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Becoming a father is an emotional roller coaster – an analysis of first-time fathers' blogs

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Aim. To identify and describe the process of fatherhood during the partner's pregnancy among expectant, first-time fathers.

Background. Pregnancy seems to be a demanding period for expectant fathers and this period is a part of their transition to fatherhood. Blogs can be seen as personal diaries, and offer an alternative method of collecting data as they are an arena for sharing experiences and narratives.

Design. An explorative qualitative design.

Method. Blogs from the Internet by eleven first-time fathers living in Sweden were included in the study. Qualitative content analysis was used for the analysis of the blogs.

Results. A theme emerged expressing the latent content of the text: "Becoming a father for the first time is an emotional roller coaster where the role of the expectant father is not obvious" and five different categories describing the manifest content: the pregnancy, a new life, to make the child real, preparations for the delivery and the arrival of the child and a new role in life.

Conclusions. The metaphor 'roller coaster' indicates the tension between different feelings about the men's future as fathers. They are searching for answers on how to be a good father. They feel excluded when they visit antenatal care centres, and have difficulties finding out how to support their partner. This is an existential period when they understand themselves as adults and also miss relatives who have died. During pregnancy the men start to communicate with their child, and this interaction gives a sense of reality and creates hope and joy about being a father.

Relevance to clinical practice. Staff involved in antenatal care can use the knowledge from this study when meeting with expectant fathers. Perspectives expressed in blogs may enhance the professionals' understanding that the transition process of fatherhood is complex.

Keywords: qualitative study, reproductive health, sexuality, blogs, first-time fathers, transition, pregnancy, qualitative content analysis.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Research about the transition to parenthood has traditionally focused on women (Burke 1985, Ruble *et al.* 1990, Smith & French 2002, Nelson 2003) but in the last decade, interest in men's transition to parenthood has increased (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Deave *et al.* 2008, Fenwick *et al.* 2012).

Pregnancy seems to be the most demanding period for expectant fathers during their transition to fatherhood (Genesoni & Tallandini 2009), which may be due to challenges of changing role and identity from mainly being a partner to becoming a father (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003). Practical issues such as changes in the household budget might also be challenging (Gage & Kirk 2002, Fenwick *et al.* 2012, Wilkes *et al.* 2011). Anxiety, irritability (Chalmers & Meyer 1996) and feelings of unreality and ambivalence are reported during the first months of pregnancy (Gage & Kirk 2002, Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Genesoni & Tallandini 2009), even though there is also a desire to bond with the expected child (Genesoni & Tallandini 2009). The first ultrasound examination is reported as a significant event which can reduce feelings of unreality, while excitement, pride and joy take over (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Chalmers & Meyer 1996).

Expectant fathers want to have an active role in their partners' pregnancy (Genesoni & Tallandini 2009) even though some of them feel left out, especially at the beginning of the pregnancy, due to the woman's physical changes, when the foetus may be very obvious for the woman but not for the man (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Fenwick *et al.* 2012). Physiological symptoms due to the pregnancy are common among women but symptoms such as insomnia, extreme fatigue, weight gain,

nausea and back pain have also been reported by expectant fathers (Chalmers & Meyer 1996).

At the end of the pregnancy many men feel well prepared for their life as a father and have changed their focus from themselves to the new family (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Fenwick *et al.* 2012), and the relationship with their partner might be improved (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003). As the birth comes closer, fear concerning the health and life of the baby and the woman is reported (Chalmers & Meyer 1996, Eriksson *et al.* 2006).

Expectant first-time fathers seem to feel excluded from parental education (Deave & Johnson 2008, Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Fenwick *et al.* 2012) but education groups exclusively for expectant fathers appear to strengthen them (Friedewald *et al.* 2005, Genesoni & Tallandini 2009). The first part of the pregnancy seems to be when they have most need of advice, especially from those who have experience of parenting. However, during the end of the pregnancy they want to think and act more on their own (Gage & Kirk 2002).

