

## *Becoming a father: a qualitative study on the journey to fatherhood*

### BACKGROUND

The transition to fatherhood represents one of the most significant changes in a man's life and brings many challenges. Despite the great importance of this period, empirical data on it are not abundant, with only a small amount of psychological research on fatherhood available in the Czech Republic; this topic is also rather marginalized abroad. This qualitative study aims to explore men's unique experiences with the process of becoming a father and to understand how paternal identity is shaped.

### PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

Four men who had recently become fathers participated in the research. A semi-structured interview was conducted with each of them.

### RESULTS

Using the interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) approach, an in-depth analysis of the data identified five

significant categories that emerge during the transition to fatherhood: responsibility and commitment to the child, father identity formation, fatherhood and motherhood, changes in the partner relationship and coping with the father role.

### CONCLUSIONS

The research suggests that the process of becoming a father is a long-term dynamic process, in which father identity is shaped and consolidated through a variety of situations and experiences. Within this process, paternal identity is also shaped through repeated comparisons and definitions of the role of the mother. Process of becoming a father involves developmental, identity, personality, partnership and family aspects.

### KEY WORDS

transition to fatherhood; first-time fathers; paternal identity; paternal role; parenthood

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## BACKGROUND

The topic of fatherhood is becoming more and more relevant with changes in society. In the conventional view, the father was a less important figure in terms of his impact on the child's development (he was attributed a mostly secondary role) and his central influence was seen more in terms of providing financially for the family (Lamb, 1975). In recent decades, however, we can observe a shift in the perception of the father's role in Western societies, and in younger generations there is a growing incidence of the so-called "new fatherhood" associated with emotional intimacy and availability of the father as well as increased involvement of the father in childcare and household care (Maříková, 2009; McGill, 2014). Sociocultural changes in Western society have led to men now being not only welcomed but expected to attend parenting preparation courses and to be present during childbirth; their involvement in child and household care is now also more widely expected in the postnatal period (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Wetherell & Edley, 1999).

In this work, we will focus on a more specific topic, namely the process of becoming a father. The process of becoming a father is an understudied topic in developmental psychology, yet childbirth and adaptation to this life change is a significant developmental task of adulthood (Colarusso & Nemiroff, 1982; Cowan, 1988).

One of the significant themes that emerges in research is the impact of the transition to fatherhood on men's personality changes and their maturation process. Several authors associate the process of becoming a father with the potential for personal growth and the development of certain capabilities (Barclay et al., 1996; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Jessner et al., 1970; Kao & Long, 2004; Lamb & Lewis, 2004; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021; Premberg et al., 2008; Tehrani et al., 2014). In many qualitative studies focusing on the transition to fatherhood, men have reported various changes, both in personal characteristics and their attitudes towards life and other people.

Men in some studies began to perceive themselves as more sensitive, calmer, harmonious or patient (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Premberg et al., 2008; Silva et al., 2021) or more humble (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003). One notable subject of discussion has revolved around the observed progression of generativity and the decline in egocentrism (Donovan, 1995; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004). Research also discusses changes in values and priorities during the process of becoming a father (Kao & Long, 2004; Kowlessar, 2012; Kowlessar et al., 2014; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2021), or a new perspective on life (Kao & Long, 2004; Kowlessar, 2012; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021). Some studies mentioned a boost in

self-confidence and increase in self-worth (Barclay et al., 1996; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Habib, 2012; Kao & Long, 2004) or a reaffirmation of masculinity (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004).

Another branch of research focuses on the concept of maturity to parenthood (Łada-Maško & Kaźmierczak, 2021, 2023). The notion of maturity to parenthood has been associated with individual values, personality traits, and close relationships, and some researchers even attempted to examine it in connection to attachment (Łada-Maško & Kaźmierczak, 2023).

The theme of responsibility appears frequently in qualitative research on the transition to fatherhood and seems to be one of the most significant categories. Responsibility is addressed by individual participants from various perspectives. An increased sense of responsibility is found in the majority of studies (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Johnsen et al., 2017; Kowlessar, 2012; Kowlessar et al., 2014; Premberg et al., 2008; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2021; Tehrani et al., 2014). Studies also observed that the participants spend time more responsibly, with a shift towards spending more time with their families at the expense of their own leisure activities and time with friends (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003). There was also a noted increase in responsible approaches to planning and time management (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021; Tehrani et al., 2014).

In the context of increased responsibility for the child and the family, studies repeatedly highlight the theme of increased self-care (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2021). These changes included improvements in lifestyle, such as better nutrition, increased physical activity, and reducing alcohol and cigarette consumption (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kowlessar et al., 2014; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2021; Wilkes et al., 2012). There was also found an increase in caution and a reduction in impulsivity and risk-taking behaviors, such as fast driving or participating in extreme sports (Gage & Kirk, 2002; Premberg et al., 2008; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2021; St John et al., 2005). Motivation for these changes stemmed not only from the desire to set an example (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Wilkes et al., 2012) but also from the realization that someone else's life depended on them (Gage & Kirk, 2002).

Another common theme that emerges in research is the construction of fatherhood identity. Men form ideas about their own fatherhood already during their partner's pregnancy (Höfner et al., 2011; Kowlessar, 2012; Wulf, 2015). Research indicates that when searching for their own version of fatherhood and constructing their own identity as fathers, men most often draw upon their experiences with their own

fathers (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Habib, 2012; Höfner et al., 2011; Kowlessar, 2012; Scott-Heyes, 1982). Fathers have been significant role models, especially in terms of their availability, representing either a positive or negative example in this regard (Habib, 2012).

