The Relationship between Economic Downturns and the Proportion of Stay-at-Home Father

Households

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ABSTRACT

We relate trends in the proportions of stay-at-home father households with macroeconomic fluctuations and change in social norms regarding gender roles. Specifically, we suggest that during an economic downturn, stay-at-home father households become more prevalent; male spouses lose their job and female spouses become the sole earners of a household. Once the labor market recovers and unemployment rates decline, the proportion of stay-at-home father households also declines, but stays above pre-economic downturn levels. Thus, labor market conditions are associated with changes in division of household work. We test this proposition using CPS data from 1976-2009. We find an association between increased unemployment levels and the proportion of stay-at-home father households. In addition, each recession is associated with a boost in the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population. Finally, the increase in stay-at-home father households is driven by an increase in both fathers who stay at home to take care of children and fathers who stay at home for other reasons, mostly inability to work or find work.

INTRODUCTION

Stay-at-home father households, households in which the mother is the sole-earner of income, represent a small yet growing percentage of households in the United States. Depending on the method stay-at-home father households were defined, the percentage of stay-at-home father households among two-parent households was estimated to be between one percent (Rabin, 1996) and 3.6 percent (Fields, 2003). The high participation rates of women in the labor force and the latest recession that had greater impact on men than on women (Harrington, Van Deusen, and Ladge, 2010), combined with greater projected growth rates in occupations that are dominated by women (Boushey, 2009), suggest that the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the U.S. population is only likely to increase.

There are two potential reasons for the growth in the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population. First, the past few decades have seen a tremendous change in women's participation in the labor force. Women make up 50% of the workforce and earn 62% of the associate's degrees, 57% of the bachelor's degrees, and 60% of the master's degrees awarded each year. In 1970 women earned fewer than 10% of PhD's and professional degrees in United States. In 2008, approximately 50% of professional degrees and nearly 50% of PhD's are given to women (Mason, 2009). These changes in labor force participation and the proportion of women with advanced degrees translate into increased number of dual-earner and dual-career families which comprise 59 percent of all married couples families (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2004: Table 21). The change in women education translates to growing proportions of families in which the wife earns more than her husband or is the spouse with a career as opposed to a job (Drago, Black, and Wooden, 2005). It is likely that the sheer number of women who participate in the labor force will result in greater proportion of stay-at-home father households in the

population. For example, when a husband is unable to work due to illness or disability he is much more likely than ever before to have a wife that is in the labor force. It is also likely that some couples, when facing family demands that require one of the spouses to leave work (e.g., taking care of pre-school children or elder parents) would decide that the wife would keep working because the wife earns more money or has greater career advancement potential than her husband.

A second, sociological rather than economical, explanation for the growing proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population is that changes in social norms and perception of gender roles have changed in favor of such household work arrangements. While social perceptions of career mothers and especially of stay-at-home fathers are mostly negative (Brescoll and Uhlmann, 2005; Bridges, Etaugh, and Barnes-Farrell, 2002; Gorman and Fritzsche, 2002), there has been growing acceptance of this reversal of gender roles in recent decades. While men's participation in the labor force is still higher than that of women and women are still much more likely to stay-at-home with pre-school children, it is possible that the growth in the proportion of stay-at-home father households among two-parent families is facilitated, at least partly, by changing social norms regarding traditional gender roles.

Previous research suggested that changes in husbands' participation in traditional female tasks should be studied not only from a social change perspective (i.e., changes in perceptions of working mothers and stay-at-home fathers) but also from a macroeconomic perspective that acknowledges that fluctuations in the economy have an effect on the division of roles in families (Casper and O'Connell, 1998). Following this and other calls to study the effect of changes in the economy on the ways families organize their work schedules (Brayfield, 1995; Casper and O'Connell, 1998; Presser, 1989) we propose a third mechanism for the growth in the proportion

of stay-at-home father households. We assert that shocks in labor market conditions, mainly a sudden increase in male unemployment rates during economic downturns, forces many families to a stay-at-home father household work arrangements. Once unemployment rate drops back to pre-downturn levels, the proportion of stay-at-home father households decreases, as some men go back to the labor force. However, some households choose to continue with this household arrangement and thus, over all, the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population remains higher than the levels preceding the economic downturn. More specifically, we expect the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population to increase once unemployment rates among men increase and drop when male unemployment rates begin to drop back, but not to as low as the pre-economic downturn level. We thus combine both sociological and economical explanations of the growth in the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the U.S. population.