The Internet is nowadays an important arena in peoples' daily lives. The main motives for blogging presented in a study are to document life, convey statements and opinions, express feelings, or create and maintain forums (Nardi *et al.* 2004). Women appear to be more interested in the social aspects and giving personalized content when blogging, while men tend to be more interested in conveying information and opinions (Pedersen & Macaffe 2007). Pregnant women use the Internet to a great extent to get information about pregnancy and childbirth (Gao *et al.* 2012, Larsson 2009). In a study by McCullagh (2008) the blog is described as a personal diary/journal. This indicates that blogging provides a unique opportunity

for expressing privacy and it allows bloggers to work out their private project in new ways, despite the inherent privacy risks posed by this medium. Blogging offers new opportunities to discuss personal matters and provide opinions openly in a format that can be archived indefinitely, and easily accessed by anyone with an Internet connection (McCullagh 2008).

The blog offers an alternative form of collecting data as it is an arena for sharing experiences and narratives. It allows anonymity afforded by a pseudonym and can therefore bring about more open sharing than in a face-to-face interview with a researcher (Eastham 2011). A blog can be seen as naturalistic data written as a diary in such a way as to openly communicate with an audience that is interested in the issues of the blog (Hookway 2008). Blogs written by men with a pregnant partner can give insight into what these men value as significant about their life situation as an expectant father. Until now, men's transition to parenthood expressed in blogs seems to have been unexplored. Hence, the aim of this study was to identify and describe the process of fatherhood during the partner's pregnancy among expectant, first-time fathers.

METHODS

Study design

An explorative qualitative design was chosen for this study.

Sample

Inclusion criteria were: the blog would be written in order to be a father blog written by a first-time father living in Sweden; it should have been published during pregnancy and continued to the childbirth. Exclusion criteria were: the expectant fathers only wrote occasionally, and the gaps between blogging entries were longer than one month; the blog content was mainly photos; the aim of blogging seemed mostly to be about conducting a dialogue with relatives.

Data collection

The search engine Google was used to find blogs. The term “father blogs” was chosen as a search query, and the search resulted in hits of individual father blogs but also of websites where a large number of father blogs were collected. After reading through a lot of the blogs it appeared that most of them were written by fathers expecting their second or third child, or were started after the baby was born. Eleven blogs that which matched the inclusion criteria and which, after a first thorough reading, seemed to have rich content and provide enough information, were included in the study.

The blogs contained posts with text and photos from the expectant father and comments from blog readers. The length of the blogs from the beginning of writing until the child’s birth, ranged between 2-66 pages. The time the expectant fathers

started their blog varied. Three of them started early, in the second month of pregnancy. Most of them started in the middle of the pregnancy, and three of them started in the eighth month of pregnancy and later (Figure 1).

Insert Figure 1 here

Six of the expectant fathers used their names in the blog while the rest chose to remain anonymous. In three of the blogs, the profession was mentioned and seven of the expectant fathers specified that they lived in big cities; one lived in a small village, and in three cases the size of the city was not made clear. Six expectant fathers published their ages, and these ranged from 22-34 years (median age 28). The blogs varied in content and depth in the sense that some of them had a greater depth when describing thoughts and feelings, whereas others focused mostly on describing everyday events. Some of them contained colloquial and slang language while others were written in a more linguistically correct way, and one was written in a poetic way. The blogs were copied and pasted into Word files. The photos and the comments from readers were excluded.

Analysis

Qualitative content analysis according to Graneheim & Lundman (2004) was chosen for the analysis of the blogs. To become familiar with the text and to get a sense of the whole content of the text the data from the blogs were read over and over again by two of the authors (J.K, L.Å). The text was then divided into meaning units. The chosen meaning units were compared and discussed by both authors, and the meaning units were then copied from each blog to an Excel document. Each meaning unit was then condensed and labelled with a code. The codes were

compared based on their variations and similarities, after which they were placed together into subcategories. The subcategories that seemed to be concerned with the same subject area were placed together and formed a category, which expresses the manifest content of the text as it refers to a descriptive level of content.