Research also suggests that bodily experiences have a significant impact on the acceptance of fatherhood and the construction of paternal identity (Diamond, 1986; Draper, 2002; Gurwitt, 1976; Kowlessar, 2012; Silva et al., 2021; Wulf, 2015). In contrast to their female partners, men lack the opportunity for direct physical contact with the child during pregnancy and can only perceive the reality of the child indirectly (such as through their partner's abdominal wall or via ultrasound images). Draper (2002) refers to these moments as "body-mediated moments" and underscores their significance in the transition to fatherhood. For men, the child is primarily an abstract idea for a large portion of the partner's pregnancy and only becomes more tangible during the second trimester, when the signs of pregnancy become more clearly visible on the partner's body (Gurwitt, 1976). Many authors (Diamond, 1986; Draper, 2002; Gurwitt, 1976; Kowlessar, 2012; Silva et al., 2021) consider the moments when men encounter evidence of the existence of a child to be highly significant for the acceptance of their own paternity.

An interesting perspective on the formation of paternal identity can be found in the work of Berman and Long (2022). These authors assert that, unlike mothers, who undergo a physically intense transition to parenthood, fatherhood is distinctly crafted in the context of the absence of bodily experiences. These authors do not perceive the journey into fatherhood as a seamless and obvious process; instead, they suggest that fathers struggle as they attempt to define their roles through their absence in the mother-child dyad, both before and after the child's birth. Their hypothesis posits that men primarily define their fatherhood in terms of "non-motherhood", and they structure their paternal identity around what they are not, rather than what they are.

Another important area of research involves exploring emotional shifts during the transition to fatherhood. The process of becoming a father brings with it a range of emotional changes, and although for many fathers these changes are experienced positively, for some, these emotional turbulences can result in mental health difficulties. The most common psychological problems include anxiety and depression (Clark et al., 2009; Goodman, 2004; Leach et al., 2016; Paulson & Bazemore, 2010).

A very significant moment on the path to fatherhood is the discovery that one's partner is pregnant. The typical emotional response of men in this situation is joy (Diamond, 1986), while mixed and ambivalent feelings of happiness are also present, along with anxiety and uncertainty about the impending

responsibility (Jordan, 2007; Wulf, 2015). Men are gradually saying goodbye to the freedom associated with life without a child and coming to terms with the idea that they will have to adapt to the child's needs (Fägerskiöld, 2008).

During pregnancy, various negative emotions can arise, such as nervousness, tension, and anxiety (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004), feelings of confusion, chaos, and ambivalence (Donovan, 1995; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004; May, 1982; Sansiriphun et al., 2010), feelings of unpreparedness, inadequacy, incapacity, and uncertainty regarding their new role (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021; Sansiriphun et al., 2010), concerns about the health of their partner and their child (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021; Silva et al., 2021), or fear of losing autonomy and their old life-style (Dayton et al., 2016; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004). In research, a sense of exclusion, disconnection, or detachment from the pregnancy process often appeared, along with a feeling that men were more in the role of observers (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Donovan, 1995; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021). It is possible that this feeling was intensified by the sense that the child is not yet tangible during the first two trimesters, as many studies have reported (Åsenhed et al., 2014; Donovan, 1995; Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Johnsen et al., 2017; Kao & Long, 2004; May, 1982; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Willig, 2021; Silva et al., 2021). Nevertheless, various positive emotions are also mentioned (Sansiriphun et al., 2010), such as feelings of love, pride, joy, gratitude (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kao & Long, 2004; Kowlessar, 2012), or enthusiasm (Deave & Johnson, 2008).

The birth of a child is a turning point on the journey to fatherhood. In recent decades, it has become increasingly common in many countries for fathers to be present at the birth of their child (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Wulf, 2015). Being present by their partner's side during the birth represents an intense experience for men (Fägerskiöld, 2008; Wulf, 2015). Fägerskiöld (2008) mentions the positive aspects that the decision to be present at the birth brings with it an improved relationship with the partner and the child, a greater appreciation of the partner, an increased sense of security for the mother of the child but also mentions the negative emotions that this situation can arouse in men (Deave & Johnson, 2008): fear, pain, feeling useless or overlooked, especially when their role is not clarified and they are not given enough information. After the birth of a child, men may experience very strong emotions of awe, love, happiness or pride (Deave & Johnson, 2008).

The men in Greenberg and Morris' (1974) research reported that they were surprised at how well they

were able to connect emotionally to their child soon after birth. But men after the birth also often experience feelings of helplessness (Goodman, 2005; Henderson & Brouse, 1991; Kowlessar et al., 2014), and caregiving is usually learned through trial and error and by observing the child's mother, whom they perceive as being more competent (Kowlessar et al., 2014). Men's subjective assessment of how they are managing caregiving is very important to their overall satisfaction with the first year following the birth of their child. The ability to soothe the baby or put him/her to sleep emerges as particularly important in this assessment (Premberg et al., 2008).

Another significant area of research is the changes in the partner relationship in relation to the transition to parenthood. Several studies observed that men endeavor to provide support and help to their partners during pregnancy and postpartum, often taking on the supportive role (Åsenhed et al., 2014; Diamond, 2007; Johnsen et al., 2017; Kao & Long, 2004; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Tehrani et al., 2014). Research also shows that the birth of a child significantly affects the partner relationship. Expectant fathers may experience a crisis in the early months of their partner's pregnancy where they re-evaluate their relationship with their partner and family members. There are references to a temporary deterioration in relationship quality and an increase in the number of conflicts (Doss et al., 2009; Habib, 2012; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Twenge et al., 2003), but studies also point to a deepening of the relationship and a shift in the relationship to a higher level (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Shapiro et al., 2000).

