

Experiences of the first year as father

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Background and aims: The importance of fathers' participation for development of the child and the well-being of the family is recognized from earlier research. In Sweden, legislation allows fathers to share the parental leave equally with the mother even so fathers only use a small of their paid leave. The aim of the study was to explore experiences of the first year as a father.

Method: A phenomenological life world approach was used. Ethical approval was obtained. Ten men, recruited by a purposive sample, were interviewed 12–14 months after the delivery of their first child. The data collection was performed during June and August 2004 in the south-west area of Sweden.

Findings: The essence of the experiences of the first year as father was to place the baby in the centre without giving up one's own person. The child provided warmth and happiness in the family and men experienced a deeper

relationship to their partner. The contact between father and child was facilitated by engagement and time spent alone with the child. The major constituents identified from the findings were 'To be overwhelmed', 'To master the new situation' and 'To get a new completeness in life'.

Discussion and conclusion: To master fatherhood maintenance of integrity and possibility to develop an independent relationship with the child is important. Fathers are invited to participate in postnatal childbirth education but the activities address women's needs and it is doubtful if the fathers benefit from participation. Though fathers entered the delivery room some decades ago, as a support to the woman, health personnel of today must be aware of fathers' own needs and the impact gender aspects have on their professional support.

Keywords: experience, fathers, fatherhood, father and infant relationship, gender, paternal role – postpartum.

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Introduction

Fathers and their efforts are important for the development of the newborn child and family. In Sweden, fathers have the opportunity to share parental leave equally with the child's mother; legislation has even changed to encourage fathers to participate in the care of the newborn. Despite this, they only use a small part of their paid leave.

The changed role of fathers from breadwinner and authority figure in the family to an involved parent is a common challenge in the western world. From a historical perspective it was the father's responsibility to support motherhood by protecting, encouraging and guiding the mother's care of the newborn child. Previously motherhood was seen as an expert job and the role of the father was subordinated (1). First, in the late 20th century a

participating and caring fatherhood started to develop (2, 3). Thus, fathers of today have no tradition in their role to refer to (4–6). The importance of their role in children's lives and the benefit of positive involvement have been observed in studies from different countries (7–9). It is advantageous for the mother and infant in different aspects, to the mother during both pregnancy and childbirth and for the development of the child (9–12).

In Sweden, it is a public ambition to achieve involvement of the fathers in infant care and to increase gender equality between parents. Society has sustained men's parenthood in different ways during the last decades, especially through political decisions and economical means of control (13). One effort has been to increase men's allocation of parental leave. Though it has increased from 6.7% in 1986 to 17% in 2003, it is not as extensive as expected. The Swedish legislation towards an equal use of parental leave has been efficient but not quite sufficient to reach the ultimate aim (13). At present parents have the benefit of taking a parental leave and stay at home for approximately 18 months. Parental leave can be shared equally or the main part transferred to one parent. Over

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and above this fathers have paternal leave to be used in relation to the delivery, allowing both parents time together with the newborn (14).

Hence, even if economic promotions lead to a higher level of gender equality for parents, other necessities have an impact on fatherhood. Research shows that men feel alone in their transition to fathers (6, 10, 15). It is essential for health professionals to understand men's own experiences to be able to give support in an efficient way (16–18). The aim of this study was to explore experiences of the first year as father.

Methods

The study is the second in a project about first-time fatherhood, where the first interview study explored fathers' experiences of childbirth education (19). To understand the phenomenon the first year as a father, a phenomenological lifeworld approach was used in the present study (20–23). Ethical approval was obtained from the Ethical Committee of The Central Ethical Review Board in Gothenburg and permission to do the study was obtained from the Supervisor Physician of the Antenatal Care Units in Södra Älvsborgs Public Health Service Area.

Participants and interviews

In total, 10 first-time fathers participated in the study, recruited by a purposive sample at a maternity ward. They were aged between 25 and 32 and lived in a small town in the south-west of Sweden.

Their educational level varied from comprehensive school to an academic grade. They had all participated in childbirth education and were all cohabiting with the mother of the child; one of them lived in a relationship where the woman already had a child prior to the current pregnancy. The interviews were carried out in Swedish, after informed consent, and citations were translated into English. The participants were offered the opportunity to have psychological support after the interviews if needed, but this was not used by any of the fathers.

