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First-time fathers' experiences of parenting during the first year

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Objective: The objective of this study was to explore the experiences of fathers during their first year as parents to fully capture their experiences and transition to parenthood. **Background:** Becoming a parent for the first time has a life-changing impact for both the mother and the father, yet the factors implicated in the transition to fatherhood have been under-researched. **Methods:** In this qualitative study using an interpretative phenomenological approach (IPA), 10 first-time fathers were interviewed 7–12 months after the birth of their baby. **Results:** Two super-ordinate themes were uncovered: experiences during pregnancy and fatherhood – the early days, which are supported by six sub-ordinate themes. Fathers' narratives can be understood within the theoretical framework of Draper's Transition Theory; early fatherhood represents the continuation of a man's transitory journey, which starts during pregnancy. **Conclusion:** Despite increasing public awareness and socio-political changes affecting paternal parenting culture, fathers still seem to feel undervalued and unsupported when it comes to antenatal support. The antenatal period is a critical time in which to engage with and support motivated expectant fathers; antenatal psycho-education classes can be adapted to accommodate the needs of men. The mental health of the man has an impact on the woman in the antenatal and post-natal periods; addressing the needs of men during pregnancy can function as an early intervention for his family system and could reduce the financial cost to health services in the long term.

Keywords: fathers; interpretive phenomenology; qualitative; transition theory; parenting

Academic and clinical interest in fatherhood has gathered momentum; it now routinely features in health, family and social policy contexts (Draper, 2002) and government-led public health awareness programmes (Department of Health, 2009). However, there still seems to be a paucity of studies exploring the experiences of first-time fathers from the UK. One Scottish study (Bradley, Boath, & Mackenzie, 2004) of 10 first-time fathers explored their experiences of support. Men expressed negative experiences regarding antenatal classes, which they perceived as patronising. However, a major limitation of this study was the lack of detail included in the methodology; the authors did not convey adequate information about the participants, when the interviews were conducted, or the social contexts of the participants. Participants were also not asked about the type of support they would have valued in the antenatal and/or post-natal periods.

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Nine first-time fathers' experiences were explored between 4 and 11 weeks post-birth (Chin, Daiches, & Hall, 2011). The majority of men planned to have a baby and perceived fatherhood as the next stage in their relationship. Men who attended the labour reported feeling a lack of utility and involvement in the process, which for some men increased feelings of physical detachment from their partner. Similar findings were also reported by Premberg, Hellström and Berg (2008) with Swedish/Scandinavian fathers, which suggest that the experience of men's transition to fatherhood contains universally shared elements which traverse cultural boundaries. Men's narratives from the aforementioned studies alluded to an attitude which pervades western antenatal/maternity services, and which some authors have termed *mother-centrism* (Ball, 2009). A meta-synthesis by Goodman (2005), which predominantly contained experiences of first-time fathers from various cultural backgrounds, highlighted that men experienced a plethora of emotions, ranging from helplessness to completeness as they managed the demands and expectations of their new role.

In a study of 22 first-time Canadian fathers (Henderson & Brouse, 1991), it was noted that men go through three predictable stages during the transition of early fatherhood (three weeks postpartum): expectations, reality and transition to mastery. However, this proposed three-stage model (Henderson & Brouse, 1991) seems overly simplistic and lacks a consideration of the participants' social context. Interviews were also conducted in the presence of the participants' respective partners, which potentially impacted on how open and honest the men were willing to be.

Although the aforementioned studies provide a valuable insight and contribution to the body of fatherhood research, the majority of them provide only a narrow temporal window in which to understand the personal experiences of the first-time fathers. As most fathers could only reflect and comment about their parenting experiences during the first few weeks of their babies being born, their narratives lack an experiential trajectory over time.

In order for health services to better cater to the needs of first-time fathers, it is vital that health professionals have an appreciation of their personal world. By using the existing literature as a guide, the aim of the current study was to add to the knowledge base of fatherhood research, by exploring the lived experience of first-time fathers during the first 12 months, including their experiences of support. By capturing data over the first year, participants had a larger retrospective pool of experience to draw from, adding further variety to their narratives and giving a sense of how their experiences transition over time. Furthermore, by comparing and contrasting the findings with previously published research, new insights can be gained.

