



Couples' views of men's transition to first time fatherhood

A Research Report

CONTENTS

Acknowledgments	2
The project team	2
Project summary	3
Background	5
Project aims	7
Theoretical underpinnings	8
The research process	10
Results	11
a. A lack of preparation for and involvement in the process of transition	11
b. A stressed parental relationship	12
c. The joy of fatherhood	14
d. Points of difference that emerged from the women's groups	15
Discussion and conclusions	18
Recommendations	19
References	20



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PROJECT SUMMARY

This report details a research project commissioned by the Public Health Service, Nelson-Marlborough District Health Board and designed by the School of Health and Social Sciences, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology.

The project aimed to explore the experiences of men during their transition to first time fatherhood from the perspectives of both partners. However it should be understood that this project builds on the findings of 3 earlier projects which interviewed 239 fathers as well as a smaller number of antenatal educators, midwives and others involved in the support of families. The first of these projects was designed to provide baseline information on fathers' experience of services that support developing families. One subsequent project built on this baseline data by exploring the views of a group of service providers (Plunket Staff) on their engagement with fathers. The final of the three projects looked at fathers experiences during the antenatal period, a period identified in the first project as being vital in men's engagement with the parenting process.

The evidence from these projects suggested that men experience considerable tension in their transition to fatherhood. That while they are committed to the principle of being a partner in the parenting relationship this desire is frustrated by differing expectations from others. Specifically others expect that men's main role is that of a support person to the mother rather than as a parent in their own right. An assumption this current project is based upon is that this situation is so pervasive and uncritically accepted that it can only be considered hegemonic in nature.

The previous projects, taken together, gave considerable insight into men's experience of the transition to fatherhood. However, the term 'transition' implies a process occurring over time, suggesting the need for a longitudinal study or at least a study that attempts to follow people through the process. Further the views of the female partners, the person most close to men's transition had not been sought.

The project reported here sought to add to the limited information available on the experience and support needs of men in their transition to fatherhood by collecting data over an extended period of time and by exploring both partners' views on men's transition to fatherhood, specifically the project aimed to provide information to address the following questions:

- a. What are the experiences of men during their transition to first time fatherhood?
- b. How do female partners perceive the transition of men to first time fatherhood?

The project utilised transitional theory and group process as theoretical perspectives to assist in generating, organising and understanding data as it emerged throughout the project.

11 couples agreed to participate in the project. The participants attended 2 gender specific groups, one before the birth of the child and the other at least 6 weeks after the birth. Both groups were asked to consider the men's experience of the transition to fatherhood.



The men identified 3 main themes as being of particular importance

- o A lack of preparation for and involvement in the process of transition to fatherhood.
- o A stressed parental relationship
- o The joy of fatherhood

In addition the women identified 6 themes that were not weighted by the men.

- o A lack of intimacy following the birth of the child
- o Financial concerns
- o The fathering club.
- o The men's developing attachment with the baby.
- o The importance of the gender of the baby
- o The area of extended family networks

The project concluded that a lack of preparedness over such a vulnerable time places the man, the parental relationship and ultimately the family at considerable psychological and emotional risk. This was compounded by the contradictions the men experienced in their expectations prior to and following the birth of their child. It was of interest that the data ranked as important by the women (but not by the men) reflects commonly held assumptions/myths about how men respond to fatherhood. For example, difficulties with sexual abstinence, worries about finance and concerns about the gender and attachment to the child.

It was recommended that:

- o Further research of a similar nature is undertaken with a larger group of participants representing a wider range of social backgrounds.
- o There is a commitment by services that support developing families to develop educational processes and tools, focussing on parenthood, that reflect the needs and experiences of men.
- o That these support services acknowledge, prepare and support couples through the changes in the parental relationship.
- o Approaches to education and support must include the opportunity for men to get together and talk. Facilitation must be by people experienced in supporting men.
- o Finally, agencies that fund and/or audit services that support developing families develop policy that ensures these services provide evidence that men are being included in service provision.

BACKGROUND

This report details a research project commissioned by the Public Health Service, Nelson-Marlborough District Health Board. The project itself was designed by the School of Health and Social Sciences, Nelson Marlborough Institute of Technology. One important aspect is that the project team was representative of both organisations. This collaborative approach provided strong practice and academic perspectives to the project.

The project aimed to explore the experiences of men during their transition to first time fatherhood from the perspectives of both partners. However it should be understood that this project builds on the findings of 3 earlier projects which interviewed 239 fathers as well as a smaller number of antenatal educators, midwives and others involved in the support of families. The first of these projects was designed to provide baseline information on fathers' experience of services that support developing families. One subsequent project built on this baseline data by exploring the views of a group of service providers (Plunket Staff) on their engagement with fathers. The final of the three projects looked at fathers experiences during the antenatal period, a period identified in the first project as being vital in men's engagement with the parenting process.