Tape-recorded interviews were conducted in the participants' homes between June and August 2004 by the first author. The initial interview question was: What was it like for you personally to be a father during this first year? An intersubjective dialogue was developed in the interview through questions such as; 'how did you feel, could you describe further?' touching thoughts and feelings with the goal to reach the lifeworld of the interviewed person. If not mentioned spontaneously, the fathers were asked about how they remembered the antenatal childbirth education in relation to the first year as a father. In phenomenological research it is important to explore the hidden areas in another person and to investigate the connection between the visible and the invisible without

interpreting (24). In the interview situation this was obtained by a phenomenological attitude, which put the own natural attitude aside, bridling preconceptions and spontaneous considerations (21, 25). It was an aspiration to, through a genuine conversation and a compliant and flexible attitude, bring about new perceptions and experiences and to catch the father's covered or unknown experience (20, 22, 24).

Analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim. During the analysis researchers bridled own natural attitude, theoretical knowledge, preconceptions and spontaneous considerations (21). The analysis was conducted in accordance with Giorgi's method (20). First, the text from all interviews was read to bring out a sense of the whole. Then, with an attitude sensitive to the discipline a second rereading was performed and meaning units were marked. Then, transformation of the meaning units, which means that the respondents' 'every day' language were expressed more directly. In this process the fathers' 'naive descriptions' were transformed to a language meaningful for caring. The process of free imaginative variations was used to discover essential characteristics of the phenomenon (26). Finally, the essence of the phenomenon was formulated. The constituents containing the variation and contextual information were then described. During the process a new understanding of the phenomenon was developed (20).

Findings

The essence of fathers' experiences of the first year as father was to place the baby in the centre without giving up one's own person. The baby's needs directed the new family and thereby the lives and priorities of the fathers. This was sometimes experienced as frustrating. In the upheaval related to becoming a father, it was necessary to have space for own activities and to continue to be the same person, this made it easier to enjoy and deal with the new situation. The child provided warmth and happiness in the family and the men experienced a deeper relationship to their partner. The contact between father and child was facilitated by engagement and time spent alone with the child. Successively they learnt to interpret the infant's signals and patience and sensitivity were developed. Influenced by surrounding people, a new awareness of being adult and responsible was brought about. Fathers developed a new economical responsibility and fewer dispositions to take risks. Fatherhood including care of the child was mostly experienced as positive. Crucial for this feeling was satisfaction with how they had solved this new life phase and how they had managed to master the new situation and the distress that fatherhood also included.

Table 1 Constituents for the phenomenon experiences of the first year as father

<i>To be overwhelmed</i>	<i>To master the new situation</i>	<i>To get a new completeness in life</i>
An overwhelming event, hard to prepare for	Remain the same person	To reach out to and become close to the child
To be ruled by the baby's needs	Developed sensitivity, patience and maturity Adjustment to responsible fatherhood	To get a new affinity in the marital relation

Fathers experienced childbirth education during pregnancy as mental preparation though they had forgotten most of the content after delivery. They took no active part in the postnatal education as it was addressing the mothers.

The essential structure of the phenomenon is explicated by the constituents 'To be overwhelmed', 'To master the new situation' and 'To get a new completeness in life', which contains seven elements described in Table 1.

To be overwhelmed

An overwhelming event, hard to prepare for. To become a father was described as an overwhelming mostly positive event implying a large adjustment to new circumstances. It was hard to explain and not possible to find words that covered the experience and it took time to understand its meaning. The event was experienced as a unique occasion and to promote a good relation to the child all fathers found it important to take parental leave.

Life becomes different in all ways, well it might sound clichéd; but it is really big! (Ip6).

It has been huge, and I felt really great all the time. It was eagerly awaited and planned so it has been great.

It's just a little overwhelming (Ip1).

Participation in childbirth education during pregnancy was seen as a way to prepare for fatherhood through a mental preparation. However, it was hard to remember and to describe its benefits. Some had experienced that they were overlooked in the group but it was positive that it gave possibilities to develop a social network. With regard to learning, the experience varied and 1 year after the class most of the information was of little interest. The childbirth education focused on women's needs which seemed natural but information about fathers' needs could have been useful. Most focus was placed on the impending delivery with too little focus on childcare and normal conditions for newborn children.

I would not have been without the childbirth education... but simultaneously it was not so useful.... But it gave me the security.... Or you learned that anything could happen, you have to be ready for that ... I also remember that we drank a lot of coffee (Ip10).

The fathers sometimes participated in the postnatal childbirth education arranged by the health personnel at the child health centre. This education addressed all parents

with a newborn baby. However, it was called 'the mothers' group' and took place during the day when the fathers were usually working. Some fathers had visited the group during their parental leave period to keep up with it and let the baby meet their friends. Sometimes another father was present but mostly there was only the one. They had noticed that men generally talked more about sports and general things while the women talked about the children and their equipment.

