

Understanding Experiences of First-time Fathers in India

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ABSTRACT

Transitioning into fatherhood is a significant experience that comes with major biological, psychological and sociocultural changes for many fathers. The present study aims to understand the experiences of first-time fathers in India. In this exploratory qualitative study, six first-time fathers were interviewed and their unique experiences were analyzed. Five themes were established from the data- 1. Extraordinary experiences during pregnancy, 2. Social support in the form of information, 3. Changes during the Transition into fatherhood, 4. Perceived responsibilities as a father, 5. Juggling other responsibilities with parenting. Better preparation for fatherhood, and support for couple relationships during the transition to parenthood could facilitate better experiences for new fathers, and contribute to better adjustments and mental well being in first-time fathers.

Keywords: *First-Time Fathers, Pregnancy, Fatherhood, Experiences, Social Support, Responsibilities*

Parenthood...It's about guiding the next generation, and forgiving the last. –Peter Krause

In the different developmental milestones that human beings are required to attain, perhaps the most drastic is an individual's transition into parenting. Parenting is a dynamic and complex task, for which there are different schools of thoughts. It is, however, widely agreed upon that the term 'parenting' describes the process of bringing up children and giving them safety and care so that they can grow up healthy.

The American Psychological Association (2013) describes parenting as all actions that relate to raising one's offspring. Scholars have described different human parenting styles—ways in which parents interact with their children—with most classifications varying on the dimensions of emotional warmth (warm vs. cold) and control (high in control vs. low in control).

One of the most influential of these classifications is that of U.S. developmental psychologist Diana Baumrind involving four types of styles, which involves-: **Authoritarian parenting**, in which the parent or caregiver stresses obedience, deemphasizes collaboration and dialogue, and employs strong forms of punishment; **Authoritative parenting**, in which the parent or caregiver encourages a child's autonomy yet still places certain limitations on behavior; **Permissive parenting**, in which the parent or caregiver is accepting and affirmative, makes

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few demands, and avoids exercising control; and **Rejecting–neglecting parenting**, in which the parent or caregiver is unsupportive, fails to monitor or limit behavior, and is more attentive to his or her needs than those of the child.

Normative family structures usually involve two parents of binary genders but with time, these family structures are now expanding to involve single-parent, same-sex parents and others. While social structures emphasize the role of female parents in the child's rearing, there has been a steady increase in the recognition of the role of male parents as well.

First-time fathers have been the subject of research recently, either by medical professionals or the nursing profession, which has led to the acknowledgment that men have their own distinct experiences of conception, pregnancy, participation in birth, and early parenting, all within the context of a larger life experience (Fletcher 2013; Halle et al. 2008).

First-time fathering is considered to be a "developmental engine" that ignites during the prenatal period and is therefore a fertile field for fostering men's generative skills, which are also entangled with their identities (Carlson et al., 2014; Jordan, 2007; Walsh, 2014).

An Indian study by Sriram (2018) first-time fathers talked about parenting and they stated that both parents have equal responsibilities and share their work equally, though there are differences in the way they contribute to the parenting process, based on their skills, temperament and time.

The father's involvement is also crucial in the healthy development of an infant (Pruett, 1998). This role can have a great impact on the child and can help shape them into the person they eventually become. Thus, fathers, much like mothers, are pillars in the development of a child's emotional well-being.

The role one's father plays in the child's life can also have an impact on the relationships the child will go on to foster in their life. The way a father treats his child will influence what they look for in other people. Friends, lovers, and spouses will all be chosen based on how the child perceived the meaning of their relationship with their father. Thus, the patterns a father sets in the relationships with his children will dictate how his children relate with other people.

Therefore, it is important to understand the experiences of first-time fathers in order to make this transition from a husband to a father smooth and healthy for both the baby and the parents. The literature on the present topic is discussed below.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Ancient Research studies did not place much importance on the role of the father. Only a small number of parent-child studies investigated the father's role, and the few studies that were done at that time focused on the father's involvement as reported by the mother. For example, in a number of studies that used over 2,000 parents who responded to questions about parenting, not one father was interviewed (Manitsa, 2013).

