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## Fathering, Caregiving, and Masculinity

### Stay-at-Home Fathers and Family Communication

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Stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) are often defined as men who perform primary caregiving responsibilities for children living at home, do not engage in full-time paid labor outside of the home, and are married to mothers who are the sole or vast majority family breadwinners. Stories of so-called “role reversed” marriages, “trophy husbands,” and “recession stay-at-home dads” recently have been featured in the media and popular press (Harris, 2009; Hymowitz, 2012; Morgan, 2011; Smith, 2009; Stout, 2010). SAHFs and breadwinning mothers also are the focus of a small but growing body of social research (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004, 2007; Kramer & Kramer, 2011; Radin, 1998; Rochlen, McKelley, & Whittaker, 2010; Smith, 1998). Yet communication practices and processes constructing the lives of stay-at-home fathers and their families are remarkably scant in the interdisciplinary research (for exceptions, see Cripe, 2007; Livesay, 2008; Medved, Okimoto, & Ryan, 2012; Medved & Rawlins, 2011; Petroski & Edley, 2006; Vavrus, 2002).

Fatherhood historically has consisted of a set of interrelated and dynamic structures, practices, and discourses. U.S. industrialization brought

momentous changes to the social organization of work and family early in the 20th century. With the decline the “household economy,” fatherhood and masculinity became tightly coupled with breadwinning and paid work undertaken outside the home (Griswold, 1993; Warren, 2007). Private sphere caregiving and household labor were reconstructed to emphasize the “feminine” and extol the “cult of domesticity.” The ideology of the “separate spheres” came to signify this gendered (also classed and raced) symbolic and material separation of family and work (Ferree, 1990). The second wave of the U.S. feminist movement a half a century later ushered in far-reaching changes for women and mothers’ roles. Still dominant fathering practices and ideologies have not equally transformed.

Estimates of the prevalence of stay-at-home fathering families (SAHFF) in the United States vary depending on the statistical parameters employed (see Kramer & Kramer, 2011; U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). Analysis of Current Population Survey (CPS) data shows that in any given year between 2000 and 2009, 3.5% of households or 550,000 families consisted of (a) a heterosexual married couple with (b) at least one child 18 years or younger residing in the house, (c) a mother working at least 35 hours per week for at least 40 weeks a year, and (d) a husband not participating in the paid labor force (Kramer & Kramer, 2011). This figure, however, likely underestimates the number of men who consider themselves SAHFs while retaining ties to part-time or informal paid or unpaid community labor (Doucet, 2007; Medved et al., 2012) or are in committed gay or unmarried relationships. Yet, despite their statistical rarity, the experiences of SAHFFs are theoretically critical objects of inquiry directing attention toward the need for more understanding of this complex family role and begging the question, *why does more need to be known about SAHFs and their family relationships, interactions, and/or linguistic practices?* Four answers warrant attention.

First, the “slow drip” of gendered social change often happens on the margins of ‘traditional’ family life (Sullivan, 2004). To glimpse how communication both constructs and is constructed by diverse family relationships and processes, it is critical to investigate lives that don’t follow traditional gendered family scripts (Turner & West, 2006). Second, paid work and caregiving opportunities and choices are shaped by economic cycles and the shifting nature of work (Kramer & Kramer, 2011). Today, women continue to outpace men in terms of both educational and earnings growth (Fry & Cohen, 2010). Thus, SAHFs and so-called “reverse traditional couples” (RTCs) are likely to become more not less prevalent (Medved et al., 2012). Communication scholarship cannot lag behind “real world” shifts in redefining *family* in the United States and elsewhere.

Third, an increasing number of children are growing up in households with SAHFFs. Kramer and Kramer (2011) estimate that 1.125 million children

live in SAHF households. Decades of research illustrate the roles that parental communication plays in children's lives as well as its role in the gendering of family and work roles (see Galinsky, 1999; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris & Shepherd, 2006; Socha & Stamp, 1995). Yet we know little about the parenting practices of SAHFs and/or how, if at all, gender and parental interactions shift when fathers are primary caregivers (Coltrane, 1996). Finally, SAHFs also potentially challenge the heteronormative assumptions of masculinity and caregiving. Studies of SAHFs' identity struggles and successes, including conspicuously absent studies of gay or racial/ethnic minorities' voices, are essential to grasp the construction of and resistance to inclusive forms of masculinity and caregiving (Anderson, 2009). Questioning traditional intersections between fathering and masculinity is essential to broaden, rethink and reconfigure family communication scholarship *vis a vis* dominant narratives of family life and scholarship.

