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Exploring fathers' experience of their first child's early years: Representations versus reality

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Abstract: This qualitative study explored fathers' lived experience and meanings of being a first-time father in the United Kingdom. Seven fathers were interviewed, and the resulting data were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Two main categories emerged from the analysis: The first captures how fathers' experiences developed over time concerning: i. how becoming a father was a "natural way of being"; ii. how they were confronted with the differences between reality and their expectations; iii. how they described traditional fatherhood and the compulsory equality in parenting; and iv. about their willingness to be involved as a modern father. The second master theme describes the challenges faced by fathers including how fathers: i. cope with tiredness; ii. have undesirable feelings, including fear, worry and uncertainty; iii. lack acknowledgement and feel some resultant shame; and iv. experience guilt when they were not physically present for their children. This research discusses the impact of both their understandings (including representations) of fatherhood and how fatherhood is subjectively experienced. It is recommended that therapists attend to these changing experiences in order to offer appropriate psychotherapeutic approaches and tools to fathers.

Keywords: Fatherhood, IPA, lived experience, parenting, representations

In today's society in the United Kingdom, it seems that many fathers play different and more active roles in childrearing, in comparison with their own fathers (Parker & Wang, 2013). These current roles and experiences remain under-researched, and this has implications for fathers' mental wellbeing.

I have noted a substantial rise in men presenting in my psychotherapy practice with concerns about their fatherhood role. Fathers in my clinical experience seem to be demonstrating high levels of anxiety regarding the mental and physical demands of fatherhood and concerns for the well-being of their children. In addition, there seems to be a lack of information and acknowledgement of how the demands of fathers have changed over the last decades and how they seem to be struggling, holding guilt or not feeling understood. It seems reasonable to assume that psychotherapists who

work with fathers would benefit from literature that validates and explains their psychological challenges.

The importance of early recognition and intervention of poor mental well-being for women during pregnancy and up until their first year postpartum has been recognised (Marchesi et al., 2016). However, while there has been a great deal of research on the mother's emotions, the consequences of fatherhood have received less attention in the literature. Palkovitz (2002) described the importance of fathers' development and wellbeing while Paulson and Bazemore (2010) found 8-16% of men report postpartum depression. Research also reveals that some men experience increased depression during their partners' pregnancies and that fathers' depression during pregnancy and after the child's birth can adversely affect both the mother and child (Junge et al., 2016). Significant correlates of fathers' postpartum depression include negative emotions, financial concerns, balancing work-life demands, low education levels, and marital problems (Kumar et al., 2018).

Men who start a family today are expected to create their own role as a father and find a balance between their job, childcare, housework and hobbies on an equal footing with women (Solberg & Glavin, 2018). The empowerment of women has been significantly supported and developed. In England, around 133,000 mothers with toddlers as their youngest child were employed in 2017 (65.1%) compared to 55.8% in 1997 (Labour Force Survey, 2017).

Several studies (McNeill, 2004; Bridges, 2018; Rafferty et al., 2020) have researched the psychological impact on fathers following a child diagnosed with a chronic condition or when an unforeseen event happens (Lindberg & Engstrom, 2013; Lizcano et al., 2013). Predictors of fulfilling fatherhood, especially in different fatherhood contexts, are still relatively unknown. Nevertheless, the father's active involvement in child-rearing is nowadays taken for granted in many societies (Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). There appears to be a lack of UK studies of fathers in general, especially during their offspring's early childhood; therefore, this study acts as a pilot exploring the lived experiences of fathers.

My positioning as a researcher

My fascination with fathers' experiences throughout the early childhood of their children relates significantly with my personal experience. There is a gap of 15 years between my siblings and myself, and I consider my father was a different parent with me as opposed to them. He was physically and emotionally available to me, while my siblings describe a paternal figure as a financial provider more than a present figure.

I have seen my daughters' father enabling and empowering me as a woman, allowing me to develop my professional career. I have also experienced his struggle and the difference between his own fathering role to that of his childhood paternal figure.

The fact that I am a woman is also significant, and I have considered this throughout the whole research process. Lefkowich (2019) identified that researchers could use reflexive practice and field journaling to understand better how gender norms and uneven power dynamics are introduced to, co-constructed within, and generated from qualitative studies. These reflections and concerted efforts to confront broader social injustices embedded in research practices are necessary for researchers to produce valuable data and promote reciprocal research benefits. Without such efforts, researchers may reinforce the same structures of power and stereotypical gender norms that they aim to disrupt in their scholarship.

By acknowledging this and keeping it in mind throughout, I have tried to minimise the effect it might have had. By constantly trying to keep my mind open, allowing my analysis to be driven by the data and by having these analyses audited by my academic supervisor and consultant supervisor, I have strived to ensure that my interpretations of the data are not unduly coloured by any inclinations I might have to make the data fit my own perspective.

Literature Review

The fatherhood construct

Finding a singular definition of fatherhood that is broad and personal is out of reach. We all have our own experience of having fathers, being fathers or living with fathers. Thus, our implicit theoretical conceptions of fatherhood are shaped by personal experiences. Many researchers highlight the lack of attention writers have paid to the role of fathers in research (O'Brian, 2004; Pollock et al., 2002; Reeves, 2006).

Fathers' participation during the upbringing of their children has significantly increased during the last decades. This is explained by Solberg and Glavin (2018), who remarked that growth in the father's positive engagement depends on a sense of mastery, meaningfulness, control, and manageability concerning his child, his partner, and his new everyday life.

Impact of women in the workforce

Relations between women's and men's employment patterns and their family roles are increasingly being recognised.

Various issues concerning the links between the worlds of work and family are considered to illustrate the impact of shifts in work patterns on both men's and women's family roles (Coltrane & Adams, 2008).

Since the mid-1960s, there has been a significant increase in women's participation rate in the labour force. The Bureau of Labour Statistics (2017) identified that between 1960 and 2016, the employment rate for mothers with children under age 6 increased dramatically from about 20% to 65%. It is even higher among mothers of children aged between 6 and 17 (75%).

Maternal employment is a significant influence on paternal involvement, which has increased considerably over the last half-century (Pleck, 2010). Bianchi (2009) also identified that working women decrease their time devoted to housework, but they still spend time on childcare, especially in children under six. Additionally, women who do not work outside the home continue to share childcare significantly with their husbands (Coltrane & Adams, 2008).