However, the world began to radically change with the social, economic and technical advances of the 20th century, and with those changes came a basic change in the structure and function of the family — with a consequent shift in the authority of the father.

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His influence was increasingly seen as minor, even negligible, and his importance was defined by how well he provided for the family (Manitsa, 2013).

Additionally, increasing literature regarding a father's mental health further indicates that up to a third of fathers may experience depressive symptoms during the first year of their babies (Philpott et al., 2017), a form of prenatal depression which is still largely associated solely with mothers. Fathers transitioning to parenthood have also been shown to experience elevated levels of stress and other emotions such as worry and fear (Kabakyenga et al., 2012) further contributing to the detriment of their mental well-being.

The father's participation during the child's gestation period has also been considered, with ultrasound attendance found to be contributing to the overall paternal feelings of connection to the unborn baby and the subsequent motivation to change behavior (Walsh et al., 2014). Fathers who engage more are also able to provide more support to wives in childbirth and nursing care. Those prepared and who felt needed were more likely to state that 'to witness the birth of their baby was fantastic' (Redshaw and Henderson, 2013).

A growing body of literature promoting the involvement of first time fathers in maternal care have reported improvements in the utilization of health services during pregnancy, optimal antenatal care attendance, birth preparedness and improved maternal health outcomes (Alio et al., 2011; Yargawa & Leonardi-Bee, 2015).

Their participation and engagement have been associated with lowered maternal stress levels, lowered occurrences of antenatal and postpartum depression, increased utilization of maternal health services, readiness for birth complications and positive birth outcomes (Kululanga et al., 2011; Nesane et al., 2016; Alio et al., 2013).

Children look to their fathers to lay down the rules and enforce them. They also look to their fathers to provide a feeling of security, both physical and emotional. Children want to make their fathers proud, and an involved father promotes inner growth and strength. Engaging fathers can thus positively impact the psychological, behavioral, social and cognitive outcomes of the child (Sarkadi et al., 2008).

More specifically, daughters depend on their fathers for security and emotional support. A father shows his daughter what a good relationship with a man is like. If a father is loving and gentle, his daughter will look for those qualities in men when she's old enough to begin dating. Children with highly engaged fathers have been shown to perform better in school (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004) and relate better socially and are less prone to engaging in risk-related behaviors (Leath, 2017). On the other hand, boys will seek approval from their fathers from a very young age. When a father is absent, young boys look to other male figures to set the "rules" for how to behave and survive in the world.

Rationale of the present study

Postpartum period for both the parents and the baby are of tremendous importance. The baby needs a lot of care from using good quality products for good health to a sense of emotional attachment towards the mother and father. Since it's one of the new experiences for the couple, they require knowledge, guidance and support in fulfilling the needs of the baby.

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Mothers are the ones who are physically connected to the baby and get a chance to spend most of the time with them. They usually get secondary guidance from their parents, in-laws and medical professionals whereas fathers still lack knowledge and guidance.

Earlier, the title "parent" was commonly used to indicate a mother. When father was mentioned, it was a reference to another influence. Different cultures have different views on male partner involvement during pregnancy (Bhatta, 2013). Most patriarchal socio-cultural settings do not prioritize the engagement of males because women are the ones who are most touched by these issues (Kaye et al., 2014).

However, the roles of mothers and fathers in the family have undergone significant social and cultural shifts in societies since the 20th century (Cabrera et al., 2000). As was previously said, the main type of support that the husband is obliged to give throughout pregnancy and labor is to provide. This was accomplished, and pride and satisfaction were enthusiastically expressed. Other helpful responsibilities (such as giving emotional, spiritual, or domestic assistance) were seen as optional and secondary obligations: duties that may be filled by family and friends in their place.

