Exploring the Psychological Well-being of Stay-at-Home Fathers

Neşe. Köse*[1] , Farhad. Namjoo[2]

[1] Department of Health, Culture, and Sport Services, AkdenizUniversity, Antalya, Turkey
[2] Department of Psychology and Counseling, KMAN Research Institute, Richmond Hill, Ontario, Canada

* **Corresponding author email address**: nesekose@kdeniz.edu.tr

Article Info

Article type:
Original Research

ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the psychological well-being of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs), focusing on their self-identity and role perception, the challenges they face, and the coping mechanisms they employ. A qualitative research design was employed, utilizing semi-structured interviews to gather data from 24 SAHFs. Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation. The interviews were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing, lasting between 45 to 90 minutes. Data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed using NVivo software. Thematic analysis was used to identify key themes and patterns in the data, providing an in-depth understanding of the participants' experiences. The study identified three main themes: Identity and Role Perception, Challenges and Coping Mechanisms, and Social Support and Relationships. SAHFs experienced significant shifts in self-identity, moving from career-focused to fatherhood-centered roles. They faced various emotional challenges, including stress, anxiety, and social isolation, exacerbated by time management and financial pressures. Social support from spouses, peers, and community involvement played a crucial role in mitigating these challenges. The importance of robust support networks and community engagement was underscored, highlighting the need for tailored interventions to enhance the well-being of SAHFs. The psychological well-being of SAHFs is influenced by a complex interplay of identity shifts, societal perceptions, and the challenges of managing daily responsibilities. Social support emerges as a critical factor in promoting mental health and reducing feelings of isolation. This study contributes to the understanding of SAHFs' experiences and underscores the need for targeted support systems and policies to address their unique challenges. Future research should expand on these findings with larger, more diverse samples and explore the long-term impacts of being a SAHF.

Keywords: *Stay-at-home fathers, psychological well-being, self-identity, coping mechanisms, social support, qualitative research, mental health, parenting, gender roles.*

1. Introduction

The transition to fatherhood is a significant life event that brings about substantial changes in men's lives. It is a period marked by joy, fulfillment, and the formation of a unique bond with their children. However, it is also a time of increased stress, anxiety, and potential mental health challenges. Traditionally, much of the focus has been on mothers during this transition, but recent studies have highlighted the importance of understanding the experiences of fathers, particularly those who assume the role of primary caregivers (Herawati et al., 2024; Krys et al., 2019; Lim, 2019). Stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) are a growing demographic, challenging traditional gender roles and offering a unique perspective on parenting and psychological well-being (Holmes et al., 2021).

The psychological well-being of fathers during the transition to parenthood has been increasingly studied. Baldwin et al. (2018) conducted a systematic review that highlighted the mental health challenges faced by first-time fathers. They found that fathers often experience significant stress and anxiety, which can impact their overall well-being (Baldwin et al., 2018). These findings are corroborated by Baldwin et al. (2019) in their qualitative exploratory study, which emphasized the need for better support systems for first-time fathers during this transitional period (Baldwin et al., 2019).

Stay-at-home fathers represent a unique subset of fathers whose experiences diverge from those of traditional working fathers. Holmes et al. (2021) explored the well-being of SAHFs using the American Time Use Survey, finding that social contact and time alone are critical factors influencing their subjective well-being (Holmes et al., 2021). This study highlights the importance of social interactions and the potential for isolation among SAHFs, underscoring the need for robust support networks.

The societal and cultural context plays a crucial role in shaping the experiences of SAHFs. Caldwell et al. (2013) examined how masculinity moderates the impact of discrimination and parenting on depressive symptoms among nonresident African-American fathers. Their findings suggest that societal expectations of masculinity can exacerbate mental health issues in fathers who do not conform to traditional roles ((Caldwell et al., 2013). This highlights the potential additional pressures faced by SAHFs who challenge conventional gender norms.