6 general themes emerged from these projects:

1. Men are very conscious of the pervasiveness of negative stereotypes regarding fathers and fathering in our society. They considered the effect these stereotypes had as the single most important factor in maintaining what they viewed as a climate of caution and suspicion towards fathers in our society. More worrying was that on occasion they themselves contributed to this negativity by uncritically supporting the stereotypes.

The role of the media in communicating negative images of fathers was strongly emphasised in each of the projects which interviewed fathers. This was linked to the wider issue of what they saw as the negativity surrounding the contribution of men to society in general.

2. Fathers today want to be more involved with their families. More specifically, fathers want to parent in a manner that differs from that of their own fathers. They viewed their own fathers as constrained in their parenting role by a range of historical, social, and gender factors which they considered were less marked today. That is, today fathers have more choice in how they might parent their children

This shift from more traditional ways of parenting has been suggested as causing men in particular difficulty in reconciling the inevitable tensions that change introduces (Olsson, Jansson & Norberg, 1998)

3. Fathers today are committed to the principle of "Partners in Parenting".

They wanted to share the parenting role with their partners. They have an expectation that they should be regarded as a parent in their own right.

The participants, in general, believed they were not valued as a father. One project concluded that policy development and family research needed to be more focussed on the principle of a parenting partnership (Mitchell & Chapman, 2003).

4. Fathers are seen, approached and involved as a support person for their partner rather than as parent in their own right. Generally this is reflected by the values, attitudes and behaviour of both service providers as well as by others around them (including families).



The focus on the father as a support person rather than as a parent has been frequently commented on by researchers in this area. As Olsson et al state, "Being a father meant to be the second best parent, relating to the child on the mother's conditions, supporting the mother and assuming other supportive responsibilities in the family, such as being a breadwinner" (1998, p210).

5. Fathers believe they are distanced in their desire for involved parenting by service providers and by others around them.

Mitchell & Chapman (2001) found that the service providers they interviewed initially talked of how they were successfully engaging with fathers and supporting them in meeting their needs. The authors suggested that this belief could only be considered hegemonic¹ when, after a period of facilitated reflection on their practice, the service providers completely changed their view. They then talked of how they struggled to attract fathers to their service, struggled to engage with them and were largely unaware of their needs. It was concluded that this situation, when combined with the invisibility of fathers in policy development, leads to the marginalisation of fathers during their transition to fatherhood. (It should be noted that the service providers interviewed agreed to participate in the projects in a desire to achieve

the principles of best practice and best outcomes for fathers and for families).

6. All participants accepted that the support needs of fathers differed from those of their female partners however service providers were unaware of these needs. In addition fathers themselves, although aware that their needs were different, struggled to identify their particular needs for support.

During the initial phase of data collection in the previous projects it was evident that many men were unable to talk about their own needs. That is, when they were asked about their needs they talked of their partners' needs rather than their own. It was only after being reminded of the research question that the men began to consider their own situation.

The evidence from these projects suggests that men experience considerable tension in their transition to fatherhood. While they are committed to the principle of being a partner in the parenting relationship this desire is frustrated by differing expectations from others. Specifically, others expect that men's main role is that of a support person to the mother. An assumption this current project is based upon is that this situation is so pervasive and uncritically accepted that it can only be considered hegemonic in nature.

¹ **Hegemony** is the dominance of one group over other group so that perspectives become skewed to favour the dominant group. Hegemony controls the ways that ideas become "naturalised". The notion of "common sense" supports and ingrains this dominance in the culture of the groups involved (Adapted from Wikipedia, 2005).

PROJECT AIMS

The previous projects, taken together, gave considerable insight into men's experience of the transition to fatherhood. A significant number of men were interviewed as well as a range of people from services that support developing families. However each project gave what can only be considered a 'snapshot' of people's thoughts at a particular time. The term 'transition' implies a process occurring over time suggesting the need for a longitudinal study or at least a study that attempts to follow people through the process. Further the views of the female partners, the person most close to the transition had not been sought.

It should be noted that this report is aimed at concluding a series of 4 projects. For the purposes of clarity and consistency of process the literature referred to in the Background section above is very limited. Needless to say there is a wide range of North American, European and Australasian literature that describes the difficulties men have in adapting to the parenting role. This literature has been well detailed in previous reports.

The transition to parenthood is considered one of the major shifts in adult life involving vast emotional and social adjustments. In contemporary Western societies, traditional ways of being a mother or father, as well as the gendered division of paid and unpaid labour and views on marital relationships are being challenged.