However, recent studies have reported that males are now becoming more open to participating in pregnancies and other reproductive health issues (Kakaire et al., 2011).

It has been seen that involvement of the father helps in maternal wellbeing during and post pregnancy. Presence of the father in the labor room has resulted in feelings of attachment and responsibility towards the baby and the mother. Engaging fathers in pregnancy-related care is highly crucial now because they can play a central role that can significantly improve final birth outcomes (Dudgeon & Inhorn, 2004; Matseke et al., 2017).

Some first-time fathers preferred to be mocked by their peers or portrayed as "weak" in society for adopting "feminine roles" or staying with their partners in hospitals.

Stepping away from gender stereotypes that have been culturally formed is a clear beginning of a new era. First-time fathers go through a big shift throughout the paternal postpartum period, therefore their individual experiences should be taken into account. Problems faced by mothers are often addressed and we have a lot of research which has been done on them but this topic is still under-researched and poorly understood.

Objective

To understand the experiences of first-time fathers in India

METHOD

Design

In this study, the exploratory method of qualitative research design has been used. This design has been chosen in order to explore in-depth the various factors that contribute to the individual experiences of fathers with their first child.

Sampling

For the purpose of this study, the inclusion criteria for the target population was first-time fathers in the age range 26-36 years, i.e., young adults. Only those fathers were taken whose babies were born healthy and are in the age group of 6 months to 2 years. To represent this

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population, a sample of 6 first-time fathers were taken from various educational backgrounds using Purposive sampling.

Procedure

For the purpose of this study, a semi structured interview schedule was made having questions related to various dimensions including experience during pregnancy and conception, changes in lifestyle, transition from a man to a father, time spent with child, perceived responsibilities, pleasant fatherhood experiences, changes in relationships and difficulties in balancing career and family.

The interviews were taken in person and the informed consent was taken from the participants for the recording of the conversation. Debriefing was done in order to make the participant comfortable and confidentiality of responses was ensured.

RESULTS

The data collected through the semi-structured interview schedule was transcribed properly and the data was subjected to the method of manual thematic analysis. A total of five themes were extracted.

Theme 1: Extraordinary Experiences during Pregnancy

“The Feeling was really different. I can't explain this feeling in words. It was really a sort of different feeling. There was also fear. The feeling was too good. We are happy actually.”

“The first ultrasound we went for in the 1st month was very amazing. We heard my baby boy's heartbeat when he was there in the mother's womb. It was a very nice experience when we heard his heartbeat for the very first time. I got very emotional at that time when I heard his heartbeat.”

“Yes initially I went with my wife for some check ups but due to lockdown I was stuck in Kolkata for 2 months and in 2020 because of which my wife went alone or with his family members because of lockdown as well the doctor came to the home or consulted on the phone generally”

“So, a memorable experience. So, everything was memorable you know everything seems to be new. We planned you know how to raise the baby; you know, decorating our room and ...Then, whole night sometimes, it used to happen in a month almost that the whole night she didn't sleep and you know I was also awake with her. These were my memorable experiences.”

“It was allowed But I did not go inside because when the doctors told us about the complications, we all got scared.”

Theme 2: Social support in the form of Information

“I took it from the internet as well as my parents also guided and the doctor that we were seeing was also very supportive and a kind of a good guide.”

“Yes, alot of guidance they have given. For example, after the pregnancy we should give some ayurvedic treatment to the mother and child. So, all this, my mother guided and handled.”

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“Mostly about a diet. And not to spend much time on the phone. And they told my wife to develop a reading habit. They also told not to lift anything heavy.”

“Like, like being a first time father, first time parents, we actually become very worried. Like if she is sneezing or if she is barfing, we actually get worried like what is happening. Then our parents told us that we do not need to worry, this is a normal thing. Things happen, like if she is not walking then she is not walking. They were like give her some time, it is okay. That kind of parenting advice they always give us.”