The conditions and state of fatherhood in the Czech Republic are indicated by some demographic statistical data and findings from research and studies (Bakalář, 2002; Dudová, 2006; Friedlaenderová, 2012; Nešporová, 2019). One of the important statistics indicating a lower rate of male caregivers than female caregivers is the percentage of men receiving parental allowance: the percentage of men does not exceed 2%. In the Czech Republic, it is possible to receive this allowance up to four years of age of the child. According to data from the Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, only 1.78% of Czech fathers received parental allowance in 2021. There were 5,300 men and 292,200 women on parental leave. Another institution supporting fatherhood and establishing a relationship with the child is the possibility of taking short-term (14 days) paternity leave. Paternity leave can be taken up to six weeks after the birth of the child. This state support can be drawn from 2018 and more and more men are using it (MPSV, 2023). The discourse of the active father is gradually reflected not only in changes in the perception of new forms of fatherhood, but also in legislative and social support from the state. The predominance of women over men in the caregiving role is also reflected in the solution to the care

of children after a divorce: the majority of children are entrusted to the care of the mother, not the father, although in recent years we can observe trends in the increasing proportion of care being entrusted to the father or to shared parenting. Specifically, in 2021, the court entrusted 8.67% of children to the care of the father and another 9.74% to shared parenting, and after mutual agreement between the parents, 5.75% to the custody of the father and 14.56% to alternate custody. For further demographic context of the picture of fatherhood in the Czech Republic, we can note that the average age of a man at the birth of his first child has been around 35 in recent years (CSO, 2023). We can conclude the excursion into the Czech environment by saying that the image of the Czech father as a full-fledged caregiver for the child and the accentuation of the importance of the father's role for the development of the child is moving in a positive direction not only in psychological research, but also in support from state institutions.

The topic of fatherhood in the Czech Republic is on the periphery of interest of psychologically oriented researchers where fatherhood is researched mainly from a sociological and social-constructivist perspective. For example, paternity leave or new forms of fatherhood are frequent topics of research. Although some psychological studies exploring fatherhood in the Czech environment can be found (e.g. Fialová, 2014; Halířová, 2007; Kabancová, 2020; Nebáznivá, 2018), there are only a few qualitative studies mapping the transition to fatherhood.

This paper presents research conducted in 2019. It traces the men's unique experiences with the process of becoming a father and describes how paternal identity is formed. Four in-depth interviews were conducted with men who became first-time fathers as part of a qualitative research study. Interpretative phenomenological analysis identified five significant themes associated with the transition to fatherhood: responsibility and commitment to the child, father identity formation, fatherhood and motherhood, changes in the partner relationship and coping with the father role.

The research is a psychological probe into men's experiences with the transition to fatherhood. This qualitative study seeks to understand the experience of the transition to fatherhood from the period of a partner's pregnancy to several months after childbirth. The approach adopted for the research on fatherhood presented here was interpretive phenomenological analysis (IPA), which, according to Osborn and Smith (2003), who introduced it to qualitative research, relies primarily on phenomenology and hermeneutics. This approach is appropriate in situations where the researcher wishes to explore how participants perceive a given experience and what meaning they attribute to it. The IPA approach was first used in research on mothers' identities during

the transition to motherhood, a very similar topic (Smith, 1999).

The key words in the IPA approach are primarily the words experience and meaning, so the research question is geared towards understanding the experience of the individual being studied and capturing the meaning that the individual attaches to their experience. Research questions are usually formulated broadly and are open-ended (Osborn & Smith, 2003).

Based on the above theoretical framework, the following research questions were formulated:

1. What is the male experience in the process of becoming a father during their partner's pregnancy and the early months of their first child's life?
2. How is paternal identity formed in the transition to fatherhood?

## PARTICIPANTS AND PROCEDURE

### RESEARCH METHOD

For research purposes, a semi-structured interview method was selected. This form of an interview represents a kind of intermediate stage between a structured and an unstructured interview. The researcher has pre-prepared sets of questions to ask the participants (Miovský, 2006). However, their order is not fixed and the participant has a relatively large degree of freedom in how they answer. The activity of the researcher is higher than in an unstructured interview (Ferjenčík, 2000). Osborn and Smith (2003) consider the semi-structured interview as the optimal method in the IPA approach. It is not necessary to ask questions according to a predetermined order and plan, making it possible to react with flexibility according to the respondent's answers and the flow of the interview.

Prior to the actual data collection, a pilot interview was conducted. Based on the feedback, some questions were reworded or eliminated and some were added.

Subsequently, one interview was conducted with each participant, the main topic being the experience of the process of becoming a father. Questions were directed towards the prenatal, perinatal and postnatal periods. Men were given the option of choosing the location where the interview would take place. Most of them chose a neutral setting (café, university facilities), with only one participant choosing his own home.

### PARTICIPANTS

Participants were included in the research on the basis of a deliberate, referential selection, according to predetermined criteria. Only men over the age of

eighteen who had their first child (aged 3-12 months) to whom they had a biological relationship were included in the study. They were also required to be in a partnered or married relationship with the mother of the child and to live in one household with her.

Between June and December 2019, 15 men were approached and after assessing all factors, four were included in the research. This was a homogeneous group, with all four participants meeting the following criteria: under 30 years of age, university degree, currently employed, in a long-term relationship and coming from intact families.

The average age of the participants was 27.50 ( $SD = 1.50$ ); the mean age of their partners was also 27.50 ( $SD = 1.80$ ). The average relationship duration was 5.10 years ( $SD = 1.80$ ). Three out of four couples were married; the average length of the marriage was 2.90 years ( $SD = 1.40$ ). The average age of the child at the time of the interview was 6.20 months ( $SD = 2.20$ ). The men came from four different locations in the Czech Republic (> 1 000 000 inhabitants, > 300 000 inhabitants, > 100 000 inhabitants, < 10 000 inhabitants).

### ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE RESEARCH

The ethical context of the research was supervised at the specialist seminars of the Department of Psychology, Faculty of Education, Charles University. The research intention and data collection design were approved by the head management of the Department of Psychology. The opposition to the broader results of the work (Škvařil, 2019) did not bring any findings and recommendations that would not be in accordance with the ethical recommendations of Charles University.

Prior to the start of the interview, all participants were informed of the research process and conditions; all participants signed an informed consent form. All men participated voluntarily and were free to withdraw from the research at any time. During the interviews, the men were treated with respect for their privacy and emotional state, and they had the option not to answer a question if they did not wish to do so. Once transcribed, the interview record was deleted immediately and all names were anonymized; the research followed the principles of anonymity in processing the data and confidentiality was ensured.

### DATA ANALYSIS

The data were analyzed and interpreted in accordance with the principles of interpretative phenomenological analysis (Osborn & Smith, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). The content of each interview was explored through repeated readings. Brief notes and comments were written in the margin of the text.

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Phenomena related to the research questions were then identified and these were then labeled with a condensed phrase or provisional term that attempted to capture the essence of the message. Greater attention was paid to recurring themes or statements that displayed a stronger emotional presence. Correlations and connections were sought between individual concepts and then they were clustered thematically based on meaning. The thematic clusters were organized through repeated sorting, comparing and merging, and then a suitable concept at a higher level of abstraction was selected for them. In this way, categories and their subcategories were formed. The categories were continuously discussed with another researcher to increase the reliability of the analysis. The resulting categories were compared with specific passages from the interviews to confirm or refute that they made sense even in relation to the primary source – the actual words of the participants. At this stage, some categories were discarded if they proved to be too far removed from the participants' statements or proved to be irrelevant to the research queries. This phase resulted in the identification of five significant categories, which were made up of smaller units (subcategories). Final-

ly, these themes were converted into narrative form, where the analysis was extended by illustrating with examples and looking for subtle differences between categories. In the narrative section, descriptions of each theme are interspersed with specific examples from the interviews.

## RESULTS

An in-depth analysis of the interviews identified five significant categories of transition to fatherhood: paternal identity, responsibility and commitment, partnership and parenthood, fatherhood and motherhood, and coping with the paternal role (see Table 1). The themes intersect and influence each other, so there is no sharp boundary between the categories that clearly identifies where a category begins or ends.

### PATERNAL IDENTITY

Research suggests that paternal identity does not emerge in one specific moment but is a long-lasting, dynamic process where the concept of oneself as a father is constructed from various fragments of memories, experiences, fantasies, expectations or internalized paternal patterns.

Although the male participants in the research had thought about their own fatherhood even before the period of pregnancy, the discovery that their partner was pregnant brought the topic into consciousness with greater urgency and a rallying to prepare for a life change: *Like, I started to realize everything I needed to do to make it as manageable as possible (I1); The outlook of great responsibility and a complete change to the state of living that, although it didn't actually exist at the time then yet, there was already the prospect that it would (I3).*

In the first months of pregnancy, the paternal identity was still very fragile. Uncertainty about whether pregnancy and childbirth would proceed without complications led the men to be somewhat cautious. Paternal identity was already taking shape but actual fatherhood was still difficult to observe during this period and was not yet guaranteed to occur. This was most evident in one participant who, for this reason, preferred to suppress positive emotions associated with fatherhood in the early months: *I'm not quite the type to be over the moon about it and... like... there's always that shadow that I don't... I don't want to be excited yet because the more I'm excited now and if it doesn't work out, then the sadder I'll be about it (I2).*

As the pregnancy progressed, evidence (e.g. physical changes in the partner) of the existence of a child grew, while the risk of miscarriage decreased. Various significant moments, such as being present during ultrasound examinations, pregnancy-related medical

**Table 1**

*Identified themes and categories of emerging fatherhood*

Themes	Categories
Paternal identity	Emerging paternal identity
	Fatherhood role models
	Personal fatherhood role model
	New self-perception
Responsibility and commitment	Reactions of others
	Acceptance of responsibility
	Responsible mindset
Parenthood and partnership	Spending time with family
	Partner relationship in a new light
	Support and protector
Fatherhood and motherhood	Mother as the more important parent
	Bigger role of father in later stages of child development
Coping with the paternal role	Happiness and worry
	Making the child happy
	Support from others

examinations or feeling the baby move through the partner's abdominal wall, contributed to the awareness and reinforcement of the emerging paternal identity.

The men experienced these moments intensely and they helped them anchor the whole experience in reality: *Always such a strong realization... such reassurance... a reminder... that something was going to happen and that I had to prepare for it somehow* (I4). There is a sense that the experience of having an unborn child was difficult for them to grasp, as if the baby was both real and unreal at the same time, and the whole experience was beyond them: *It was kind of so unreal. I couldn't really imagine that there was a baby living in that belly* (I4); *You realize that something is happening outside of you but that you have a hand in it* (I3); *It's an interesting and nice feeling when you can already feel that something is living there* (I1).