Longitudinal studies provide valuable insights into the evolving mental health and well-being of fathers. The Men and Parenting Pathways (MAPP) study, as described by Francis et al. (2021), is a longitudinal Australian cohort study that investigates men's mental health and well-being at the normative age for first-time fatherhood. This study aims to understand the trajectories of mental health in fathers, emphasizing the need for ongoing support throughout fatherhood (Francis et al., 2021). Similarly, Garfield et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal study focusing on young adult fathers, revealing significant changes in paternal mental health over time (Garfield et al., 2014).

The mental health challenges faced by SAHFs are multifaceted. Giallo et al. (2023) identified preconception factors associated with postnatal mental health and suicidality among first-time fathers, highlighting the importance of addressing mental health issues before they escalate (Giallo et al., 2023). Mansour et al. (2023) further explored the social network investment of men, finding significant associations between social support and mental health outcomes (Mansour et al., 2023). These studies suggest that enhancing social support networks can be a vital strategy in mitigating mental health challenges.

The quality of relationships, both with partners and peers, is a critical determinant of paternal mental health. Greenwood et al. (2021) examined the impact of parent and peer attachments during adolescence on paternal postpartum mental health. Their findings indicate that strong attachment bonds formed during adolescence can positively influence mental health outcomes in fathers (Greenwood et al., 2021). This underscores the importance of nurturing supportive relationships throughout the life course.

Despite the growing body of research on fatherhood and mental health, there is a paucity of studies focusing specifically on the psychological well-being of SAHFs. This study aims to fill this gap by exploring the experiences, challenges, and coping mechanisms of SAHFs. By using a qualitative research design, this study seeks to provide a comprehensive understanding of the nuanced experiences of these fathers, contributing valuable insights to the existing literature.

The specific objectives of this study are:
- To explore the self-identity and role perception of SAHFs.
- To identify the main challenges and coping mechanisms employed by SAHFs.
- To understand the role of social support and relationships in the well-being of SAHFs.

The study is guided by the following research questions:

- How do SAHFs perceive their self-identity and role within the family and society?
- What are the primary challenges faced by SAHFs, and what coping strategies do they employ?
- How do social support and relationships impact the psychological well-being of SAHFs?

2. Methods and Materials

2.1. Study Design and Participants

This study employs a qualitative research design to explore the psychological well-being of stay-at-home fathers. The qualitative approach allows for an in-depth understanding of the experiences, emotions, and perceptions of these fathers, providing rich and nuanced insights into their psychological well-being.

The participants of this study were stay-at-home fathers from diverse backgrounds. The inclusion criteria required participants to have been stay-at-home fathers for at least one year. A purposive sampling method was used to ensure a diverse range of participants in terms of age, socioeconomic status, and cultural background. The final sample consisted of 24 stay-at-home fathers, which was deemed sufficient to achieve theoretical saturation.

2.2. Measures

2.2.1. Semi-Structured Interview

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, which were conducted either in-person or via video conferencing, depending on the participants' preferences and availability. The interviews lasted between 45 to 90 minutes and were audio-recorded with the participants' consent. The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for flexibility, enabling the participants to freely express their thoughts and experiences while ensuring that the core topics of interest were covered.

The interview guide included open-ended questions aimed at exploring various aspects of the participants' psychological well-being, such as their daily routines, coping strategies, social support systems, challenges faced, and perceptions of their role as stay-at-home fathers. Follow-up questions were used to delve deeper into specific issues that arose during the interviews.

2.3. Data analysis

The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. NVivo software was used for the analysis of the transcribed data. Thematic analysis was employed to identify, analyze, and report patterns (themes) within the data. The process involved several steps:

Familiarization with the Data: The researchers immersed themselves in the data by reading and re-reading the transcripts and noting initial ideas.

Generating Initial Codes: The data were systematically coded using NVivo software. Codes were applied to segments of the text that appeared relevant to the research questions.

Searching for Themes: The initial codes were examined and collated into potential themes. All relevant coded data extracts were collated within the identified themes.

Reviewing Themes: The themes were reviewed and refined. This involved checking if the themes worked in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.

Defining and Naming Themes: The themes were further refined to clearly define what each theme encompassed. Each theme was named to reflect its essence and scope.

