and femininities while still including some dominant masculine ideals (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). Yet hybrid masculinities remain rooted in devaluations of care as deemed "feminine," and are used to marginalize poor fathers who do not meet newer middle-class masculinity ideals (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Doucet 2018; Randles

2018). Stay-at-home fathers may face similar marginalization because they engage in childcare, but not employment.

Ambivalence and Stigma
Although more men now engage in childcare and identify as staying home to care for children (Kramer, Kelly, and McCulloch 2015; Livingston and Parker 2019), newer norms are not fully embraced (Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2017). When economic conditions arise that conflict with traditional values and norms, this can lead to collective "cultural ambivalence" before new values are fully accepted—a state in which prevailing norms compete or are inchoate (Park 2013). Cultural ambivalence is tied to Durkheim's concept of *anomie*, roughly a state of "normlessness" occurring during societal economic transitions (Park 2013). Similarly, "sociological ambivalence" arises when a single role or a set of roles or statuses incorporates incompatible social norms, generating role conflict for those with competing roles (Merton 1976). Sociologists have described ambivalence as a characteristic of modernity, but rarely use this concept when describing family life or gendered norms; applications are mainly limited to role ambivalence, such as when grandparents provide childcare, or relationships between adult children and aging parents (Hillcoat-Nallétamby and Phillips 2011).

We extend these concepts to describe contemporary masculinity norms, especially regarding at-home fathers. Ideals of fathers-as-providers are incompatible with staying home and with economic conditions in which men are increasingly facing stagnating wages, joblessness, and lower earnings than women partners, potentially generating cultural ambivalence identifiable through news portrayals. These incompatibilities create role conflict for those undertaking both father and at-home caregiver roles. At-home fathers report tensions about not providing for or "contributing to" their families, especially when home because of unemployment or when they are working class and face stronger breadwinning expectations (Chesley 2011; Doucet 2018; Myers and Demantas 2015; Steinour 2018). They address these tensions by developing hybrid identities incorporating both masculine and feminine qualities, redefining masculinity as "providing" care, resisting "Mr. Mom" labels, reconstructing roles of at-home fathers as masculine and housework as labor-intensive, or even doing housework in a more labor-intensive manner (Lee and Lee 2018; Myers and Demantas 2015; Snitker 2018).

At-home fathers also experience stigmatization because of their norm-violating role (Doucet 2004; Rochlen, McKelley, and Whittaker 2010; Smith 1998; Steinour 2018) despite changing economic conditions and the rise of caring masculinities norms, typifying cultural ambivalence. They may also emphasize their stigmatization to highlight their endurance of hardship, in alliance with masculinity ideals. Stigmatization is a mechanism for enforcing norms, such as the father-as-provider norm, occurring through negative verbal and nonverbal responses, ridicule, stereotyping, and discrimination against those with a different, and discredited, attribute or status (Goffman 1963; Link and Phelan 2001). Stigmatization can be conditional on whether a devalued status is chosen or involuntary, with the latter less stigmatized (Boyce et al. 2007). Members of stigmatized groups experience "stereotype threat," internalizing negative stereotypes, or experiencing concern they will be viewed through the lens of those stereotypes, reducing aspirations to certain roles, and increasing perceptions of negative appraisals (Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016). Prior research found that stereotypes about at-home fathers included that they are lazy, unemployable, "not a good man" (Chesley 2011; Doucet 2004), incompetent parents, "freakish," or "obviously homosexual," according to one father (Smith 1998).

Much prior research on at-home fathers described stigmatization. Fathers reported that mothers were uncomfortable with and suspicious about men joining in parenting spaces dominated by women, and both men and women challenged the legitimacy of their role, contributing to difficulties creating social-support networks and social isolation while reinforcing stigma, discreditation, and a sense of illegitimacy (Chesley 2011; Doucet 2018; Smith 1998; Snitker 2018; Steinour 2018). At-home fathers reported assumptions that their role was temporary, and sometimes excessive praise, reinforcing ideas about parenting being the realm of women and causing them to feel uncomfortable, undermined, or out of place (Smith 1998; Snitker 2018; Steinour 2018). Fathers described being addressed as "Mr. Mom" (the title of a 1983 movie about an inept at-home father), arguably positioning them as deviant or untrustworthy, while evaluating their parenting abilities in relation to women; fathers saw this as a negative label (Snitker 2018).

News Portrayals

News portrayals of at-home fathers can reflect, transmit, construct, and reinforce stigma, even while diffusing information about this role (Cleland 2001) or featuring fathers in a sympathetic light, with ambivalent portrayals mirroring cultural ambivalence about this role. Portrayals can shape public opinion by "framing" social issues, generating "schemata of interpretation" that affect audiences' evaluations of phenomena; frames are identifiable through thematic clusters found with content analysis methods (Altheide and Schneider 2012; de Vreese 2005; Gamson and Modigliani 1989; Goffman 1974). Portrayals can also "symbolically annihilate" devalued groups by omitting, marginalizing, or trivializing them (Merskin 1998).

The news gravitates toward stories on trends and nonnormative behavior, people overcoming adversity or in unusual situations that evoke sympathy or surprise, and role reversals (Gans 1979), all of which can describe at-home fathers. Portrayals and frames can react to trends; those of work and family roles, for instance, changed over time in reaction to labor trends, with some lag (Brown 1978). They are also influenced by the beliefs, norms, values, and social networks of journalists and editors, who occupy relatively elite positions, interacting with and reporting on affluent upper- and upper-middle-class elites who are a major part of their audience; thus, audiences also shape coverage (de Vreese 2005; Gans 1979).

While there is considerable research on stay-at-home fathers, few reports have examined their portrayal in the media. One study, covering the early 2000s, found that 24 percent of news articles described stigma (Burkstrand-Reid 2012). Another found that 1990s TV-news portrayals included only positive images, potentially legitimizing nurturance among men, but featured only professional and managerial-class men (Vavrus 2002). A study of twenty-first-century books found advice regarding status loss and indications that roles were accidental or temporary, accompanied by masculinity loss and hardship (Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2020). Fathers were depicted as inferior to mothers in parenting ability, providing care in "uniquely masculine" ways (Hunter, Riggs, and Augoustinos 2020).