During the prenatal period, the men reflected on the topic of fatherhood, imagined different situations they might find themselves in as a father and formed a certain idea of a father they wanted to live up to. The interviews revealed that in constructing their own conceptions of fatherhood, the men drew inspiration from their own experiences with different father figures, from their own experiences of being in a parent-like role (e.g. teacher, uncle) or from memories of their own childhood and adolescence. The most significant role models for the participants were their own fathers, whom they wanted to either emulate or set themselves apart from in terms of certain characteristics. For them, they either represented a positive or a negative model of fatherhood: *My dad didn't take care of me at that age, and it's a lot about that the mother is taking care of the child... and she's breastfeeding and she's changing the diapers and so on... and he was the one bringing home the money. I think it was a lot like that. I'm more involved, I try harder compared to that dad* (I2); *Well, my dad I think has set the bar quite high as far as fatherhood goes, so I want to be at least as good... so yeah. My dad was very family oriented so I need to live up to him in that* (I4). Individual research participants were strongly influenced by their own fathers in terms of which qualities they considered important for the father role (e.g. father as a keeper of order and discipline, available father who spends enough time with the family, etc.).

Already during pregnancy, the men began to view themselves from a new perspective – that of their own child. They began to see themselves as someone from whom the child would learn, both in a positive and negative sense. This perspective allowed them to uncover and glimpse their strengths and weaknesses in a new light, and at the same time gave them a new meaning: *I realized that all the things I do will be observed and... such a reawakening of conscience. So I was thinking about how I'm going to look in his*

*eyes... specifically, like how I'm going to teach him to resolve conflicts... I probably won't help my son with that or I don't know how I'm going to help him with that, so maybe I was aware of some of my weaknesses as well. But at the same time I think I can teach him a lot of good things, that's for sure* (I3). For some of the men, this insight led to an attempt to channel some of their habits or personality traits (e.g. one participant corrected a tendency to be short-tempered through better emotional self-regulation).

For men, the birth of the child represented the moment when their emerging paternal identity was confirmed and legitimized. When they saw their child with their own eyes, heard his cries and were able to touch him, it confirmed that they had become fathers. The intensity of the feelings was so great that the participants found it difficult to put these experiences into words. The birth of the baby was accompanied by feelings of incredibility, love, happiness and joy, but also by the realization of the baby's vulnerability and the greatness of the commitment: *She had a very angry face... and she was all wrapped up in a hat and I thought it was absolutely incredible to see her like that... that suddenly it was real! Something that we've been waiting for and preparing for, all of a sudden she's got that face and she's looking at you, so it was amazing. She already had that grasping reflex... they've got that right away. So she had a hat there, so I put the hat on her. I found it all so fragile* (I2); *It was eerily beautiful looking at the image of yourself and your offspring, so like I say. I guess I see it very much from the position of that reflection or how I see myself and what kind of dad I want to be. It was such a mishmash of everything, all those feelings. And it manifested itself in our son. Very strong, of course. It felt very alien suddenly but also a welcome element in my life. So before I came to terms with it, it was quite surreal but that faded fairly quickly. And after that there's just that bond that develops and grows* (I3).

From that moment on, they could integrate the real experiences with their newborn child into their paternal identity, which until then had existed only in their imagination. Positive reactions from others – especially from immediate family and friends – also helped to strengthen the father role: *When I told guys older than me, for example, they reacted in a way like 'welcome to the club' or something... although it was only explicitly said like that once, I felt there that they were happy for me and envious at the same time and... it was such an interesting reaction... that I thought... oh, they envy me, so I guess there's something awfully good about it too* (I3); *By having such positive reactions, it helped me to sort of enjoy the role in a healthy way* (I4). It is likely that after such a major life change as the birth of a child, there may also be a transformation in overall self-perception. Participants reflected that they experienced personality changes and a shift in their perception of self with the arrival of their

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offspring. The men shared the impression that they were currently at a higher developmental stage characterized by greater personal maturity, and overall they perceived themselves as more responsible (now feeling responsible not only for themselves but also for their child and family).

## RESPONSIBILITY AND COMMITMENT

In the transition to fatherhood, responsibility stands out as a very strong and important theme. The theme of responsibility can be seen on several levels in the stories of the different parties: the acceptance of the responsibilities associated with parenthood, the responsible approach to preparing for parenthood and caring for the child and in the form of spending time with the family (availability of the father).

The weight of responsibility on the men was great and awakened uncertainty in them about their qualities: *I wondered if I could do it... it's a big responsibility, so if I'll be up to it (I4); ...a feeling of insane responsibility (I3)*. Accepting the child as their own and the associated responsibilities appeared in various forms in the fathers' statements, either explicitly or by implication. This important act was most explicitly verbalized by participant 4 (I4): *I can think of moments when maybe one thinks about it somehow and accepts the child as one's own*. Two of the participants felt it was important to be able to accept the child unconditionally, while at the same time, we can see formulations that point to a conscious commitment: *We will do it somehow unconditionally, making a resolution to do so. We said from the beginning that we would love him, even if maybe he wasn't healthy or had a disability or something (I4)*. The decision to build a relationship with the child from birth, which appeared in many different forms in the words of the fathers, can also be understood as a form of commitment. This was especially pronounced in the second participant, who decided to always put his daughter first: *So I want to be a great support and kind of like a friend to Sara and I have a rule that she must always come first and at work, no matter how bad it looks, it's always just work... and I never want to put her second. Now there is a time when she probably doesn't know it, but for now I try to be there at all the doctors' appointments for example, and regardless of any time constraints, I'm always there (I2)*. Among other things, the men's acceptance of responsibility for the child was helped by their awareness of the fragility and vulnerability of a small human being, which most of them felt strongly in the first moments after the birth of the child: *That the time is now then, and I'm definitely the dad now and... I don't think it can be summed up in a few sentences. Also scary in the sense that it's a fragile creature and he's just going to need that protection and he's going to be dependent and so*

*on and so forth... that actually it's very lovely but it means a lot of challenging things (I3)*.