During the analysis process there was a continuous discussion between the four authors about the codes and their content and about which subcategories they belonged to, and there was continuous back and forth movement between the whole text, the codes, subcategories and categories. A third author (C.B) read and analysed two blogs and the result was compared with the first two authors' analyses. This process of reflection and discussion resulted in agreement about the subcategories and categories. At the end, and after several thorough readings of the blogs, an underlying meaning appeared which was formulated into a theme, expressing the latent content of the text (Graneheim & Lundman 2004).

Trustworthiness and ethical issues

In qualitative research the concepts of credibility, transferability and dependability are considered aspects of trustworthiness (Graneheim & Lundman 2004). To increase the credibility, two of the authors conducted the analysis process together, which enabled discussion and reflection throughout the analysis process. The third authors' analysis was compared with the two first authors' and representative quotations are presented. Transferability of the findings is possible as the sample, the analysis process, and the findings are accurately described. Dependability, which illustrates grades of change in data over time during the process of analysis, was assured by the discussions conducted by the authors who performed the analysis.

No Ethics Committee approval was necessary according to Swedish law, since no method causing physiological or psychological influence on the participants was applied (Swedish Code of Statutes 2003). A decision not to contact the authors of the blogs was made due to the fact that the blogs were publicly available and were not password-protected (Ess & the AOIR Ethics Working Committee 2002, Markham & Buchanan 2012)

To ensure confidentiality, neither the name of the blogs nor the web addresses of the blogs are published, names presented in the quotations have been changed, and the writers' real names have been changed to fictitious names. In order not to prevent the quotations being tracked to the right blog, some words in the quotations have been changed to different but similar words.

RESULTS

During the analysis a theme emerged, “Becoming a father for the first time is an emotional roller coaster where the role of the expectant father is not obvious”. The results of the analysis are illustrated in five different categories: the pregnancy, a new life, to make the child real, preparations for the delivery and the arrival of the child, and a new role in life.

Theme: Becoming a father for the first time is an emotional roller coaster

The roller coaster is a metaphor for what the expectant fathers experience during the pregnancy, and it is about the men’s emotions, thoughts and expectations. There is a sense of both unreality, which dominates at the beginning of the journey, and reality, which becomes more pronounced as the journey continues.

The emotions go up and down, and the carousel experience of the journey brings a sense of horror and delight. The men look at their pregnant partners who are sitting next to them making the same journey and they express a feeling of "sitting in the stands watching a game from behind”. There is often frustration as the men try to support the women while they are suffering from concerns associated with the pregnancy. The insight of being restrained and having no chance of getting off is developed. Therefore, the men try to hold on as best they can when the roller coaster is traveling at speed in the turns.

The ultrasound describes a turning point where the pregnancy becomes real; it is something that opens up a new world and also many new expectations. It gives the men the possibility to control the speed and the highs and lows of the roller coaster. After this, the men’s reflections increase about their competence and capacity as a

father. They have both faith and doubt in their own abilities and if they will be enough. Soon, the expectant fathers come to the top of the roller coaster and there is a breath-taking feeling. They have doubts about whether they will be able to master the steep slopes of the roller coaster. They wonder if they will be able to face the reality of the new life as a father.

The pregnancy

Several expectant fathers write about the pregnancy announcement. They think it is hard to keep the pregnancy a secret and they describe a sense of uncertainty that the pregnancy will continue. At the same time they want to tell the whole world about it.

A new world, only for women and children, is experienced during visits to antenatal care centres, and the men feel neglected. The behaviour of the midwife is questioned when she mostly speaks to the woman, although the expectant father sits next to the partner.

“They call it maternity care, and that is partly why the prospective fathers are overridden. Yes, it is the expectant mothers that carries the child and it is the expectant mother they take a blood sample from. But the prospective father must also be important?” (Per)

Some write repeatedly about how they appreciate prenatal classes. A suggestion is that the mothers and fathers should be divided into different groups so everyone can speak about their needs.

The men express admiration for the women who are brave and strong even though they have pregnancy-related concerns, but the symptoms also affect everyday life

for the men. They feel powerless as they stand next to the woman without being able to help.