This chapter has two goals: (a) to provide a review of the interdisciplinary SAHF literature for family communication scholars unfamiliar with its emergent depth and breadth, as well as (b) to offer a communication studies-based research agenda. To achieve the first goal, the review below is organized around three questions that to date dominate SAHF research:

- How have discourses and practices of fathering and masculinity changed over time?
- Why and when do fathers choose (or involuntarily) become stay-at-home fathers?
- What types of stigma experiences and identity challenges do SAHFs experience?

## Review of Interdisciplinary SAHF Research

### Fathering, Masculinity, and Full-Time Caregiving

Historic changes in dominant popular discourses and practices of fathering are well documented and interwoven with the shifting constructions of masculinity in the United States (Griswold, 1993; LaRossa, Gordon, Wilson, Bairan, & Jaret, 1991; Morman & Floyd, 2002, 2006). While a full review of this history is beyond the scope of this chapter, definitions of "good fathering" have altered a number of times in the past centuries. In the colonial United States through the early republic, for example, fathering was defined as a moral role in the family. Fathers were charged with "ensuring that their children grew up with an appropriate sense of values, acquired primarily from the study of religious materials like the Bible" (Lamb, 2000, p. 26). With the industrial separation of home and work, men's roles in the family came to be minimized and fathering redefined as primarily the

provision of a family wage. As early as the 1930s and early 1940s, cartoons depicting men as incompetent caregivers appeared in the *Saturday Evening Post* (LaRossa et al., 1991). Fear of domineering mothers feminizing boys and appeals for strong post-World War II masculine role models led to fathering being additionally defined as sex-role modeling. Ideas of new nurturant fathers then arrived with the second women's movement along with calls for men to increase participation in the domestic sphere. Talk of nurturant fathering shifted the boundaries of masculinity and fathering to include active and emotional involvement in children's daily child-care activities (Lamb, 2000). And, in the academy, particularly in the field of developmental psychology, the construct of involved fathering came into widespread use in the 1980s (Lamb, 2000; Pleck, 1997). While the construct of involved fathering has not been used to explore the lives and interactions of SAHFs or by scholars in communication studies, this idea's potential use below will be discussed as a direction for future research. At the same time that developmental psychologists were developing this construct, however, the newly emerging field of men's studies, shaped by feminist movements in and outside the academy, also began to challenge the politics of masculinities in relation to fathering definitions and practices (e.g., Carrigan, Connell, & Lee, 1985; Lupton & Barclay, 1997). Histories of the marginalized experiences of minority fathers have also begun to reveal similarities and differences in fathering narratives and experiences (e.g., Conner & White, 2006).

The idea of masculinity, while often debated, can be defined as "combinations of actions and signs, part powerful, part arbitrary, performed in reaction and in relation to complex material relations and emotional demands; these signify that this is man" (Hearn & Collinson, 1994, p. 104). Multiple masculinities have existed and changed over time. Further, masculinities are positioned hierarchically with hegemonic forms argued to represent patterns of practices that allow dominance of men over women and other subordinated masculinities (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Hanke, 1997; Vavrus, 2002).

Hegemonic understandings of masculinities and their political force were first synthesized by Carrigan, Connell, and Lee (1985) in their article "Toward a New Sociology of Masculinity" (see also Hanke, 1997). Drawing from Gramsci's work on complicity and class stabilization, the term *hegemony* was brought into theories of gender relations; an analytic move making tremendous scholarly contribution as well as much misunderstanding and debate (see Hanke, 1997; Hearn, 1998). Hegemonic notions of masculinity came to embody "the currently most honored way of being a man" (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005, p. 832). And, while hegemonic masculinity can "include such 'positive' actions as bring home a wage, sustaining a sexual

relationship, and being a father” (p. 840), it is most often used to highlight aspects of manhood and/or fathering that uphold gender domination. Primary family breadwinning has remained an obligatory, pervasive, critical element of hegemonic definitions of masculinity and fathering in the United States since the industrial revolution; breadwinning has been emblematic of men’s power in marital relations and parenting (Bittman, England, Sayer, Folbre, & Matheson, 2003; Brines, 1994). Because SAHFs depart from hegemonic fathering and breadwinning practices, studies first inquired about *why*, i.e., why do these men ostensibly *choose* to take on nontraditional family roles?

### Choosing (?) to Be a Stay-at-Home Father

Given the above hegemonic assumptions of masculinity, fathering, and breadwinning, the logic undergirding cultural and scholarly fascinations with SAHFs’ choices can be plotted in the following way: (a) a “good father” *would not willingly choose* to be at home, therefore, (b) staying at home must result *not from choice* but rather from a wife’s significantly higher earning, a father’s job loss, or a man being unable to work (for an depiction of married women executives and SAHFs, see Hymowitz, 2012). While strong support exists for the primacy of paid work in many father’s lives (e.g., Townsend, 2002; Warren, 2007) as well as economic and work-related forces shaping SAHFs decisions, extant research shows that these issues are only part of the story (Chesley, 2011; Kramer & Kramer, 2011; Medved et al., 2012; Rochlen et al., 2010).