“I feel the majority of guidance was given to my wife as the caretaking and development of the child will be done by my wife and was given to my wife and still is given to my wife because she is the caretaker majority take care of my child”

Theme 3: Changes due to Transition into Fatherhood

“So, when a baby is born, there is a tag on the hand of the baby. So, I brought the tag home because it was the first thing which was related to the baby. And I have that tag till now.”

“...most of the questions are about my child. Like whether she is eating well or not, how she is doing right now, the center of attraction is my kid.”

“no change as such but I feel little more attached to my family now”

“No, in fact this feeling increases. When I get tired from the office, and when I see her I forget all the tiredness and all the tension. I feel incomplete and missing if I don't see her for a long time.”

“It was really, I mean, I was really elated, you can say, like, I lost my voice at that point of time. Which we actually saw inside of my wife's womb. So it was outside. It was a really weird experience. The first time was very weird.”

“Yeah, there is change. Like if I talk about my parents, before the child they weren't concerned with us. Like how we are spending time, what we are eating, whether we are eating really nice or not. They used to ask us every other day but after the child, most of the questions are about my child. Like whether she is eating well or not, how she is doing right now, the center of attraction is my kid.”

“So, after the birth of my child, everyone seems to be happy and there is a change in my father, change in my mother. Obviously, they have become busier. My father-in-law, mother-in-law, though they are not there but daily they do video calls. They want to be u know remain engaged.”

Theme 4: Perceived Responsibilities as a Father

“First responsibility every father has, to secure his child's future. I have policies and FD's for her for her further studies.”

“But when I reach home after office, then I actually take care of some of the responsibilities like changing clothes, changing diapers, cleaning and sometimes feeding out also, those kinds of things.”

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“There are a lot of responsibilities I have as a father. Like, now when she is small I need to take care of her so that does get hurt anywhere.. And when she gets a little big, I need to take care of her schooling and her studies.”

“As a father, I feel my responsibility you know like to check whatever the need he has at present. Ordering all those things, I only take care from ordering bottles, diapers and do bedding and everything. I don't let anybody else order.”

“Actually, there are a lot of responsibilities from the medication and education perspective. Medication should be proper, so I have made sure any vaccination is missed. We are also trying to incline him towards studies. We try to teach him everyday, small things. We are also searching for some good schools in our locality for him. We also tried to teach our marathi language. Though, he doesn't speak Hindi. But in future we need to teach him Hindi.”

Theme 5: Juggling other responsibilities with Parenting

“I don't mix personal and professional life until and unless it is very necessary to open my laptop and do some kind of work after 6:00 o'clock. It's nothing. Saturday, Sundays are completely off.”

“No, there's no such challenges I have faced till now. If my baby gets ill, then my wife, father and mother take care of her. There are very limited times when I am involved in the situation.”

“So, it was mostly because of my job. Actually, what happened when my baby was born and prior to 1 and half month my grandfather expired. And I had already taken so much leave. So, I had to plan once again you know for the leave. So, I planned for it. So, my baby you know he was born on 15th of January this year and then I planned my leave from 30th onwards for a month. Initially, I was not there so I spent less time with him and then again, my job commitments.”

“Yes, I am able to manage everything as of now because of covid, everything is happening at home from the last three years. Work from home is going on. Our working culture is different as compared to other IT companies. In my case, I only need to work 2-3 hours every day. So I am able to manage everything. And if my office opens up then also I think I will be able to manage everything, because it is 5 days working for me.”

“I tried to manage them together but sometimes you are supposed to do work at home also after the office. My family and my wife also understand that there is something important that's why I am doing office work at home.”

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the experiences of first time fathers during the initial two years of their child's life. An exploratory qualitative research design was used and six first time fathers were interviewed using an open ended semi structured interview schedule. The data was analyzed by manual thematic analysis and five common themes were extracted.