Portrayals of fathers generally shifted in the late twentieth century, reflecting a "new fatherhood" movement related to the rise of caring masculinities, in which media discourse started emphasizing that "good dads" shared in childcare, but still reinforced father-as-provider norms (LaRossa 2015; Marshall et al. 2014). Nurturant fatherhood was increasingly foregrounded, depicted as highly fulfilling to fathers (Milkie and Denny 2014; Vavrus 2002). Yet twenty-first-century depictions persistently emphasized fathers' provider role, with at-home

fatherhood depicted as emasculating (Marshall et al. 2014; Schmitz 2016; Wall and Arnold 2007). Portrayals also featured "bad dads": low-income men depicted as "deadbeat dads" (Coltrane and Adams 2008; Furstenberg 1988). Similar portrayals occurred in academic research, with "good dads" framed as employed, well-educated, caregiving fathers and "bad dads" as less-educated men who were failures as both providers and caregivers (Marks and Palkovitz 2004).

Informed by this prior research, we analyze depictions of at-home fathers in print news media to better understand cultural conceptions of this role. We focus on a 30-year period bridging the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, asking: Who is profiled in news stories about at-home fathers, and how are they depicted? What major themes appear, do they change over time, do they differ when staying home is described as voluntary versus involuntary, and how do they compare with depictions of at-home mothers? How do portrayals map against national trends in staying at home? Men shouldering a larger share of childcare and domestic work is critical to achieving gender equality (England 2010). How does the news "frame" men who do?

Data and Method

Data

We searched the database LexisNexis Academic, using the terms "stay-at-home father," "stay-at-home dad," "at home dad," "at home father," "SAHF," "SAHD," and "Mr. Mom" in U.S. newspapers and magazines published between 1987 (the first year indexed) and 2016. Articles about at-home fathers were analyzed; articles referring to them in the context of another topic (such as a quotation by someone described as an at-home father in an unrelated story) were excluded. We identified 94 articles through this method, coding all articles identified. In addition to coding articles for several features (described below), we coded information for each at-home father discussed in three or more sentences. Two thirds of articles ($n = 60$, 64 percent) included such depictions, with 106 fathers meeting this criterion. To ensure consistency, articles were coded by a single coder (the third author), with a series of pretests and discussions with the other authors to clarify directions and reduce inconsistencies, in line with established content analysis methods (Altheide and Schneider 2012). Our prior study, which had three coders, revealed that coding was straightforward and yielded high levels of agreement, giving us confidence that a well-trained single coder would yield valid and reliable results. After entering data into SPSS, we identified themes quantitatively, made note of articles, or fathers, for which given themes were present, and reread articles to qualitatively analyze three of four themes by hand, recording all relevant quotations, identifying commonalities, and presenting representative quotations below; the fourth (The Daddy Elite) was determined through demographic characteristics of fathers.

Measures

We built on our earlier research of mothers to permit comparisons, using a similar protocol that replicated codesheets and adding additional measures based on themes found in pretests and guided by research on fathers (Altheide and Schneider 2012). Two sets of codesheets were produced (available from the authors): one included features of articles, and one included features of at-home father described in-depth. For articles, we collected information on publication outlets (see Online Appendix Table A1), publication year, length, the section in

which it appeared, and type (general information, or editorial/opinion). We noted mentions of a "trend" or "rise" in staying home, unemployment, or a "choice" to leave the workforce.

For each father discussed in-depth, we collected information about them if mentioned, including marital status, partner's gender, education, age, and number and age of children when the father went home. We recorded the last job before going home and their partner's current job. Because almost no articles mentioned race, we could not determine racial patterns. We noted mentions of fathers' participation in childcare, housework, education, or paid work. If engaged in paid work, we noted whether it was in the same field as their prior job, whether it was freelance/consulting work, and its extent. We also noted whether partners were described as participating in childcare and housework, reasons for leaving the workforce, and whether exits were described using rhetoric such as "chose" or "decided," drawing on themes identified in our prior study. We examined whether *overall* reactions to fathers by partners, children, other family, friends, other fathers or mothers, or strangers were reported as negative, positive, or mixed. A category for "stigma" noted whether fathers received *any* negative reactions or whether depictions mentioned stigma, ostracism, getting "looks," perceived discomfort by others, ridicule, or negative stereotypes about the role; many used the words "stigma" and "stereotypes" explicitly. Finally, we noted other problems mentioned about staying home, including lacking structure or goals, lack of recognition for the work involved in parenting, seeing themselves as less of a man, loss of provider status, boredom, isolation, financial problems, stress, or worry about returns to work. While many of these problems can result from stigmatization, we did not code them as stigmatization itself. For content analyses, percentages were rounded to whole numbers.

Analysis of Trends in Staying Home

We calculated rates at which fathers were at home using the ipums.org online data analyzer to analyze the *Current Population Survey—March supplement* for 1987–2016, weighting results to account for sampling techniques (Flood et al. 2018). Because portrayals focused on fathers of children younger than 5 years (see below), which is when parents are most likely to stay home with children, we limited analyses to parents sharing a household with children younger than 5 years. Stay-at-home rates were calculated using two measures: first, whether parents were out of the labor force for any reason and, second, whether they were out of the labor force for the reason "taking care of home/family." We also examined differences in at-home rates by whether fathers had completed 4-year college degrees or were married (including spouses present or absent from household).

Results

Among 94 articles about stay-at-home fathers published in 1987–2016, the mean length was 1,133 words, with a median of 891.5 words. Just over half (49 articles) were published in general news sections, one-tenth (9) were in business and financial sections, and one third (32) were in lifestyle, living, family, home, or style sections. Three-fourths (70) were general information or reportage, with one-quarter (24) editorials/commentary. Results for articles on at-home mothers were similar, except fully half were editorial/commentary—typically written by women defending their decision or advocating for it.