Method

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA; Smith, 1996) was chosen as the methodological approach. IPA combines phenomenological with interpretative processes to help understand and uncover meaning of the phenomenon from the participant's perspective with their social context (Larkin, Watts, & Clifton, 2006). This approach required engagement in the process of dual hermeneutics (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), where the interviewer was trying to make sense of the participant's internal world while the participant is making sense of their world at the same time (Smith & Osborn, 2008). Phenomenology is regarded as both a research method and a philosophical belief system (Fater & Mullaney, 2000).

Sample and recruitment

Ten first-time fathers took part in the study in 2011. Participants were aged between 27 and 47 years, were married, in full-time employment and lived with their respective partners and babies. Using convenience sampling, all men were recruited via antenatal classes run by the National Health Service (NHS), and classed themselves as white British. Babies were aged between 7 and 12 months and all were the result of planned pregnancies. All fathers met the following criteria: (a) they were a first-time father; (b) their baby was 12 months old or younger; (c) they were involved in the parenting of their baby; and (d) they could understand and communicate proficiently in English.

Data collection

All 10 fathers completed one semi-structured interview, devised according to guidelines relating to IPA research (Smith et al., 2009), and which lasted 78 minutes on average. The interviews were audio-recorded and took place in participants' homes; only one member of the research team (OK) and the participant were present at interview.

Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the National Health Service (NHS; Ref: 11/H1003/2) in England (UK). Prior to being recruited, participants were given a study information leaflet. Interested individuals then contacted the research team and a meeting was arranged. At this meeting written consent was obtained and issues around confidentiality and risk were also discussed.

Data analysis

Analysis was conducted by hand, in an idiographic manner, and involved a cyclical, refining process, comparable to peeling away layers of an onion until the true essence of the phenomenon is revealed (Husserl, 1962). The following stages were used in the analysis. (a) Field notes: notes were made during the interviews, these consisted of observations of participants' non-verbal communication, personal thoughts and ideas, which could not be captured during audio-recording; these were used to aid, not replace, later interpretations. (b) Transcription: the audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, this allowed close attention to be paid to participants' use of language, tone, and flow of speech. (c) Familiarity: transcripts were read numerous times in order to become highly familiar with them; which also allowed the research team to acquire a felt sense of the content. (d) Coding: portions of participant transcripts were highlighted, one margin was used to record subjective aspects of interest, personal thoughts and ideas. The other margin was used to reconceptualise preliminary notes into abstract themes based on interpretations of the meaning. The use of field notes were vital in checking that themes conveyed the essential meaning of participants' narratives, by cross-referencing participants' verbal and non-verbal communication. In the event of the identification of a novel theme the preceding transcripts were re-examined in light of this; this process was repeated until all possible key concepts/themes were identified from all 10 transcripts. (e) Indexing: emergent sub-ordinate themes were tabulated

in a master table. (f) Relational structuring: the relationship between themes was explored and connections were made based on interpretative processes involving the essential meanings of the themes. (g) Super-ordinate themes: sub-ordinate theme clusters were subsumed within a hierarchical structure of super-ordinate themes. Super-ordinate themes were conceptual umbrellas which encapsulated the essence of sub-ordinate themes. Sub-ordinate themes could be present in more than one cluster or super-ordinate theme, meaning that themes were not only distinct from each other but also overlapped. The formulation of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes produced a detailed description which captured the meaning of the phenomenon under investigation, as perceived by the participants and interpreted by the research team, which maintained the integrity of both unique and shared experiences. While the initial analysis was undertaken by one member of the research team (OK), the themes and conceptual interpretations were checked and validated by each member of the research team. This validation progress was ongoing throughout the data analysis phase.

Results

The analysis yielded two super-ordinate themes, which contained six sub-ordinate themes relating to first-time fathers’ lived experiences. Table 1 contains an overview of the super-ordinate and sub-ordinate theme structure.