(Olsson et al, 1998, p205)

The project reported here sought to add to the limited information available on the experience and support needs of men in their transition to fatherhood by collecting data over an extended period of time and by exploring both partners' views on men's transition to fatherhood. Specifically the project aimed to provide information to address the following questions:

- a. What are the experiences of men during their transition to first-time fatherhood?
- b. How do female partners perceive the transition of males to first - time fatherhood?



THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

Studies that have explored the transition of couples to parenthood have used a range of theoretical positions to both frame and guide the research process.

Feeney, Alexander, Noller & Hohaus (2003) used attachment theory to explore and provide support for the hypothesis that there is a strong correlation between insecure relationships and postnatal depression in mothers. The study found that there was a high correlation between maternal depression and parents' attachment insecurity. Knauth (2001) used an ecological framework to review a range of studies involving couples in their transition to parenthood. The study concluded that new parents are at risk of experiencing increased marital conflict following the birth of their child. Hudson, Elek, & Fleck. (2001) used self-efficacy theory to explore the relationship between self-efficacy (the ability to perform effectively in a given situation) and parent satisfaction levels. The study concluded that fathers reported significantly lower self-efficacy scores than mothers at all stages of data collection. Similarly Wilson (2000), White, Wilson, Gunnel Elander, Sci & Persson (1999), Olssen, Jansson & Norberg (1998), Vehvilainen-Julkunen (1995) in their studies of parental transition framed their studies around a range of differing theoretical perspectives when they looked at the experience of fathers in particular.

All the studies mentioned above indicated that, to a greater or lesser degree, the transition to parenthood (for couples in general and men in particular) involved a range of often quite unexpected tensions. These studies aimed to provide information that could be of help in identifying and easing these tensions. However, it is of particular note that while transition was used as a major construct in framing these studies the term was poorly defined. For example, White et al (1999,

p171) described transition as simply “a period of change”. This is somewhat surprising when the authors went on to describe this experience with terms such as threatening, challenging, disruptive and possibly involving a level of conflict reaching crisis proportions.

Draper in her study of men's passage to parenthood observed that men have a sense of uncertainty and an “in between” status in the unfamiliar territory of pregnancy and childbirth (Draper, 2003). Draper further argues that this situation has the potential for significant risks to the person through the absence of rituals that were previously managed by rigidly defined gender roles stating, “historically traditional stereotypes, framed by hegemonic masculinity, have clearly differentiated men's and women's parenting roles and portrayed the father as an authoritarian and breadwinner figure. However cultural and political changes over the past 20 years, such as changes in family practices, employment and the division of domestic labour, have led to changing notions of fatherhood” (2003, p70). Draper further suggested that, for women, the transition, framed by medical science and signs of pregnancy, is more clearly understood.

In relation to a more detailed approach to transition Meleis, Sawyer, Eun-Ok, Messias & Schumacher (2000) describe the development of a middle range theory of transition. This process involved a rigorous analysis of the concept of transition as well as a review, analysis and collation of a range of research studies that described transitional experiences. Meleis et al described the process of transition as being complex and multidimensional involving a life changing event where people have to effectively redefine themselves as a person. Meleis et al suggest that to engage in a positive transitional experience those

involved need to be aware of and engaged with the process as well as being supported through what are described as “critical points and events” (2000, p18).

In the 3 studies discussed in the background to this report, Mitchell & Chapman found that research participants (ie. the fathers) did experience difficulty (often serious difficulty) in negotiating the transition to fatherhood. Indeed for most men the transition was fraught with problems antenatally, perinatally and postnatally. Difficulties were due to a variety of reasons the most influential being what service providers experienced in attempting to include them as a partner in parenting. Further, fathers identified what they described as vulnerable points where they were more open to being involved but at the same time, vulnerable to being distanced. As one participant noted “There's some point in every Dad's life - they're open, before the door gets closed. That's the time to put [others] alongside them. The key is in knowing what their needs are and what the entry points are” (Chapman., McIntosh., & Mitchell, 2000, p14).

Group process is commonly thought of as a method of data collection (eg. as in focus groups). However, group process can also be viewed as a way in which understandings can be explored and moulded. When considered from a perspective that values the notion of the shared nature of identity, consciousness and reality, groups and group process can also be viewed as a research methodology (Tuckett & Stewart, 2004). Seen in this way the collective nature (or synergy) of a group has been suggested as offering the opportunity for individual participants to identify and subsequently voice understandings of their experiences in what could be described as a developing collective consciousness. The assumption being that our understandings of the world are not developed in

isolation but through interactions with others (Jamieson & Williams, 2003). In this project the researchers believed group process would provide the opportunity for the participants to engage with others in a manner not commonly experienced and to uncover and/or create knowledge unique to this experience. Emergent transitional theory (as described by Meleis et al) would provide a theoretical perspective to assist in understanding and organising data as it emerged from the project.