Trends in News Depictions and Staying Home

Articles were increasingly common over time (Figure 1). Before 1994, only two articles appeared, and in the 1990s, only eight appeared (0.8 per year). Appearances jumped to 33 articles (3.3 per year) in 2000–2009 and to 51 (7.3 per year) in 2010–2016. Coverage increased considerably beginning in 2012 and remained high, but declined in 2016 after peaking in 2015.
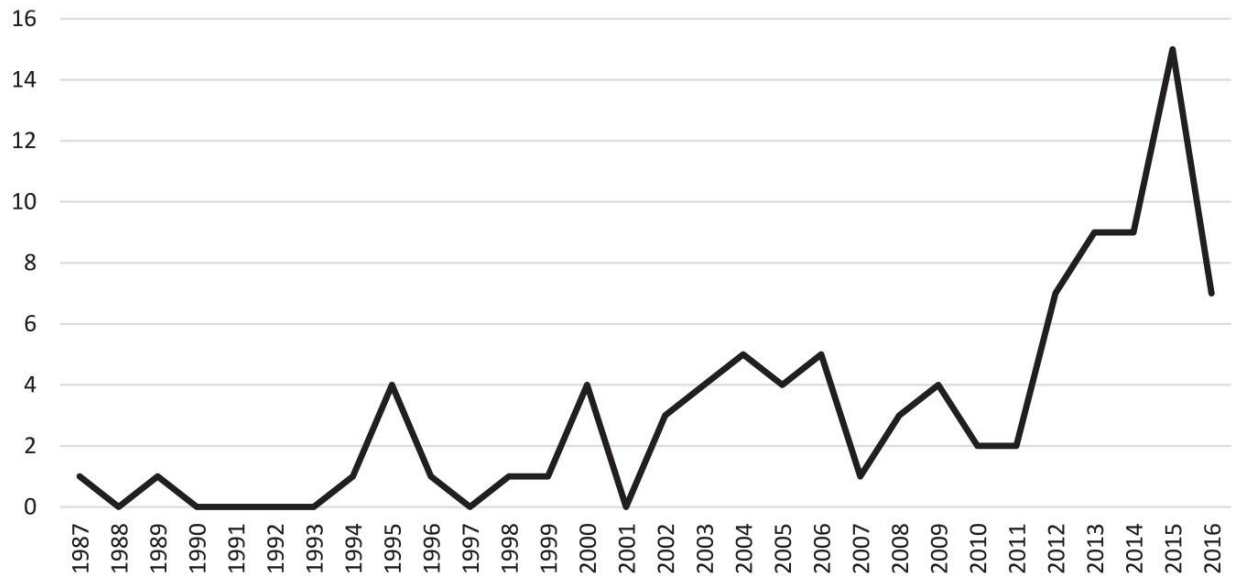
Figure 1: Number of Articles About Stay-at-Home Dads by Year of Publication

Although the rate at which fathers stayed home was very low, it rose in the period examined, and articles overwhelmingly (96 percent) framed the phenomenon as a "trend." As shown in Figure 2, the percentage of fathers out of the labor force rose from 3.6 percent to 6.6 percent from 1987 to 2016, with considerably higher rates beginning in 2009, peaking in 2013 before plateauing at slightly lower levels. The percent at home to care for family similarly increased from 0.2 percent in 1987, with increases especially in 2010 and later peaking at 2.1 percent in 2013 before declining to 1.5 percent in 2016, but still exceeding rates witnessed in 2010 or earlier. In contrast, mothers' rates of staying home, always much higher than fathers,' did not show a clear pattern, declining in the 1990s before increasing slightly in the early 2000s, and then plateauing; in 2016, 27.5 percent were home to care for family, and 35.6 percent were out of the labor force.
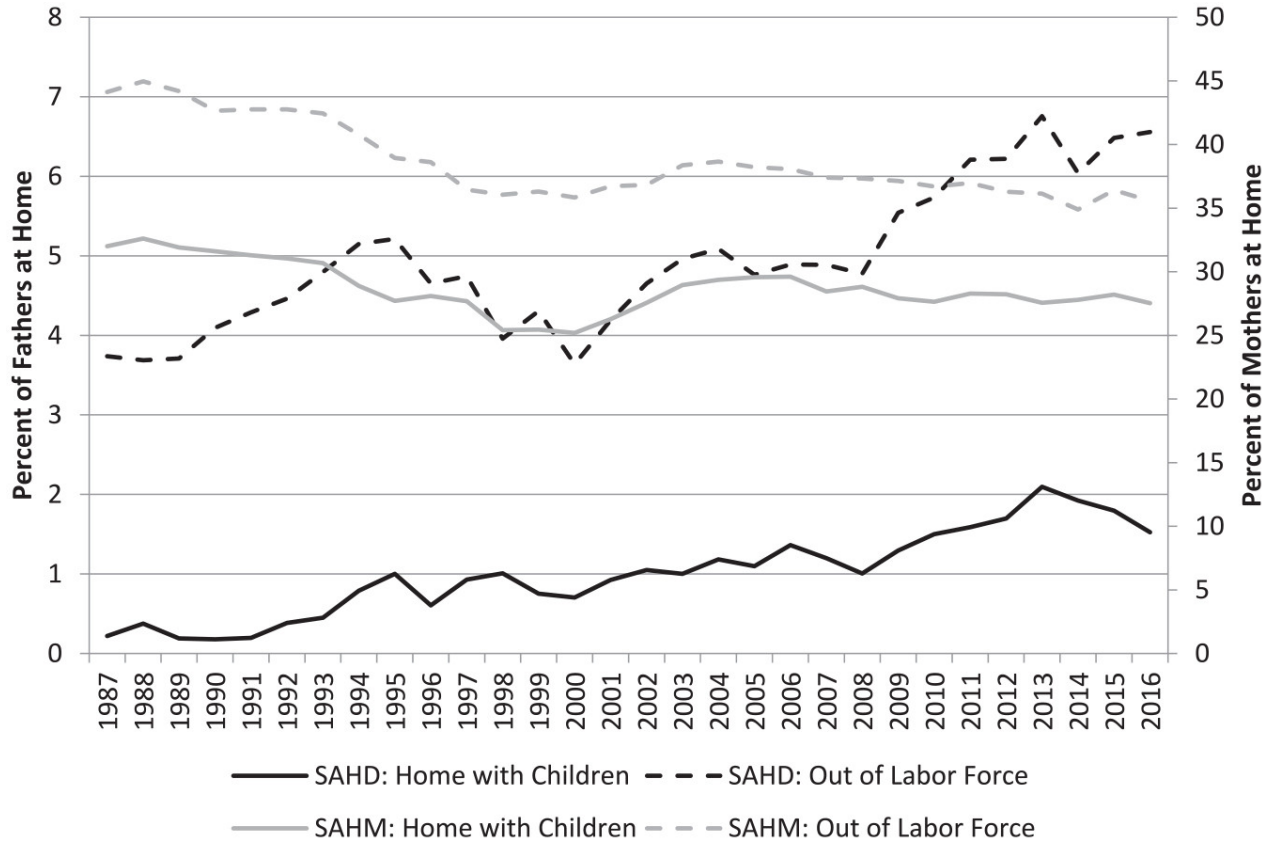
Figure 2: Percentage of Fathers and Mothers of Children Below 5 Years at Home, 1987–2016
Note: SAHF = stay-at-home father; SAHM = stay-at-home mom.

Imaging Stay-at-Home Fathers: Themes in Depictions

We identified some similar themes in depictions of at-home fathers and mothers, but also found important differences. Most notably, stigmatization was a significant theme for at-home fathers. We describe and illustrate themes below.