Participant narratives were interwoven with existing theoretical perspectives and research findings in order to create a dialogue between the data and theory (Geertz, 1973). Narratives are presented as quotations exactly as they were spoken. Consistent with qualitative research, this approach affords the reader a vicarious experience of participants’ experiences, and simultaneously allows the researcher to remain true to the original data (Sandelowski, 1994). Within quotations ‘...’ indicate missing or edited quotations, and words of explanation are presented in brackets. The terms *Participant* and *Father* are used interchangeably in this section. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants and to bring their narratives to life.

Experiences during pregnancy

This theme related to fathers’ experiences during the antenatal period. Pregnancy is regarded as a key transitional moment for men in their journey into fatherhood (Fenwick, Bayes, & Johansson, 2012). Despite not being directly asked about their experiences in the antenatal period, all fathers spoke about their experiences during pregnancy, especially those relating to antenatal classes, suggesting that experiences

Table 1. Overview of super-ordinate and sub-ordinate themes.

Experiences during pregnancy	Fatherhood – the early days
Feelings of separation	Helplessness Trial and error parenting She leads, I follow Working together Gaining confidence and regaining control

in the antenatal period shaped parenting experiences in the post-natal period and formed a significant portion of their overall experiential journey.

Feelings of separation

This was a highly prevalent theme, which was prolific in how fathers felt about the pregnancy itself and support from health professionals and during the pregnancy period. Bob conveyed a felt sense of being separate from his wife's pregnant body:

Well before he was born I held Jenni's [wife's name] tummy, but with the best will in the world, it's just a bump that moves, like something out of a Ridley Scott film [laughs] it's weird and an extraordinary thing, no doubt about it, but I did find it different and I feel that it has to feel different with the mum as they are carrying the baby and feeling it move and grow inside, that must mean that the emotional attachment that must build must be extraordinary and I don't think that any bloke could ever understand that.

This psychological response is consistent with how men think and feel during the Moratorium phase of pregnancy (May, 1982), which is characterised by them often feeling removed and emotionally distant from the pregnancy experience because they do not have first-hand experience of their partners' pregnant body (Finnbogadóttir, CrangSvalenius, & Persson, 2003; Kao & Long, 2004).

All participants had attended one or more antenatal class with their respective partner. However, these classes inadvertently propagated feelings of separation, with fathers reporting that they were primarily geared towards the birth and the mother. In hindsight, participants had clear ideas about the type of support they would have valued as expectant fathers, as voiced by Scott:

What would have been useful would be to talk to a dad basically, a couple of parents maybe six months in or maybe a year in who could sort of turn round to you and say, right this is what it's actually like, this is what we found and what was useful to us ... it would be good if a group of dads who've got children could host a meeting to share experiences all the way from the birth, like if there was someone whose partner had a C section, straight through to the weeks and months afterwards, they could tell people what they did and what helped them and just to generally share experiences and support each other in an informal way, not to give people resolutions but just to say this was how it was for them.

The overwhelmingly negative experiences of antenatal services voiced by men have also been highlighted by various other researchers (Barclay, Donovan, & Genovese, 1996; Bradley et al., 2004; Brennan, Marshall-Lucette, Ayers, & Ahmed, 2007). During the transition phase, feelings of separation and marginalisation precipitated men's inability to experience first-hand the changes their respective partners were going through; men's experiences were grounded in their partner's pregnant body, which ironically served to maintain feelings of distance for some men. Feelings of separation were perpetuated by men feeling unsupported, unprepared and undervalued by the lack of antenatal support they received.

Fatherhood – the early days

This super-ordinate theme contained post-birth experiences which most participants felt occurred within the first 3 and 6 months of fatherhood.

Helplessness

All fathers conveyed the impression that despite being active, involved fathers their lack of prior knowledge and experience gave rise to feelings of helplessness, as Kevin describes: 'You're not overly sure what you're supposed to be doing, and there are times when you have the emotion of complete helplessness.' Similar feelings of helplessness have been highlighted by other researchers (Henderson & Brouse, 1991), indicating that it is a normal part of the new fatherhood experience.

Trial and error parenting

Parents employed various techniques in response to the novel and challenging situations they encountered. Luke likened parenting his new-born baby to a steep learning curve involving the process of trial and error. As a first-time father he had no frame of reference, and found it difficult to initially understand his baby's needs:

Initially it is all about trial and error, at least that's how it was for us, purely trial and error ... in the early days we were both sort of saying, what's wrong with him? Is it his nappy? Is it food? Is it sleep? And you go through that sort of list until you find something that makes him quiet and you go, well it was that then, and so you start to notice those signs a little more each time.

