

Construction of the Father's Identity: Nurses' Support

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ABSTRACT

Aim: The transition to fatherhood represents a major life event with implications for men, father-child relationship, baby's development and family adaptation. This study aims to understand the experience of men as they transition to fatherhood during the prenatal period.

Methods: This is an exploratory and descriptive study using a qualitative research paradigm. Data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews that were analyzed by a content analysis technique. Ten expectant fathers participated.

Results: The theme "development of a father identity" emerges in the data and contains five categories. The challenging process of constructing the new identity as a father is shaped by conceptions, meanings, personal values and childhood experiences which help men to develop the type of father they want to be.

Conclusion/Recommendations: The results indicate that the pregnancy period induces men into a trajectory of redefinition and construction of the new identity as a father. Healthcare professionals should think critically about how the process of becoming a father can be facilitated by practices to promote a smoother transition, which benefits the whole family.

INTRODUCTION

Contemporary fatherhood emphasizes the involvement of men and greater affective contact with their children, in addition to their traditional role as a financial provider [1]. The transition to fatherhood is a challenging journey for a man, characterized by the metamorphosis from men to fathers which begins during pregnancy [2]. Pregnancy is a demanding period in terms of psychological reorganization of the self [3,4] and it is during this period that the desire to be a good father starts [5]. The first months postpartum is highly dependent on the preceding months of pregnancy, which are regarded as a time of preparation for fatherhood [6]. However, many men are not prepared for their personal transition to fatherhood, nor the required family adaptations, which in turn adds important implications for the whole family [7]. The involvement of men during this period is associated with their own psychological well-being as well as the whole household [8]. Studies often focus on mothers and seldom on fathers' experiences of pregnancy. The objective of this study, therefore, was to understand the experience of men as they transition to fatherhood during the prenatal period, aiming to improve the health gains of the family.

METHODS

This is an exploratory, descriptive, cross-sectional and retrospective study, based on a qualitative research paradigm.

Participants were expectant fathers recruited through antenatal classes facilitated by a midwife in a Primary Care Unit located in North of Portugal. The inclusion criteria consisted of being an expectant father, experiencing the partner’s pregnancy for the first time, undergoing the last trimester (in order to have sufficient time to develop the feeling of fatherhood), currently in a common-law marriage, and with gestation without maternal-fetal pathology.

The study consisted of ten expectant fathers between the ages of 27 to 40 years old. Demographic information of the participants is shown in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Demographics of participants.

Fathers	Age (years)	Education	Occupation
Father 1	27	College degree	Businessman
Father 2	30	College degree	Doctor
Father 3	36	High school	Real estate consultant
Father 4	33	College degree	Nurse
Father 5	35	Middle school	Electrician
Father 6	40	High school	Businessman
Father 7	36	College degree	Teacher
Father 8	38	Middle school	Factory worker
Father 9	38	High school	Real estate consultant
Father 10	40	Middle school	Factory worker

Data collection was performed using semi-structured interviews, spanning from 42 to 70 min. Conversations were recorded using a voice recorder (MP3 device). All interviews were performed at a comfortable and private place in the Primary Care Unit, respecting the preference of the participants. After completing each interview, the researcher wrote field notes and transcribed the recording. The tone of voice, silence, and pauses were noted in the transcript in order to extract the authentic meaning.

The opening question used to begin each interview was, “Please tell me how your experience has been from the moment you knew you would be a father?” During the interview, the researcher encouraged the participants to clarify and elaborate the details of their experience by using probing and focused questions to steer the interviews towards the aim of our study such as, “That is very interesting. Please tell me more about...”, “Please explain what you mean by...?”. However, in order to avoid interrupting the participant’s flow of thought, the researcher asked the questions only when the participant had finished speaking.

After transcription, interviews were analyzed using content analysis technique according to Bardin [9], with semantic categorization and an inductive approach. Data analyses were performed using the Qualitative Solutions Research (QSR) NVivo 11 program.

Data trustworthiness was established following Lincoln and Guba [10]. All participants checked the findings for accuracy of the interpretations. Two external investigators reviewed the interpretations and findings to affirm credibility. Sufficient descriptive data was supplied to assist in the evaluation of the transferability of the results.

Standard ethical guidelines were followed, including informed consent, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw. Ethical approval was obtained by the National Commission for Data Protection and the Ethics Committee of the Administraco Regional de Sade do Norte. The interviews were recorded and deleted after this research to ensure anonymity of the participants and confidentiality. Names used in the interviews were fictional and the interviews were codified from F1 to F10.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The theme "development of a father identity" emerges in the data and describes a man's trajectory in redefining himself as a father. This theme captures the essence of the journey of personal development that the man undertakes throughout the pregnancy, and that will allow him to prepare to take on new roles and new responsibilities. During this journey, the man makes an assessment of himself, his own experiences on fathering, and his responsibilities and priorities. This in turn opens the possibility for changes in values and goals, including the values of professional life. He positions himself in a psychological and social space that allows him to observe his life through the perspective of a future father, reformulating his way of seeing the world and himself.