Change and difference are essential properties of transitions. All transitions involve change whereas not all change is related to transition. Transitions are both the result of change and result in change.

(Meleis et al, 2000)



THE RESEARCH PROCESS

Ethical approval for the project was granted by the Nelson Marlborough Ethics Committee (now the Upper South B Regional Ethics Committee).

Prospective participants were personally approached through several organisations offering antenatal education courses for couples. These included both fee paying and non fee paying courses as well as a “non traditional” course specifically targeting preparation for childbirth. Because of the differing attraction of the courses the participants represented a range of backgrounds. The main selection criteria was that the couples were to be first time (biological) parents who were able to commit to a project that was planned to continue over several months. All couples represented heterosexual relationships. In all 11 couples agreed to participate. While this number varied throughout the course of the project the 11 couples had the opportunity to comment and critique the draft findings as they evolved.

The process of data collection involved the participants attending 2 gender specific groups, one before the birth of the child and the other at least 6 weeks after the birth. The 6 weeks timeframe following the birth was deliberately chosen in the understanding that, by this stage, support services were more distant and the couple would be facing the task of managing their changed status more independently.

At the beginning of the first group after introductions and a revisiting of the research aims and process the men were asked to consider the question: “What is your experience of the transition to fatherhood?” In the group of females the participants were asked the question, “What is your perception of your partner's transition to fatherhood?” There was no elaboration on this question as it was considered important that the participants developed their own understanding of the nature of the topic and of the question itself. Further involvement from the

facilitators was restricted to refocussing discussion on the original question when it seems discussion was 'off track'. However caution was exercised here as the researchers believed discussion often needs to divert from a topic to explore issues more broadly and that following this discussion will return to the topic. The group discussions were audio taped as well as summarised on newsprint that was pinned around the walls of the room. The scribing of the summary was carried out during the group discussion and was situated in such a way that the participants could view the summary as it was written.

Following the discussion the audiotape was stopped and the participants were given tokens (sticky labels) which they were asked to attach to the points on the newsprint they considered most valuable. Each participant had 6 tokens amounting to the same value for each person. The participants were asked to attach the tokens without discussion with the aim of each person having as much “say” as each other. This was aimed at minimising the potential bias caused by group members who may talk more or talk less. The more highly ranked points (ie. those with more tokens attached) were then identified as themes, supported by quotations from the transcribed audiotape and this initial analysis was posted to the participants for verification of its accuracy. A strength of this approach is that the participants essentially complete the first stage of data analysis themselves.

The second group followed exactly the same process except the question posed was slightly different (as mentioned above). The themes were then collapsed together and collated in themes common to both.

RESULTS

Organising data from 4 group discussions and from two different sets of participants (male and female) presented a challenge. It was decided to organise the data around the themes from the men's discussion first with data from the women's groups used as supplementary comment. This initial presentation would be followed by data from the women's groups which differed in focus or contradicted the data from the men's group.

The men identified 3 main themes as being of particular importance (ie. These areas were weighted by the number of tokens attached):

- o A lack of preparation for and involvement in the process of transition.
- o A stressed parental relationship
- o The joy of fatherhood

In addition the women identified 6 themes that were not weighted by the men. (While the men discussed the first 2 themes below they did not weight them as important).

- o A lack of intimacy following the birth of the child
- o Financial concerns
- o The fathering club.
- o The men's developing attachment with the baby.
- o The importance of the gender of the baby
- o The area of extended family networks

a. A lack of preparation for and involvement in the process of transition.

- i. **The expectation the men held that they would be able to fit** the new baby around their current lifestyle was evident in the first group. In fact there was an impression created that their lifestyle need not change to any great degree at all.

We do exactly what we want to do, if I want to go for a walk or whatever, that's okay I just do it. If I want to go out to the pub which I do very rarely, you know I don't have to ask anybody, I just say I'm going to do this and I do it

No problem, if we want to go fishing, we'll take the child fishing, go for a hike or something like that or even for a ride on your push bike, go for a ride up in the mountains or something like that, you put a back pack on, take it for a ride, no problem, there's always a way around it

We live on a boat, I mean we're going to take off again and go sailing again, for us to have a child on board, it's fine, I mean no problem, I mean hundreds of families have people live on boats that have got families and they cruise around the world, I mean they can fit into our life but we can also give them an experience as well

- ii. **“Nothings going to change but everything did”** was a comment that echoed the general feeling in the second group following the birth of their child. The men described their naivety in not being at all prepared for this change.