She leads, I follow

An interesting finding was that the majority of fathers seemed to learn how to perform baby-related tasks (feeding, changing nappies, etc.) and interact with their baby by first observing mother–baby interactions. Kevin: 'I learned a lot from watching Jane [wife] with him, you know how to hold him, change a nappy, bathe him'. Despite their partners also being first-time parents, fathers felt that their spouses were more experienced and better equipped to deal with their baby. This perception may have been due to fathers' feelings of anxiety, or believing that the mother–infant bond had an innate, almost instinctual quality which was lacking in the father–baby dyad. Another possible explanation could be due to the fact that mothers usually spend more time with their babies during their maternity leave, and therefore are given more time to learn how to relate to and tune into their babies' needs easier than the fathers.

Working together

This theme featured in the majority of participants' narratives. Mark recalled his experience of how he and his partner supported each other, engaged in co-parenting practices, and established routines:

Another thing we did was the both of us were getting up in the night to deal with her [daughter] and we soon realised that maybe I needed some more sleep so Anna [wife] would get up and do all the night feeds one night and I would do all the night feeds the next night ...we soon got her onto the bottle so I could help out with the dream feeds while Anna slept and when she got up to do the next feed I would be able to go to sleep ... working in partnership is key.

Gaining confidence and regaining control

Many participants spoke about how they started to feel more confident and competent as fathers as time progressed. The mediating variable in Bob's case was experience and time; his desire to be an involved father will have been influential in him wanting to gain experience, competence and confidence:

It was purely about experience and from that comes confidence ... the more you do the more you learn and as time goes on you remember how you've dealt with things in the past ... I wanted to make sure that I got stuck in ... being off work for a month gave me the opportunity to get involved.

The above quote highlighted the importance of fathers having the opportunity to get involved with their new family, by having adequate time off work. Historically, this has been an area in which men have struggled. However, recent changes in UK government legislation regarding flexible paternity leave arrangements have come into effect, enabling greater parity. Interestingly, none of the men in the study took the opportunity to extend their paternity leave by sharing it with their partners; this was surprising because all men presented themselves as involved, 'hands-on' fathers. Although not explicitly mentioned by the participants, this may have been due to societal attitudes of male hegemony, which still exist.

Discussion

All men in the study felt they were at the right stage in their life cycle to enter into fatherhood; they seemed to share similar values in terms of being in a stable relationship, having a secure job and accommodation. As such, all pregnancies were planned and expected and there were no major birth complications. This shared social context sets the backdrop for the fathers' subsequent parenting experiences; it can therefore be assumed that the tone of their narratives would have been different if the pregnancies had been unplanned or if the fathers had been teenagers with prominent financial, relationship and employment worries.

Considered in conjunction with previous research, it is possible to assume that a first-time father, who shares similar socio-demographic attributes with the participants in this study, may go through similar changes and experiences. The findings triangulate with and support the existing literature as well as offer new insights into early fatherhood experiences. As part of their overall fatherhood experience, fathers in this study experienced feelings of hopelessness as they struggled to adjust to their new role; similar findings were conveyed by the fathers in Goodman's (2005) study. Men's experiences of antenatal support also mirrored those found by other researchers (Barclay et al., 1996; Bradley et al., 2004; Brennan et al., 2007; Chin, Hall, & Daiches, 2011); these experiences inadvertently served to widen the emotional gap between the expectant father and the pregnancy process. Novel findings include the fathers' use of adaptive strategies, based on social learning (Bandura, 1977), to expedite their acquisition of knowledge and experience in the postnatal period. Our findings also indicate that the mother's level of motivation, health status and engagement has a direct bearing on how the father develops a sense of mastery in the early postnatal period.

The birth of a couple's baby marks the continuation of their transition and not the start of it, with many feelings and experiences carrying over from the antenatal

to postnatal periods. It is well documented that men often experience feelings of separation during the pregnancy process, the findings from this study support this notion but also highlight that these feelings do not necessarily dissipate once they become fathers. The findings also support the fact that men and women's parenting experiences are inextricably intertwined (Miller, 2011); this understanding is useful for clinicians to bear in mind.