The first theme is based on the *extraordinary experiences of pregnancy* as reported by fathers. Hearing the news of becoming a parent for the first time is the most special and pleasurable experience for both the parents. All the expectant fathers reported that they felt

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happy and excited to hear the pregnancy news. 16.6% of the participants reported mixed feelings as they felt the feeling of being responsible and frightened as this will be a new change in their lives.

Talking about antenatal attendance, 83.3% of the participants illustrated that they used to accompany their wives to prenatal appointments in which one of the participants shared his emotional experience of hearing his baby's heartbeat in the ultrasound. However, a few expectant fathers got stuck far from their homes during COVID-19 lockdown and were unable to cherish the moments of the last stage of pregnancy and even delivery of their first child.

Only 33.3% of fathers claimed to be taking extra care of their wives during pregnancy. One participant reported having sleepless nights with a partner during pregnancy as a special memory that he will never forget. 50% participants planned their baby's welcoming by changing their sleeping arrangements, organizing and celebrating baby showers and decorating their rooms. On the day of delivery, while 33.3% of the participants were absent due to lockdown, 16.6% were scared to go inside and 50% were not allowed to go inside the delivery room.

Research has also suggested that Expectant fathers experience shared feelings of pride, happiness with anxiety about their partner's health, and normalcy of child and delivery (Joy & Paul 2012). They report various social and personal life changes such as having difficulties in attending multiple needs and coping. They have various expectations and unanswered questions about the child and express their elation and pride on becoming a father and experiencing a new identity (Joy & Paul 2012; Al Furaikh & Thilagavathy 2017; Thilagavathy 2016).

Golian et al., (2015) in their study implied that the pregnancy period provides men an opportunity to experience novel feelings, changes and shift themselves from manhood to fatherhood.

The second theme explains *social support in the form of information*. While 66.6% of the men received and tried to receive information and guidance related to childcare during pregnancy like parenting advice, taking care of his wife when she's ill, and not allowing wife to lift heavy weights, 16.6% claimed that they don't require any such assistance as they don't even get to spend much time to spend with their child. For 66.6% of the participants, their parents were found to be a major support system in order to guide and help them.

33.3% expectant fathers also reported that the couple have adopted new habits like going on morning walks and reading books during pregnancy.

Incorporating father-inclusive services, father-friendly resources (having information from a father's perspective), and parenting groups with people who have similar experiences as participants are some helpful ways that would promote fathers' mental health and wellness (Baldwin et al., 2018). Da Costa and colleagues (2015) demonstrated that poor social support can lead to antenatal depressive symptoms in fathers.

According to literature, fathers who acknowledged and embraced lifestyle changes adjusted more readily to their new roles as fathers (Iwata, 2014), and couples who were better

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prepared worked together more effectively to meet the challenges of parenthood (Darwin et al., 2017).

Seeing and holding one's baby for the first time is special for almost everyone. The third theme depicts the *changes due to transition into fatherhood*. When asked about their experiences, a number of diverse responses were noted from the participants. While 66.6% fathers reported being happy and excited to hold their baby for the first time, 16.6% reported being scared to hold them.

All the new fathers mentioned that their child has become the thread to bind their families together. 50% fathers mentioned that in order to cherish their experiences with the baby, they celebrate their child's birthdays every month in the first year of childbirth.

It was also seen that 50% of the fathers who spend time and play with their child after office hours had reduced levels of stress and fatigue. Active involvement of fathers in their children's lives results in positive child development outcomes, parental well-being, and family cohesion (Wilson & Prior, 2011).

Darwin and colleagues (2017) demonstrated that fathers who spend more time with their children feel more confident and reported their experience to be extremely rewarding.

Theme four describes the *perceived responsibilities of a father*. When asked participants about their perceived responsibilities as a father towards their child, the majority of the fathers, i.e., 83.3% mentioned providing education and financial assistance to their child as their primary responsibility while 66.6% mentioned providing protection and a good environment to the baby.