Economic Downturn and Male Unemployment

Economic downturns are affecting different demographics in different magnitudes. For example, younger employees are more adversely affected by economic downturns and are more likely to experience unemployment (Verick, 2009). Casper and O'Connell (1998) studied the effect of cyclical changes in employment on the likelihood of father-provided childcare services. Using data from the Survey of Income and Program Participation (SIPP), they find that during the economic recession of 1991 fathers were more likely to provide care for their children than in the years before (1988) and after (1993) the recession. Other studies have shown that a key factor affecting the use of fathers as child-care providers is the father's availability as indicated by the number of non-overlapping hours of employment between spouses (Brayfield, 1995; Presser 1989, 1994). These studies provide support for a potential effect of unemployment on

households work arrangements. In addition, these studies provide some evidence that the effect of unemployment is not lasting after unemployment rates drop to pre-recession levels (Casper and O'Connell, 1998). However, since these studies are limited in their time scope to one recession (Casper and O'Connell, 1998), or a single point in time (Brayfield, 1995; Presser, 1994) it is not clear whether the changes in gender roles and household arrangements following the increase in unemployment disappear after the unemployment rate drops back to conventional levels or whether some of the households that shifted into new households work arrangements persist with these changes even after the unemployment rate drops. In this study we observe the proportions of stay-at-home father households over 33 years and three economic downturns that were characterized by high unemployment.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: first, we explore the reasons that lead families to choose a stay-at-home father household type. We identify two types of households; those who are forced into such household work structure by inability of the father to find work or illness/disability of the father and those in which the father reported he stays at home to take care of home and family. These reasons closely follow the language used in the Current Population Surveys which ask unemployed individuals for the reasons they did not work in the previous year. We then proceed with the results section and examine the long-term relationship between economic downturns and the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population. Specifically, we first examine whether there is a relationship between the unemployment rate and the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population; second, we examine if the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population drops when unemployment rates drop; and third, we examine whether the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population following a recession is higher than the pre-recession levels. We perform some

additional analysis that differentiates stay-at-home fathers by the reasons fathers provided for not working. We conclude with a discussion of our results.

Caregiving Stay-at-Home Fathers vs. Unable to Work Stay-at-Home Fathers

Different paths can lead families to a stay-at-home father work arrangement. Fathers might be incapable to work (e.g., because of illness or disability) or unable to find a job. In such cases, a working wife will become the sole earner of the family. We treat such households as *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. On the other end of the spectrum, families might choose a stay-at-home father household working arrangement. For example, fathers might report that they stay-at-home to take care of the children or the home. We treat such families as *caretaking* stay-at-home father household.

The distinction between *unable to work* stay-at-home father households and *caretaking* stay-at-home father households is important because it might represent two different types of households. *unable to work* stay-at-home father households are likely to change their household work arrangements if the father becomes healthier or is able to find a job as unemployment rates decline; C*aretaking* Stay-at-home father households should not be affected as much by changes in the economic conditions such as a decline in unemployment rates. Furthermore, it is possible that *caretaking* stay-at-home father households have different characteristics than *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. For example, among *caretaking* stay-at-home father households the mother might have higher income and greater earning potential (higher education) that will lead husbands with lower earning potential to stay at home. The distinction between *unable to work* stay-at-home father households and *caretaking* stay-at-home father households is also important because it might represent the economic and social forces that lead families to

choosing a stay-at-home father work arrangement. *Unable to work* stay-at-home father households are more likely to be influenced by labor market and economic forces, mainly inability of the father to earn income from work that results in the mother's being the sole earner. *Caretaking* stay-a-home father households are more likely to be influenced by social and economic forces. Mothers might have far greater earning potential than their spouses (economic reasons) but at the same time, fathers might be more comfortable in taking the role of child care provider and homemaker if gender role perceptions in these households are more egalitarian.

METHOD

Sample

The March Current Population Surveys (CPS) and unemployment data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics are used in this study. The CPS is a monthly U.S. household survey conducted jointly by the U.S. Census Bureau and the Bureau of Labor Statistics. The CPS monthly survey includes a battery of labor force and demographic questions, and the March Annual Demographic File and Income Supplement includes additional variables that will be used in this study. In particular, the current study would utilize the Integrated Public Use Microdata Series of the Current Population Surveys (IPUMS-CPS; King, Ruggles, Alexander, Leicach, and Sobek, 2009) that coded variables identically between 1962 and 2009 to allow cross-time comparisons using the March CPS. The CPS provides information at the individual (person) and household levels and as such is very well suited for the current study goals. For the current study, we will use all available data from 1976 to 2009. Data before 1976 is missing some of the study's

variables of interest. Note that data from the 2009 March supplement uses reporting on labor force participation in 2008 and therefore that is the last year used in our study.

