

Fatherhood in Transition: The Impact of Involved Fathering on Women's Careers

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Background: In the wake of placing greater importance on their careers, women are reentering the workforce more quickly after becoming mothers; at the same time, men are becoming increasingly involved in childcare and housework when they become fathers (Coltrane et al., 2013). In fact, there is increasing pressure on men to not only be “providers,” but also equal partners in co-parenting (Burke & Major, 2014; Harrington et al., 2010). Although being a good provider was once equivalent to being a good father, this is no longer the case and new modes of fatherhood are on the rise. The approach known as “involved fathering” is less prevalent than traditional approaches; however, scholars have uncovered a number of benefits such as increased job satisfaction and commitment, when organizations support this new mode of fathering (Ladge et al., 2015). However, most men in the U.S. lack resources, such as paternity leave and formal workplace flexibility, that help them adjust to their fatherhood roles (Cooper, 2000) and become more involved at home (Kaufman, 2013). When men take advantage of flexible work arrangements and take on more duties at home, they reduce the “second-shift” (Hochschild, 1989) burden that working mothers often experience (Ladge et al., 2015). In fact, research has found that fathers’ family involvement directly impacts the mothers’ work-family balance (Fagan & Press, 2008), and demonstrated that when men alleviate childcare and housework demands from their wives/partners, they help working mothers advance in their careers (Ladge et al., 2015; Mundy, 2013).

As men transition to fatherhood, they develop a fatherhood identity. This identity impacts their involvement in childcaring duties and the level of support they provide to their wives/partners to engage in both career and family (Bataille & McGill-Carlison, 2017). In fact, a first paternity leave is a time for a man to enact his envisioned fatherhood ideals, such as those of involved fathering (Ladge et al., 2015). However, little is known about the impact that involved fathering has on mothers as they transition back to work post-maternity leave and craft an approach that allows them to combine motherhood with a professional career. We set out to explore how first time expectant fathers develop a fatherhood identity, and discover what impact the father’s level of involvement in childcare and household duties has on the mother’s return to work.

Methods: Using a longitudinal design, we conducted a qualitative, interview-based study. The interviews elicited personal stories that revealed first-time fathers’ attitudes, perceptions, and experiences as they transitioned from expectant to new fathers. The first interview took place when each informant was a first-time expectant father, and the second interview was conducted six to twelve months after the birth of the baby. The sample includes professional/managerial men who were married to/partnered with educated, professional women. Taking a narrative approach to data collection and analysis allowed us to examine how these men formed and revise

their identities through this major life transition. Data collection is ongoing; as such, the findings we uncovered are the result of 18 completed cases.

Findings: Through our analysis, three distinct fatherhood role ideologies emerged; traditional, egalitarian, and “superdad” (Kaufman, 2013). The traditional ideology was seen in those placing a strong emphasis on work and in terms of being a “provider”. The egalitarian ideology was revealed in those sharing childcare and/or housework responsibilities with their partners and placing focus on both career and family. Finally, the “superdad” ideology was seen in men taking responsibility for more than an equal share of childcare and housework activities while maintaining their full-time jobs. All participants described taking part in care of the home, to varying degrees. As expectant fathers, men begin to make changes to their work and home lives to accommodate the needs of a pregnant partner, and thereafter. These findings suggest that a general shift away from a strict, gendered division of labor is taking place in today’s dual career couples. We discovered that the majority of the men were using flexibility at work in order to be more involved at home. In doing so, they provided critical support that facilitated both their wives’/partners’ post-maternity leave return to work, and their ability to meet the demands of motherhood as well as their professional careers.

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