Producing the Report: Finally, the analysis was documented in a coherent and logical manner, providing a detailed account of the themes and supporting them with data extracts.

3. Findings and Results

The study included 24 stay-at-home fathers, representing a diverse range of backgrounds. The ages of the participants ranged from 30 to 55 years, with the majority (14 participants, 58%) being in the 35-45 age group. Participants came from various socioeconomic statuses: 8 fathers (33%) identified as middle-class, 10 (42%) as upper-middle-class, and 6 (25%) as working-class. In terms of education, 16 participants (67%) held a bachelor's degree or higher, while the remaining 8 (33%) had completed high school or vocational training. The duration of their stay-at-home status varied, with 10 fathers (42%) having been stay-at-home for 1-3 years, 8 (33%) for 4-6 years, and 6 (25%) for over 7 years. The participants' children ranged in age from infancy to adolescence, with most fathers (15 participants, 63%) having children under the age of 10.

Table 1

The Results of Qualitative Analysis

Category	Subcategory	Concepts
Identity and Role Perception	Self-Identity	Self-worth, Self-esteem, Personal values
	Role Satisfaction	Contentment, Fulfillment, Pride in role
	Societal Perceptions	Stigma, Recognition, Social value
	Comparison with Working Fathers	Competitiveness, Comparison anxiety, Validation
	Gender Expectations	Traditional roles, Modern roles, Gender stereotypes
	Fatherhood vs. Career Identity	Career loss, Career satisfaction, Identity shift
	Personal Growth	Skills development, Adaptability, Resilience
Challenges and Coping Mechanisms	Emotional Challenges	Stress, Anxiety, Frustration
	Time Management	Daily routines, Scheduling, Flexibility
	Financial Pressure	Income loss, Budgeting, Financial planning
	Social Isolation	Loneliness, Lack of adult interaction, Disconnectedness
	Health and Well-being	Mental health, Physical health, Self-care
	Balancing Responsibilities	Household chores, Childcare, Personal time
	Coping Strategies	Problem-solving, Positive thinking, Hobbies
	Seeking Professional Help	Counseling, Therapy, Support groups
Social Support and Relationships	Spousal Support	Emotional support, Shared responsibilities, Conflict resolution
	Peer Support	Friendship with other fathers, Networking, Shared experiences
	Family Support	Extended family help, Grandparents' involvement, Sibling support
	Community Involvement	Local groups, Neighborhood ties, Volunteer work
	Impact on Friendships	Maintaining friendships, Changes in social circles, Social engagements

3.1. Identity and Role Perception

Self-Identity: Stay-at-home fathers often experience significant changes in their self-identity. Concepts such as self-worth, self-esteem, and personal values are frequently mentioned. One father noted, "I've had to redefine what success means to me. It's no longer about climbing the corporate ladder but about being there for my kids."

Role Satisfaction: Many stay-at-home fathers express contentment, fulfillment, and pride in their role. A participant shared, "I never imagined finding so much joy in the everyday moments with my children. It's incredibly satisfying."

Societal Perceptions: Fathers encounter mixed societal perceptions, including stigma, recognition, and social value. One father explained, "Sometimes people look at me like I'm doing something wrong, but others really admire what I do. It's a mixed bag."

Comparison with Working Fathers: Feelings of competitiveness, comparison anxiety, and the need for validation are common. One interviewee stated, "I often wonder if I'm doing enough, especially when I see other dads balancing work and home life."

Gender Expectations: Traditional roles, modern roles, and gender stereotypes play a significant part in their experiences. A father mentioned, "Breaking away from traditional gender roles has been challenging, but also liberating. Society's expectations can be hard to ignore."

Fatherhood vs. Career Identity: The shift from a career-focused identity to a fatherhood-focused one involves career loss, career satisfaction, and identity shift. One father described, "Leaving my job was tough, but I've found a different kind of satisfaction in being a full-time dad."

Personal Growth: Stay-at-home fathers often experience skills development, adaptability, and resilience. As one participant put it, "I've learned so much about myself and my capabilities. It's been a journey of personal growth."