Demands and Expectations

The role of the father in a child's life reflects the society at the time, including the provision of policies and practices to enable men to take active roles in their child's early lives. 'Good fathering' is no longer defined by a man's ability to protect, provide, and implement discipline within the family (Dunlop & Mletzko, 2011; Fischer & Anderson, 2012). Instead, contemporary Western fathering is increasingly fair, with men more actively involved in domestic and infant care responsibilities. Those men who have assumed a more significant share of roles traditionally filled by women will experience challenges to traditional sources of male self-esteem, potentially heightening the risk for depressive disorders among men (Dunlop & Mletzko, 2011).

What once seemed a natural pattern of a parenting model in which fathers were viewed as "helpers" to mothers is now yielding new cultural ideas, such as "co-parenting" (Pleck, 1997). This author also described how changes in the responsibilities of men and women are creating a new set of expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about what men and women should do in the family context. The ideal of co-parent represents a significant shift as it obliterates a "gender division of labour in domestic and breadwinning responsibilities" (Pleck, 1997, p. 48).

In summary, there seems to be a lack of UK studies of fathers in general, especially during their offspring's early childhood. One of the main objectives of this research is to identify and acknowledge the fathers' psychological challenges. In addition,

this research aims to expand knowledge and awareness to offer supportive psychotherapeutic tools to fathers.

With the above in mind, my research aimed to answer the question: What do fathers think about their experience of being a first-time father of a child during early childhood?

Methodology

This exploratory investigation collected data that describes a gap in existing knowledge about the phenomenon being examined. I intended to explore the under-researched area of first-time fathers' experiences in greater depth by attempting to collect information that describes how things are instead of explaining or evaluating information (Denscombe, 2010).

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The aim of the study was to explore the phenomenology of how fathers made sense of their children's early years. The methodological approach of this study was based on Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2009). IPA aims to uncover how participants perceive their lived world experiences concerning the phenomenon under investigation by standing in their shoes (insofar as this is feasible) and attempting to make meaning of their experience through the interpretative process. It involves an attempt to understand the question: "what is it like?" (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Phenomenology is congruent with my ontological position; this research method grapples with meanings of lived experience as it is lived; philosophical perspective and in-depth qualitative analysis are some phrases that emerge when discussing phenomenological research (Dowling, 2007). I aimed to capture the experience of fathers through a descriptive, rich, and detailed account of how fathers make meaning of the world around them. This makes my position lean towards experiential epistemology, in which knowledge means experience through a natural description and interpretation of phenomena constructed through language and dialogue; it delves into people's experiences and clarifies the grounds of knowledge (Heron, 1988). Therefore, the data collected during the interviews is a co-construction between researcher and participant which allowed me as a researcher to understand the dialogue and gain the meaning of the text at different levels, which is also termed a hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009).

The concept of the hermeneutic circle is central when considering IPA, as it helps a researcher think of the levels of

interpretation that need to be conducted. The hermeneutic circle suggests that: "to understand any given part, you look to the whole; to understand the whole, you look to the parts" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 28).

I have arrived at IPA as my chosen method, as it has at its core a concern with how people make sense of significant life experiences. I value its *idiographic* potential where individuals' experience can be received as detailed, deep analysis (Smith et al., 2009). I focused on the relational aspect of the experience, looking for similarities and differences in how these may diverge or converge across my participants. My personal experience while using IPA, with its grounding in phenomenology, hermeneutics, and ideography, allowed me to capture a sense of these essential elements of experience resulting in a rich and detailed exploration of fathers during the early childhood of their firstborn.

Research design

In IPA, the researcher aims to immerse themselves in the data to try and consider the interviewees' perspectives. The objective of this method is to provide evidence of the participants' meaning of the phenomena as well as recording the researcher's meaning-making process (Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014).

Phenomenology, and IPA specifically, makes use of purposive homogeneous sampling using small numbers of participants selected for their capacity to illuminate the research question (Smith & Osborn, 2003; McLeod, 2003). In line with my methodology, I attempted to adopt a phenomenological attitude (Smith et al., 2009) characterised by displaying openness, active attention, restraining pre-understanding and taken-for-granted assumptions (Finlay, 2008).

Data collection

The data were gathered through semi-structured interviews; the questions consisted of two parts. The participants were first asked: "What motivated you to be part of this research?" and "What is it like to be a father?" Then more specific questions were engaged such as: "Why did you decide to become a father?"; "What did you expect father's life to be like?" and "What has changed since you became a father?" After the interview, they were invited to add further relevant information.

Participants characteristics

Seven participants shared the experience of being the father of a child between 1 and 6 years old.

Inclusion criteria
- > 18 years old.
- Fluent in the English language.
- Residents of the United Kingdom.
- Have a child between the age of 1 and 5 years old.

Exclusion criteria
- Previously diagnosed with any mental or physical health condition.
- Fathers of foster children and stepchildren.

An initial telephone interview of approximately ten minutes was made to assess the participant's suitability.

Demographic details are offered in Table 1. Participants' ages ranged from 32 to 41 years, with a mean age of 34.1. All participants were professionals and two with master's degrees. All were working full-time and living with the mother of the child. Six were married, and one was living in partnership.

Participant	Pseudonym	Age	Education Level	Occupation	Relationship Status
FATHERP1	Mateo	34	Bachelor	Auditor	Married
FATHERP2	Edward	33	Bachelor	Teacher	Married
FATHERP3	Bill	34	Bachelor	Manager	Married
FATHERP4	Andres	41	Masters	Teacher	Married
FATHERP5	Anthony	33	Bachelor	Engineer	Married
FATHERP6	Fred	32	Bachelor	Contract Manager	Living partner
FATHERP7	Jacob	32	Masters	Financial advisor	Married

Table 1: Participants - Selected Demographics

Table 2 details their ethnicity and other social aspects which was more varied: Four of them were white British, one was British/Asian, one was Spanish and one was Venezuelan. Although English was the second language for FATHER1 and FATHER4, they were fluent English speakers. The declared religion was also varied, three being Catholic, one agnostic and one Church of England. The fact that most interviews were online was an advantage to having participants from diverse locations. Lastly, the children were aged between one and four years old, with a mean age of two and a half; four were girls, and three were boys.