It's not really a transition, it was more like getting to a cliff and being pushed off it.

If this information ever gets to help anybody out there, I think the biggest thing they should be told is to be prepared mentally and financially for something that they would least expect because don't get me wrong, this is all a good thing and I'm really happy, but I didn't expect anything like that's happening now. But I would definitely do it again.



iii. A lack of information and involvement in preparation for fatherhood by service providers and by others around them was identified as being the primary cause of feeling distanced from the process of transition. Discussion was mostly about how they felt excluded during this time. For example through a lack of information.

I didn't personally think there was enough information about what was happening with the birth. They were all talking to my partner about what she was going to go through, what was going to happen with her. I also think that there was absolutely no information about what was going to happen after the birth.

And also through a lack of involvement

No one says, "are you coping with it?" I don't think anyone has yet said to me "how are you coping with it?" They might say, "how's work?" [but] I mean work's work, you know but how am I coping with everything else that's going on?

They all ask, they say "how's [my partner]" and my answer is "good, and I'm good too thanks, thanks for asking."

It's her and the baby and the midwife or it's her and her baby and her mum and then you're sort of out there on the fringe a bit.

The midwife came up and had a chat to [my partner] but why couldn't the midwife wait for me to get back and have a chat to both of us? I mean the two of us; it's not just the one of us.

It's quite hard, so far I've been told pretty much it's my fault, I'm the arsehole I get left out of everything, it's all about her and the baby.

While these perspectives represented the

majority of experiences they were tempered by some experiences of positive support and flexibility from service providers.

Our midwife is pretty good. She really knows what she's doing. She asks me questions and stuff. [I] don't feel like a spare wheel sitting in the corner of a room

[My partner] just said to me, "do you want the midwife on the next visit to come after work?" I said "yeah that would be great." So it's great. You feel part of it. The midwife turns up and she asks how I'm doing, how are things going with me and things like that.

In both groups the women focussed on a lack of information (rather than a lack of involvement) that was available to assist their partners.

Instant family, from having nobody to look after but himself all these years, I can only imagine how terrifying it must be. But there's not enough information - like, there's heaps of books for us as pregnant women, and how we're going to feel, and you get paragraphs on how to help men...

He's started reading my pregnancy book really early on and stuff like that, but it's more designed for women and how we're feeling.

I think men's roles have changed quicker than the literature and the information that we're getting. It's probably more focussed on the women more than men.

b. A stressed parental relationship

This theme evolved in the second men's group and was discussed from differing perspectives. Discussion was mainly on the difficulties

experienced in appreciating each other's contribution to family life. The discussion was prolonged, energetic and at times quite emotional with the following sub-themes emerging.

i. The varied value placed on parental contribution

We're having issues with her thinking I don't value her time at home compared with my time out earning.

I've gotta work to earn the money but she doesn't think that. And honesty I don't think I could be a stay at home Dad, yeah I mean I do it occasionally when she goes out or whatever but yeah I don't know that I would actually cope being a full-time Dad. It's hard to communicate that I do appreciate what she does at home.

You're working; she's at home looking after your child. [She thinks] you're out there having fun mate, you're not working, you're away from home, away from the baby.

She's sitting there looking at the clock [thinking] he'll be home soon. [I'm thinking] "I'll just drive round the block a couple more times ... sorry I'm stuck in traffic".

ii. The impact of tiredness and the manner in which this stresses the parental relationship:

Two o'clock in the morning baby wakes up and you get shrugged by your missus. "It's your turn; I've had him all day. You never change the nappies, you never go anywhere". "Sweet I do nothing during the day, I've only gotta get up in another couple of hours and go to work, fine".

And that comes back to the valuing thing because if you're tired its like well I've got to

get up and go to work tomorrow and its like well I've got to put up with baby all tomorrow.

I think the thing is that when you get home normally at the end of the day you've been working and your wife's been working and the baby might be scratchy at that time of the day and its hard to sort of find you know a bit of a break, it just seems non-stop.

The women, as with the men, discussed difficulties

in appreciating each other's contribution to family life. While negative experiences were discussed these were considered of less importance than in the fathers' group. In the main most of the women considered that this area was being managed in a positive manner.

Before we had the baby you had the time and the reserves to work on the relationship and we both did, I mean we both recognised that we are quite different people so we had to kind of work on the relationship and we both did. But since the baby has arrived I can see that that is happening less and I suppose that's a potential threat for the relationship if you don't.

iii. The baby's crying was identified as a particular stress on the father. From the fathers' perspective

He can make himself heard all around the house. If you walk away from it for a while you get the evils from him when you get back. You sort of feel a bit guilty for taking a bit of time for yourself. You know you're being a bad parent by leaving him crying for awhile.