3.2. Challenges and Coping Mechanisms

Emotional Challenges: Fathers frequently face stress, anxiety, and frustration. One participant revealed, "There are days when the stress is overwhelming, and I question if I'm doing the right thing."

Time Management: Managing daily routines, scheduling, and flexibility is crucial. A father shared, "Juggling the kids' schedules with household chores requires a lot of planning and flexibility."

Financial Pressure: Income loss, budgeting, and financial planning are common issues. One interviewee noted, "Adjusting to a single income was one of the hardest parts. Budgeting has become a necessary skill."

Social Isolation: Loneliness, lack of adult interaction, and feelings of disconnectedness are significant challenges. A father explained, "Sometimes, it feels like I'm on an island. Adult interaction is limited, and it can be quite isolating."

Health and Well-being: Mental health, physical health, and self-care are critical concerns. One father mentioned, "Maintaining my mental and physical health is a priority. Self-care routines have become essential."

Balancing Responsibilities: Balancing household chores, childcare, and personal time is a constant struggle. A participant said, "Finding time for myself amidst all the responsibilities is tough, but necessary."

Coping Strategies: Fathers use problem-solving, positive thinking, and hobbies as coping strategies. One father shared, "I've developed new hobbies and learned to approach problems with a positive mindset. It helps a lot."

Seeking Professional Help: Counseling, therapy, and support groups are valuable resources. One interviewee revealed, "Talking to a therapist has been incredibly helpful. It provides an outlet and professional guidance."

3.3. Social Support and Relationships

Spousal Support: Emotional support, shared responsibilities, and conflict resolution with spouses are vital. A father noted, "My partner's support has been invaluable. We share responsibilities and work through conflicts together."

Peer Support: Friendships with other fathers, networking, and shared experiences provide significant support. One participant explained, "Connecting with other stay-at-home dads has been a lifeline. We share experiences and advice."

Family Support: Extended family help, grandparents' involvement, and sibling support are crucial. A father mentioned, "Having my parents and siblings involved has made a huge difference. It's a team effort."

Community Involvement: Local groups, neighborhood ties, and volunteer work foster a sense of community. One interviewee shared, "Being active in the community has helped me feel connected and supported."

Impact on Friendships: Maintaining friendships, changes in social circles, and social engagements are notable. A father stated, "It's been challenging to maintain old friendships, but I've also formed new connections."

4. Discussion and Conclusion

This study explored the psychological well-being of stay-at-home fathers (SAHFs) through semi-structured interviews, identifying key themes related to identity and role perception, challenges and coping mechanisms, and social support and relationships. The findings revealed that SAHFs experience significant changes in self-identity, navigate various societal perceptions, and face unique challenges that impact their mental health and well-being. The results also highlighted the critical role of social support in mitigating these challenges and promoting positive mental health outcomes.

The study found that SAHFs undergo a substantial transformation in their self-identity, shifting from career-focused to fatherhood-centered roles. This shift involves redefining success and personal values, often leading to increased self-worth and self-esteem. These findings align with Baldwin et al. (2019), who reported that first-time fathers experience significant identity shifts and emphasized the need for support systems to help navigate these changes (Baldwin et al., 2019). Furthermore, the sense of fulfillment and pride expressed by SAHFs in their role aligns with the findings of Holmes et al. (2021), who noted that SAHFs derive substantial satisfaction from their caregiving responsibilities, despite societal stigma and traditional gender expectations (Holmes et al., 2021).

SAHFs face various emotional challenges, including stress, anxiety, and frustration, as they manage household responsibilities and childcare. These findings are consistent with Baldwin et al. (2018), who identified similar emotional challenges in first-time fathers during the transition to parenthood. Time management and financial pressure are also significant stressors, as noted by participants who struggled to balance daily routines and budget on a single income. This echoes the findings of Giallo et al. (2023), who highlighted the financial strains and time management issues faced by fathers, impacting their mental health and well-being (Giallo et al., 2023).