Participant	Ethnicity	Religiosity	Location	Child gender	Child age
FATHERP1	Spanish	Catholic	Horley	Female	1 year old
FATHERP2	White British	None	Newcastle	Male	2 years old
FATHERP3	White British	Agnostic	Kent	Male	2 years old
FATHERP4	Venezuelan	Catholic	Purley	Female	3 years old
FATHERP5	White British	Church of England	Horsham	Female	4 years old
FATHERP6	White British	None	Horley	Female	2 years old
FATHERP7	British/Asian	Catholic	London	Male	4 years old

Table 2: Participants - Selected Demographics re: Culture

Data Analysis

My analysis was done in a hybrid way, combining manual analysis and using the *NVivo* (version 12) software. The whole process was well documented and supervised by my academic supervisor and consultant supervisor to ensure greater rigour and quality.

The analysis took place once all interviews were conducted and transcribed. Analysis was comprehensively and systematically conducted on each interview by first noting exploratory comments from descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual perspectives and breaking down the text by reading paragraphs backwards and out of sequence. Once this process was exhausted, emergent themes were sought, thereby observing one manifestation of the hermeneutic circle (Smith et al., 2009).

To enable themes to emerge that best reflected the participants' experience, each transcript was analysed separately, following the Smith et al. (2009) six-stage approach, as detailed in Figure 1.

1. Reading and listening to the interviews

2. Initial noting (descriptive, linguistic, conceptual and reflexive comments)

3. Developing emergent themes

4. Searching for connections across emergent themes

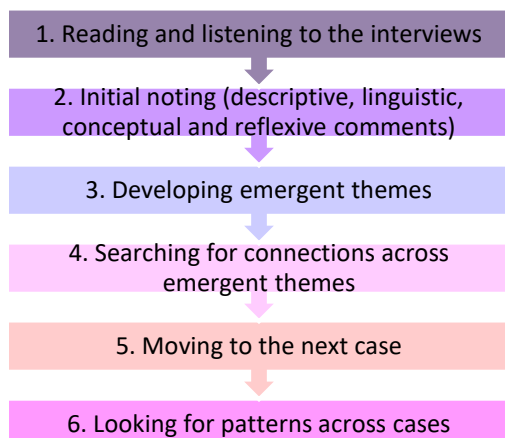5. Moving to the next case

6. Looking for patterns across cases

Figure 1: Data Analysis Six-Stage Process

Once all the interviews were coded, five themes and 59 subthemes were identified. The data transcripts and *NVivo* provided a concrete base to undertake the iterative, recursive, non-linear and creative interpretations that characterise and are essential components of inductive analysis (Mason, 2002). However, to gain a fuller embodied sensibility (characteristic of phenomenology), I felt the process needed to be engaged manually to move fluidly through the data. This more satisfying process allowed me to end up with four themes and 18 sub-themes, as evidence in the table 3 below:

Themes	Sub-themes
Development of contemporary fatherhood	Father as a natural way of being
	Expectation vs reality
	Traditional fatherhood
	Equality in parenting and involvement as a modern father
Fatherhood challenges	Coping with tiredness
	Undesirable feelings. "Fear, worry and uncertainty"
	Struggling in fatherhood
	Lack of acknowledgement
	Guilt when physically absent
Meaning in life	Identity as a father
	Fatherhood happiness
	Child as a priority
	Relationship changes
Father in action	Father as a teaching role
	Parental responsibility
	Role of the father in the discipline
	Father as an emotional support
	Active role of a dad through physical contact

Table 3: Results of Master Themes and Sub-themes

Space does not permit adequate exploration of all these themes, so I have chosen to selectively discuss the first two themes: *Development of Contemporary Fatherhood* and *Fatherhood Challenges* themes.

Ethical considerations

I particularly paid attention to ethical principles relating to duty of care, informed consent, and confidentiality throughout the research process including using pseudonyms to ensure

anonymity. Furthermore, I am registered with the Information Commissioners Office ICO and comply with the Data Protection Act and the GDPR. As a Psychologist, I also comply with ethical guidelines for research of the British Psychological Society (BPS) and the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC). In addition, this study was passed by the Ethics Committee at Metanoia Institute and Middlesex University.

Results

The themes and their subthemes are explored within a narrative thematic structure, with evidence to support the themes from the interviews' verbatim transcripts.

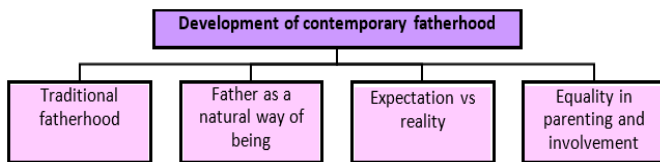## Development of contemporary fatherhood

Figure 2 Theme: Development of Contemporary Fatherhood and Sub-themes

This first master theme captures how fathers' experiences of contemporary fatherhood developed over time concerning: i. how becoming a father was a "natural way of being"; ii. how they were confronted with the differences between reality and their expectations; iii. how they described traditional fatherhood and the compulsory equality in parenting; and iv. about their willingness to be involved as a modern father.

Traditional fatherhood "the relaxed and fun guy"

This sub-theme reveals participants' sense of the traditional role of their fathers. They report how their role as a father significantly differs from their fathers' position, describing their father as passive, where the mother actively takes control of the child's caring.

> "I think maybe in the past it was more accepted that the mum is the one that is going to be taking care of the kid and maybe the dad is more like relaxed about it." (Jacob)

Jacob is noting his sense of how, in the past, mothers did the care while fathers were not expected to have an active role in caring for their offspring.

A difference in the way children were disciplined in the past is evident. Participants describe how their mother actively executed this role, besides a lack of consistency and guilt by

their fathers if a correction was in place, as evidenced in Anthony's interview:

> "Ehh you know, and if for some reason he had to tell me off he would just send me to my room, and then I would hear him creeping up the stairs and he would apologise." (Anthony)

Participants express a sense of guilt when setting boundaries or rules for their children. This is evident when Edward describes his own father as: "fun and relaxed", but when he was asked to describe himself, he said: "not being as good as my father, because I need to be strict."

During the interviews, Fred explains how he "idealised" his father and describes how easy it is to create that relationship when you never told anyone off. This took him to a level of consciousness about the importance of putting things into perspective and considering generational changes and confrontation on the significance of disciplining his child and reducing guilt around it.

Furthermore, most fathers show understanding of how their parents behaved when they were younger, acknowledging that there was no expectation of having an active role in their upbringing, as fathers used to be more focused on their work. As expressed by Mateo:

> "From my dad, we didn't expect anything, he was going to work, and that was it." (Mateo)

Nevertheless, resentment towards his dad being absent during his upbringing, is present in Andres:

> "He wasn't a very good father actually, not a good father at all because he … was totally absorbed in his work and he neglected all of us."