To begin, an early study of primary caregiving fathers found that men in full-time caregiving roles for more than two years perceived their own fathers as inattentive, were in their 30s and/or with career experience, enjoyed the support of family members, and had small families (Radin, 1989). Studies also report that SAHFs are often married to higher-earning wives with keen career interests, have strong views on the importance of home care, reservations about the quality of child-care facilities as well as concerns about child-care costs (Doucet, 2004, 2007). Additionally, SAHFs themselves report seeing full-time parenting as an opportunity to spend time with their children and individual preference or personality (Rochlen et al., 2010) as well as personal illness, spousal illness, or egalitarian ideals (Smith, 1998). Recently, distinctions have been made between *caregiving* and *unable-to-work* at-home fathering families (Kramer & Kramer, 2011). Caregiving stay-at-home fathering families (i.e., those that result from deliberate choice) tend to share key traits with stay-at-home mothering families in that these couples are “making work

and care decisions based on economic exchange rather than cultural expectations of gender” (p. 18). In the past decade, fathers increasingly report that their full-time caregiving roles are the result of conscious choices rather than by default due to an inability to participate for various reasons in the paid labor force. This finding suggests a vital, albeit small, shift in gendered assumptions of the division of labor (see also Chesley, 2011; Medved et al., 2012).

In one of the most comprehensive studies to date, Doucet (2004) described three paths to primary caregiving for SAHFs. First, a small number of SAHFs reported having achieved career success and, as a result, being comfortable in full-time caregiving roles. Doucet tells the story of Rory, a 53-year-old father who quit his consulting job to help his son overcome a stuttering problem. Rory explains, “If I had been 20 years old with a son with a stutter and food allergies, I would have responded completely differently. . . . I have worked in many different places. It’s not like I’m saying that this kid is holding me back.” A second and more typical path SAHFs followed is that of fathers in transition. Over a third of the men in Doucet’s study were SAHFs as a means of transition between jobs or careers. Some transition SAHFs had lost jobs; others experienced serious illnesses, while some were frustrated with job dissatisfaction. All of these men took time to rethink their career paths while caregiving and planned to return to full-time work. Andrew, for example, a water supply engineer whose wife had a time-consuming job, explained his time at home as a transition out of his career, but only a temporary one. He says: “I was also thinking about getting out of the business anyway. This is not the kind of thing I want to do for the rest of my life. We thought two years. Ideally, three.”

Finally, 30 of the 70 SAHFs participating in Doucet’s study took on part-time work or moved their work sites into the home while simultaneously taking on full-time caregiving duties. Shahin, for example, a self-employed cabinet maker decided to remain at home after his wife’s maternity leave ended. In addition to having strong desires for parental care, Shahin explains, “It just seemed more logical for me to stay home, especially since I have my own business. I could do at least part-time work.” Doucet’s paths detail men’s perspectives on their caregiving and wage-earning choices or circumstances.

Scholars also have begun to recognize the necessity of jointly analyzing the perspectives of both SAHFs and breadwinning mothers (BWM) (Medved, 2009b; Meisenbach, 2010). Couples’ decision making and identities constitute “linked lives” (Elder, 1998), that is, SAHFs and breadwinning mothers’ experiences, senses of self, and interactions are intimately

interconnected in systems of gender relations (Connell, 2002). One study found that couples explain men's caregiving roles as primarily shaped by work-related reasons and their decisions both serve to "do" and "undo" traditional assumptions of gender relations (Chesley, 2011). Another study found that SAHFs and their wives accounted for the emergence of their nontraditional work and family arrangements through four categories of explanations: (a) paid work, (b) caregiving, (c) personal, and (d) economic (Medved et al., 2012). Supportive of past research, work-related reasons as well as men's caregiving willingness were pervasive in both SAHFs and their wives' accounts. Yet paid work reasons only represented 36% of the total number of coded explanations. Frequently mentioned reasons also included socialization, relational groundwork, and women's full-time caregiving hesitance. Aligning with conventional "gender accountability," women more often than men discussed the roots of their arrangement with personal and caregiving explanations. Conversely, men more frequently used paid work rationales as shaping the origins of their arrangements.