The men's responsible attitude was already present in the prenatal period, in several forms: creating a home for the child, providing for material needs, seeking information about the course of pregnancy, childbirth and parenting, attending medical check-ups, etc. The second participant was the most involved in this respect, being present at all the examinations and accompanying his wife even to routine check-ups. In all cases, the men were present at the birth, they did not want to miss this important moment and at the same time they wanted to provide support to their partner. The fathers also tried to work on themselves, to develop their own competences, to reduce their negative personality traits (e.g. short temper) and negatively perceived habits (e.g. smoking). In the postnatal period, the men differed in their level of involvement; however, in all cases they considered it important to be involved in the care of the child and to jointly take care of the household responsibilities.

The theme of responsibility is also linked to the research participants' decision to be available for the child and to be able to put the child's needs before their own, even in moments when external or internal conditions are not favorable: in moments of a poor mental or physical state of mind, when the child is unwell and caring for them is demanding or when they themselves have other responsibilities. These men consider spending time with the family to be essential.

## PARTNERSHIP AND PARENTHOOD

The partnership of the men underwent a significant transformation – the partners became parents, which brought with it a shift on several levels. They began to see the partnership in a new light – in relation to the child they now share: *I think it has deepened it. We definitely tried to prepare for it together in some way so that the little one would come into a good environment... so that the relationship would be, like, okay... so that we weren't passing our problems on to him. So I think it's been good for the relationship. It's something that brings us more together and... that's something that will stay now (I4)*. The quality of the relationship was seen as essential to the quality of the child's life. The men reflected on a deeper connection with their partner, and the relationship for some had taken on a new dimension and greater depth.

Despite these new and intense feelings, the birth of a child was a stressful ordeal for the newly parented couples. Partnership life was now primarily driven by the needs of the child. The men reported that with the need to care for the child, time to devote to the partner relationship had diminished and



the quality of the relationship had suffered to some extent. The partners made an effort to nurture their relationship, although the men reported that they had to take a more proactive and conscious approach to it: *With the way there's so many things to do, you sort of neglect the contact... the communication and so on, so it's a thing that has to be almost pedantically observed because it sort of slips away quite quickly or the need... is overlooked quite quickly and it doesn't manifest itself straight away. It manifests itself maybe after a while when we're mad at each other for something... or we're mad and we don't even know why... or specifically we're mad at each other and my wife knows why we're mad at each other [laughing] (I3).*

Research suggests that participants most often intended to take on the role of supporter and protector. They had already acted in this role during their partner's pregnancy. They perceived their partner, the bearer of their future child, as vulnerable during this period and tried to deflect various negative influences that could potentially endanger her. The interviews show that they were more considerate towards their partners, accompanying them to medical appointments or trying to protect them from physical or psychological stress: *Then I actually went there almost every day... to be supportive in those days right after... women ask a lot of questions about whether she's going to be a good mom and so on and it's crazy stressful and she was worried a lot, so paradoxically, it was also challenging in those few days and weeks after that (I3).*

They perceived it as very important to be able to support their partner during and shortly after the birth. After the birth of the child, the mother became the primary caregiver but the men tried to be active and involved, and saw their role primarily as one of support and help in caring for the child and the household: *I try to help, but it's not that I'm replacing her, not that at all. It's always on her shoulders. I admire and acknowledge her for that... and she's great... and I know I should be helping more and I try to help her. Most of the time, I have her in my arms, so I just carry her, change her... I try to go along every chance I get, of course... like I've been with her to get her ears pierced. I've tried to feed her out of the bottle too... we always want to be together for baths. If I'm to say what I help with, it's that I hold her, change her diaper, help out during baths and what not... (I2).*

## FATHERHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

The men's search for their own place in the family system and the shaping of their paternal role was based, among other things, on the differences they saw between the roles of father and mother. The interviews revealed that the men tended to compare themselves with the mothers and define their own

parental position in relation to them. One of the central themes of the research was the fact that in the infant stage (or even the toddler stage) the men perceived the mother as the more important parent, even when they approached childcare with interest and wanted to match the mother in contribution to the child: *Mom will be the most important person for the kid until a certain age... then maybe it'll turn around again, but... I'm mainly trying to make sure that he knows me, that I spend that time with him and help as much as I can, but like I say... I can't feed him... yet (I4); ...and she's the mother who's also affected by hormones and she's got a better temperament for it (I2); I don't know, well, I guess her mom's a bit better with her than I am... [sadness in his voice] because after all they're together all day and stuff, well... at first, it was like I was the guy who comes home in the evening... [laughs] well now it's good, but like I say... she just likes her better... which is, like, normal... she's the mother, so what are you gonna do (I1).*

The main limit was breastfeeding. This biologically determined fact could not be compensated for by the men, despite some of them imagining that they would be able to feed the child in other ways: *Maybe I thought that I would be the daddy who would get up at night to feed the child, and now I find that she actually falls asleep after some breastfeeding and I can't compensate for that. I was dismissive of the fact that she was going to be totally dependent on her mother and I've found that it's not that easy because she doesn't really want to drink from the bottle... when you're feeding her outright (I2).*

The men also reflected on the fact that the children responded better to their mothers than to them and the mothers had a better ability to calm the baby down or make them fall asleep. In situations where they were unable to do so themselves, they experienced feelings of incompetence, frustration, helplessness and failure: *Being here alone with her, she broke me down and I totally lost it... I was feeling helpless and angry and I don't know what... I called her after an hour to come home... told her that I wasn't going to calm her down, that it was awful (I2); My son started crying terribly but it was really the magnitude of the crying that I thought... so that's really something, because he was gagging, just going completely nuts, screaming... completely red from the blood rushing to his head (I3).* The improved bond between child and mother was explained primarily in biological terms (closer bonding resulting from the fact that the child was in a symbiotic relationship with the mother during pregnancy, hormonal influences, etc.). However, the research also found that the men respected their female partners for their ability to establish a close emotional relationship with and care for their child but that there were also occasional feelings of envy.