33.3% of fathers reported that taking care of the child's present needs like feeding, cleaning, changing diapers are also some of his responsibilities while the other 33.3% of fathers were still figuring out their roles in their child's life.

In a recent study by Onyeze-Joe & Godin (2020), it was found that the majority of first-time fathers still believe that their foremost responsibility during pregnancy and delivery is to contribute monetarily. The study has also discovered that some first-time fathers are ready to go above and beyond the norm and perform more feminine tasks during pregnancy, even if some men naturally adhere to gender stereotypes.

83.3% fathers found themselves similar to their own father when it comes to parenting, taking care of the baby and balancing personal and professional life. According to research, the father's relationship with his father may be a factor in influencing his own role identification, sense of commitment, and self-efficacy either by identifying with his father or making up for his father's mistakes (Cowan and Cowan 1987; Daly 1995).

Additionally, fathers of a girl child have reported that they are more emotionally attached to their child as compared to fathers of a boy child. Sharaff and Srivastava (2010) illustrated that sex of the child has been found to be significantly related to father's involvement in which the girl child is benefited more in terms of higher paternal involvement.

The last theme is about *fathers juggling other responsibilities with parenting*. When it comes to making balance in personal and professional life after becoming a father, 33.3%

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fathers carry their office work to home while other 33.3% prefer not doing office work while they are with their families.

When asked about stress related to childcare, 50% fathers reported their child's health and eating habits, and delayed developmental tasks as their source of stress. 66.6% fathers have not faced any challenge in their fatherhood experience after the childbirth due to family's support in child rearing.

Genesoni and Tallandini (2009) noted in their research that men may struggle to balance the necessity to provide for their families with their desire to be active in childcare in a variety of situations. A trend has been shown for fathers who put in more time at work to show less involvement with the child (Sharaff & Srivastava, 2010).

CONCLUSION

In this study, all the fathers reported that they were happy and excited when they heard about their wife's pregnancy regardless of the pregnancy being planned or unplanned. It was seen that the fathers were actively involved in the antenatal appointments with their partners and were taking extra care of them in terms of nutrition and physical health.

However, none of the participants demonstrated going to the delivery room due to multiple reasons. Half of the fathers showed their love and gratitude towards their partner by celebrating baby showers, room decorations and spending sleepless nights with their pregnant wives when they were unable to sleep.

Social support and informational support from parents, friends and other experienced parents were found to be an important factor in determining the fathers' involvement with the wife and the baby after the childbirth.

Regardless of the baby's sex, fathers were overwhelmed to see their child for the first time in which some exhibited feelings of achievement and a sense of responsibility.

Their child became the thread to bind their family members together and the center of attraction for all the members. Almost half of the fathers reported that they tend to forget about their problems and stress when they play with their child after returning from the workplace.

The perceived responsibilities of the fathers were found to be giving financial support for the education of the child and medical facilities. Only a fraction of fathers reported providing emotional and mental support to the child as their responsibility as a father. Surprisingly, One third of the fathers were comfortable with doing conventional maternal tasks like feeding, cleaning and making bed for the baby after returning from the workplace.

Half of the fathers preferred carrying their workplace tasks to home as it was considered as something important while the other half have separated their personal and professional life. The source of stress for the fathers was the delayed developmental tasks of their child, poor eating habits and some behavioral issues. The overall experiences as a new parent mentioned were positive feelings of having a baby, strong relationships with family members and the child, and learning to be more responsible and patient.

Limitations

The current study has a few limitations including the primary limitation being small sample size due to which it can not be generalized to the whole population. It has gathered individual experiences of new fathers which are unique to every individual. The educational status, financial status, and socio-cultural backgrounds of the fathers were not considered which might have played a role in their experiences during and post pregnancy.

The role of COVID-19 pandemic in the pregnancy period and postpartum was not taken into consideration. In addition, Efforts were put in so as to minimize the researcher bias, but some amount of researcher bias may be revealed in the findings of the study.

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Conflict of Interest

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