Some expectant fathers write that having a baby is the coolest thing they have ever experienced. They understand intellectually that they are soon going to have a baby, but emotionally it is difficult to understand. They express at some point a strong desire for the child and the hope that the baby will be well, but they have to deal with the stress of not knowing. The men comment that the ultrasound that is carried out in weeks 18-19 is revolutionary, powerful and fascinating. It seems to make the pregnancy more real, and the men calm down, knowing that everything “is as it should be” with the baby. Towards the end of the pregnancy, several men describe having conflicting emotions. They are longing for the child and are prepared to take care of it but at the same time they express a feeling of wanting to escape. Nevertheless the pregnancy has given them a humble attitude towards life and they look forward to meeting the child.

A new life

The men who blog write that life takes a different turn when they are expecting a baby and will soon be parents. Something new and exciting is waiting, and this is expressed as a great challenge, in one way causing stress but in another creating great joy. Becoming a parent is given priority and the focus is now directed towards the baby.

“Strangely, as soon as we found out that we were expecting a child, I saw pregnant women and strollers everywhere. It is clear that they were always there but why didn’t I see them before?” (Nicklas)

Some describe a turning point where they consider themselves as adults. Owning a house and a car, as well as a dog makes a man realize that he has grown up, something that symbolises the start of the new life.

Some blogging men write that although the pregnancy is a happy time they are reminded of relatives who have died, and they express sorrow. They wish that the deceased was still here and could share their new life. However, they also state that a chapter in life is finished and a new chapter is about to begin.

To make the child real

The blogs include many assumptions and thoughts about how the child within the women's body develops during pregnancy. One example is at what time the child can begin to perceive and locate sounds; another is when the child is able to see objects clearly. They write about the baby kicking, about listening to the baby's heartbeat when visiting the antenatal care centre, and about observing their child on the ultrasound scanner. An expectant father writes that the more the child confirms its existence by kicking, the more real the child becomes for him.

A number of the men have conversations with the child. One writes that once when the child was kicking very hard he spoke to it close to the women's body and asked the baby not to be so eager. As the kicking stopped he was sure that the child had heard him and therefore calmed down. Another writes about conversations he sometimes has with the child when his partner is sleeping. This can be illustrated by the poems and texts dedicated to the child on his blog. This man also expresses expectations that the child might read these poems in the future and would understand the father's longing for the child.

"I look forward to talking with you for real. Lying in bed and talking for hours. You can choose the topic of the conversation. We don't have to talk if you don't want to. We can change nappies cook delicious food and just continue to philosophize."

(Christoffer)

The future of the child is illuminated from different perspectives in the blogs. Some blogs describe discussions between the men and their partners on whether or not they should find out the sex of the child during the pregnancy and what they will name it. The men have ideas about who the waiting child will resemble in appearance, but also about character traits, such as independence or stubbornness. One blogger has formed a conception about the future profession of the child and exemplifies some professions he dislikes, which he hopes that the child will avoid. One father reflects at the end of the pregnancy about whether the child is a time optimist because there are no signs to indicate that the labour is about to start, and he speculates on whether this optimism will continue throughout the child's life.

"Unfortunately, we see no signs that the baby wants to come out, but in a few days we will know if it is the kind of person who will never be able to keep time."

(Tobias)

Preparations for the delivery and the arrival of the child

Several men write about purchases that must be made before the child's arrival. They have concerns about the things they should buy for the baby. There is a need to be aware of various injury risks, and they write about necessary security measures and how important safety is.

“How do you find your way in the jungle of stroller manufacturers and retailers? Everyone says their stroller is the best”. (David)

The men also imagine the first time at home with the child. They mention that they are afraid of not being able to comfort their child and of misinterpreting the child's signals. The men read books about breastfeeding and the first time at home with the baby. In this way they try to increase their knowledge of the child's signals and how to interpret and understand them. One man mentions his own blogging as a preparation.

"Writing a blog can be seen as an exercise and preparation for becoming a dad."
(Joakim)

When the due date is approaching, almost all the men write about signs that might indicate that labour is starting. This is a nervous and restless time and they describe their concerns about the birth and the complications that can happen. They describe a sense of fear and are insecure about their role in the delivery room. They write about what they do to reduce anxiety, such as visiting an obstetric ward. In the blogs they reflect about how childbirth is shown in movies, as something intense and rapid. One of the men writes about a blog written by a new mother, which gave him a descriptive and terrifying picture of what the situation can be like in the delivery room. The men talk with friends who have had a baby recently and review their experience of the birth. Some express a desire to be supportive of their woman while she is giving birth, and they also express their thoughts about their own reactions during the delivery.