Family First, Child-Centric. Among 106 at-home fathers described in-depth, those whose age could be identified (42) were on average 34 years old when they went home, with three-quarters in their 30s. Those whose number of children were discussed (93) averaged 1.4 children when they went home. Virtually all (98 of 99) whose children's ages were mentioned had children aged below 5 years when they went home, and for 82 whose children's ages could be exactly determined, more than four-fifths (68) had children aged below 1 year.

Most portrayals discussed how fathers came to stay home. Almost all (103) mentioned going home to care for children, and 14 mentioned housework needs. Most frequently cited was wanting parental care for children, mentioned in 64 (60 percent) descriptions of fathers, such as one who went home "after balancing the expenses of childcare—and the value of having a parent at home." Thirty fathers were described as preferring to be home instead of working, and 16 as having partners who wanted them home. Only four mentioned a father being better suited to taking care of children than their partner. For women, taking care of children was similarly the

overwhelming reason for being home, but fathers mentioned a greater variety of economic motivations (discussed further below), whereas mothers' exits were reported as almost entirely family focused.

Virtually, all (102 of 106) fathers discussed participation in childcare, and more than half (59, 56 percent) mentioned housework. Twenty-three fathers mentioned partners' childcare and 14 mentioned partners' housework, although neither was usually portrayed as extensive; just two mentioned that their wife "takes over when she gets home." By contrast, only 16 of 98 mothers in our prior research described housework, eight mentioned partners' childcare, and one mentioned partners' housework.

Although fathers were described as at-home dads, 30 (28 percent) discussed paid employment at home and four more were described as returning to work after staying home. Similarly, in depictions of at-home mothers, more than one-third were engaged in paid work. Yet at-home father status and family obligations were central to depictions, with employment discussed as secondary to parenting roles, and often done from home. For example, one father, who started a business from home, "learned things along the way, including the importance of an answering machine. 'When you change a diaper, the phone will ring.'" Some brought children to work, such as one who "has grown comfortable with his 8-month-old daughter riding shotgun with him on advertising calls around the area."

Work was linked to past professions and often depicted as sporadic. Most (26 of 28 whose past and current jobs were specified) worked in the same field as their past job. Nine of 30 were doing freelance or consulting work. Eight of 14 whose hours were described worked 1 day a week or less, or only episodically, whereas only six worked at least 2 days a week regularly. Among fathers not employed already, 15 planned to return to work, with four actively seeking a job. One was unsure, and only three would definitely not return to work. In total, 49 of 106 fathers (46 percent) were portrayed as currently working or planning to work in the future.

The Daddy Elite. Just over half of fathers whose former job could be identified (99) left professional occupations with potential for high pay, often requiring advanced degrees, and most partners whose jobs were identified (83) worked in similar occupations (see Table 1). The elite status of both partners' jobs paralleled our observations for mothers. Particularly common were men partnered with lawyers (10), doctors (8), pharmacists (7), and professors (6), together constituting one-third of known partners' jobs. Only eight partners worked in creative or education professions and only seven in working-class jobs. By contrast, among at-home fathers themselves, only one previously worked as a lawyer and one as a professor. Almost one-third (30) worked in creative or education professions at the non-professorial level (professions often having lower salaries) or were students, and 17 were previously employed in working-class jobs.

TABLE 1: Former Jobs of Stay-At-Home Fathers and Partners' Current Job

| Job type	Father's former job (n)	Partner's current job (n)
Professional: Supervisory (manager, supervisor, business owner, president, and administrator)	16	10
Professional: Other (architect, archeologist, lobbyist, computer programmer, IT specialist, counselor, car salesman, engineer, financial services, biologist, vice president, registered nurse, social worker, pilot, campaign manager, public relations, landscape architect, mortgage loan officer, and acupuncturist)	29	22
Professional: Medical doctors and pharmacists	0	15
Professional: Lawyer	1	10
Professional: Banker, financial manager, accounting, trade analyst, actuary, and mortgage broker	5	7
Professor	1	6
Total professional	52 (53%)	68 (82%)
Creative, sports (creative director, artist, illustrator, fashion industry, writer, graphic designer, journalist, musician, photographer, professional wakeboarder, TV writer, and post-production or video editor)	20	6
Student	3	2
Education (teacher, higher education except professors)	7	0
Total education/creative	30 (30%)	8 (10%)
Working class: Restaurant industry (bartender, chef, and food buyer)	3	0
Working class: Sales, retail, and real estate	5	2
Working class: Other (repairman, factory work, hotel industry, mechanic, shipping and receiving, and truck driver)	7	0
Working class: Secretary, office manager	0	4
Working class: Military, security, and firefighter	2	1
Total working class	17 (17%)	7 (8%)
N, identified jobs	99	83

Among fathers whose education was identified (36), only two had less than a college degree, 26 (72 percent) had a 4-year college degree, and eight (22 percent) had a graduate degree. This overrepresentation of highly educated fathers contrasts with national trends in staying home (see Figure 3). For both measures, fathers with *lower* levels of education had substantially *higher* rates of staying home. Those without a college degree were a large majority of at-home fathers;