Father as a natural way of being

This sub-theme describes how men experience their transition to fatherhood as a natural evolution of their manhood. Most fathers indicate that the desire to become parents was always present, "I always wanted to be a dad" (Mateo) "I never conceived my life without children" (Fred). It seems that regardless of other aspects of his life, his desire to procreate felt like a way of developing:

> "I think it's a very natural thing I've always wanted children... I would say it's, was a natural expectation I've always had and a desire to sort of develop and mould someone as I would like to." (Edward)

The phrase "mould someone as I would like to" seems to imply a belief that he can have influence over his child and his willingness to shape him in a particular way.

Similarly, the expectation of having a child seems natural as part of the relationship consolidation. Many participants link the desire to become a father with choosing the correct partner, as mentioned by Edward: "I married her thinking that she really wanted children, I probably wouldn't have married someone who didn't want children". Furthermore, it was seen as an expectation of the marriage stages as described by Andres:

> "I think it's part and parcel of marriage you know, so when you get married and when you are before the priest and you go down the aisle you say to the person you are going to give everything to the other person. There is nothing of you that you are not going to give. And you give them everything including your fatherhood." (Andres)

In this quote, Andres shows his willingness to become a father and his belief that having children is a natural expectation of marriage.

Expectation vs reality

The second sub-theme that is evident throughout the transcripts is the contradiction between what participants expect of fatherhood and the reality of the role. This might be linked with the previous subordinate theme of the natural shift where the willingness to have a child, and it being "natural" have impact on considering the implications of fatherhood.

This is evidenced by Bill when he was asked why he decided to become a father:

> "I guess I just always wanted to have a family and be a father …. To … have a next generation to some extent I guess oh gosh it's such a difficult question. I never really gave it that much thought."

It can also be seen as a sense of doubt, confusion and difficulty with answering the question, which led to an unanticipated amount of work, changes and responsibilities. Mateo also mentioned:

> "You don't know what to expect, but probably you don't expect to be this intense."

The comparison on social networking sites seems to create unrealistic expectations of fathers leading them to believe that fatherhood is just about the connection of those happy moments, rather than the constant demand and attention that a child requires:

> "I get quite a lot of comments from friends as well, when they see us in pictures, which is very fake as you know, it's very easy to see Instagram, it looks all so easy."

The focus on enjoying and playing with their children seems more prevalent than fatherhood's challenges and responsibilities. When participants speak about their expectations of being a father, it is apparent a limited reflection around the responsibility (day-to-day caring obligations) were not considered. The reality left the fathers with a sense of shock and frustration:

> "Looking back on it I wasn't expecting it to be almost what you see in the movies. Like you play with your children, and that's it. There is no … no all the other stuff, just 2 minutes of a movie scene, of them playing together and having fun. So that was my expectancy … obviously I didn't know. I didn't know that it was … constant caring and yeah teaching and showing, mouth feeding and all of that."

There is only one father who has more realistic expectations, and he is noticeably aware and relaxed about the challenges that becoming a progenitor carries:

> "When having my daughter, I knew that this would probably be one of the hardest things." (Fred)

Equality in parenting and involvement as a modern father

All the men interviewed spoke about experiencing equality in how they are parenting nowadays, not only as an expectation but as a willingness to have an active role in the children's upbringing. Mateo has clearly acknowledged this in the following quote:
> "It's expected that mum and dad are both responsible and they need to look after the baby on equal foot".

The phrase "on equal foot" reinforces his meaning and expectation to be at the same level as the mother and bring up the child together. Similarly, another exciting development on fatherhood has been acknowledging different roles of themselves as a team and as a person, considering and appreciating individual time, jobs or leisure:

> "For my wife and I, rather than always having to be a team on it perhaps we could look after our son on our own once in a while to give the other person a bit of time with their friends or family or whatever on our own if that works". (Bill)

"You are working, your wife is working, how is it fair that she does more than you. I think yeah realistically that role has changed". (Jacob)

When participants speak about equality in parenting, they remark on the importance of being involved and providing physical and emotional security. They described a willingness to be there for emotional support, and they experienced a sense of satisfaction and meaning in their active role as a father:

"I am trying to install it in her now that if she has something she needs to talk about she can come to daddy or mummy. So yeah. Whereas when I was younger, I would always go with problems to mum". (Fred)

"Our scenario it's 50/50 shared. So if she is ill, she knows we are both there, she can choose to who to come, I'm busy and my wife is free, my wife is busy then I'm free, it is like that. In that sense it is … a bit more shared between us". (Jacob)

Participants experience a willingness to be involved in their children's upbringing; they also describe pleasure in their active role as a father, which develops a sense of belonging in the family. This is present for Mateo when he experiences a switch in the way he used to enjoy himself. As a father, he connects more with his family's gratification than the activity per se.

"I have also learned to enjoy things that before I didn't even think about. For me, enjoying going to the movies or for a drink, now I get excited to go to the park or to the zoo because we are going as a family". (Mateo)

Fatherhood challenges

The second master theme describes the challenges faced by fathers, including how fathers: i. cope with tiredness; ii. have undesirable feelings, including fear, worry and uncertainty; iii. lack acknowledgement and feel some resultant shame; and iv. experience guilt when they were not physically present for their children.
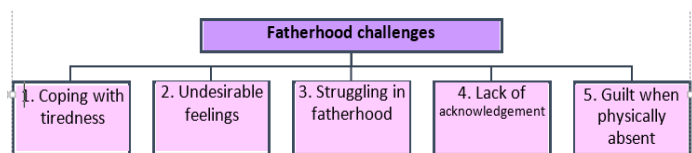

Figure 3: Master Theme: Fatherhood Challenges and Sub-themes

Coping with tiredness

This sub-theme theme represents fathers' experiences of tiredness. Lack of sleep and constant demands of the children led to a feeling of exhaustion; this is explained in diverse forms by many of the participants.

"It's tiring as well, I am not going to lie, it's tiring, …, because for example there are many days when my daughter wakes up at 4:30 AM." (Mateo)

In this quote from Mateo, his "I am not going to lie", could imply that he feels the need to hide or cover the way he was feeling regarding his expected tiredness, which is associated with his lack of sleep. This could also be linked to the lack of fathers' expectancy about having an active role and, therefore, not experiencing tiredness.