This theme is composed of the five categories "redefining values and priorities," "meaning of father role," "sense of responsibility" "reflections on own fathering," and "fatherhood feeling".

Redefining Values and Priorities

During the transition to fatherhood, men look at life in a different way, and this new perspective leads to a redefinition of personal and professional values and priorities. Priorities are redirected, focusing on the family and the baby that is about to become part of the couple's life. Impending paternity influences the decisions to be made, being perceived as a turning point: *"it is a turning point in which it is the cycle of life. Now I'm not a son, I'm going to be a father. And some decisions now, of course they are influenced by that fact" (F4).*

Consistent with our findings, other studies ^[11] have reported changes in the values system in first-time fathers. The metasynthesis of Kowlessar, Fox and Wittkowski ^[2] explored the experience of men during pregnancy and concluded that pregnancy instigated men on a journey of personal discovery during which they engaged in a reflective process, re-evaluating personal values in the context of their new role as father.

Meaning of Father Role

This category describes how a man conceptualizes the role of a father during pregnancy and subsequently in contact with the child. The significance of paternal role in pregnancy is strongly associated with the support of the pregnant woman and the child in utero: *"man is a key element in the experience of a pregnancy and must be very close to this whole process, including in the support of the mother and in the affections to the mother and baby."* (F2), while postpartum is a representation of a very present father figure in the daily life of the child. Kaye et al. ^[12] reported similar results concerning the characteristics of an ideal father in the context of pregnancy and childbirth. This ideal father was described as caregiver and protector, a father who hopes and wants to get involved, cares about pregnancy and the future of his child.

Sense of responsibility

The sense of responsibility category refers to psychological maturation and increased responsibility during the development of paternal identity. Nevertheless, it is a responsibility that is well accepted, because it results from the realization of the dream of being a father: *"Responsibility increases now that I will be a father, I feel it, but it is a good responsibility because I have always wanted to be a father"* (F1). These findings concurred with other evidence ^[13,14] which concluded that men show increased responsibility for their new family during pregnancy. The increase in responsibilities illustrate that they are reacting to the transition to fatherhood ^[15].

Reflections on Own Fathering

During pregnancy, the men reflect on the parental model they desire for the future. The construction of identity as a father is permeated by the individual history of each man and his family patterns, either to deny them, confront them or confirm them, *"I think a lot, there is much that I will want to pass on to my son and much that I'm not going to want to give it to him. I have very well delineated ... my father was not a present father, I do not have a healthy relationship with my father, I do not want any of this for my son."* (F9).

Other studies ^[3,16] have reported that the reflection on the childhood experience promotes the psychological adjustment to the paternal role and will influence the parental style that men will adopt in the future, which supported our findings. Perceptions of an inadequate or unsatisfactory experience with his own father seem to give men a boost to have a closer relationship with his own child ^[17].

Fatherhood Feeling

This category demonstrates the beginning of the recognition of the identity as a father, translated by the moment from which men feel like parents. The identity foundation is marked by the pregnancy test, *"The first test (pregnancy test),*

when we did the first test I felt like a father, I felt there is something there, it's a human being there" (F8), ultrasound, delivery, or even wife's happiness. The literature search revealed a scarcity of studies related to this finding; thus, more research is suggested on this interesting topic. However, for Widarsson et al. ^[18] the transformative process of becoming a father begins when the pregnancy is confirmed and is fulfilled when men hold his first child for the first time.

Limitations of the Study

Even though this study offered some valuable insights regarding the process of transition to fatherhood, the subjective nature of data collection, and the small number of participants limited the generalization of the findings.

The fact that partners of expectant fathers who participated in this study attended the antenatal classes does not allow us to know if the parents with partners who do not attend it have the same experiences, so, as a suggestion, it would be pertinent to extend the study of this population of expectant fathers.

CONCLUSION

The pregnancy period induces men into a trajectory of redefinition and construction of the new identity as a father. This challenging process is shaped by conceptions, meanings, personal values and childhood experiences, which help expectant fathers to develop the type of father they want to be. Men call into question values and definitions and open the possibility of a new conception and way of experiencing paternity, with greater affective intensity. Impending paternity instigates men on a journey of personal discovery marked by psychological maturation and increase responsibility. Men begin a complex, conscious and unconscious subjective work of elaborating the inheritances received from their own fathers and deciding whether to transmit them to their children.

Considering the complexity of this transition, healthcare professionals should think critically about how the process of becoming a father can be facilitated by practices to promote a smoother transition, which benefits the whole family.

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