across all years, only 17.7 percent of fathers home to care for family and 14.3 percent of fathers out of the labor force had a college degree (not shown, available from authors).
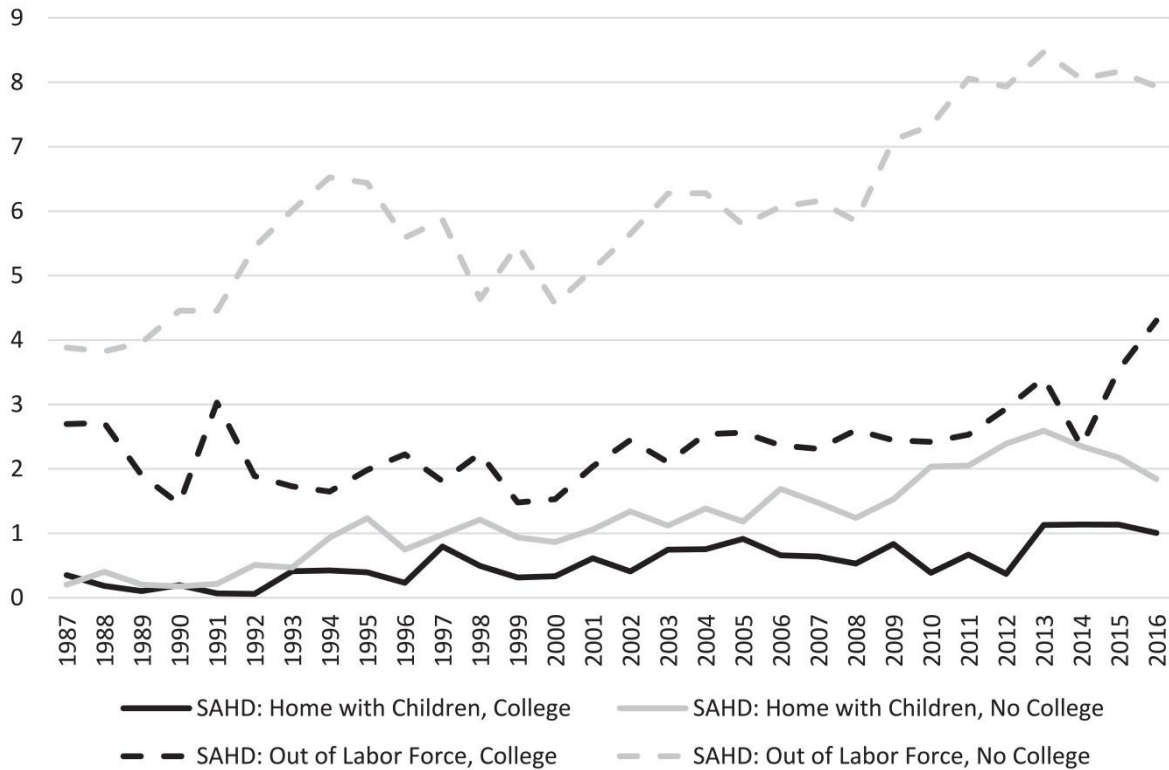
Figure 3: Percentage of Fathers of Children Aged Below 5 Years at Home, by Education
Note: SAHD = stay-at-home dad.

Portrayals also focused on heterosexual married families. Nearly all fathers whose partners' gender could be determined (103) were in heterosexual relationships, with only one gay father discussed. Almost all whose marital status could be determined (97 of 104) were married; four were separated or divorced, two were cohabiting, and one was widowed. By contrast, in national trends, married fathers were *less* likely than unmarried fathers to stay at home, by either definition of staying home (see Figure 4). Although the majority—76 percent of fathers of young children home to care for family and 75.7 percent out of the labor force across all years—were married, they were overrepresented in news depictions compared with the population.
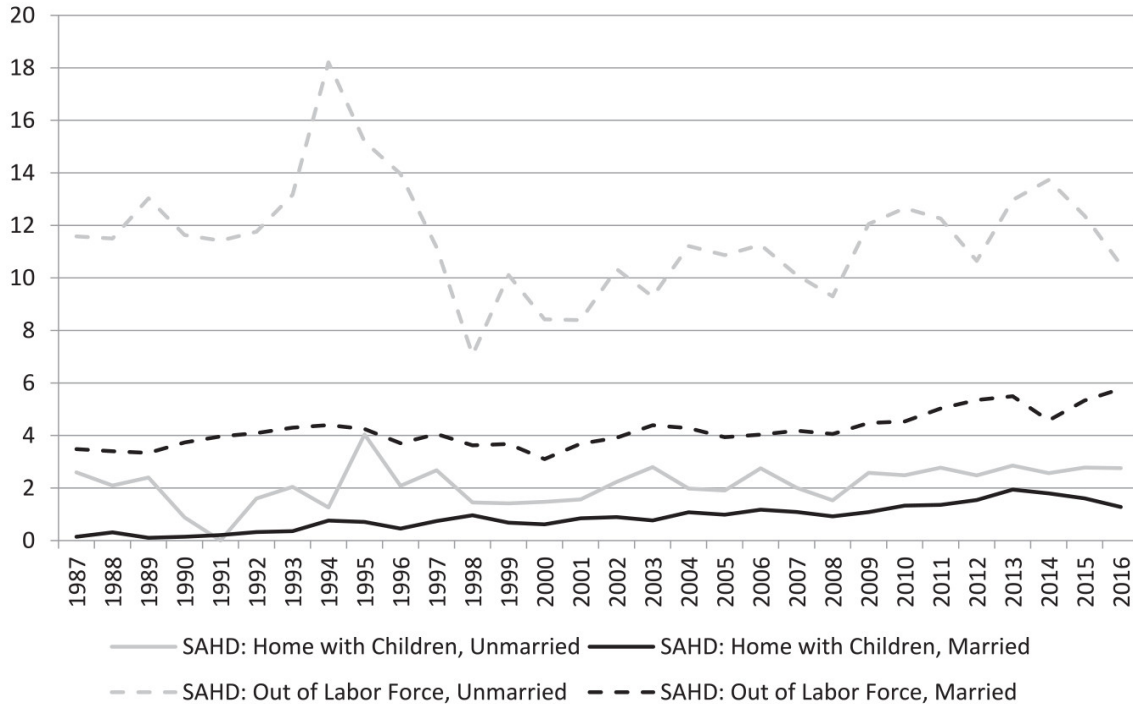
Figure 4: Percentage of Fathers of Children Aged Below 5 Years at Home, by Marital Status
Note: SAHD = stay-at-home dad.

"Choice" Rhetoric. In addition to citing childcare, housework, and personal preference (discussed above), fathers mentioned several economic reasons for staying home, with these more pronounced than in depictions of mothers. Thirty-six fathers mentioned a partner who earned more or had higher potential income, and 15 had a partner whose job had better fringe benefits. Ten mentioned the ability to work from home, and 19 mentioned involuntary unemployment. Twenty-six cited childcare costs, seven described spouses with inflexible jobs, and four left jobs that were too inflexible, with three mentioning problems finding childcare. Among mothers, economic reasons for leaving the workforce were rarer; childcare costs were mentioned by five, seven described overly demanding jobs, and nine had difficulties juggling work and family, with none mentioning unemployment.

Staying home was usually described as a "choice," in language echoing articles about at-home mothers. Titles of articles included "For more fathers who stay at home, it's a *choice*" and "They're stay at home dads, by *choice,* and loving it" (emphases added). Eighty-two percent (87) of reports of fathers and 76 percent (71) of articles included rhetoric about "choosing" or "making a decision" to stay at home—sometimes at odds with other details. Five fathers who initially went home because of unemployment framed this as a choice to not look for new employment. One article was titled "More fathers *choosing* to stay home with kids after job losses" (emphasis added). Another father unable to work outside the home after work-related injuries was described as staying home with his newborn because he "jumped at the chance." One article, describing a father laid off right when their daycare provider left the country, stated "Staying home was a *choice* he and his wife made together. 'We knew it was the best *decision,* and we knew he would do a great job at it.' [his wife] stated" (emphasis added).