Furthermore, even before they were a parent, these men were trying to be empathetic to their peers. It seemed unexpected for some participants to feel these levels of exhaustion, as expressed by Edward:

"I think understanding of you know, families and people who are parents, ehh and how tough it can be, I remember when colleagues that were parents, were telling me that they were tired, I was like, yeah, but now I know it's pretty extreme."
On the other hand, Andres identifies the lack of sleep as the most difficult, above other challenges that may arise as a parent:

"I do think that there have been really difficult times you know mainly when there is a lack of sleep."

Another relevant aspect of tiredness was how participants experience that when they were feeling tired, this could have a negative impact on their day-to-day activities:
"Some days you feel like, I am tired, or things are not good in general." (Mateo)

Participants show tiredness when being asked by their child to engage in repetitive activities:

"So tiring and I think mum … my wife is much better at that, having that patience, she has so good patience to do endless role play with my daughter. But for me it's really hard to do like endless role play, I'd rather build a tower." (Andres)

This quote also implies that Andres feels forced to do what his child is asking him to do when he would prefer to engage with her in a different activity that he could enjoy more.

Undesirable feelings "fear, worry and uncertainty"

Participants report protecting their children as natural and innate. However, with this a feeling of fear may arise, especially around child safety, as Mateo explained: "And I guess that maybe, the fear that you have that something bad can happen to her". This fear is also seen as transferable to other life experiences where children were involved:

> "So, yeah, I guess that part of me sort of being more considered but also I cannot watch any film with a child getting hurt." (Fred)

Participants describe feelings of anxiety regarding the responsibility that carries the upbringing of their children, especially the impact that, as parents, they have on their future lives, as mentioned:

> "…the fear that you can't influence them for good to guide them in a good direction". (Andres)

This same participant experiences fear around the influence that society could have on his child and the lack of control over this impact.

> "…the fear of other people influencing them or the state and the state has no right to kind of you know … have that role." (Andres)

Participants report difficulties dealing with the uncertainty around the well-being of their children, mostly when they were at an age where they could not openly express their pain or discomfort:

> "In this case I was also worried of course, because I didn't know what was wrong, it could be that she had some pain or something like was making her feeling unwell, so we were worried that if she just had a sore throat or if it's something else." (Mateo)

On the other hand, when Bill was asked if he would give any advice to himself before becoming a father, he commented: "I think the other bit of advice I would give myself is not to worry so much". This implies that there was a cost involved. The energy used in worrying, could have been invested in more meaningful tasks.

Struggling in fatherhood

This theme captures the father's struggle and the feelings that parenting triggers. Some participants acknowledge the frustration occurring when an unexpected situation arises.

Also, they experience difficulties with emotional self-control and shame feelings.

> "It's just that I'm not being in control of my emotions, not like I've done anything, actually I think I have been incredibly patient but just that feeling of frustration like I don't want to feel that, I understand that it's completely natural, it's like if he is in the middle of the street and he pooped his pants for the third time that day it's pretty frustrating, I don't know I just feel like I shouldn't be getting so wound up but it's just really hard not to." (Edward)

In addition, few participants show acceptance of the challenges around the decision to have a child:

> "Everyone was saying, and it is correct, that it is one of the hardest   things you will ever do. … there was a programme on the other day and they said, particular parents and the way they were parenting, that if you wanted an easy life, you should have got a hamster." (Fred)

This participant uses this example to illustrate the acceptance of difficulty and the responsibility of being a father. This acceptance was also seen in Jacob's statement:

> "I think it's a lack of having a life maybe and I think it's the … sacrifices that you have to make…I think everyone has to make some kind of sacrifice for children, right?".

In this quote, however, there is a sense of initially being defeated, followed by the acceptance of his decision to have a child with the effort that goes with it.

On the other hand, instead of acceptance, some participants show some shame of the struggle, as seen in Mateo's doubt when he was asked about the difficulties as a father:

> "Uhhmm (long pause). I don't think there are many bad things, but ehhh I would say, ehhh, maybe, I don't know, it's really difficult at times." (Mateo)

In other fathers, a sense of polarised emotions can be seen, from acknowledging the struggle to appreciating the positives of having a child and the fulfilment that brings to their life:

> "So yeah, on the one hand it is absolutely amazing from an emotional perspective and having a child is like nothing else like it but ehmmm on the other hand it's kind of like yeah it's also one of the most stressful things you could ever do." (Fred)

Lack of acknowledgement

All participants describe situations that provoke feelings from not being acknowledged for their fatherhood role by society, partners or even their child.

> "I think the society that we live in the role of the father is probably under the plate, isn't it?" (Andres)

His expression of "under the plate" can imply a sense of his role as a father being unnoticed; he seemed firm on this thought, to the point of seeking validation from the interviewer of his righteousness.

Some participants describe a sense of having to earn their children's love; they identify a difference with the mother's role. They experience a more natural way of developing a bond with the mother but feel that fathers must develop this bond continuously.

> "As a father you kind of always feels that you have to kind of win the approval a little bit, whereas with the mum it just happens so much more naturally, that's hard you know… that's hard to take a little bit, you try to kind of win your child over a bit and you gotta get use to lots of sacrifices." (Andres)

In this participant's case, there is a sense of struggle, especially around the continuing effort he seems to have to put into their bond and connection with his child. Mateo also recognises his different experiences in which his child needed emotional support and turned to her mother, which confuses, frustrates, and annoys him.

> "There was one day that my daughter was crying and asking for her mum and I was thinking…Why isn't what I can offer enough?"

Participants experience a lack of emotional care for the father by the health care professions:

> "If they are really interested in having a child ehhm it's kind of like: how do I feel in all of this? It is almost like: oh where is the father? Yeah so I kind of think it is dismissed. So yeah that is something I have definitely learned as a father, you are almost like a second right citizen in the aspect of the medical world then what a lot of people think. So the thing that could be changed would be that, you know, quite a lot of us do actually want to have children." (Fred)

In this quote, Fred seems to be expressing the frustration of not being acknowledged despite his willingness to belong in his child's life. This is evident when he mentioned: "like a second right citizen", which could be interpreted as experiencing a sense of discrimination in his fatherhood role, probably not only by his family but also by society in general.

Beside just the health care system, Fred also mentions having felt unnoticed by society:

> "A lot of people ask the question to the mother like: how are you doing? And that sort of thing but I do find that a lot of the time you don't get asked a lot of questions about how you are doing…I just feel at times like that person in a corner."

His expression, "that person in a corner" also emphasises his experience of being unnoticed by society when being in his role as a father.