Social isolation emerged as a critical challenge for SAHFs, with many participants reporting feelings of loneliness and a lack of adult interaction. Holmes et al. (2021) similarly found that social contact and time alone significantly influence the well-being of SAHFs, underscoring the importance of social networks and community involvement (Holmes et al., 2021). The health and well-being of SAHFs are also affected, with participants emphasizing the need for mental and physical self-care. This is supported by Caldwell et al. (2013), who noted the impact of societal expectations on the mental health of fathers, particularly those deviating from traditional roles (Caldwell et al., 2013).

The importance of spousal support, peer support, and community involvement in the well-being of SAHFs cannot be overstated. Participants highlighted the emotional support and shared responsibilities provided by their spouses as crucial to their mental health. This finding aligns with Greenwood et al. (2021), who emphasized the role of strong attachment bonds in promoting paternal mental health (Greenwood et al., 2021). Peer support, particularly from other SAHFs, provides a sense of camaraderie and shared experience, as noted by Mansour et al. (2023). Community involvement, through local groups and volunteer work, also plays a vital role in reducing feelings of isolation and enhancing social connections (Mansour et al., 2023).

The study also found that maintaining friendships and social engagements is challenging for SAHFs, with many experiencing changes in their social circles. This is consistent with the findings of Francis et al. (2021), who noted the evolving nature of social relationships for first-time fathers and the need for supportive networks to navigate these changes (Francis et al., 2021). The overall findings of this study underscore the critical importance of robust social support systems in promoting the psychological well-being of SAHFs.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, with 24 participants, which may limit the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study relied on self-reported data, which can be subject to bias and inaccuracies. The participants were also predominantly from a specific geographical area, which may not reflect the experiences of SAHFs in different cultural or socio-economic contexts. Finally, the qualitative nature of the study, while providing in-depth insights, limits the ability to quantify the prevalence of certain experiences and challenges among SAHFs.

Future research should aim to address these limitations by including larger and more diverse samples to enhance the generalizability of the findings. Longitudinal studies would be particularly valuable in understanding the long-term psychological impacts of being a SAHF and how these impacts evolve over time. Additionally, quantitative studies could complement qualitative findings by providing statistical analyses of the prevalence and severity of mental health challenges among SAHFs. Research should also explore the effectiveness of various support interventions, such as counseling, peer support groups, and community programs, in improving the mental health and well-being of SAHFs.

Based on the findings of this study, several practical recommendations can be made to support the psychological well-being of SAHFs. First, it is crucial to develop and promote support networks specifically tailored for SAHFs, including peer support groups and community programs. These networks can provide emotional support, reduce feelings of isolation, and offer practical advice on managing daily challenges. Employers and policymakers should also recognize the unique needs of SAHFs and consider implementing policies that support work-life balance, such as flexible working arrangements and financial assistance programs. Additionally, mental health professionals should be aware of the specific challenges faced by SAHFs and offer targeted interventions, such as counseling and stress management programs, to address their needs.

In conclusion, this study highlights the unique experiences and challenges of SAHFs, emphasizing the importance of social support in promoting their psychological well-being. By addressing the identified challenges and providing targeted support, we can enhance the mental health and overall well-being of SAHFs, ultimately benefiting their families and communities. The findings of this study contribute to a growing body of literature on fatherhood and mental health, offering valuable insights for researchers, practitioners, and policymakers.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

Acknowledgments

We would like to express our gratitude to all individuals helped us to do the project.

Declaration of Interest

The authors report no conflict of interest.

Funding

According to the authors, this article has no financial support.

Ethical Considerations

The study protocol adhered to the principles outlined in the Helsinki Declaration, which provides guidelines for ethical research involving human participants.