Pretty hard for me because if the little one's crying, she wants her mother most of the



time, she wants to go to her and I can't settle her down and that gets pretty stressful. And then this tension builds up. It doesn't stop and you know you're getting up through the night as well as doing all that, it's not easy, its not easy.

And from the women's perspective ...

I mean in the first few weeks I had a couple of times when I came home and [our baby] had screamed the entire time and [my partner] was really at the end of his tether and when he's at the end of his tether then that immediately winds me up.

iv. Despite the above pressures the men identified a range of positive experiences in the manner in which the transition to fatherhood was managed.

I think our relationship has changed. I think we have to stick together now we have this baby. Before we had a stable relationship. Now that there is a baby I have the feeling we have to sort things out amongst us. If there's conflict and if we have trouble with each other, we have to talk about it, there's no way that we can just let it go.

You are now going to be part of each other's lives forever because you've always got that factor that brings you together. Your child might turn 30 down the road and get married so you both go to that wedding so you're always gonna have that factor of being connected in some way or another. You can't really afford just to say "oh fuck you" and walk out can you. There's always gotta be that connection which is pretty amazing because it gives you a sort of an amazing bond.

That's why this is probably hard from your

[own] point of view because it is no longer [just] me.

The impact of stress on the parental relationship was ranked as being of high importance in the second men's group. It was noted by the researchers at the time that the transcriptions/written words gave no real sense of the distress this was causing most of the men present.

c. The joy of fatherhood

i. In the first men's group the men talked energetically of a sense of hope and joy for the future. Interestingly, while this point was discussed later in the group it nevertheless attracted the strongest weighting of all of the themes. The point involved aspects of "being there' for the family ...

I'd get to the stage where I'll go to work, I'll do what I need to do and go home again. I think I'll muck around less at work because if I can get this done [it's] time to go home, see the kids.

I mean yeah like tomorrow we've got a scan at 10 o'clock. In the past I would have made it for after work. But [now] I just ring up work and say, "I've got an appointment at 10 o'clock, see you later, bye."

To expressions of sheer delight.

My kids are going to have the flashiest sandpit in Nelson, bring your diggers around

ii. The development of a new role was ranked as an important aspect of fathering in the second group. Building on the theme of a sense of hope and joy the men's thoughts are clearly expressed below:

I was home with [our baby] and seeing most of the things [she did]. I was home alone with her and she had been trying for a few days to stick her foot in her mouth and she finally managed it. It was me that was there. It was like yeah, [my partner] came home and I had something to tell her.

I think that's what I really want to do, one of the dearest things to me is seeing him grow up, I want to see him turn 60, 70, 80 you know. I won't be around then but I still want to see him turn those ages. You know it's unreal.

For me it's these pools of light, I love her, she's a great child and it's really nice to have her.

The women discussed 'the joy of fatherhood' from their perspective.

I think that they give the child something the mother doesn't. I think that with him it's an adventurousness that I don't have. I guess we tend to kid glove them a little bit more.

[My partner] can be quite a serious guy at times and yeah having this little baby has really helped him to lighten up in some ways I think and I suppose that's the joy thing that the fathers spoke about the first time round and that's really, yeah it's really tangible, I really see that joy in him when he's with her and this lightness that she brings to him.

And pride. I think there's a huge sense of pride with [fathers]. You know to the point where he'll argue to be the one who's taking the baby in the supermarket. He loves the fuss that everyone makes of her but he loves being proud. I do think [they have] an overwhelming sense of pride that comes with having a baby.

d. Points of difference that emerged from the women's groups

These themes were identified as important by the women but not by the men. This is not to say that they were not discussed by the men, as several were. What is notable is that when it came time to weight the importance of these points by the use of the tokens, the men didn't weight them at all.

- i. A lack of intimacy following the birth of the child** was identified by the women in the second group. Initially the topic was discussed in general terms.

[My partner] has found it really hard (the lack of intimacy), really really hard.

Not just the sexual side of the intimacy, just the time to hug, and just even sharing a bed.

And particularly in regard to limited sexual activity

I would say that definitely for us it's the sex thing. I would say [it] was a huge issue for us.

I mean you can tell, like some things will start going downhill and I suddenly think "Oh God we haven't had sex for like a week or maybe two weeks, oh God we better have sex". It's not quite as bad as that but ...

Yeah and he's really good at trying to be understanding about it but you know the pain shows in his eyes. It's like "oh you know you've just had a baby and it's fine, it's really fine".