Guilt when physically absent

The majority of the participants express guilt about not being sufficiently present in their children's lives. This was experienced when being absent from their children's daily routine and when they were not physically present for their wives:

> "I think guilty, I feel guilty giving so much to my work sometimes, so I am exhausted, or I am impatient when I get home...and you know, also quite often I have to work late because I had to run an event and then my wife is there on her own." (Jacob)

The guilt of not being physically present for their children was not only experienced when absent because of work; it was also present when having leisure time.

> Edward: "I think I feel the guilt of that, and then if I do want to do something for myself like play football or golf, I then also have the guilt that I am not with them, with my family. I usually feel guilt or tired." (Edward)

This quote from Edward suggests his frustration related to wanting to fulfil other roles in his life; it seems that the guilt when doing any other activity is always present if he is not acting in his fathering role. Andres also expresses something similar:

> "I think the thing I find so sad is that my job is somehow robbing me of my relationship because mum gets all the time with the daughter, she can build that important relationship but, in my case, because I have all this work I come home and still have all this work to do its its I feel this sense that I really want to I really want to spend some time with her and sometimes this is not possible. That's heart-breaking for a father".

The phrase "That's heart-breaking for a father" expresses his guilt and sadness when not actively present, which leaves him with a feeling that other areas of his life are taking over his willingness to have a more active role as a father.

Discussion

Fathers' experiences during their firstborn have been insufficiently acknowledged in the literature, despite the growing involvement of fathers during recent years. This research expands the pool of literature on fatherhood as fathers were able to have a "voice" and share their experiences.

Development of contemporary fatherhood

This first theme seems particularly figural highlighting how changes in the fatherhood role generated challenges, an increase in fathers' meaning in life, and an expectation and willingness to be active in their children's lives. These findings are elaborated below with respect to the literature.

Father as a "natural way of being"

Our research suggests that fathers experience their transition to fatherhood as a natural evolution of their manhood, seeing their desire to procreate as a way of progressing as human beings. This view is similarly reflected in contemporary approaches to fatherhood. The range of discourses around fatherhood outlined by Lupton and Barclay (1997) more than 20 years ago remain relevant to exploring the experience of fatherhood today. Here, fatherhood is seen as a logical step and as "natural" part of adult masculinity.

Knoester and Eggebeen (2006) indicated that men have naturally increased their involvement to include more caregiving and parenting activities; it seems reasonable therefore to suggest that this process will have a transformative effect on men.

Additionally, with regard to the expectation of having a child being a natural part of relationship consolidation with their spouse, there is a sense of giving themselves entirely as an individual to their wives. These findings are supported by Strier (2014) who found that in many western societies, there is increasingly a contemporary notion of a father who is both sensitive to, and actively involved in, the nurturing of his children within a relationship (with his children's mother). This nurturing is founded on expectations of more equal co-

parenting and acknowledges the cultural context in which his paternal role is accomplished.

Beyond the evolution of contemporary fathers, our research suggests that some fathers still showed a concern about financial stability and needing to plan for having a child. This could be seen in terms of providing a sense of security for the family. Doherty et al. (2006) similarly note there is an emphasis given to new fathers' economic provider role, and that there is a socially constructed consensus that fathers should have a specific concern about the financial security of their families. First, a modelling hypothesis comes from the social learning theory (Bandura, 1989) that suggests that men model themselves after their own fathers. This modelling process will be enhanced if their fathers are nurturing and accessible. Second, a compensatory or reworking hypothesis argues that fathers tend to compensate or make up for deficiencies in their childhood relationships with their fathers by being better and more involved when assuming this role (Roy & Smith, 2013).

Expectation vs reality

The contradiction between what participants expect of fatherhood and the reality of the role was present in this research in various ways:

- The comparisons made on social networking sites created an unreal expectation of fathers; this makes them believe that fatherhood was just about the connection of those "happy" moments, more than the constant demand and attention that a child requires. This finding fit with those of Stepanikova et al., (2010), who described how the direction of the relationship between internet use and psychological well-being might be positive or negative, depending on how internet use influences the social processes that contribute to mental health.

- The focus on enjoying and playing with their children seemed more prevalent than fatherhood's challenges and responsibilities. When participants spoke about their expectations of being a father, it was apparent that they did not consider the day-to-day caring obligations when they decided to have a child, leaving them with a sense of shock and frustration. This finding mirrors the explanation of Pleck (1997) who explain that changes in the responsibilities of men and women create a new set of expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about what men and women should do in the context of family. The ideal of being a co-parent represents a significant shift because it obliterates gender divisions of labour in domestic and breadwinning responsibilities.

Traditional fatherhood; "the relaxed and fun guy"

Our research identified how participants perceived their role as being significantly different from their own fathers' position (e.g., describing their father as passive and the mother actively in control of the child's caring). Silverstein et al. (2002) described this in their definition of a conventional father, being someone who maintains emotional distance from his children, focusing more on discipline than affection. Because a real man must avoid "sissy" stuff, and childcare has traditionally been defined as women's work, a traditional father limits his involvement in childcare. He might babysit if his wife has to be away, but he does not actively manage the children.

Most participants showed an understanding of how their parents behaved when they were younger, acknowledging that there had been no expectation of having an active role in their upbringing given the way their fathers were more focused on their work. Different levels of acceptance regarding fathers being absent from their upbringing were seen in this research. In most participants, the passive role of their father translated as a sense of acceptance and resignation of how things were in the past, as well as an appreciation of their mother's role. These findings give support to those of Knoester and Eggebeen (2006) who identified that in contemporary society men have naturally increased their involvement to include more caregiving and parenting activities.

Nevertheless, resentment towards his father being absent during his upbringing was present in one of the participants. This also fits with Knoester and Eggebeen's (2006) claims that fatherhood is not as appreciated as a transforming event in adults' lives as motherhood. Parenthood presents significant developmental challenges to adults and can lead to personal reorganisation and growth, openness to learning, new coping strategies, increased differentiation and integration, maturity, and a prime generative encounter (Palkovitz, 2002; Snarey, 1993; cited in Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006).

Another relevant aspect to emerge was a difference in the way children were disciplined in the past. It was perceived that mothers actively executed this role; participants also described their fathers' lack of consistency and guilt if a correction was in place. This finding is consistent with Silverstein et al. (2002) who described the traditional father as the "patriarchal" father, indicating a dominant power position in the family. There are many positive aspects to the rules of masculinity for the traditional father. They prescribe being a responsible provider, a disciplinarian who instils a sense of morality in his children, and a role model who is physically strong and remains calm in the face of danger.