The contemporary relevance of Transition Theory (Draper, 2003) provides a useful theoretical framework to understand first-time fathers' experiences in both the antenatal and post-natal periods, as men pass through the stages of separation, transition and incorporation. Pregnancy confirmation marked the start of men's separation from their familiar, usual social lives. Men described their social circles changing and old interpersonal relationships drifting away. The process of separating from a familiar life proved difficult for some men to adjust to and seemed to continue to be negotiated once their baby was born. Pregnancy experiences, inherent in the men's narratives, symbolise the awareness of changing roles and status; first-time expectant fathers changed from non-father to father. Pregnancy not only affected how men thought and felt about themselves and their social contexts, but how their social worlds related to them. For many men these personal and social changes were experienced with anxiety and uncertainty (Kowlessar, Wittkowski, & Fox, 2014).

Strengths and limitations

In phenomenological research it is vital to access the right people with appropriate life experience and knowledge of the phenomenon under scrutiny (Thomas, 2005). All the men involved in this study were white, middle class, in stable relationships, had attended antenatal classes with their partners, were present at the birth and viewed themselves as committed and involved fathers. Although vital in contextually understanding their lived experiences, the lack of participant diversity is a limitation. Including participants from different socio-economic backgrounds would have added a further layer of richness to the findings. The fact that all pregnancies were planned may also account for the dominance of positive stories contained in participants' narratives. We also acknowledge that participants were not asked about the length of paternity leave they took. This contextual factor may have contributed to their overall transition and parenting experience in the early days and thus would have been useful to explore further.

Developing an awareness of this interpersonal dynamic meant that the use of reflexivity and bracketing (Ahern, 1999) was essential so that preconceptions were kept to a minimum and did not overly bias the findings. According to Ashworth (1999), the use of bracketing in a qualitative study ensures that the findings are accurate accounts of the participants' experiences and free, as far as possible, from researcher bias, which strengthens the credibility of the findings.

Implications for clinical practice

When considering how existing antenatal services are delivered in the UK, the type of support participants were talking about could be offered in existing models of care in a relatively cost-effective manner. If one or two experienced fathers/health care professionals were present to help facilitate the sessions alongside midwives,

they could provide valuable support to the expectant fathers by providing psycho-education and sharing personal narratives. Friedewald, Fletcher and Fairbairn (2005) posited an effective model of how male oriented discussion forums can emotionally support expectant fathers in the antenatal period. It is therefore possible to adapt current service delivery models to ensure men are more included, informed and supported. Researchers have demonstrated how efficacious including men in antenatal education classes can be (Premberg & Lundgren, 2006; Symon & Lee, 2003), as a way of reducing anxiety, facilitating emotional transition, and enabling them to feel better equipped to support their partners through this particularly sensitive period. The inclusion of expectant mothers may also prove to be beneficial because they may gain an insight into how their partners may feel during pregnancy, labour and in the early days of fatherhood; however, this may inhibit some men from sharing their views.

Other ways health visitors and midwives can support men during their transition is by sign-posting them to appropriate online websites. There is compelling evidence which suggests that men/fathers prefer to seek information and support via the internet. It is a good medium with which to engage otherwise hard-to-reach individuals (Fletcher & St George, 2011; Fletcher, Vimpani, Russell, & Keatinge, 2008; Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Fleck, Elek, & Shipman, 2003).

Health visitors and midwives are in an ideal position to provide support to both men and women. It is also useful if health professionals bear in mind that the experiences and needs of first-time fathers and mothers are more similar than different, and the clinical skills used to address the difficulties encountered by mothers can be applied to also support fathers. Offering fathers the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling is the first step to making them feel valued and included.

Conclusion

In contemporary western societies, women's rites of passage to motherhood are defined and widely accepted, while the paternal rite of passage is less clear. Paternal feelings of uncertainty, separation and marginalisation, both before and after becoming a father are a reflection of this. It may benefit men more if the contemporary man's passage to fatherhood is viewed as a continuous process, which does not end at the birth but continually evolves as the man negotiates the complex personal and social changes of fathering practice.

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