Stigmatization and the Mr. Mom Problem. Fathers were quoted repeatedly and at length about stigmatization experiences, a theme entirely absent from depictions of at-home mothers. Whereas children were universally depicted as supportive of at-home fathers, and 65 of 72 partners' initial reactions were described as positive, two partners opposed their staying home, and five were described as having mixed reactions, mostly in response to not having more active parenting roles themselves. One mother said, "It took a while for me to let go of the reins" and another was described as sad when her daughter would stop crying in her husband's arms, but not hers. A third said, "It was tough at the beginning and there are some days when it's hard. . . . I go through stages where it bothers me, but the answer always is 'What's the alternative?' Sometimes I feel like I just have to suck it up and, well, take it like a man." These remarks encapsulate the gendered role conflict in this arrangement and the ensuing uneasiness and ambivalence it created. Reactions of other family members were less commonly mentioned, with three positive and five mixed.

More commonly mentioned were reactions of other parents, particularly mothers, at schools, parks, or in public. Only one of 29 described only positive reactions from these sources. Half (17 of 29) described mixed reactions, and 11 only negative reactions. Actual or perceived negative reactions specifically from mothers were reported by 26 fathers. One father was confronted by moms on the playground asking, "Why are you lurking around the playground?" One experienced hostility from mothers on the playground "closing ranks" on him and another described himself as "the leper" to mothers. One said that neighborhood moms were "not kind" and "I'd go to birthday parties or playgroups, and I could sense the whispers. They felt like I was intruding." One father described feeling uncomfortable attending a mothers' group, stating, "It's pretty acceptable if a mom does it, it's a pejorative if a dad does it. The perception is that maybe I let my wife wear the pants or I'm not supporting the family. These perceptions don't apply to me, but you walk in the meeting aware of these stereotypes."

Even more commonly mentioned were reactions of strangers, with only one of 32 described as entirely positive, 20 as having mixed reactions, and 11 having only negative reactions, with some reports indicative of internalized stigma and stereotype threat. Eleven fathers also mentioned only positive reactions from friends, but for 12 those reactions were mixed. One father said, "someone will find out what I do, and the conversation will stop, they'll go talk to someone else." Another said, "There's definitely a stigma—ok, a stigma's not the right word—there's an image when you're a stay-at-home dad. . . . The first reaction I get is, he must have lost his job, something must have gone wrong." One father related, "Some people ask if I'm looking for a job. Some people think I will go insane . . . there are plenty of jokes about 'Mr. Mom.'" Another discussed strangers asking, "Is it Daddy's day today?" adding that when he responded "Every day is Daddy's day. I stay home and my wife works" that "sometimes [he'd] get a funny look." Similar experiences were mentioned by others, who described being asked, "Oh, are you babysitting today?" or "Oh, are you Mr. Mom today?" Reports of "odd" "funny" or "skeptical" looks were common. One father said he "got teased and taunted by other fathers," often being asked "Oh, so you're Mr. Mom now?" Several articles used the phrase "He's a Mr. Mom."

Fathers were depicted as pushing back against stigma. One countered, "You wouldn't call a woman who works Mrs. Daddy," going on to say that "Mr. Mom" is insulting and describes an inept father. Another stated, "I don't care what people say about men staying home, that it's wimpy or other explicit words." One father stated, "I now know why women are so angry . . . for people in the work world, their opinions on anything are considered more valid than those who

just take care of children. Here's the great line: 'Well, all you do is hang out at the park all day.' The gender switch has been difficult because of the outside world, but very rewarding in my internal world." Although positive reactions were rarer, men highlighted them, sometimes reporting excessive praise. One father reported, "The sight of several men pushing strollers sometimes actually elicits cheers from passersby. We get a lot of people cheering—women love it, women who are moms." Another was quoted as saying: "We've gotten so many people who pull over as we walk along and say how much they loved seeing us with our kids."

Several articles described stigmatization of stay-at-home fathers generally without focusing on experiences of any one father, sometimes describing diminished stigma, often using the term "stigma" explicitly. Representative titles included "Stigma aside, dad's glad to stay home" and "Stay-at home fathers face isolation and a lingering stigma." Articles described challenges facing men at home: "Stay-at-home dads are still subject to ridicule, but as society has become more accustomed to them, they've become more accepted." "Stay-at-home dads face their own kind of desperation: strange looks from moms and nannies, snide remarks from former colleagues, and elusive playdates." "Dads who make these changes say they face a stigma that women don't. A woman who heads home might be looked at as less of an employee . . . but not less of a woman. Men, however, suspect that their manhood is questioned. That stigma is real, but [at-home dads] are taking a step toward eliminating it."

In total, 46 fathers in 34 articles reported stigma, comprising 36 percent of all articles and 57 percent—the majority—of the 60 articles that discussed stories of fathers in-depth. Stigmatization appeared in depictions mentioning unemployment at lower rates (32 percent) than those not mentioning job loss (46 percent), although results were not significant in a chi-square test across all years (Table 2). Stigmatization was significantly tied to choice, present in 49 percent of portrayals of fathers that used choice rhetoric, but only 16 percent of portrayals without choice rhetoric.

In addition to stigmatization experiences, fathers mentioned other problems with staying home, some of which may have resulted from stigma-related experiences such as ostracism by at-home mothers, or internalized stereotypes. The stress of childcare was mentioned by at-home fathers at more than four times the rate of mothers: 65 (61 percent) and 13 (13 percent), respectively. Isolation was also common, discussed by 50 fathers (47 percent) compared with one quarter of at-home mothers. Boredom was discussed by 33 fathers, and 18 felt a lack of recognition for the hard work involved in childcare, while 11 mentioned problems with a lack of structure or goals, perceptions noted by roughly equal proportions of women.

Beyond these well-known challenges to at-home parenting, men voiced a variety of concerns related to work and masculinity. Eight were worried about their ability to return to work and seven mentioned financial problems. Nine felt bad about losing their status as a provider, and eight said they saw themselves as less of a man or had to "grapple with my own feelings of what it means to be a man" or words to that effect, problems unique to fathers. One at-home dad stated, "It takes one's manhood, chews it up, spits it out and does it again. . . . I don't have a lot of friends who could do this." Another told a journalist that "Dads need to come to terms with not being the main breadwinner and realize that their contribution at home is not meaningless . . . the first year can be a hard transition time." Finally, one recounted, "If I were a woman, people would say I was amazing. But I'm a man, and so this is seen as weak."