Supplementing Doucet's (2004) work on SAHFs' paths, Medved and colleagues explored reverse traditional couples (RTCs) decision-making pathways and found three routes to nontraditional caring-earning arrangements: (a) early relational negotiation, (b) arrangement reconsideration, and (c) traditional inversion. In particular, the early negotiation pathway empirically demonstrates that some couples consciously plan for supposed role reversal and/or men express desires to be stay-at-home fathers from the initial stages of their relationships (Rochlen, McKelley, & Whittaker, 2010). For example, Medved and colleagues recount the story of Marissa and Stanley. Marissa initially was uncertain about motherhood and delayed conversations with her husband about having children until she completed her doctoral degree. Stanley, eager to start a family, explained that as he approached his mid-30s he made it clear to Marissa that having children for him was nonnegotiable and he would be willing to take on primary child-care duties. Early on in their parenthood negotiations Stanley told Marissa, "I'll stay home with the kids. That's what I've always wanted" (p. 29). To help make his caregiving role a reality, Stanley dropped out of law school to pursue a degree in teaching; a career he eventually left with the birth of their first daughter.

Different from Marissa and Stanley's route to gender unconventionality, the second path identified by Medved and colleagues is arrangement reconsideration. This second pathway is best described as a shift in work and family organization after a period of time as parents and often triggered by an external event, a relational "decision point" and/or some combination.

For example, Marco and Candy met on the job. He was in operations while she was in sales. Candy started off her explanation for their nontraditional division of labor by saying, "There's not a rhyme or reason in there. There certainly [was] no plan for it to be that way" (p. 27). Both of their careers required extensive travel and the stress of their dual-career life became "very chaotic" with three young children. Both had been "soul searching" over how to make a change for about a year. Having one person at home was one option they considered to help alleviate the stress. Yet they had not taken any action when she got word of downsizing at their company. In the past few years, Candy had moved ahead of Marco in terms of earnings and responsibility at the company. So when the opportunity presented itself for Marco to "volunteer" for a layoff at work, both of them agreed that it might be the solution. Marco explained, "I went to my boss and I said 'I know what's going on. And I'll be okay if you take me out, take care of me'" (p. 27).

Finally, couples also initially organized their work and family lives as male breadwinner–female caregivers; but then, for various reasons "reversed" caring and earning roles. Traditional inversion pathways took the form of a wife leaving dedicated, full-time caregiving to become the primary earner and a husband exiting, reducing participation, or remaining out of the paid labor force by choice or after involuntary job loss. Sam and Krista, for instance, switched roles when their daughters were 10 and 12 years old. Krista, who had been at home for over a decade, wanted to start a new career. She had recently been completing a master's degree and was eager to return to the workforce. Sam was successful yet unhappy and unfulfilled at work. An unexpected inheritance income allowed them the financial freedom to live on one income. Sam quit his job and took on the dual role of taking care of his young daughters and beginning the process of figuring out a new mid-career direction.

Finally, one feminist communication study additionally explored the ways SAHFs and BWMs together negotiate gendered daily work and family practices. Couples talked differently about three issues: task responsibility, identity adoption, and role eligibility. From these discussions the authors interpreted five "homemaking-moneymaking stances" or couple orientations: (a) reversing, (b) conflicting, (c) collaborating, (d) improvising, and (e) sharing. The authors conclude, "While some couples temporarily sojourned and retained traditionally gendered associations for their activities and selves, others keenly reconstituted historical alignments between femininity and care as well as masculinity and economic provision" (Medved & Rawlins, 2011, p. 26). In addition to exploring how fathers



become primary caregivers, the stigmatizing and rewarding experiences of full-time male caregiving also have garnered scholarly attention.

### Communicating Stigma, Hegemonic Masculinity, and Identity Challenges for SAHFs

Suspicion has often been cast toward men who do not perform bread-winning tasks or who do “women’s work” (Smith, 1998; Williams, 2012; for a review, see Medved, 2009a). Since the industrial revolution, married fathers in the United States without jobs arguably have had one legitimate subject position: an unemployed man (Ezzy, 2002; see also Komarovskiy, 1940/2004). Not surprisingly, SAHFs often report experiencing identity challenges and public stigma (Doucet, 2004; Radin, 1989; Rochlen et al., 2010; Smith, 1998). Masculinity is often characterized as “flight from the feminine” (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). For SAHFs, especially those taking care of young children, it virtually is impossible to escape from doing so-called “women’s work” such as changing diapers, soothing infants, feeding children, and nurturing family life.

The nature of public scrutiny and related sources of identity struggles are twofold: first, questions arise about the lack of full-time wage earning and its associated economic dependence; second, people also may doubt men’s abilities (*vis-à-vis* women’s often-assumed “natural instincts”) and distrust their desire to be caregivers. As one SAHF said, “I felt I wasn’t being a good man” (Doucet, 2004, p. 288). Three key reasons SAHFs perceive being stigmatized are (a) violations of gender norms, (b) ignorance of SAHF roles, and (c) distrust/suspicion/fear of harm toward children (Rochlen et al., 2010).