Well there was a great deal of talking about the kids and what they do, but sometimes it's fun to talk about something else too. And I gather the fathers had a little wider perspective (Ip1).

To be ruled by the baby's needs. The baby had a central position in the family, everything revolved around it, its needs ruled and the fathers became more bound than before. Flexibility decreased and they had less space for spontaneous actions, which was sometimes experienced as irritating. All activities had to be planned and adapted to the baby's eating and sleeping times. However, there was a variation among the fathers on how much they let the baby rule daily life and for some fathers there seemed to be no hinder. Own activities had to be planned and discussed with the child's mother. It was also necessary to adjust to the baby's will and the fathers developed a will to participate in activities that amused the child.

A new little person who is in the centre all the time, as you have to think of him/her first. You get a little more bound, a little more stuck (Ip1).

You can bring him everywhere; you can go out for dinner, but not to the movies (Ip2).

It's when you are going somewhere there's a lot to do before you can go. The baby has to be dressed and everything. You have to adapt to baby's meals, there's a lot to think about. We used to go to a children's music-class. The children sing and really love it. They really appreciate it; she brightens up every time we come to this place. It is funny (Ip 5).

The arrival of the child changed how fathers prioritized. Hobbies and leisure time activities were postponed in favour of caring for and spending time with the baby. Advanced hobbies such as sailing, hunting and playing in a rock band were seen as necessary to postpone as well as maintaining and renovating the house and garden. Priorities varied among the fathers, for example, some put

a house renovation on hold and others tried to speed it up to be able to spend time with the child later.

Parental leave was seen as an option to spend time with the baby. The woman's demands and decisions influenced how long fathers were on leave and breast feeding was an important factor. Thus, the woman was given priority to parental leave and the father took what the woman was willing to relinquish. All the men in the study had been on parental leave, varying from 2 to 4 months, the rest of their allotted parental leave had been or would be transferred to the woman.

My wife has agreed to share the parental leave and found it okay to start working again. And I thought that my working life is going to continue for many years and will be the same so I wanted to take the chance to be at home with the baby. You get no second chance. But not all mothers are willing to share the parental leave (Ip1).

To master the new situation

The text illuminated that it was important to master fatherhood. Mastering gave satisfaction and included different situations such as to succeed with putting the baby to sleep or to comfort a frightened child. To be able to handle the child without the woman seemed vital. The fathers had noticed that their calm and peaceful concern for the child had a positive effect on the child and they were happy to have a child easy to care for. Another part of the mastery was to deal with new feelings and to develop unknown sides of the personality.

Remain the same person. The adaptation to the baby's needs was experienced differently; some men found it demanding to prioritize the child and some easily adapted to the eagerly awaited child. Despite the adaptation it was vital, to remain the same person, keeping up with former life and interests and keeping integrity.

If I would rather go fishing it's no problem, my wife stays at home and takes care of the child. But it's the same if she wants to go. It's important to continue to be yourself and not just be a parent. To remain being the person you are and not sacrificing, of course if you have to but not if it's not necessary. Then it's easier to be happy to remain being the person you are (Ip2).

A way to deal with this was to share leisure time with the baby's mother and to bring the baby to activities such as skiing-trips, car racing or to a restaurant for dinner. Time for rest and relaxation was also crucial for own well-being and the fathers had realized that if they themselves were content and felt good, the baby also felt good.

She shows that she thinks it is exciting to be out where it happens. She think it's fun. She gets excited when she hears the sounds of motorbikes and cars (Ip5).

Developed sensitivity, patience and maturity. The fathers did not feel changed but the same as ever, although there were descriptions of new detected feelings and traits. Fatherhood had developed the personality and enriched it with calmness, patience and sensitivity. A new sensitivity had aroused especially in situations related to children.

I've been much more sensitive, I care more about others. Earlier a sad film never affected me, but now I really feel the sadness, especially if there are children involved (Ip2).

To bear patience with the child was crucial. The fathers also considered themselves dedicated to interpreting the baby's hints and to follow the child's willpower when it was possible. To become a father was seen to be a mature person. A mature person was described as not being self-centred or light-hearted, but ready to step back and put what was best for the child in the forefront.

Well, you grow up a little. Now playing for fun is done, I'm a daddy (Ip8).

Adjustment to responsible fatherhood. To become a father meant to gain a new responsibility, including to give the child a secure upbringing and to provide for a family. Parental leave meant lower income at the same time as the child caused extra costs so the fathers had less money left for their own expenses. The new responsibility also meant that fathers were more aware of risky situations and took precautions for their own and their baby's safety.