Identifying Stay-at-Home Father Households

Stay-at-home father households were identified as households in which the husband was out of the labor force and had not received any income from work in the previous year, while his wife was working for pay and earned one-hundred percent of the household income and worked at least a full-time job (35 hours or more per week). In addition, households must include at least one child who is 18 years old or younger and be a single family household with no adults leaving in the household other than the husband and the wife. To calculate the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population we included all married single family households with at least one child 18 years of age or younger and in which at least one spouse has income from work.

Distinguishing Unable to Work versus Caretaking

All adults who reported not working in the year before the survey were asked to provide a reason for not working. Reasons categories as *unable to work* were "could not find work" and "ill or disabled". We categorized as *caretaking* all households in which the father reported he was "taking care of home/family" as the reason he was not working. All other reasons were coded as other, and included "going to school", "retired", "in armed forces", and "other".

Household Characteristics

We use data on household and individual characteristics as reported in the CPS. We also use these variables to estimate the different characteristics of *caretaking* stay-at-home father

households as compared with *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. The variables used are income (adjusted to 2009 CPI and logged), number of children living in the household, age of youngest child, father's education, mother's education, and race/ethnicity (Caucasians, African-Americans, Hispanics and other race).

Unemployment

For the descriptive statistics we used national male unemployment levels for each year between 1976 and 2008 as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. For the inferential statistics (logistic and multinomial logistic regression) we used yearly unemployment at the state level, as reported by the Bureau of Labor Statistics. State level unemployment is likely to better represent the effect of unemployment on families than national level of unemployment.

RESULTS

We divide the yearly data into four periods (1976-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, and 2000-2008) in order to present the data more clearly. As can be seen in Table 1, the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population more than doubled over time. Only 1.6 percent of married couple households with children were stay-at-home father households in 1976-1979. In the period between 2000 and 2008 3.3 percent of married households with children were stay-at-home father households. Table 1 also presents the characteristics of these households, by decade. As can be seen, income of stay-at-home father households increased moderately from 1976 to 1999 and more substantially in 2000-2008. Stay-at-home father households also experienced a drop in the number of children over time, from 2.29 in 1976-1979 to 1.98 in 2000-2008. An interesting finding is that the education of wives in stay-at-home father

households has been greater than that of the husbands throughout the years. Furthermore, the gender educational gap is growing steadily throughout the years (similar to that in the population). Finally, the racial and ethnic composition of stay-at-home father households closely reflects the racial composition in the population as a whole. In 2000-2008 59 percent of stay-at-home father households were white, 12 percent were black, 11 percent were Hispanic, and 18 percent were of other race (either mixed race or other race).

Insert Table 1 about here

Turning into the relationship between unemployment rate and the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population, we find strong support for our proposition. As can be seen in Figure 1, the percent of stay-at-home father households (defined as a household in which the mother is the sole earner) is clearly linked to the male unemployment rate. As can be seen, a peek in unemployment rates (1983-1984; 1992-1994; 2003-2005) is accompanied by a jump in the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population. More interesting is the fact that while the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population declines as male unemployment level drops, it does not drop back to pre-economic downturn levels. The proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population was about 1.6 percent between 1976 and 1982, climbed up to 2.5 percent during the economic downturn of 1982-1984, and flattened around 2.1 percent between 1985 and 1991. As unemployment levels increased between 1992 and 1994, so did the proportion of stay-at-home father households, up to 3.2 percent. Then, as unemployment levels declined between 1995 and 2002, the proportion of stay-

at-home father households declined and flattened around 2.8 percent, before rising again sharply in 2004 as male unemployment rates increased, reaching record levels of 3.7 percent in 2004. Again, as male unemployment rates declined between 2005 and 2008, so did the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population, flattening at 3.4 percent.