Stigma experiences for SAHFs play out in three inter-related domains: (a) personal processes, (b) interpersonal interactions, and (c) material manifestations (Smith, 1998). First, identity challenges may emerge from SAHFs wrestling with their personal definitions of masculinity. For instance, some SAHFs attempt to craft a legitimate identity by distancing themselves from more hegemonic or “macho” forms of masculinity. In describing why her husband could be happy staying-at-home, one BWM said, “I think that some men have such an ego that they could never have a wife who is the breadwinner. They’re too busy beating on their chests; they can’t have someone else bringing home the bacon. But he’s not that way” (Medved & Rawlins, 2011, p. 21). SAHFs and/or their wives may also construct men’s biological sex as a barrier to certain types of caregiving. One SAHF, for example, reported feeling “incapacitated” as a man to provide care for

daughters; he said, “I’ve found at times that my wife can pick up certain attitudes from the girls that I don’t and it’s just something intuitive” (Medved, 2012, p. 20). Privileging his wife’s intuition over his own parenting abilities helps to preserve supposedly innate gender roles even in the face of contradictory daily practices.

Second, interpersonal interactions are also sites for the negotiation of gender legitimacy. The construction of SAHFs’ identities is both indexical and contextual. Creating an acceptable sense of self is argued to be easier within the private, relational sphere (Smith, 1998). Different from interactions with the community at large, partners “control” and craft discursive references to justify the “reversal” in the home. Yet, behind closed doors, conventional gendered assumptions may remain strong. One SAHF explained that while his wife, a former at-home mother, was the full-time caregiver, an assumption never existed that she “needed” to go back to work, however, “with me being at home, even with her, there’s always expectation like, you’ll work one day—always” (Medved, 2012). More often, however, stigmatizing interactions take place outside of intimate relations.

While the nature of public scrutiny has changed over the past few decades, studies at the turn of the 21st century found that explicit challenges to men publicly performing full-time caregiving come in four forms: (a) being ignored by stay-at-home mothers, (b) being tested about their commitment to caregiving, (c) experiencing “faux pas” or assumed to not genuinely be primary caregivers, (d) and feeling a lack of comfort when interacting with female peers who view them as sexually suspect (Smith, 1998; see also Doucet, 2004).

Finally, the embodiment of SAHFs’ stigma experiences cannot be overlooked as men wander in “estrogen filled worlds” still dominated by women (Doucet, 2006). Often, SAHFs feel the gaze of suspicion while walking with their children in public during the day in suburbia, in shopping centers, or at playgrounds. While the novelty of American men giving care in public has somewhat been reduced (Williams, 2012), these activities still beget notice and particular challenges associated with visible male caregiving (Doucet, 2006). One participant in Doucet’s study recalled a mother approaching him at the playground and saying, “I’m a little embarrassed but I’m coming to check you out.” She continues, “My daughter came home and told me about this man hanging around the school yard reading stories to the kids. . . . I hope you are not offended.” (p. 702). As a means of responding to public stigma and scrutiny, SAHFs often remain attached to paid work, self-provisioning labors, or community work (Doucet, 2004). SAHFs may also, in the face of stigma, craft separate men-only communities of caregiving (Williams, 2012) as well as attempt to rationalize or ignore

criticism and control information. For example, fathers may not correct others' assumptions that they are out of work or respond by saying they are "retired" (Smith, 1998).

Creating and maintaining an identity as a SAHF is an inherently contradictory process as well as one intimately connected to larger discourses and practices of gender and paid work. One communication-based study of SAHF support-group discourse from a relational dialectics perspective depicts identity contradictions (Livesay, 2008). SAHFs' online talk reveals the gendered dialectical tension of "traditionally masculine masculinity—traditionally feminine masculinity." This dialectic was evidenced in four ways: (a) explicit discussion of this masculine/feminine gendered dialectic, (b) contradictions between SAHFs' lived experience and the social discourses of "housework = more sex for men," (c) SAHFs' talk of desire to connect with their children, but also to spend time with other men and/or adults, and (d) SAHFs' efforts to manage being a polite parent while also being a protective parent. Cripe (2007) positions the job of SAHFs as dirty work to underscore the contradictory taint and praise associated with men who care for children in this traditionally undervalued "occupation."

In addition to exploring individual or relational identities and experiences, media portrayals of SAHFs have also been the focus of scholarly inquiry. Media portrayals of "Mr. Moms" in the late 1990s are shown to produce only minimal and conflicting challenges to hegemonic constructions of masculinity (Vavrus, 2002). Discourse from the 84 television news stories Vavrus analyzes consistently reproduces three ideological stances: (a) privileging only married, heterosexual, middle-class families, (b) valorizing SAHFs for learning to perform domestic and caregiving work, and (c) reinforcing SAHF duties as appropriately masculine. In doing so, these media outlets draw on a narrow and reoccurring field of stock footage presenting only a few exemplar middle-to-upper middle class men who ostensibly chose to be stay-at-home fathers. News coverage on Mr. Moms also works to legitimize these men's unconventional family roles by appealing to expert testimony of academics or parenting professionals about the potential benefits of men staying home.