Thus, in the neonatal and infant period, the male research participants perceive their parenting op-

tions as limited but foresee that their importance for the child will increase as they get older: *Up until the age of two, it's such a primarily maternal role... when they grow up a bit... it's going to be a different story. I can't do so much now, later I can do more (I1); I imagined those later periods when he's maybe 4 or 5 years old, when you can explain things to him. But of course you have to come through to that stage and you can't skip over to it (I4).*

#### COPING WITH THE PATERNAL ROLE

We find a certain ambivalence in the fathers' experiences, as caring for a child brings with it both joys and worries, as we can see in the statement of one of the participants: *When we are sick, for example, or when something is going on... at that moment you have like doubts... or it's unpleasant even... or it's depressing a little bit. And then again... like a swing... again the little one is fine that day and laughing and that... that makes up for almost everything (I4).* In the men's words, we find both poles of parenting that alternatively or more or less emerge. On the one hand, there are the uplifting feelings of love, joy, pride, and on the other, the weight of responsibility, helplessness, anger or worry.

Positive moments with the child and successes in the father role, especially when the men managed to cope with or overcome a particular challenging moment, proved to be very supportive for the sense of competence and the affirmation of paternal identity. The most challenging aspect for the men was calming their child or making them fall asleep: *When my wife wants to put him to sleep she sort of cradles him... and when I hold him in that position he starts to buck, he starts to cry for some reason... I don't know if I'm holding him wrong... so I can't really help her with that either (I3).* The inability to soothe the child was perceived as their own failure, often accompanied by feelings of despair, helplessness and anger. All the more powerful for them, then, were the rare moments when the child responded to their efforts by quieting down or falling asleep: *My biggest achievement or a moment of satisfaction was when I was holding him and he fell asleep... so that was kind of nice (I3).*

Support from others whether it be material (e.g. provision of baby supplies), emotional (e.g. support, sharing of joys and worries) or educational (e.g. advice from older and more experienced fathers) also proved to be very important for the men and their coping with the fatherhood role.

#### DISCUSSION

The research focused on men's experiences of the process of becoming a father. In the empirical part,

men's experiences with the transition to fatherhood were examined through an IPA approach, which helped clarify the significant themes that emerge during this transitional period. Before conducting the research, two research questions were posed:

#### 1. THE MALE EXPERIENCE IN THE PROCESS OF BECOMING A FATHER DURING THEIR PARTNER'S PREGNANCY AND THE EARLY MONTHS OF THEIR FIRST CHILD'S LIFE

The fathers perceived that they had experienced personality changes and greater personal maturity. They reflected a significant shift especially in the area of responsibility and the ability to put the needs of others before their own. The domain of responsibility has emerged in various forms, such as assuming responsibility associated with parenthood, cultivating a responsible attitude toward the pregnancy period, and preparing for parenthood, or in terms of spending time with the family (paternal availability). These findings align with the results of many international qualitative studies (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Finnbo-gadóttir et al., 2003; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Johnsen et al., 2017; Kowlessar, 2012; Kowlessar et al., 2014; Premberg et al., 2008; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Silva et al., 2021; Tehrani et al., 2014).

References made by some fathers about the conscious formation of a commitment to the child appear to align with Zoja's (2017) concept, which emphasizes the significance of fathers making a deliberate decision to accept the child as their own. In Zoja's (2017) perspective, a man does not automatically become a father upon the child's birth but becomes one only when he consciously chooses to do so. Based on the results of this research, we could hypothesize that this commitment must be consistently recalled and reinforced to maintain its original strength.

The research participants also reflect on the changes in the partner relationship, which moves from the level of partnership to the level of parenthood. References to changes in the form and quality of the partner relationship after the birth of a child can be found in both Czech and foreign literature. Research has reported a temporary deterioration in the quality of the relationship and an increase in the frequency of conflicts (Doss et al., 2009; Habib, 2012; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Twenge et al., 2003), but also a deepening of the relationship and taking the relationship to a new level (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Shapiro et al., 2000). Research participants reported comparable positive and negative experiences from their own partner relationships. In addition to increased conflict, decreased time together and impaired communication, they also mentioned that they began to feel more closeness to their partners

and were better able to tune into their needs. Within the newly formed family system, they most often took on the role of protector and supporter of the mother, which would be consistent with Diamond's (2007) concept that this function is most often associated with fatherhood in early childhood. The finding that men assumed the role of supporting their partners during pregnancy and after childbirth also emerged in several qualitative studies (Åsenhed et al., 2014; Diamond, 2007; Johnsen et al., 2017; Kao & Long, 2004; Sansiriphun et al., 2010; Tehrani et al., 2014).

## 2. FORMATION OF PATERNAL IDENTITY DURING THE TRANSITION TO FATHERHOOD

The research suggests that a man does not become a father only at the moment when the child is born, but from a psychological point of view, it is a long-lasting dynamic process where the father's identity is formed and sustained through various experiences.

The men were already looking for their own path to fatherhood during pregnancy, and part of the psychological preparation was reflection and exploration. From their new position in life – the role of father-to-be – the men reflected on experiences from the distant and recent past that could potentially be helpful to them. They reflected on their own childhood experiences, experiences with their own fathers and other father figures, experiences with friends in the role of fathers, or even their own memories of being in a similar role (e.g. as an uncle or teacher). In their imagination, they explored which of the approaches was closer or more distant, what was in line with their background, and which qualities they would like to convey to their own children and which they would not – in this way, they were looking for their own way, their own model of fatherhood.