My hobby is expensive and the income decreases quite a lot, so you have to cut down on everything, all expenses. You have a little girl to care for. So that's it, you have to provide and see to her best interest first (Ip5).

Fathers attempted to spend more time with the baby by working shorter days. It was hard to combine providing for the family and being an involved father. Fatherhood was also adjusted through surrounding people who had new requirements that they had to relate to. Friends and relatives saw them as fathers and commented on their new role and responsibility. On the other hand, fathers got sympathy from workmates when they were tired after taking care of the baby at night, which was experienced as the most demanding task of fatherhood. To master the demanding situation was described as crucial. One of the men who had been on sick leave and had medical treatment for depression during the baby's first year described that the worst was to feel insufficient and not being able to care for the baby.

And to be insufficient for your family it was really horrible I would not wish it on my worst enemy to feel that you can't handle the situation (Ip10).

To get a new completeness in life

The new situation, becoming a family, was experienced as completeness in life. It was experienced as a new

wholeness built on the close relation to the child and a new affinity in the marital relation.

To reach out to and become close to the child. The men strived to become close to the child in different ways. Crucial was to plan for parental leave to get time to spend with the child. The opportunity for parental leave is supported by the legislation but still for some men in this study it was difficult to get permission from their employer for parental leave. In daily life the fathers prioritized playing with and taking care of the child ahead of other activities. During the lactation period the opportunity for contact on their own with the child was limited for the fathers, the baby was 'tied to the mother's apron strings'. Fathers' chances to take care of the baby were usually limited to the evenings but if the child fell asleep early or while breast feeding their opportunities were restricted. Nevertheless, some fathers taking the main part of the childcare had proudly notified that the baby was more attached to them than to the mother. As the child got older the father's contact with it increased. Time spent with the child and especially when the fathers were alone with their children was described as crucial for the bonding between father and child. One man illustrated that he was alone with the baby for the first 24 hours and since then he experienced that he had a special contact as the 'first parent' to the child.

To be on parental leave, this time on your own with the child, you can make up things to do, things you don't usually have time to do. To take a walk, go to the children's zoo and look at the goats, it is a special quality to be alone with the child (Ip6).

When it's just the two of us, she's cosy with me; otherwise you have to share her attention with the mother (Ip10).

The child was described as a source of love, happiness and pride. To spend time with the child was fun and to follow the child's development from the first eye contact to day-by-day was expressed as really exciting. The new relation to the baby implied special considerations, but it was not experienced as a strain. Their baby was presented as easy to care for and if the baby was sometimes demanding, for example, crying at night, the discomfort was made up by the warmth and affection the baby gave during the day. Fathers' relations to their children were described as attentive and caring although their playing tended to be rougher than the mothers.

It's fun to be with her, she's an interesting creature and she's developing the more you spend time with her, new things happen all the time. It's so exciting to see her every tiny little thing now she throws the toy on purpose, and then sitting in her highchair she looks at the dog and drops the biscuit (Ip8).

To get a new affinity in the marital relation. When the baby was born a new affinity in the relation was developed, in

spite of the baby's arrival meaning that the spouses had less time for each other. Their relationship was described as calmer and deeper, and an awareness of the woman's needs for rest and leisure time to sustain the relationship had arisen. However, experiences varied and for some men the marital relation had not changed much.

My wife felt she needed to do something else to get new energy, so I have taken care of the child every evening this week. I think it's worth it, to get a cheerful wife (Ip8).

The goal of the parent's was to share the baby's care equally. To agree on upbringing and care was seen as decisive and to reach that goal it was vital to bring up conflicts early and to talk things through. Discussions and quarrels were seen as necessary for the progress of the relationship. To marry and have children was experienced as a new completeness and the supreme thing in life. Relations to their own parents and original family were increased during this period and the fathers were pleased with the joy the baby brought even to the grandparents.

We talk a lot, as we always have; we did it before we had a child so I don't think we have changed our relation. We talk a lot and discuss problems at an early stage (Ip1).

It's the best that's ever happened in my life it's hard to tell. This that we are a family, a wholeness, we belong together much more now (Ip4).

Discussion

In a phenomenological lifeworld approach it is essential to reach the people who have rich experiences of the phenomenon and who have an interest in conveying their experiences. The men interviewed in this study had all participated in a childbirth education group during the pregnancy. When they agreed to participate in this study, they agreed to talk about their experiences. The interest and commitment they showed in their participation leads one to believe that they are also interested and committed fathers. This could be one of the reasons that positive experiences were dominant in the results.