This has led to an idealisation of the father role and a realisation of how easy it is to create that relationship when you never discipline anyone. Participants were nudged to a level of consciousness about the importance of putting things into perspective, considering generational changes, including the willingness to be part of the discipline of his children while acknowledging the guilt they can experience, which is mainly related to their experience of having had traditional fathers. These findings highlight how the fatherhood construct has changed and developed during the last two decades, showing greater demands and expectations of fathers' participation than before. "Good fathering" is no longer defined by a man's ability to protect, provide, and implement discipline within the family. Instead, discourses of contemporary western fathering seem increasingly egalitarian, with men more actively involved in domestic and infant care responsibilities (Dunlop & Mletzko, 2011; Fischer & Anderson, 2012).

Equality in parenting and involvement as a modern father

This sub-theme showed the importance for fathers to experience equality in the way they are parenting nowadays, not only as an expectation but as a willingness to have an active role in the children's upbringing. In other words, the father seeks to be at the same level as the mother with them bringing up the child together. These findings highlight how changes in the responsibilities of men and women are creating a new set of expectations, beliefs, and attitudes about what men and women should do in the family context. The ideal of co-parent represents a significant shift as it obliterates a "gender division of labour in domestic and breadwinning responsibilities" (Pleck, 1997, p. 48)

Another exciting development in fatherhood discourse and experience has been the acknowledgement of their different roles in a team and as a person, considering and appreciating individual time, jobs, or leisure. When participants spoke about equality in parenting, they remarked on the importance of being involved and providing physical and emotional security. They described a willingness to be there as emotional support, and that they experienced a sense of satisfaction and meaning in their active role as a father in that way. The feeling of being available to their children connected them to provide in an integral way to the children altogether. The finding supports those of Hudson et al. (2001), who found that the changes in paternal involvement positively impact men, as paternal engagement is strongly associated with greater parenting satisfaction and the partnered relationship for mothers and fathers alike.

Besides the willingness experienced by the fathers of this study to be involved in their children's upbringing, they also described pleasure in their active role as a father, which developed a sense of belonging in the family. Previous research validates this, describing that fathers often spend time with their children through active, physical involvement,

and these experiences can promote opportunities for emotional connections (Coyl-Shepherd & Newland, 2013).

Fatherhood challenges

The findings highlight how fathers found coping with their tiredness challenging which led to associated undesirable feelings, including fear, worry, and uncertainty. Here, it seems that fathers experienced being insufficiently acknowledged and the shame that results from that. Participants also experienced guilt when they were not physically present for their children.

Several pieces of research have described how fatherhood demands can cause mental health disorders. A recent systematic review reported that the prevalence rates for anxiety disorder in men ranged between 4.1 and 16.0 % during their partners' pregnancy, and between 2.4 and 18.0 % during the postnatal period (Leach et al., 2016). Prevalence rates of antenatal and postnatal depression in fathers in a systematic review of 20 studies ranged from 1.2 to 25.5 % (Goodman, 2004).

Coping with tiredness

Fathers experience tiredness, manifesting in different ways, due to the lack of sleep and the constant demands of children leading to a feeling of exhaustion. Additionally, fathers experienced shame and the necessity to hide or cover their feelings regarding their expected tiredness, which was associated with their lack of sleep. This could be linked to the lack of fathers' expectancy about having an active role and therefore, not experiencing tiredness. This finding was also evident in Stingley and Edwards (2015) research who found that adjusting to parenthood can be a tumultuous time in the lives of some men, fraught with the increased stress of caring for a newborn, decreased sleep, and role strain and gender role conflict.

It was apparent that tiredness impacted their day-to-day activities, significantly affecting their concentration at work. Sleep is considered important to body restitution, like energy conservation, thermoregulation, and tissue recovery and is essential for cognitive performance, especially memory consolidation (Maquet, 2001; Stickgold, 2005).

Undesirable feelings (fear, worry and uncertainty)

Participants reported protecting their children as natural and innate. They experienced fear around child safety as well as around the responsibility of guiding their children's future, including the positive or negative influence that, as a parent,

they could have over them. Chin et al.'s (2011) research similarly found that, as with mothers, fathers can be overwhelmed and experience an array of emotions - confusion, love, a sense of great responsibility, uncertainty, and frustration - as they manage their new role's demands and expectations (Chin et al., 2011).

Participants also feared the influence that schools and other entities could have on their children, which could also be seen as a sense of realisation not to have absolute control over their children's upbringing and how society has a bearing on it. These findings are similarly highlighted in Mollborn and Lawrence (2018) who identified that healthy lifestyles are multidimensional and dynamic, and children demonstrate distinct combinations of risks and protections. Family factors, such as resources and parenting, shape earlier health lifestyles, which influence later lifestyles. Results show that development and contexts drive changes in healthy lifestyles, as the role of family-related risk and protective actors decrease with age while some school and peer influences emerge.

Additionally, participants reported difficulties dealing with the uncertainty around the well-being of their children, mostly when they were at an age where they could not openly express their pain or discomfort. On the other hand, when one participant was asked if he could give himself advice before becoming a father, he noted that he would want to not worry so much. Such worry becomes a cost where time spent could be invested in more meaningful tasks. Baldwin et al. (2019) similarly noted the presence of parenting-related negative thoughts indicating that some degree of postnatal negative thoughts may be functional and representative of a non-clinical parenting transition. For example, parenting concerns such as fear for an infant's safety or worries about understanding infant communication may encourage parents to be more diligent and attentive to meeting and understanding their needs, positively influencing parenting confidence and behaviours.

Struggling in fatherhood

All the participants were aware of their struggles, particularly when an unexpected situation arose which led to difficulties around emotional self-control, triggering a necessity to justify the struggle and feel ashamed by it. This finding supports the argument of Strauss and Goldberg (1999) who explored the notion of selves and possible selves during and after the transition to fatherhood. They postulated that a man's psychological well-being might be adversely affected if there is a discrepancy between a father's authentic and ideal self. Feelings of failure or incompetence in the new role of parent can lead to a poor fatherhood adjustment.