“Nervousness is like a stone in the chest. It grows stronger every day. It's like eating from a buffet and being unable to stop. It increases all the time.” (Joakim)

A new role in life

The men who blog write about their upcoming role, their expectations, and how to find the answer to what characterizes a good father. Many of them draw the conclusion that there is no right answer to that question; instead they must all do their very best, as there are several ways to raise a child.

*“It feels like fathers should be masculine, cutting down trees in the forest. Fathers should hunt moose with their bare hands, wearing a loincloth of animal skins.”
(Adam)*

Generally, the men do not want to repeat the same mistakes as their own fathers, but to be fathers in their own way.

Aspects of gender often occur in the blogs. The men express that they want to challenge current notions of gender. One expectant father mentions that only pink and blue birthday cards with girls and boys as cute little passive princesses and small active princes are available, and says this is a big problem. Among adults, they recognize that men are disadvantaged and not as prioritized as women in terms of parental leave - something that seems strange as the society has the ambition to promote equality among men and women. In different ways the men prepare practically and mentally before becoming fathers. One blogging man writes about building a changing table, whereas others write about reading books as a preparation for their first time with the child. They also read other blogs written by fathers. Sharing experiences by reading such blogs, as well as their own writing in

the blogs, help them in their preparations to become fathers. However, one man wonders if it is really possible to prepare to be a father.

DISCUSSION

With the blogs, the men communicate their transition to fathers as an emotional roller coaster. During naturally occurring interaction (Silverman 2006) with an implicit audience they illuminate aspects of their everyday life from the point of view of expectant fathers. In this way it might be possible to understand how the men construct fatherhood and negotiate their roles as expectant fathers.

Some findings in this study have been shown in previous studies. Expectant fathers experience pregnancy as a strong emotional period in which they have ambivalent feelings (Gage & Kirk 2002, Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Genesoni & Tallandi 2009). Experiences of feeling excluded when they visit antenatal care centres have also been described (Finnbogadottir *et al.* 2003, Deave & Johnson 2008, Fenwick *et al.* 2012). It is surprising that none of the men write about receiving support from the staff at antenatal care centres. Our study stresses that the expectant fathers feel excluded in the meetings at antenatal care centres during the individual visits.

However, the men in our study valued the parental group from a social perspective, mentioning that they appreciated meeting other expectant fathers; something that is confirmed by other studies (Friedewald *et al.* 2005, Genesoni & Tallandini 2009, Premberg & Lundgren 2006). Nevertheless, expectant fathers seem to have a great need to communicate with others about their specific situation. Is their interaction in the blogs a substitute for the absent sense of community at the antenatal care centre? Pointing to the findings in the study, our suggestion is that midwives should not neglect expectant fathers by excluding them in the discussions at the antenatal care centre. Instead, they should make them feel comfortable, welcome, and involved in the traditional female setting that the antenatal care centre might have.

The men who blog write extensively about child development - when the baby is kicking, the child's name, and the ultrasound examination - which is in concordance with Finnbogadottir *et al.* (2003). These ways of encountering the child can be understood as something that decreases feelings of unreality, and which is a part of their experience during their partner's pregnancy. The blogging fathers have different kinds of conversations with their child during the pregnancy, also reported by Sansiriphun *et al.* (2010). However, the unique characteristic of our study is that we have obtained a real insight into how the expectant fathers actually communicate with their children, as, according to Silverman 2006, the blogs are a form of naturally occurring interaction. An example of this communication is the expectant father who addresses the child with "you" as shown in the category "making the child real". The affinity between the father and the child becomes clear and evident when he uses the word "we", which includes him and the expected child. The text shows that the child's wishes are respected and will receive preference (you can choose the topic, we do not have to talk if you do not want to). This kind of conversation might help the expectant father to see the child already as a person.