The essence of the experience of fatherhood was that the child was central without the men relinquishing being their own person. To become a father is an overwhelming experience, which demands adaptability to a completely new life situation with increased responsibility. It is stated that what is needed to achieve an independent overall responsibility for the child is accessibility, responsibility and engagement (9). We found that the feeling of mastering the new situation of involved father gave satisfaction. Research has shown that the way in which the man manages the transition to becoming a father during the pregnancy, childbirth and the time directly after is crucial for the man and the new family (27–29). In this study, there are indications that depression during the child's first

year lead to a nonmastering of the situation, which lead to difficult emotional stress, and the experience of being inadequate. This echoes findings in previous studies, where men with depressive postpartum reactions show an inability to take care of the baby and experience irritation and alienation (30–32).

The increased emotionality, sensitivity, patience and maturity which fatherhood was shown to bring about is in compliance with previous research and may be regarded as a development towards a participating, caring fatherhood (15, 33, 34). In previous studies it has been found that the fathers develop a softer, nurturing side of their personality in the contact with their child (35, 36). The findings show that it was when the fathers were alone with their child that they had a deeper contact. This confirms earlier research showing that men postpone their emotional attachment to the child when the woman is there to comfort and take care of the child (37). In both previous research and this study fatherhood is described as emotionally overwhelming and signifies experiences of increased responsibility, adjustment and personal development. This illustrates that the deep human experience is relatively unaffected by external circumstances over time (34, 36, 38).

A new insight in the findings was that the fathers described an independent relationship to the child as a prerequisite for involved fatherhood. The relationship gave both the man satisfaction and the chance to give the woman some respite and time for her own activities. To achieve a good relationship was considered the most important motive for using parental leave. In previous research men's interest for the child's care was seen as a way for the fathers to establish a close relationship to their child (27, 39, 40). The men in this study needed to seek contact with the child more actively than the mother who had a symbiotic relationship to the child. Even if breast feeding, which is a part of the symbiosis was experienced as an impediment in the relationship between father and child, the man still saw it as his task to support the woman in breast feeding. The father's support to the breast feeding mother has a positive effect on the actual breast feeding, the attachment between mother and child and the family dynamic (41–43).

To become a parent is a transition process, which places additional demands on the individual (44, 45). The men in the study were compelled in their transition towards an involved, caring fatherhood. But the results show that they also endeavoured to live up to the traditional role of the father which was outlined in the introduction with family responsibility and the duty of breadwinner (1). Ambivalence to fatherhood is also shown in working life where employers questioned the men's right to parental leave and in health care where men are offered parenting education, which is mainly aimed at women. One possible reason is that our society, as for many other societies in the western world is still today imprinted by male hegemony.

Research has shown that it is hegemony's cultural power, which results in men being able to assert and maintain their leading position in society. (46). Even if the equal father's role of today clashes with the traditional father's role, it is the traditional father's role which supports the male hegemony and obstructs and postpones the development of an equal parent role (47).

In the findings, there emerged a need for an extant integrity to achieve a successful transition to father despite the fact that they were aware of the adjustments parenthood demands. That may be seen as the men asserting their right to shape their involved parental role in a way which differs from both the traditional father's role and the female parental role (48). However, more research is needed to elucidate this aspect.

Finally, we may conclude that health personnel need to be aware of the gender aspects so their support to parents does not hinder the father's transition to an involved fatherhood. Increased knowledge of father's needs of a maintained integrity and need for support to build an independent relationship to the child can guide their encounter with the fathers. To sustain the father's transition it is necessary to invite the fathers into the traditional female sphere near the newborn baby. An active confirming attitude to the fathers is essential; though inviting parents to support groups addressing mothers and meeting the fathers with an ambiguous attitude is not an adequate way to achieve involved fathers. This is important hence a gender practice excluding the fathers reinforces the traditional role of the father and obstructs an involved caring fatherhood.

Conclusion

The experience of the first year as father was that, to master fatherhood maintenance of integrity and possibility to develop an independent relationship with the child was important. Fathers are invited to participate in postnatal childbirth education but the activities address women's needs and the benefit of fathers' participation are doubtful.

Though fathers entered the delivery room some decades ago, as a support to the woman, health personnel of today must be aware of fathers' own needs and the impact gender aspects have on their professional support.

Author contributions

Åsa Premberg, Anna-Lena Hellström and Marie Berg participated in the planning and design of the study. Åsa Premberg has committed the literature review, ethical approval, interviews, application for funding, transcriptions, analysis and writing. Marie Berg has collaborated in the analysis and supervised during the whole process. Anna-Lena Hellström has supervised during the whole process.

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