Insert Figure 1 about here

In the last step of the analyses we examined whether the increase in stay-at-home father households following an economic downturn was driven by *caretaking* stay-at-home father households, those in which the father indicated he did not work because he is taking care of the children and the household or by *unable to work* stay-at-home fathers, those in which the father indicated he did not work because he was not able to find work or was unable to work because of illness or disability. We compare the proportion of *caretaking* stay-at-home father households across the 33 years between 1976 and 2008. As can be seen in Figure 2 the increase in the proportion of stay-at-home father households is explained by both *caretaking* and *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. However, the *unable to work* stay-at-home fathers seem to account for a greater part of the increase in the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population. In fact, the increase in *caretaking* stay-at-home fathers seem to be linear during the 1983-1984 high male unemployment rates, only slightly affected by the 1992-1994 high male unemployment rates and more strongly affected by the 2003-2005 high male unemployment rates.

Insert Figure 2 about here

Logistic and Multinomial Logistic Regression

In the last step of the analyses we estimated whether male unemployment is related to higher proportion of stay-at-home father households by estimating a logistic regression predicting type of household. State unemployment levels for each year were used in the analyses. Stay-at-home father households were contrasted with all other types of two-parent households with children (dual-earners and stay-at-home mother households). Table 2 presents the results for the logistic regression for four periods: 1976-1979, 1980-1989, 1990-1999, and 2000-2008.

Insert Table 2 about here

We find support for the effect of unemployment rate on the proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population. In all periods, except 1980-1989, the effect of unemployment rate on the proportion of stay-at-home father households was significant and positive, with an increase of one percent in unemployment associated with a one to 4.8 percent increase in the probability of a household becoming a stay-at-home father household compared to other types of two-parent household. In addition, lower wage, fewer and older children, older father's age, both parents being black (compared to white), lower father education and higher mother education were all related to greater probability of a household becoming a stay-at-home father household.

Finally, multinomial logistic regression was estimated where the omitted category was other two-parent working households (stay-at-home mother and dual-earner households). *Unable to work* stay-at-home fathers and *caregiving* stay-at-home fathers were contrasted with two-parent working households. The results (not presented) provide further support to the effect of unemployment rate on the proportion of stay-at-home father households and clarify the different effect unemployment rate has on the proportion of *caretaking* stay-at-home father households and *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. Between 1976 and 1979 there were only ten *caregiving* stay-at-home father in the sample and therefore we omitted this period from the analysis. Between 1980 and 1989 the unemployment rate was not significantly related to the proportion of *caregiving* stay-at-home father households but was significantly related to the proportion of *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. A one percent increase in unemployment was associated with a 6.1 percent increase in the proportion of *unable to work* stay-at-home father households as compared to other two-parent households ($p<.001$). Similar results were found for the period between 1990 and 1999. The unemployment rate was not significantly related to the proportion of *caregiving* stay-at-home father households but was significantly related to the proportion of *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. A one percent increase in unemployment was associated with a 6.8 percent increase in the proportion of *unable to work* stay-at-home father households as compared to other two-parent households ($p<.001$). In 2000-2008 an increase in the unemployment rate was related to an increase in the proportion of both *caregiving* and *unable to work* stay-at-home father households. A one percent increase in unemployment was associated with a 5.9 percent increase in the proportion of *caregiving* stay-at-home father households as compared to other two-parent households ($p<.05$) and A one percent increase in unemployment was associated with a 7.0 percent increase in the

proportion of *unable to work* stay-at-home father households as compared to other two-parent households ($p<.001$).

DISCUSSION

Stay-at-home father households in which the wife is the sole earner are growing in their proportion over time. Previous research indicated that change in traditional gender roles into a more egalitarian division of labor in the household is the driving mechanism behind this change. This study provides first evidence that macroeconomic fluctuations in the economy should also be considered as associated with this change. As such, this study takes a more holistic approach in that it shows how changes at the individual household level, such as division of roles in the family, is potentially driven by circumstances that are beyond the family control, such as unemployment. Furthermore, while we are unable to directly test it, it seems that the move into a more egalitarian division of roles in the household is not following a linear trend but rather a trend that advances in leaps and bounds that are triggered by economic circumstances, mainly the level of male unemployment.