The expectant fathers reflect on their future role as fathers, and in their reflections and stories it is notable that they do not take the role for granted (Dick 2011). They do not turn to their own fathers for support, but say that they don't want to do make the same mistakes as their fathers. Similar findings can be seen also in Deave *et al.* (2008) and Wilkes *et al.* (2011). This might be understood to mean a new form of paternity has emerged and expectant fathers need new male role models including a more modern parenting. A feature of the modern man may be that he

chooses the blog as a communication tool to share experiences and reflections about fatherhood and parenthood. The texts reveal a tension between being a tough, strong man and being a sensitive and sensible man. Such tensions can be seen as part of the development of self-identity (McCullagh 2008). It is striking that their blogging seems to be a dialogue with themselves, and at the same time they consider the self-disclosure to others as something positive, which is in accordance with McCullagh (2008) and Fletcher & StGeorge (2011). The blogs can give men an opportunity to strengthen their identities as fathers through interaction with others in same lifesituation. In this way they might cope with the tension between frustration and confusion about their future role as fathers and expectations of hope and joy about being a father something that might influence their sexual and their reproductive health. Therefore, blogs can be seen as a tool in the quest to find a modern form of fatherhood.

A blog can be seen as a portrait of the blogger's interests and expectations (McCullagh 2008) and could therefore be a useful arena for research projects. An advantage of such data might be that it would preclude the normative answers which might be produced during a face-to-face interview. The question about how many blogs should be included is a critical issue. In this study the eleven blogs generated an extensive amount of text material, and this, together with the variation in the texts we considered, was considered sufficient. An ethical issue is whether the authors of the blogs should be contacted. There is no consensus among researchers on this question (Hookway 2008). We chose not to contact them based on the fact that the blogs are publicly available and the text has been treated confidentially. The findings may be transferable to similar contexts but there could

be limitations in transferring the findings to countries with other social or cultural structures. Whether bloggers differ from the wider population could be discussed, and it might be that people who blog are those who have an ability to express themselves in text. The characteristics of the sample are partly unknown to us as only some of the men presented their age, their professions and their residential area in the blogs. This might be a weakness; although this is a consequence of using blogs. We might have missed information from some men, but in a qualitative study the focus is the views of the people involved in the research and their perceptions and meanings in order to achieve a deep picture of their realities. Therefore the sample does not need be representative; instead a purposeful sample will give rich and in-depth information to analyse (Holloway & Wheeler 2002). The men in our study seem to seek support from others and seem to find a "support effect" through their blogs such as we consider occurs in so-called self-help groups. Our thoughts are confirmed in Stefanone & Jang (2008) where it is found that computer-mediated communication such as blogs enhances relationships rather than increasing isolation.

CONCLUSION

The metaphor 'roller coaster' indicates the men's feelings of dizziness as well as frustration and confusion about their future role as fathers. The men reflect about role models of good fatherhood. They feel excluded when they visit antenatal care centres and have difficulties finding out how to support their partner. The process of being a father includes growing up and stepping into adulthood, something that also reminds them of the loss of relatives who have died. During pregnancy, the men start to communicate with their child, and this interaction gives rise to a sense of reality and creates hope and joy about being a father. There is a tension between feelings of frustration and positive expectations for the future which obviously might influence men's sexual and reproductive health.

RELEVANCE TO CLINICAL PRACTICE

It is important that the professionals in antenatal care centres are aware that men in modern society use blogs to express their experiences of pregnancy as well as their expectations of fatherhood. When men use this way of communicating and sharing their experiences and their expectations, it is obvious by their written feelings and thoughts expressed in the texts that the transition to fatherhood is complex with tension between joy and hope as well as confusion and frustration. Blogs can therefore be an additional tool for caregivers to enhance understanding of essential aspects of men's transition to fatherhood.

CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE MANUSCRIPT

Study design: CB, JK, LÅ

Data Collection: JK, LÅ

Analysis: SA, CB, JK, LÅ

Manuscript preparation: SA, CB, JK, LÅ

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to research, authorship, and/or publication of this article

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FIGURE

Figure 1 Time overview of the blogs.

Note: The fathers’ names are fictitious.