- ii. Financial concerns were identified** as being an important concern for their partners. In the first group,



I think the major thing too, with the men, is the financial implications. I think that's what they think about more, whereas for me it was like, 'god what's this going to do to my body?' and he's thinking, 'I've got 20 years of supporting a kid.'

Overwhelmingly it was the money thing. I asked [him] 'what is it that you'd be worried about?' and he said, 'Money, more than anything.'

And in the second group the women said

I do think that the financial issue is a big thing that they have to stress about. He's more the breadwinner and therefore the one that has to worry more about whether we can get this done or this done or this done and still try and get this mortgage knocked out.

iii. The fathering club. Moving more towards other men who were parents.

He's talking to the blokes about things that he's never really talked to them about before. And they're volunteering all this knowledge as well, so I can see us moving away more from the single friends, just because our lifestyle will be different and more move towards the married ones, the parents.

My husband has become very interested all of a sudden in talking to new dads. His mates that have had babies or his brother, it might be just a rep who comes in to talk to him, but it's on a fairly superficial level. There's none of the hard stuff gets talked about.

iv. The men's developing attachment with the baby. In the first group, rather than a focus on the baby, the women described the men as having a focus upon them.

I think at the moment, [he's] still in the stage where he's actually more concerned about me and my wellbeing than the child - he's more concerned how I'm going to cope, how I'll cope physically, how I'll cope at birth.

He sort of doesn't really get the baby's thing, it's all me. So I'll say it's kicking and he'll try, but really he's not [in to] singing or talking [to the developing baby] - it's how am I, and cooking and doing things for me.

Further on in the pregnancy the women identified the scan as pivotal in a change towards the men having a greater awareness of the growing baby.

The scan I think is quite neat for [men]. I mean it seems quite surreal as well, it took kind of a few days to sink in that that is actually a baby in there, but I think it's quite neat for them being able to see it as well.

The birth of the baby was also considered a pivotal time in the men's developing attachment with their baby.

I think being at the birth was really important for him. I think he was really kinda nervous about it. He was a bit worried that he was either going to vomit or faint or drop him. I think that was really important for him that he caught (our baby). He caught him and he cut the cord and he was there the whole time. So I think that was a really important part of their bonding.

And that was such a great way to start. Because he was so involved in the birth and then it just sorta carried on, you know this incredible involvement in her life, it wasn't like me the mother having the child, it was us parents having the child, and we were both really involved right from the start.

- v. **The importance of the gender of the baby** to their partner. While opinions were varied and sometimes contradictory the discussion was quite energetic.

I think it's probably quite gender orientated as well, as to what you have, as to how they react. [He's] already said that if it's a girl it doesn't leave the house til it's thirty. But if it's a boy it'll be like, 'oh yeah, have the car.'

You're right about the whole gender - the boy's going to be playing rugby. Not my boy, he plays soccer. He's like, 'well I played soccer!' and he's had knee injuries, his shoulder's gone, 'it did me no harm.'

lucky [he is that these] are not going to be the same for him.

I was gonna leave [my crying baby] for 15 minutes, it was something we were trying for a few days to see if it worked. [My mother-in-law] gave me the biggest guilt trip and I just sat there and cried. The next day [my partner] said "look Mum, we're more important." He would never have done that, never, he would never have said that to his mother. So I thought that was a pretty amazing switch.

- vi. **The area of extended family networks.** The women discussed their awareness of how these changed and how this affected their partners. While discussion in the first group was energetic and continued for some time, the discussion itself was rather scattered. For example in terms of tensions that had developed

I guess that is another implication for the fathers, their families. [His] mother in particular is really gutted that we're not getting married before the baby. All this craziness. So he's dealing with all the pressures of impending fatherhood on top of 'why aren't you getting married, why aren't you doing the traditional thing?' and certain expectations from other people.

And also in terms of how the transition could have positive outcomes in this area.

It's funny because ... he's actually opened up this whole relationship with his mother where she's started talking about her birthing experiences. They talked about [his father] going [to the birth], a few negative experiences [that could occur] and also how



DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

It should be noted that although there were 11 couples involved in the project not all people were represented in the groups. The reasons varied but were mostly related to the vagaries of pregnancy/ill-health and the extended timeframe of this project. However, all couples did have the opportunity to comment on draft writings. Further, this report reflects the position of the majority of people and does not necessarily represent all the participants' views. While there would be considerable diversity in individual's and couple's perspectives the research process followed was quite deliberately aimed at achieving a consensus of opinion.

