

Sociologist finds stay-at-home dads' experiences bring mutual understanding to couples

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UWM sociologist Noelle Chesley studies families in which mothers are working and fathers are at home. She says the switching of traditional gender roles creates a deeper understanding of what each person contributes and the challenges they face. (UWM Photo/Derek Rickert)

UWM sociologist Noelle Chesley conducted a study during the financial crisis of 2008 on the family experience of stay-at-home fathers by looking at families that had changed their work-parenting arrangements. Either two working parents morphed into a female breadwinner and a stay-at-home dad, or a mom who previously stayed at home went to work while the father, the previous breadwinner, stayed at home with the children after losing a job.

Today, fathers represent 16 percent of the stay-at-home parent population. Chesley continues to investigate role switching and discusses her work here.

What drew you to this topic?

Back in 2007, I noticed that some friends and family members were beginning to make the shift to stay-at-home fathers and breadwinner mothers, for a variety of reasons. During the same year I was part of a panel at the annual meeting for the American Sociological Association where we were discussing the work and family experiences of women. During the discussion people kept asking: What about men? What about the experience of fathers? It was an issue beginning to be talked about in both social science and the wider culture.

Do mothers and fathers have different experiences in the role of breadwinner?

In a more recent study, one of the questions I asked (along with my coauthor Sarah Flood) was whether at-home and breadwinner parents are engaged in similar housework and [child care](#) activities. What we found was that breadwinner fathers and stay-at-home fathers both engaged in

similar levels of housework, and that breadwinner mothers and stay-at-home mothers also did similar amounts of housework. In my earlier study, mothers said that, in their experience, the biggest difference between breadwinner mothers and [fathers](#) was a greater expectation that mothers spend more time with their children when they were at home.

Are the people in these non-traditional arrangements happy?

The majority of people I interviewed said they were satisfied with the arrangement. However, it's complicated. People tended to be happy in some ways, but not in others. For example, while most women indicated that they were very happy with how their husbands were caring for their children, some wives were jealous about not being the stay-at-home parent, and not being able to spend as much time with their children. And men sometimes felt bad about not bringing in money.

Why do couples make such a change?

When I asked couples why they made the decision they often referred to "doing the math." They described their decision as more economic. Whether it was the high cost of child care, or perhaps they didn't want their children in child care at all. Sometimes it was more monetarily viable for the mother to work because her job offered better benefits.

Sometimes couples would say the father's personality was better suited or he was more flexible to take on child care. However, when people gave that reason, I found it was often to mask underlying issues like a lack of job security for the father. An arrangement like this wasn't something the couples talked about, or planned for beforehand. It was more of a reaction to situations like loss of a job or the birth of a child.

What's the main lesson from this study?

One of the things that came out of this work was mutual understanding between couples. Some women said they now understood the stress that goes along with being the sole provider for the family. Some men realized that, before the shift, they had no conception of what it took to be a stay-at-home parent. Based on my research, I believe these sorts of experiences can contribute to both men and women feeling more flexible in stepping in and out of work and parenting roles.

Can changes like this have positive impacts on society?

I have found some evidence that hints at that. Social theories suggest that should be possible. Massive social and economic shifts like the Great Recession can shake things up. One father I interviewed remarked that once he saw how complicated and how much there was to manage as a stay-at-home parent, he realized that a stay-at-home mother would make a fabulous employee.

Provided by University of Wisconsin-Madison

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