Vavrus (2002) also points to the classist notions of choice crafted across this coverage. When layoffs are presented as prompting men's choices to stay at home while professional wives' incomes are left unquestioned in terms of providing adequate income, media coverage obscures class. Most working class families and fathers are not economically able to transform a "layoff" into a "wonderful opportunity" to shift family roles. Despite any of these father's (or mother's) desires to spend time with children, layoffs typically bring unemployment and economic suffering.

Heteronormativity is also constructed in news coverage through the lack of inclusion of gay stay-at-home fathers and the reification of “reversal” through maintaining men’s need to acknowledge emasculation and learn to perform domestic skills in the private sphere. In short, Vavrus argues that media coverage of Mr. Moms primarily serves to domesticate patriarchy rather than produce significant change in gender relations.

In sum, the past two decades mark the beginning of scholarly inquiry into the lives of stay-at-home fathers. This body of research explores the reasons these men provide for why they enter into their nontraditional roles. Much extant research also explores the stigma and identity challenges experienced by SAHFs as well as how hegemonic constructions of masculinity are reaffirmed or contested through these supposed role reversals. Often SAHFs’ most difficult interactions take place in the public sphere, where larger contexts and gendered scripts are activated along with the transgressive nature of the male embodiment of caregiving. Processes of crafting a SAHF identity is clearly one wrought with contradiction and embedded in ever changing gender relations constituting our work and family lives.

## **An Agenda for Family Communication Research**

The above review of literature provides an introduction to the small but growing body of interdisciplinary research related to SAHFs, including only a handful of family communication-related contributions. While this growing body of research evidences the many reasons why men may become full-time caregivers as well as the stigmas they may experience, it does little to launch a serious investigation into the varied and complex roles that communication, interaction, discourse, and/or language play in shaping the lives and practices of stay-at-home fathers and their families. The final section of this chapter proposes a research agenda for family communication scholars focused around four themes: (a) father-child relationships; (b) fathering, gender relations, and the media; (c) family identities and stories; and (d) diverse families, masculinities, and fathering.

### **Father-Child Relationships**

Family communication scholarship has a rich history of exploring parent-child relationships (e.g., Miller-Day, 2004; Wilson, Alda, Shi, & Rack, 2010), including father-son (e.g., Floyd & Morman, 2000; Morman &

Floyd, 2002, 2006) and father-daughter relationships (e.g., Punyanut-Carter, 2008). In one investigation of 139 father-son dyads, Morman and Floyd (2002) found that fathers reported to be closer to, were more satisfied with, and expressed more supportive affection to their sons than they experienced in relationships with their own fathers. This study provides a glimpse into historically shifting definitions of good fathering by exploring generational differences in perceptions of relational satisfaction and affection. In her study of father-daughter communication, Punyanut-Carter (2008) found a positive relationship between conversation-oriented family communication patterns and perceptions of interpersonal communication satisfaction. That is, father and daughter satisfaction was significantly affected by conversation-oriented family communication patterns (e.g., pluralistic and consensual), while conformity-oriented family communication patterns (e.g., laissez-faire and protective) were not influenced by satisfaction.

This line of exploring father-child relational satisfaction with respect to communication practices and patterns leads to questions: How do SAHFs and their children perceive relational satisfaction? How and/or why do various SAHFs and their families create particular family communication patterns (Fitzpatrick & Ritchie, 1994)? And how might this satisfaction change over time in relation to SAHFs' perceptions of "choice" to enter into their role and influence the expression of affection in the parent-child dyad? This line of research would have to consider a number of critical issues: (a) finding access to a large enough sample of stay-at-home fathers and their children to permit the use of instruments such as the Revised Family Communication Patterns (RFCP) instrument (Ritchie & Fitzpatrick, 1990); (b) recognizing that not all SAHFs and their families are the same, and men enter into this arrangement at different times and for diverse reasons during the life course; (c) questioning how the experience of full-time fathering might influence or transform SAHFs relationships with his children and perceptions of caregiving (see Chesley, 2011, for some initial thoughts); and (d) exploring how pre-parent perceptions or fathering values shaped the decisions of SAHFs to enter into their nontraditional roles (see Medved et al., 2012, for discussions of the "early negotiation" pathway). In addition, future family communication research might ask, how do full-time fathers construct a "masculine ethic" of caregiving (Brandth & Kvande, 1998; Golden, 2007)? How is fathering constructed in relation to mothering and gendered marital relations in the lives of SAHFs and their wives? Further, how do SAHFs and their wives perpetuate, transform, and/or resist traditional gendered assumptions about caring and earning in

interactions with their children? Finally, following up on research on maternal gatekeeping, researchers might ask, how do SAHFs communicate with their spouses regarding daily child-care tasks and what are the implications for relational satisfaction, dyadic power (Dunbar, 2004), and divisions of household labor (see Alberts, Tracy, & Trethewey, 2011).