The studies detailed in the earlier section on Background section covered two main points. Firstly fathers wanted to be more involved with their families than fathers were able to achieve in previous generations. Secondly while they acknowledged the need to support their partner through particular times (eg. pregnancy and childbirth), they saw themselves primarily as a partner in parenting. In the main they found these hopes severely compromised by a lack of information related to their transition and also an inability of service providers to support their engagement in the process. While this project supports these points it goes on to indicate that this lack of preparedness during such a vulnerable time undoubtedly places the man (and ultimately the family) at considerable psychological and emotional risk. It seems odd that there is little or no policy development in the area of promoting men's engagement at early stages of family development. This situation becomes extremely worrying when one considers the increasing amount of evidence pointing to the inadequacies of service delivery in the area of supporting and promoting men's engagement in family development.

The studies detailed in the earlier section on 'theoretical underpinnings' consistently found the parental relationship to be stressed following the

birth of children, particularly the birth of their first child. What this current study adds is that the men's perception of the degree of relationship stress following the birth of the child is that the stress is significant. While both the men and women talked of stress in the parental relationship at this time it was the men who talked of being confused, frustrated and lost. While not all the men described their experience in this way, the degree of concern that was expressed was marked. This situation again appears directly related to a lack of information for men and also for couples about the changing relationship and about the stress that will be experienced. As with the comment in the previous paragraph, this lack of preparedness during such a vulnerable time undoubtedly places the parental relationship at considerable risk.

Transition theory talks of the necessity for people to be aware of and engaged in this process (of transition). The theory describes examples of engagement as "seeking out information, using role models and actively preparing [for the process]" (Meleis et al, 2000, p19). Meleis et al also suggest that transition involves the person having to redefine their own sense of self. The men in this project generally described a situation of minimal engagement with the process, travelling a confused and uncertain path to fatherhood. More importantly, the contradictions the men experienced in their expectations prior to and following the birth of their child were marked, again placing them in a compromised and vulnerable situation.

Using groups as the primary method of data collection uncovered some interesting points. Firstly for most if not all of the men this project was the first opportunity for them to engage in discussion about their transition to fatherhood. In both men's groups they relished this opportunity. They shared stories, posed questions, debated and argued. Contrary to the popular stereotypes of the isolated and distant male these men engaged in discussion

RECOMMENDATIONS

with energy and enthusiasm. Secondly, having the participants 'rank' the summarised points by the use of tokens provided an interesting and unexpected finding. This was that the time taken in discussing a particular point wasn't necessarily reflected in the ranking that that point received. For example, while the lack of sexual intimacy was discussed in the men's group it received no ranking as being important. That is, no tokens were attached to this point summarised on the newsprint. The men ranked stressed relationships as being of high importance with the stress being influenced by a range of variables. Further while the theme of 'joy of fatherhood' was discussed late and relatively briefly in both men's groups, it received the highest number of tokens of all points. It can only be concluded that the intensity and amount of discussion doesn't necessarily reflect what is considered important overall by group members.

The data provided by the women initially appeared to be considerably broader in focus than that of the men. Indeed it appeared so detailed that the first attempt at writing this report resulted in succumbing to the temptation to organise the data around the women's perspective. When a deliberate attempt was made to place the data from the men's groups as central to the aims of this project a different perspective emerged. Further, the data ranked as important by the women (but not by the men) tends to reflect commonly held views about how men respond to fatherhood. For example, issues with sexual abstinence, worries about finance and concerns about the gender and attachment with the child. This raises questions about discourse that is dominant, where it originates and whose interests it reflects.

Overall it is evident that a positive transition to fatherhood by men is compromised by a number of factors, What is also evident is that despite these factors the men remain committed to a vision of the joy of fatherhood.

This is a small study and therefore the findings are limited in their ability to be generalised to a wider group. However, the researchers believe the findings have a credibility and authenticity that deserves respect. Bearing this in mind it is recommended that in regard to men's transition to fatherhood:

- o further research of a similar nature is undertaken with a larger group of participants representing a wider range of social backgrounds. This research should involve quantitative as well as qualitative data.
- o there is a commitment by services that support developing families to develop educational processes and tools, focussing on parenthood, that reflect the needs and experiences of men.
- o that these support services acknowledge, prepare and support couples through the changes in the parental relationship.
- o approaches to education and support must include the opportunity for men to get together and talk. Facilitation must be by people experienced in supporting men.
- o Agencies that fund and/or audit services that support developing families develop policy that ensures these services provide evidence that men are being included in service provision.

We acknowledge that the movement of male dominated organisations to better meeting the needs of women as employees and as clients has been long and difficult. We expect that service providers that support developing families will experience similar difficulties and delays in better including men. We believe that the findings from this and previous projects will provide some insights that will assist in this endeavour.



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