References

Baldwin, S., Malone, M., Sandall, J., & Bick, D. (2018). Mental Health and Wellbeing During the Transition to Fatherhood: A Systematic Review of First Time Fathers' Experiences. *The Jbi Database of Systematic Reviews and Implementation Reports*, *16*(11), 2118-2191. https://doi.org/10.11124/jbisrir-2017-003773

Baldwin, S., Malone, M., Sandall, J., & Bick, D. (2019). A Qualitative Exploratory Study of UK First-Time Fathers' Experiences, Mental Health and Wellbeing Needs During Their Transition to Fatherhood. *BMJ open*, *9*(9), e030792. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2019-030792

Caldwell, C. H., Antonakos, C. L., Tsuchiya, K., Assari, S., & Loney, E. H. D. (2013). Masculinity as a Moderator of Discrimination and Parenting on Depressive Symptoms and Drinking Behaviors Among Nonresident African-American Fathers. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *14*(1), 47-58. https://doi.org/10.1037/a0029105

Francis, L. M., Skouteris, H., Youssef, G., Graeme, L., Williams, J., Fletcher, R., Knight, T., Milgrom, J., Manno, L. D., Olsson, C. A., & Greenwood, C. J. (2021). Cohort Profile: The Men and Parenting Pathways (MAPP) Study: A Longitudinal Australian Cohort Study of Men's Mental Health and Well-Being at the Normative Age for First-Time Fatherhood. *BMJ open*, *11*(7), e047909. https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2020-047909

Garfield, C. F., Duncan, G. J., Rutsohn, J., McDade, T. W., Adam, E. K., Coley, R. L., & Chase-Lansdale, P. L. (2014). A Longitudinal Study of Paternal Mental Health During Transition to Fatherhood as Young Adults. *Pediatrics*, *133*(5), 836-843. https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2013-3262

Giallo, R., Wynter, K., McMahon, G., Seymour, M., Fogarty, A., Cooklin, A., Leach, L., Francis, L. M., & Duursma, E. (2023). Preconception Factors Associated With Postnatal Mental Health and Suicidality Among First-Time Fathers: Results From an Australian Longitudinal Study of Men's Health. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, *58*(8), 1153-1160. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00127-023-02421-3

Greenwood, C. J., Letcher, P., Spry, E., Mansour, K. A., McIntosh, J., Thomson, K., Deane, C., Biden, E. J., Edwards, B., Hutchinson, D., Cleary, J. D., Toumbourou, J. W., Sanson, A., & Olsson, C. A. (2021). Parent and Peer Attachments in Adolescence and Paternal Postpartum Mental Health: Findings From the ATP Generation 3 Study. *Frontiers in psychology*, *12*. https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2021.672174

Herawati, N., Jafari, M., & Sanders, K. (2024). The Influence of Globalization on Family Traditions and Values. *Journal of Psychosociological Research in Family and Culture*, *2*(2), 4-10. https://doi.org/10.61838/kman.jprfc.2.2.2

Holmes, E. K., Wikle, J. S., Thomas, C. R., Jorgensen, M. A., & Egginton, B. R. (2021). Social Contact, Time Alone, and Parental Subjective Well-Being: A Focus on Stay-at-Home Fathers Using the American Time Use Survey. *Psychology of Men & Masculinity*, *22*(3), 488-499. https://doi.org/10.1037/men0000321

Krys, K., Zelenski, J. M., Capaldi, C. A., Park, J., van Tilburg, W., van Osch, Y., Haas, B. W., Bond, M. H., Dominguez-Espinoza, A., Xing, C., Igbokwe, D. O., Kwiatkowska, A., Luzniak-Piecha, M., Nader, M., Rizwan, M., Zhu, Z., & Uchida, Y. (2019). Putting the "We" Into Well-being: Using Collectivism-Themed Measures of Well-Being Attenuates Well-being's Association With Individualism. *Asian Journal of Social Psychology*, *22*(3), 256-267. https://doi.org/10.1111/ajsp.12364

Lim, A. (2019). Confucian Masculinity: State Advocacy of Active Fatherhood in Singapore. *Men and Masculinities*, *24*(1), 46-63. https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184x19867389

Mansour, K. A., Greenwood, C., Francis, L. M., Smith, I., & Olsson, C. A. (2023). Social Network Investment of Men: Cross-sectional and Longitudinal Associations With Mental Health Problems. *Applied Psychology Health and Well-Being*, *16*(1), 138-157. https://doi.org/10.1111/aphw.12475