## Fathering, Gender Relations, and the Media

All varieties of media play a significant role in shaping how we think, talk, and take action related to fathering in U.S. society and elsewhere. The work of Vavrus (2002) powerfully illustrates the power of communication-based social critique when applied to the context of full-time fathering. As noted by Vavrus in the late 1990s when she was conducting her research, the 1980s film starring Michael Keaton and Teri Garr titled *Mr. Mom* was still appropriated in news coverage and used as a cultural touchstone. While Michael Keaton's character has not been forgotten, SAHFs today are portrayed in entertainment and news media more extensively. SAHFs are reoccurring characters on television (e.g., Cam Mitchell on *Modern Family*; Joel Graham on *Parenthood*; and *Guys With Kids*) and also get extensive attention in media outlets such as *Marie Claire* magazine and *Newsweek* (e.g., Harris, 2009; Hymowitz, 2012; Stout, 2010). Beginning around 2008, "recession dads" hit the media and even became a vocal market niche for diapers (see Harrison, 2012, for the backlash that caused Huggies to pull a TV commercial reported to be offensive to SAHFs).

Communication scholars with interests at the nexus of family and media can explore how media coverage has changed (or not) with respect to SAHFs and gender (i.e., Livesay, 2008). Vavrus's (2002) focus on television coverage and exploring post-1999 portrayals of SAHFs is critical to understanding how this discourse serves to "do" or "undo" gender (Deutsch, 2007). Moreover, a larger variety of media is available for analysis—for example, SAHF blogs, Facebook groups, specific television characters, as well as films dedicated to new constructions of fathering, albeit not singularly focused on stay-at-home fathers, such as *Daddy Day Care* and the *Pursuit of Happyness*. Bringing various theoretical lenses to the critique of popular cultural representations will also help to better understand how societal discourses of masculinity operate (e.g., Hatfield, 2010; Enck-Wanzer, 2009).

To begin such a task, questions might focus on how do contemporary media representations portray the idea of choice with respect to stay-at-home fathers' decisions to leave (or remain out) of paid labor? How do entertainment media portray men's "competence" as full-time fathers? How do SAHF blogs and their community of readers talk about masculinity,

caregiving, and marital relations? How does news coverage construct the relationship between SAHFs and their breadwinning wives? Finally, how are class, race, and sexuality visible in media portrayals of SAHFs?

## Family Identities and Stories

Who we are and how we come to construct our identities as families, in family relationships, and/or in fulfilling particular family roles through language and social interaction has shaped rich and diverse lines of family communication research (e.g., Mason Bergen, Suter, & Daas, 2006; Chawla, 2007; Ellingson & Sotirin, 2010; Koenig Kellas, 2005; Langellier & Peterson, 2006; Norwood, 2012; Medved, 2009b; Rittenour & Soliz, 2009). For example, family stories are argued to contribute to the construction of family identities. In her study of study of family triad storytelling practices, Koenig Kellas found relationships between story theme (e.g., accomplishment vs. stress), person referencing practices (e.g., we-ness vs. separateness), and interactional storytelling behaviors (e.g., engagement, turn-taking). Further, story framing, perspective-taking, statements about selves-in-the-family, and identifying as a “storytelling family” emerged consistently as positive predictors of family satisfaction and functioning. Narrative processes of identity construction in the context of multicultural and adoptive families have also been the focus of research. Ballard and Ballard (2011) developed the concept of narrative inheritance in their auto-ethnographic study of adoption narratives across generations. Their analysis of a series of adoption stories reveals what they call “narrative momentum” or an orientation toward a future storytelling experience. These authors speculate on how past and present stories exert influence on the way families make sense of their unique identity and culture.

While studies of SAHF decision making have used narratives or interview accounts to examine the reasons for entering into nontraditional work and family arrangements, such approaches to these data have primarily focused on extracting from the narratives particular explanations rather than taking a narrative approach to the gathering and analysis of these data (Chesley, 2011; Doucet, 2004; Medved et al., 2012). Future research could more fully embrace a narrative perspective on identity and ask questions such as what do SAHFs’ decision-making narratives reveal about the construction of masculinity and caregiving? Or, more specifically, how do stay-at-home fathers construct choices in relation to their work and family identities? How do SAHFs and their significant others jointly craft family identity stories and how do these stories relate to particular communication practices and/or relational outcomes? Given the

still somewhat transgressive nature of these fathers' roles, exploring "cover stories" used by SAHFs and/or their spouses also would be valuable (Hest, Pearson, & Child, 2006).