Table 2: Trends in Themes by Year of Publication

Theme	1987–2000	2001–2007	2008–2011	2012–2016	Total
Stigma: Per article with fathers	60%	56%	78%	48%	57%
Per father	63%	44%	50%	33%	43%
Per unemployed father	0%	50%	75%	10%†	32%
Per father not mentioning unemployment	67%	44%	40%	39%	46%
Per father with choice rhetoric	69%	48%	50%	42% *	49%**
Per father with no choice rhetoric	33%	0%	50%	0%	16%
Mentions unemployment: Per article	29%	32%	55%	32%	34%
Per father	5%	15%	29%	22%	18%
Choice rhetoric: Per article	79%	82%	65%	75%	76%
Per father	84%	93%	71%	78%	82%
Articles with fathers (*n*)	10	16	9	25	60
Fathers (*n*)	19	27	14	46	106
Articles (*n*)	14	22	11	47	94
Unemployed fathers (*n*)	1	4	4	10	19
Fathers not mentioning unemployment (*n*)	18	23	10	36	87
Fathers with choice rhetoric (*n*)	16	25	10	36	87
Fathers with no choice rhetoric (*n*)	3	2	4	10	19

$\dagger$ $p < .10$. *$p < .05$. **$p < .01$ in chi-square tests of stigma by mention of unemployment or by choice rhetoric, within period.

Trends in Themes Over Time

Themes did not vary substantially by the section in which the article appeared, except that discussions of unemployment were more common and stigmatization less common in business/financial sections (results available from authors). To examine changes over time, we divided results into four periods, corresponding with waves of coverage (see Figure 1) and historical events. The first included all articles published from 1987 through 2000. The second, 2001–2007, included the post-9/11 recession period. The third covered 2008–2011, including the Great Recession and immediate aftereffects, and the fourth covered the 2012–2016 post-recession era.

Table 2 demonstrates that portrayals of stigmatization became less prevalent in the last period. Whereas stigmatization was discussed in most articles featuring in-depth father portrayals prior to 2012, rising to 78 percent of articles with in-depth portrayals during the Great Recession, rates dropped to just under half in the post-recession era. Similarly, the percent of in-depth father depictions discussing stigmatization dropped from 63 percent in the late 20th century to 50 percent in 2008–2011 and one-third in the post-recession era. In articles, discussions of choice rhetoric and unemployment were consistent in three of four eras, with the exception being the Great Recession, when choice rhetoric dropped from being present in more than three-fourths of articles to 65 percent, and discussions of unemployment increased from below one-third to more than half. Among in-depth father portrayals, somewhat similar patterns emerge: Choice rhetoric was not only least common during the Great Recession, but also lower in the post-recession era compared with pre-recession eras. Discussion of unemployment was highest during the Great Recession, remaining elevated during the post-recession era compared with earlier periods.

Examining relationships between unemployment and stigmatization over time, we found that unemployed fathers were somewhat (but not significantly) more likely to describe stigmatization experiences in 2001–2007 and 2008–2011 than were fathers not depicted as unemployed, but in the other two periods they were less likely to be depicted as experiencing stigma; in 2012–2016, the relationship between stigmatization and unemployment was negative and marginally significant in a chi-square. Stigmatization was positively tied to choice rhetoric in three of four periods, but this relationship was significant only in 2012–2016 in chi-squares calculated separately by period.

Discussion

Print news depictions of at-home fathers and mothers had substantial similarities. Both topics had widespread and broad coverage, targeting a general readership, and were seen as newsworthy, although articles on mothers were more commonly first-person testimonials seeking to convince women of the desirability of heading home. Articles about at-home fathers, whose behavior is far less frequent and more norm-challenging, were less likely to advocate and more likely to remain neutral in describing the phenomenon or to focus on stigmatization of the role, reported in most articles featuring in-depth depictions of fathers. Coverage corresponded to actual trends in terms of timing, but lagged behind trends to some extent, similar to patterns found in past research on depictions of changing work–family roles (Brown 1978). Coverage might even appear disproportionate, given low rates of fathers staying home, but increasing attention reflects a real increase in rates.

Depictions contained four themes serving as "frames," potentially shaping audience attitudes and interpretations (de Vreese 2005) regarding at-home fathers. Themes in depictions of at-home fathers and mothers were similar, with some nuances and one notable exception. As with mothers, reasons for leaving the labor force and living at home were dominated by young children requiring intensive childcare, although housework was more commonly discussed in portrayals of fathers, perhaps because mothers took it for granted as "women's work." Framing fathers as leaving the workforce primarily to care for children challenges gender norms. While work-related reasons known to play a role in the decision were given short shrift in at-home mother depictions, this was not true for fathers, for whom the reasons depicted were in line with research showing that economic issues—especially unemployment and low wages—figured more prominently.

The appeal of the phenomenon was enhanced by associating at-home parenthood with married couples and with college-educated fathers and partners in elite professional roles; in this regard, portrayals did not reflect realities that men with lower levels of education are more likely to be, and make up the majority of, at-home fathers, "symbolically annihilating" men with less education and unmarried men who take on this role (Merskin 1998). Instead, at-home parenthood was linked to middle- and upper-middle-class status and thus positioned desirably, potentially increasing the chance of others adopting this role (Cleland 2001). This focus on elites may in part result from social networks of journalists and editors, or general bias toward coverage of elites in the news (de Vreese 2005; Gans 1979).

Choice rhetoric framed fathers' return to home, a pattern we also found in depictions of mothers. For mothers, this "choice" was triumphant, linked to third-wave feminism, positioning going home as a now-valid, no longer devalued option, reinforcing notions of traditional femininity. In contrast, for fathers, stigmatization was significantly more common when staying home was described as voluntary, supporting a narrative that fathers who *choose* to violate norms by staying home with children are likely to experience negative consequences.

Both fathers and mothers at home faced common challenges linked to being an unpaid caregiver, including stress, isolation, and identity loss. Unique to fathers, however, was the profound experience of stigmatization, described in most articles featuring stories of stay-at-home fathers in-depth and, more than one third of all articles, potentially reducing aspirations to this role (Spencer, Logel, and Davies 2016). They were seen as incompetent as parents, experienced role conflict, were further alienated or estranged by being viewed as short-term babysitters or potential pedophiles "lurking" at the playground, ostracized by the mothers who most populated their world, and struggled to overcome challenges, misunderstandings, and often outright derision of their role. Perhaps because of stigmatization and internalized stereotypes of fathers as inept, additionally supporting a narrative of negative consequences to staying home, at-home fathers were more than four times as likely as at-home mothers to be depicted experiencing stress and twice as likely to be depicted experiencing isolation, which were discussed in most in-depth father portrayals. Although depictions of stigmatization became less common over time as fathers staying home became more common, they were present in almost half of articles featuring in-depth portrayals of fathers in the post-recession era, suggesting that norms of fathers-as-providers persisted, competing with newer fatherhood norms. Like the number of articles overall, shifts in norms lagged behind changing economic circumstances, with sharp reductions in stigmatization notable only in the post-recession era.