Some fathers showed acceptance of the challenges around the decision to have a child while for others there was a sense of polarized emotions from acknowledging the struggle and being appreciative of the positives of having a child and the fulfilment that it brings to their life. This finding is consistent with a recent qualitative study of first-time fathers noting the necessity of preparation for fatherhood, the rollercoaster feelings of excitement and apprehension, a new identity with a sense of accomplishment and personal growth, physical and emotional challenges, changed relationship with a partner, coping and support from family and friends, health professionals and services provision and support, barriers to accessing support, and men's perceived needs of more information on the physical and emotional demands of parenthood (Baldwin et al.*,* 2019).

Lack of acknowledgement

Fathers put significant emphasis on their feelings of being unnoticed, including a lack of emotional acknowledgement of them as human beings. This finding supports the argument of Gregory and Milner (2011) who point to the social construction of fatherhood where the new agenda of fatherhood seems riven with tensions. On the one hand, a pessimistic public discourse of new fatherhood emphasises the negative effect on children and wider society of lack of paternal presence which stigmatises fathering behaviours, particularly in certain socio-economic and racial groups. On the other hand, the progressive gender equality agenda is based on optimistic assumptions of change in men's gender role attitudes and practices that have not yet proved valid.

Some participants described a sense of having to earn their children's love, identifying a difference with the mother's role. They experience the children showing a natural way of developing a natural bond with the mother, while they had to work harder to develop this bond. Additionally, frustration and annoyance arise when fathers feel that they cannot provide emotional support for their child's needs while the mother supports the infant. These findings are consistent with the family systems view, where maternal attitudes need to be considered a determinant of paternal participation in childcare (Schoppe-Sullivan & Altenburger, 2019). Despite advances in women's participation in the workplace, many women still feel ambivalent about the father's involvement in domestic issues (Doucet, 2006). Due, in part, to the "cult of maternalism" (Duffy, 1988) which stresses the notion that mothers are indispensable, natural, and necessary, many women are reluctant to involve fathers actively and wholeheartedly in the daily routines of caregiving.

Guilt when physically absent

Fathers experienced guilt when, at times, they could not be physically present in their children's lives. This absence includes both not being around for their children's daily routine and not being physically present for their wives. This finding fits Martinez et al. (2011) who described how many men face a complex dilemma, having to choose between their family responsibilities, which men consider necessary and important, and their work obligations, which men see as essential, as their work obligations are perceived as part of their main role of supporting the family. This, in turn, produces strong feelings of guilt when men do not get involved as much as they would like in either area. In contrast, mothers' play involves more visual stimulation and predictable activities.

Moreover, guilt was experienced not only when absent because of work but also when having leisure time. This could make fathers feel frustrated about wanting to fulfil other roles in their life; it seems that the guilt when doing any other activity is always present if he is not acting in his father's role. This finding supports the research by Marsiglio et al. (2005) who claim that the new father ideology has gained currency in popular culture in the form of the good dad/bad dad dichotomy. The media portrays positive images of involved fathers while absent, uninvolved fathers are portrayed negatively. Marsiglio et al. (2005) contend that the stereotypes thus created, both positive and negative, are likely to arise feelings and expectations, among both fathers and those associated with them.

Evaluation of the Research

The main strength of this research is that it affirms and extends the literature around contemporary fathers' experiences. Importantly, the complexity and ambivalence of the experience is highlighted recognising both the representations and discourses around, and the subjective reality of fathers' experience. One unexpected outcome of this study is that we have developed a passion for integration and justice regarding fathers.

The data was rich and varied and we believe some depth was achieved through our therapeutic approach of being present and empathetic during the interviews. However, it is possible our use of a semi-structured interview unduly guided or limited the participants' expressions. A more open-ended style may have enabled deeper processes to be revealed.

The use of IPA was systematic and well evidenced by the participants' quotations which allow the reader to reflect on interpretations and consider possible alternatives. While our active participation in the research process and use of interpretations are a potential bias, it is appropriate given the hermeneutic approach adopted; and, perhaps, there was room to make even more of the interpretations. We acknowledge a role played by our subjectivity and that, inevitably, we were not able to fully bracket our preconceptions. However, we have aimed to adopt a reflective and reflexive approach to the research, and we have tried to be transparent about our positionality and procedures.

The findings could have been more phenomenological, however. At times, we acknowledge that we have unduly leant into cognition and describing conscious experience. Future research could usefully dig more deeply into father's embodied and pre-conscious experience as well as their intergenerational histories.

In common with other qualitative studies, this research is limited by the small and relatively homogenous sample. Also, the sample may have been skewed towards those fathers who were more interested, engaged, and motivated in their role. Further quantitative research is needed to examine a more culturally diverse range of fathers (considering ethnicity, class, and sexuality) to allow any meaningful generalisations.

Conclusion and Clinical Implications for Practitioners

As a woman interested in the father experience, I consider that, actually, my gender could help men to open up about their feelings, allowing them to speak more freely, without the fear of criticism or judgment from other men. My compassionate view towards men may enable a positive way of interpreting their experiences.

It seems that the contemporary experience of fatherhood (at least in the UK) is that fathers have a different role from their own fathers. Representations of fatherhood have changed alongside the lived experience of fatherhood. Understanding the impact of these changing discourses and experiences will guide therapists to know how best to support fathers' needs. The findings of this research reinforce the importance of exploring fathers' emotions concerning their upbringings and the conception they have of their own fathers given the impact on their well-being and fatherhood role.

In this research, only one father was aware of the expectation of fatherhood challenges; it seems relevant to consider the importance of psychoeducation of men about the responsibility of fatherhood, to reduce the frustration and shock when fathers are confronted with the demands and changes after having a child. Moreover, working on their self-compassion when these natural challenges arise seems important.

Concerning the relevance of equality in parenting and involvement as a modern father, it seems important for therapists to acknowledge the significance of men's involvement in their children's upbringing, physically and emotionally.

Many challenges arise as part of the fatherhood role according to the research participants; some expected these difficulties, and for others it was unexpected. As practitioners, understanding the complex emotions that can arise would help us better understand our clients, emotionally validate their feelings, and support them in the best possible way.

Regarding how fathers cope with tiredness, it is essential to support the levels of emotional exhaustion. As seen in this study, some participants did not expect these high levels of tiredness and did not seek the support they needed, which triggered feelings of lack of support by others. As it was also seen that being tired could impact their day-to-day activities, it is relevant to develop psychological strategies to support them.

Therapy has a key role in encouraging fathers to explore their changing experience and identity: How has the client changed with becoming a father and how they have adapted to these changes? In addition, how might fathers give each other support and develop their self-confidence through their fatherhood role?

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