In addition, future researchers might inquire as to what the narratives of SAHFs speaking from different religious, ethnic/racial, or sexuality orientations tell us about the communicative construction of varied masculinities and caregiving. The history of marital gender relations within the African American community, for instance, represents some departures from the traditional White divisions of labor (Hill, 2006). The often-used language of "role reversal" in the media to explain the choices of SAHFs and their families only works in the context of traditional, "separate spheres" frameworks for marital divisions of labor. Family communication scholars can address and critique larger societal narratives of work and family in the context of SAHFs' lives. Much variation exists in terms of how men provide care, construct relationships, and come to understand themselves as fathers in the United States and elsewhere; thus, the issue of diversity shapes the final theme for future research.

### Diverse Families, Masculinities, and Fathering

Just as masculinities are diverse, so are family forms, processes, and fathers' social locations. As noted above, the media often represent the category "stay-at-home father" as a homogeneous, middle-class, White, heterosexual man with a professional, well-educated spouse. Certainly many SAHFs exist who fit this particular work and family experience. Yet also included among fathers performing primary child care are (a) gay men with biological and/or adoptive children, (b) single fathers managing paid work and care, (c) African American and/or Latino fathers with different historical associations with masculinity and care, (d) working class fathers who may not identify as stay-at-home fathers but still perform similar caregiving duties, and (e) disabled men managing full-time child care, including veterans coming back from military service who are physically unable to work, unemployed, or perhaps unemployable due to their war-related experiences (e.g., Karner, 1996). These examples are only a start to detailing the diversity of men as full-time caregivers.

One example of research focused on diversity is Galvin and Patrick (2009) who jointly analyzed told stories of gay male partners about their transition to parenthood. While not focused specifically on full-time stay-at-home parenting, this study explores the challenges and joys of caregiving experienced by gay adoptive or surrogate fathers (see also Golombok &



Tasker, 2010). The authors report that these couples portray themselves as “pioneers,” and their stories illustrate how these men create a sense of family identity. Further, their stories revealed pressures to hide their sexuality during the adoption or surrogacy process as well as the frequent need to justify their decisions to others. In fact, gay men report receiving pressure from family and friends to become parents quickly after marriage or commitment ceremonies similar to heterosexual couples (Swarns, 2012b). Here, as elsewhere, Galvin and her coauthor develop the notion of *discourse-dependent families* (Galvin, 2006), an idea which also might prove theoretically useful in exploring SAHFs’ justifications for their nontraditional family roles by focusing on discourse is the veritable glue with which we create families today (Medved, 2012).

Using Galvin and Patrick’s study as a point of departure, family communication scholars could explore the connections between sexuality, fatherhood, and care labor. For example, how do gay male partners negotiate work and family roles? Are there ways that traditional gender enters into these couples’ ways of dividing labor (see Moore, 2008, for a perspective on Black lesbians’ divisions of work and family labors) or what other language and communication strategies do gay male couples use to negotiate work and family? A recently published book illustrates the complex intersections among sexuality and fatherhood: The book is titled, *Does This Baby Make Me Look Straight? Confessions of a Gay Dad* (Bucatinsky, 2012). These contributions to the popular culture of fathering might lead to inquiries into questions such as how are the perceptions of gay SAHFs shaped by the heterosexually coded ideologies of fatherhood? In addition, overwhelming racial stereotypes of the “absent father” that shape public perceptions of Black men’s caregiving roles as well as historical understandings of African American women’s roles as breadwinners also need to be explored in the context of SAHF families in Black communities. These are only a sample of the many questions that can be explored by family communication scholars.

In closing, the interdisciplinary body of research exploring the lives and experiences of stay-at-home fathers and their families is extremely valuable yet remains in its infancy. While a few communication researchers have contributed to this growing area of research, the opportunities and necessities of broadening scholarly participation abound. The four themes that comprise the research agenda outlined above provide some initial directions for future research. The research questions, theoretical approaches, and value orientations embedded in the themes above are as diverse as are family communication scholars today.

## Discussion Questions

1. Think about how stay-at-home fathers are portrayed in the media, for example, in movies, TV shows, magazines, and newspapers. How do these representations of stay-at-home fathers reproduce negative stereotypes of masculinity and caregiving? How do these representations create new or different positive understandings about men who are full-time caregivers?
2. Think about the family situation(s) in which you grew up. At any time was a man your primary child-care provider in the home while a woman was the main family breadwinner? Or, did you know anyone who grew up in this work-family environment? Explain the reasons you remember for how these nontraditional work and family roles came into being. What benefits or challenges were experienced with this division of labor?
3. How does the increased public presence of stay-at-home fathers on the playground, picking up children from school, volunteering in kids' classrooms, and waiting in pediatricians offices potentially serve to change (or not) gendered stereotypes of work and family?