Most negative reactions that fathers faced came from outside the home, but some also came from within. Women partners expressed regrets about losing traditional family roles, and continued to engage in them to an extent not seen by men counterparts. Prior research on at-home fathers similarly found that intensive parenting norms shaped their women partners' guilt and jealousy about parenting roles, resulting in further household tensions and role conflict as both men and women struggled with non-normative roles (Chesley 2011).

In emphasizing stigmatization in depictions, and in fathers' descriptions of themselves persisting despite that hardship, portrayals may reflect another form of masculine behavior—that of stoically enduring hardship (Barrett 1996). In this respect, fathers are portrayed as reaffirming their masculinity in accordance with hegemonic norms, while also reifying existing gender boundaries by displaying which types of behavior falls outside those boundaries (Bridges and Pascoe 2014). The excessive praise and "Mr. Mom" discourse that some fathers experienced also reinforced gender boundaries. Fathers' insistence on pushing back against the "Mr. Mom" identity and stigma, including one father's emphasis that his friends could not handle this role, can be seen as discursive strategies to masculinize their role identity.

Although depictions of stigmatization reflect reality (as research shows), the centrality of stigma tends to reinforce notions of masculinity that stigma defends, even when fathers are described as resisting stigma. This may alarm readers who might be contemplating the role. But offsetting this tendency, many articles were sympathetic to fathers, giving voice to their objections and portraying efforts to actively undermine stigma, through showing them resisting stigmatization or recounting positive experiences and reactions. Children and partners were depicted as reacting mostly positively to the role, and the modal depiction discussing other family, friends, other parents, and strangers described a mix of both positive and negative reactions from those sources. In recent periods, articles featuring in-depth depictions of at-home fathers were evenly split between those that did not discuss stigmatization and those that did.

This split in portrayals is indicative of cultural ambivalence regarding at-home fathers, with mixed reactions common, and at-home fathers described as both experiencing and resisting stigma. Cultural ambivalence arises when traditional norms and roles, here related to gender and parenting/work roles, compete with changing economic conditions. Some aspects of portrayals reflect new hybrid or caring masculinities, and stigmatization was reduced over time, potentially signaling shifting norms (Bridges and Pascoe 2014; Elliott 2016). Yet still-powerful masculinity norms position fathers in this most extreme of gender reversals as norm violators, forgoing or unable to achieve their prescribed role as financial providers, especially when they voluntarily "opt out" of work, with the at-home father role sociologically ambivalent, limiting the willingness of men to assume this role. News portrayals subsequently communicate ambivalent messages, portraying at-home fathers as elites and bringing attention to this role, but not fully embracing it, describing mixed reactions, and emphasizing stigmatization, bolstering inequalities.

In the post-recession era, more articles about at-home dads appeared, with some differences compared with earlier articles. Depictions of stigmatization fell to their lowest levels, and were less present when unemployment was mentioned, with more understanding, perhaps even face-saving, extended to these men. Depictions of unemployment, which increased over time, remaining elevated in the post-recession era, perhaps signaling changing norms in response to a critical mass of fathers in this role due to economic instability. Yet a "choice" to stay home remained positively tied to stigma. Building on earlier findings that "good dads" are portrayed as employed, well-educated, and active caregivers (Coltrane and Adams 2008; Marks and Palkovitz

2004), and that devalued roles are less stigmatized when involuntary (Boyce et al. 2007), here well-educated unemployed fathers are still "good dads" as long as they are involuntary victims of economic circumstances. Yet despite their education, and marriage to professionals who can financially provide for their children, they are "bad dads" when they are active gender norm violators and choose to opt out of a financial provider role, experiencing stigmatization as a result.

This split is again indicative of the cultural ambivalence surrounding this role, arising from, and revealing sensitivity in norms to, new economic realities that compete with persistent father-as-provider norms. Similarly, research on attitudes toward working mothers found that when a family needed their income, 76 percent agreed they should work, but only 51 percent agreed they should work when their income was unneeded; 71 percent believed fathers should work full-time even if their income was unneeded (Jacobs and Gerson 2016). As individual and broader material conditions shift, and some mothers need to work while some fathers cannot find employment, gendered work norms may shift accordingly. But changes in norms are conditional on whether nontraditional roles are discretionary or involuntary, tempering broader change in gendered norms and roles. The conditional nature of stigmatization and its co-occurrence with larger trends of economic precarity suggest caution is warranted in interpreting the rise in stay-at-home fathers as reflecting an overall liberalization of masculinity norms; if economic conditions shift further, trends and norms can reverse, as with staying home rates showing some decline in the post-recession era.

Conclusion

Depictions of at-home fathers play a disruptive and, in some ways, contradictory role. They challenge traditional masculinity norms by spotlighting a newly emerging trend and by focusing on elite men who have the potential to diffuse this innovative behavior to a wider population (Cleland 2001). Yet they also reflect and reinforce traditional norms by emphasizing stigmatization experienced by at-home fathers, cautioning against the role, especially when it is voluntary. Gender inequalities are not only challenged by these portrayals of "caring masculinities," but are also reproduced in new ways that uphold existing gender structures and hegemonic ideals.

We build gender theory related to "good/bad dads," and additionally build theory by extending the concept of cultural ambivalence to the study of men's roles. We find that conceptions of who is a "good dad" or "bad dad" can vary based on wider economic circumstances, and by whether fathers violate gendered norms voluntarily, even among well-educated fathers whose children are provided for. The cultural ambivalence we identify reflects a transitional period in fatherhood in which economic conditions have undergone sustained shifts but compete with older norms, restricting the extent to which men embrace new norms and roles. News coverage furthers ambivalence through messaging that both amplifies and cautions against this role. Understanding depictions of stay-at-home fathers—both in terms of messages diffused and reinforced by the news, and the realities, norms, and cultural ambivalences that they reflect—is key to understanding why men are reluctant to stay home with children, contributing to the stalled gender revolution (England 2010).

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Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

Note

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