We find that while the proportion of stay-at-home father households is increasing non-linearly and is strongly affected by male unemployment rate, the proportion of *caregiving* stay-at-home households, those in which the father indicated he did not work because he is taking care of the children and the household increases mostly linearly, with some evidence that in the last decade it was also affected by the unemployment rate. This finding might indicate that change in social norms that allow for males to be primary providers of children and households is following a linear trend, unlike changes that are a result of economic conditions that are more

likely to fluctuate. Future studies might try to further explore these two driving forces of change. It might be important to differentiate changes that occur following a shock (e.g., recession) from changes that occur as a result of a gradual change in social norms and values. For example, it is possible that the increase in time spent by fathers with their children (Bianchi, 2000) and the decline in mothers' hours of housework (Bianchi, 2000) are related to changes in social values and norms as well as to changes in macroeconomic factors. It is also possible that more egalitarian division of labor in more households allows economic conditions (i.e. unemployment rate) to affect not only families that are forced into a stay-at-home father household structure (i.e. *unable to work* stay-at-home father households) but also families that choose such household structure (i.e. *caregiving* stay-at-home father households).

Future studies should also try and use longitudinal designs that allow following the same family over time. Using the CPS data we are unable to follow the same family over time and observe what leads a family to choose a stay-at-home father household work arrangement and whether fathers get back to the labor force. For example, it would be interesting to observe whether *caregiving* stay-at-home fathers are similar to stay-at-home mothers in that they are more likely to return to the labor market once children enter kindergarten (Moen, 2003) and whether they are more likely to return to a part-time job, similar to some stay-at-home mothers (Moen, Robison, and Fields, 1994).

In sum, this study supports an approach to social change that takes into account a macroeconomic perspective that acknowledges that fluctuations in the economy have an effect on the individual and family level (Casper and O'Connell, 1998). It is possible that other changes in perceptions and behaviors of individuals and families are also not changing linearly and are a result of both societal changes and economic shocks.

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Table 1: Characteristics of stay-at-home father households, by decade

	1976-1979	1980-1989	1990-1999	2000-2008
Income [a]	22,847	23,386	28,875	40,640
	(15,075)	(16,296)	(26,946)	(50,181)
Number of children	2.29 (1.25)	2.09 (1.13)	2.01 (1.01)	1.98 (1.02)
Age of youngest child	10.54 (5.32)	9.86 (5.74)	9.27 (5.64)	9.47 (5.55)
Father's education [b]	3.03 (1.34)	3.31 (1.37)	4.00 (1.42)	4.42 (1.31)
Mother's education	3.21 (1.12)	3.51 (1.25)	4.31 (1.33)	4.78 (1.30)
Caucasians	.67	.63	.59	.59
African-Americans	.17	.16	.12	.12
Hispanics	.09	.10	.15	.11
Other	.07	.11	.14	.18
N	1,139	2,692	3,054	5,294
% of stay-at-home father households in the population	1.6	2.0	2.8	3.3

[a] Income is adjusted by 2009 CPI

[b] 1=1-6 years of schooling ; 2=7-8 years of schooling; 3=high school (no diploma); 4=high school diploma; 5=some college; 6=Bachelor degree; 7=graduate degree.

Standard deviation in parentheses

Table 2: Logistic regression results, by decade

	1976-1979		1980-1989		1990-19999		2000-2009	
	B	Odds ratio	B	Odds ratio	B	Odds ratio	B	Odds ratio
Log wage	-1.17***	.312	-.96***	.383	-1.23***	.292	-1.34***	.262
Number of children	-.17***	.845	-.12***	.883	-.09***	.912	-.11***	.899
Number of children age 5 and under	-.28***	.75	-.14***	.868	-.07	.935	-.11***	.899
Age of youngest child	.02*	1.022	.03***	1.029	.02**	1.020	.02***	1.015
Age father	.03***	1.029	.02***	1.024	.07***	1.070	.07***	1.072
Age mother	-.01*	.986	.00	1.000	.00	1.003	-.01***	.988
Both parents black	.91***	2.495	.89***	2.425	.51***	1.670	.57***	1.765
Both parents Hispanic	-.42**	.657	-.27***	.763	-.36***	.698	-.61***	.542
Parents of other race	.84***	2.325	.87***	2.378	.25***	1.280	.35***	1.418
Father with less than 12 years of school	.03	1.029	-.04	.965	.45***	1.565	.29***	1.335
Father with1-4 years of college	-.158	.853	-.06	.938	-.24***	.790	-.22***	.803
Father with 5+ years of college	-1.12***	.326	-.52	.596	-1.03***	.356	-.77***	.463
Mother with Less than 12 years of school	-.57***	.564	-.40***	.668	-.64***	.527	-.67***	.513
Mother with 1-4 years of college	.32*	1.380	.28***	1.324	.33***	1.393	.36***	1.433
Mother with 5+ years of college	1.03***	2.809	.68***	1.978	1.21***	3.341	1.35***	3.846
Unemployment rate	.01***	1.01	-.02	.978	.04**	1.041	.05***	1.048
Pseudo R-Squared	.140		.115		.206		.203	

Coefficients based on weighted sample; significance tests use actual sample size.

