

Vitaliy Kaganovskiy

Professor Lesley Broder

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### Stigmas Against Stay-at-Home Parents and Teleworkers

In March 2020, as the world entered lock-down due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I found myself in an unfamiliar situation. My wife was 5 months pregnant, and as an expecting father, I had much to look forward to. That week, the company I worked for closed their doors for the first time in over 25 years, since people were not traveling during a pandemic. My job as a safety director for a transportation company was quite stable, and I truly never expected to be out of work. My company was successful for many years, and I was in charge of insurance claims, safety compliance, and hiring and vetting drivers. I was the only employee in my company trained to use a complicated computerized system, which helped to provide some job security. Most New Yorkers could probably recall former Governor Cuomo encouraging us to “flatten the curve” by quarantining for just two weeks during his daily announcements. Many were grateful for two weeks at home; a much needed break that came via unfortunate circumstances. Four months later, in July 2020, my first child, Olivia, was born. When my wife returned to work that September, I found myself in yet another unfamiliar and uncomfortable situation; I was now unemployed and a stay-at-home father. Prior to the birth of my daughter, I had never even held a baby. Luckily, my wife was working from home at the time, so I had some support. I was very focused on being a great father, and most of my

attention was on my daughter, but didn't realize that this new "job" had implications for myself.

Nearly two years after the pandemic, I still share that I am a safety director when asked what I do for a living. My wife once asked me why I don't state what I actually do, considering I haven't worked in this position in almost two years. This led me to question myself, why don't I share what I actually do? I've come to realize that I don't share that I am a stay-at-home father, or that I now work-from-home, out of shame or embarrassment. I believe there is a negative stigma against stay-at-home parents; so often women who stay at home with their children are considered to be jobless or lazy, despite it being one of the most important and challenging "jobs." This portrayal of stay-at-home parents, especially fathers couldn't be more wrong. For men, it is even more socially atypical. In his article "Free to be Fathers?," Eduardo Peñalver describes a situation very similar to mine; Peñalver took a leave of absence to care for his newborn son. He experienced mixed feelings of reward, but also loss of routine, and lack of self-confidence. As an individual who grew up with the belief that fathers were meant to work while women took care of the domestic work, this new position was difficult, physically and emotionally, for Peñalver. For generations, men were designed to "pursue success in our careers and meet a lingering social expectation to be the primary breadwinner" (Peñalver 28).

While completing this semester's work through use of various sources to investigate my topic, I had the opportunity of interviewing a friend of mine, Sam, who I met online through a separate community we share interest in. Sam, a corporate lawyer, was furloughed a few weeks into the pandemic after his firm went remote. He,

too, has not yet returned to work, and is now a stay-at-home father to his two daughters, aged 4 and 1. Sam shared that, though he values the time spent at home with his girls, “being a stay-at-home dad is more work than I could have ever imagined. Women don’t get the credit they deserve for doing this by choice.” Sam shared the following quote during his interview that truly stuck with me; “I enjoyed my career as a lawyer and constantly feel emasculated that I’m not currently helping my family financially.” His use of the word “emasculated” is very powerful. The societal expectation for men to financially provide for their families and maintain a standard job runs very deep, despite the modernization of the American family and increasing number of men contributing in the household.

As a stay-at-home father, I have come to realize that an issue in my community is that, despite this role being my most demanding position yet, there is a notion, a stigma, that “staying home” to care for your children is easy, and that fathers who do it aren’t living up to societal expectations. I also feel that there is this assumption that fathers who stay at home must be doing it by force, not by choice, because there is no reason for a man to ever choose this path. By choice or not, the assumption that men will eventually return to work lingers on. Andrea Doucet, a social scientist, conducted research on the roles of feminism on the concept of stay-at-home-dads (SAHDS). She found that many men remain home by choice, due to a gap in employment, with plans to return to the workforce someday, or that some fathers may be balancing a work-from-home situation while also being caregivers. On the contrary, women tend to voluntarily take on the responsibilities of the household, and that the stay-at-home dad may really just be a construct to help promote women in the workplace and prove that females are

just as capable as males in the workforce. “SAHDs maintain some formal or informal connection to the labour market that is premised on past connections, future aspirations, a likely dependence on a partner in paid employment, and particular conditions of possibility that enable or force one parent to forgo full-time paid work for a specific time period” (Docuet 11).

My family, like many others, did not raise me to believe that the role of a father was to provide full-time care for my future children while my wife went to work and earned our income. Peñalver wrote “while fathers are taking on greater responsibilities in the home, stay-at-home dads are still stigmatized for failing to live up to their obligations as breadwinners, and men feel enormous pressure in the workplace to carry on as if their sole obligation to their families were to put money in the bank” (29). This issue is problematic, because while stay-at-fathers are at home, completing the tremendously meaningful task of raising our children, we tend to be pitied or judged for our roles. It negatively affects our self-esteem and feelings of pride and masculinity, which has its own implications for how we show up as fathers and our mental health. In his book, “The Daddy Shift,” Jeremy Adam Smith notes that “when men are robbed of the ability to support their families, the results could be brutal. Men who are put out of work do not merely lose a job, they lose their very identity (9).

The media seems to acknowledge the rise in fathers at home. A simple Google search reveals numerous articles on the rise of fathers in the domestic environment and the reshaping of the traditional American family, or personal anecdotes from stay-at-home fathers. Despite the acknowledgement that the stereotypical norm of American families consisting of a stay-at-home mom and a hardworking father is shifting, the

majority of society likely continues to consider this family dynamic as atypical. The stay-at-home father figure has also been portrayed in movies such as *Daddy Day Care* (Carr) starring Eddie Murphy. In this film, Murphy plays a character named Charlie Hinton who, after losing his job, is forced to stay home to care for his young son while his wife becomes the family breadwinner. Most of his friends and family have a negative outlook on his situation, implying notions that men can't be nurturing, or that it's a woman's job to be home with the children. Because of his desperation for more money and desire to escape these negative stigmas, Charlie and his friend open their own daycare. These media portrayals are fairly accurate but fail to acknowledge that some men may enjoy being stay-at-home fathers. Some may do it by choice. Others may not have bravely volunteered but find themselves satisfied with their unexpected positions.

It is clear that many men in the domestic environment who are considered "stay-at-home" fathers suffer from negative stigma, negatively impacted mental health, and a loss of identity. There is growing research to prove these shared outlooks and perspectives. However, there is little research on the best solution for the issue in society. As an expert in this community, I would say that support groups, even on Social Media, such as Facebook, would be helpful with the exchanging of experiences, sharing of anecdotes, and possible rants from other stay-at-home dads. Though the number of us are growing, the stay-at-home dad continues to be so rare that it is unlikely we have a friend in our community within our preexisting interpersonal relationships. Additionally, education is always a key component in spreading awareness and making improvements for societal issues. If more people read the articles I have cited in this paper, or even my own, it may increase understanding and empathy.

Works Cited

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