

At-home fathers, breadwinning mothers

Relational dialectics in lived vs. mediated experiences of fathers as primary caregivers

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Background

While a growing body of research demonstrates the importance of involved fathers in healthy child development (Child & Family Research Partnership, 2018), very involved fathers – those acting as primary caregivers for their children – must contend with a number of stereotyped societal expectations about hegemonic masculinity, which in the U.S. place men in the traditional “breadwinner” role (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Medved, 2016; Parker & Stepler, 2017). Fathers who do stay home often report feelings such as identity struggle, career derailment, social stigma, and social isolation (Ammari & Schoenebeck, 2016; Beaubien, 2018; Cripe, 2007; Livesay, 2008a; Ludden, 2013; Harrington et al., 2012) that may come from adopting a role inconsistent with their primary socialization (Coskuner-Balli & Thompson, 2012). At the same time, the willingness of fathers to challenge these societal norms and assume primary caregiving duties can have a significant positive impact on the career trajectories of their breadwinning partners (Beaubien, 2018; Harrington et al., 2012), and also challenge or reduce gender stereotypes over time (Chesley, 2011; Harrington et al., 2012; Medved, 2016).

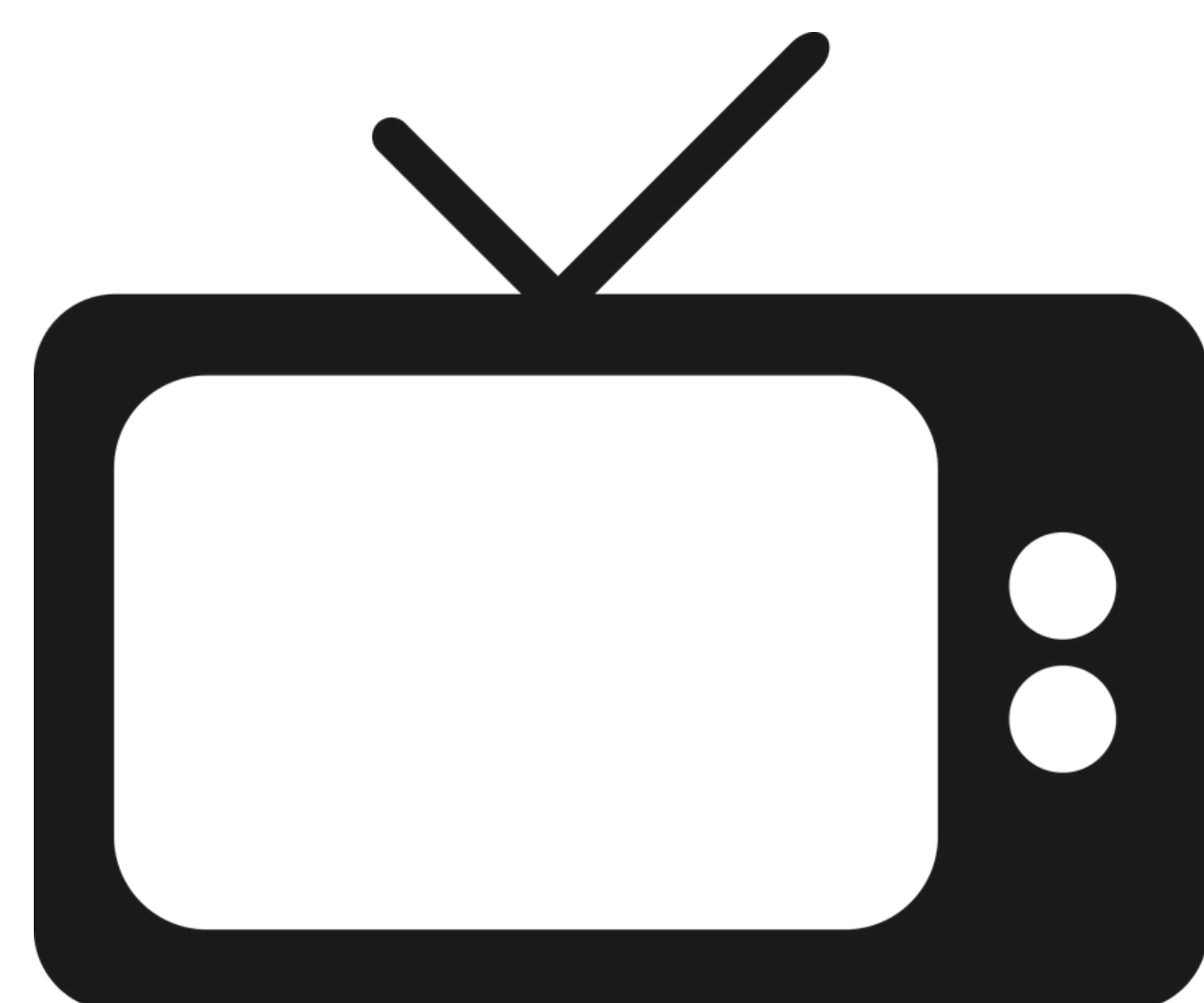
A source for social construction of gender roles and parenting schema may be mediated depictions of parenthood, which may both reflect and perpetuate parenting and gender role stereotypes. However, research suggests that in the case of mothers, mediated representations of motherhood do not accurately reflect the lived experience of at-home mothers, while still shaping the parent’s thinking and feeling about the self (Orgad, 2016). Although the experiences of both working and stay-at-home mothers have been explored in the literature, (e.g. Buzzanell, Meisenbach, Remke, Liu, Bowers & Conn, 2005; Orgad, 2016; Meisenbach, 2010), more work is needed to better understand how stay-at-home fathers negotiate the identity struggle that comes with taking on a role that challenges hegemonic masculinity.

This mixed-methods study builds on previous scholarship that has examined relationships between media portrayals and the lived experiences of stay-at-home mothers to extend this line of inquiry to stay-at-home fathers.

Methods



Interviews



Content Analysis

Stay-at-home fathers --operationalized as men partnered with women who are primarily responsible for the care of their minor children – were recruited via social media postings and snowball sampling.

Seven (7) fathers participated in interviews during March 2019. Interviews took place online via the podcasting service Zencast, which records audio from the participants’ computers. Interviews were transcribed by Rev.com.

A thematic content analysis of primetime TV shows featuring fathers in primary caregiving roles, *Man with A Plan* and *Parenthood* is also planned.

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BEST. DAD. EVER.



Interviews – Preliminary Themes

- Fathers who indicated that being an at-home dad was a proactive choice or decision for them expressed more comfort with owning that role as part of their identity than did fathers who felt the role was placed upon them due to circumstances. Having an accepting social group and outlet may also play a role in at-home dad satisfaction.
- This suggests that fathers do face internal struggles related to inhabiting a caregiving role that plays against gender stereotypes. Fathers who are able to frame their fatherly role as something they embrace may experience greater satisfaction as a parent – which could have implications for the rest of their families.
- Dads mention the ability to be closely involved in their children’s lives as a primary benefit of being an at-home dad.
- The fathers interviewed overall believed the decision for them to be at home had benefits for their wives’ respective careers related to the fathers’ carrying the mental load related to parenting for their spouses while they were at work.
- Some of the fathers interviewed expressed intention to re-enter the workforce and wondered how their current parenting role might affect re-entry.