*$p<.05$; **$p<.01$; ***$p<.001$

Figure 1: Male unemployment rates and the percentage of stay-at-home father households, 1976-2008
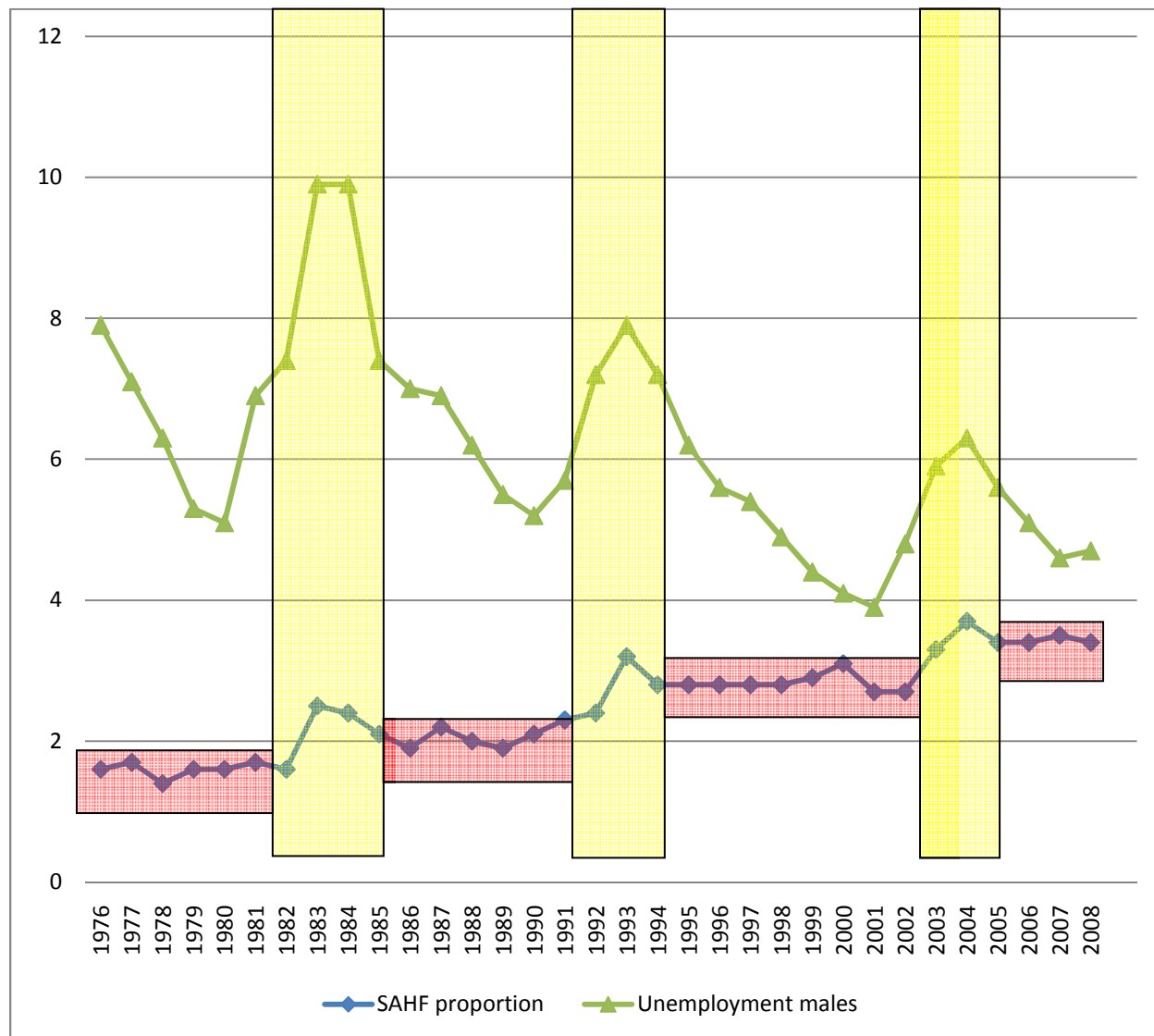
Figure 2: Proportion of stay-at-home father households in the population, by reason provided by father for staying at home, 1976-2008