In their search for this model and the formation of paternal identity, they relied most heavily on experiences with their own fathers, which corresponds with the results of foreign authors (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Habib, 2012; Höfner et al., 2011; Kowlessar, 2012). The most significant theme they reflected on in relation to their own fathers was availability/unavailability for the child, and in this sense, the father represented a positive or negative role model for them. Similar findings can be found, for example, in Habib (2012). However, other people in the environment (e.g., uncle, friend) can also become an inspiration and influence the paternal model. Similar insights can also be found in the study conducted by Wulf (2015).

Compared to their female partners, men do not have the opportunity to experience direct physical

contact with the child during pregnancy and can only experience the reality of the child indirectly (through the abdominal wall of the partner, on an ultrasound image, etc.). Draper (2002) refers to these moments as "body-mediated moments" and considers them to be very significant in terms of the transition to fatherhood. Other studies have also pointed to their important formative role (Diamond, 1986; Gurwitt, 1976; Kowlessar, 2012; Silva et al., 2021; Wulf, 2015). Silva et al. (2021) report that ultrasound and the experience of fetal movements were perceived by men as powerful experiences that helped them to accept the pregnancy. For men in particular, attending the ultrasound led to an amplification of emotions and an increase in thoughts related to their own impending fatherhood. In agreement with the above authors, our research shows that similar moments can help bridge the gap and barrier between father and child and promote acceptance of one's own fatherhood, which is facilitated by their high intensity, with men experiencing feelings of happiness, incredulity and amazement. The child, who until then has been perceived on the threshold between reality and unreality, becomes a little more tangible. The man suddenly has a bridge through which he can come into contact with his own child, and this facilitates the formation of a relationship with the child as well as his own paternal identity.

Berman and Long (2022) wrote that, in contrast to mothers, who experience their transition to parenthood very physically, fatherhood is constructed precisely through the absence of the corporeal experience. These authors do not see the transition to fatherhood as a smooth and obvious process but rather as one in which the father anxiously attempts to define himself through his absence in the mother-child dyad, both in the child's prenatal and postnatal periods. They hypothesize that men define their fatherhood largely through 'non-motherhood' and believe that they organize their paternal identity around what they are not, rather than what they are. Consistent with Berman and Long (2022), our finding would be that men defined their own fatherhood largely in terms of what they could not and were not enough for. They encountered some self-imposed limits (biological or otherwise) in the prenatal and postnatal periods, even when they wanted to match the mother in importance and tried to be as involved as possible in the care of the child. These limitations led them to modify their conception of fatherhood, where they had to redefine their own position and meaning of the paternal role, which most often led to the reinforcement of the protective and supportive role (see Diamond, 2007).

They considered the inability to breastfeed to be the biggest limitation in childcare compared to the mother. In their eyes, the mother was better predisposed biologically to care for the child in the neo-

natal and infant period. Similar perceptions can be found among men in other research (Carneiro, 2014; Fägerskiöld, 2008; Höfner et al., 2011; Kowlessar et al., 2014). Consistent with our research findings, Höfner et al. (2011) argue that breastfeeding introduces a certain asymmetry into parental care.

The men imagined that their importance in the role of parent would increase in the later developmental stages of the child (toddlerhood, preschool and beyond). This was probably to cope with the feelings of inferiority they experienced towards the mothers at certain times. The expectations of the fathers studied correspond to the psychoanalytically oriented theory of Diamond (2007), who also saw an increase in the importance of the father only in the toddler period. This author argues that the father's role in this period will primarily consist of mediating the experience of the world outside the mother-child dyad, and through his actions he will facilitate the separation of the child from the mother.

#### RESEARCH STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

The qualitative nature of our study does not allow us to generalize the results to a wider population; it is a psychological probe into the experience of several fathers. The homogeneous composition of the research participants could be considered a limitation. All men were adults, physically and mentally healthy individuals of Czech nationality who did not belong to any national minority. All of them had graduated from university, were employed and financially secure, came from complete families, and were in a long-term relationship, in which they considered having a child. The question then arises as to what findings would have been produced by a study that included men with different demographic or cultural characteristics. Due to the study's small sample size, the conclusions that can be derived from it are limited. Room for improvement in the research can be seen also in the method of data collection. A possible step to extend the research and obtain more information would be to conduct more interviews at longer intervals, e.g. during pregnancy, after childbirth and a few months after the birth of the child, which would make it possible to better follow the continuity of the process of becoming a father and information would not be obtained retrospectively as was done in this research.

One of the notable strengths of this research is its ability to uncover the depth and breadth of fathers' experiences, expanding our understanding of this often-overlooked topic. The study adhered to both methodological and ethical standards. The influence of the researcher was tempered by the researcher's thorough self-reflection, which was aided by keeping a research journal and also by the fact that the course

of the data analysis was consulted by other experts in the research.

#### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

The conducted study provides valuable insights that may inform future intervention approaches. We believe that it holds significance for midwifery education, research, and practice. It is crucial that all professionals engaged in maternal and child health embrace a broader approach to care. It could provide information for healthcare professionals to take into account gender-related factors to ensure that their support for parents is sensitive to the father's needs and does not obstruct the father's progression towards embracing an active role in fatherhood.

The findings of the research can also be viewed as an expansion of theoretical knowledge in the field of developmental psychology, particularly in terms of enhancing our understanding of developmental aspects during adulthood. These insights could be applicable not only in the obstetric sector and antenatal care, but also in couples counseling and family therapy when professionals encounter men during the period of pregnancy or childbirth. However, there is still relatively limited empirical knowledge on this topic, so the research findings can also serve as a reference point for future researchers.

#### CONCLUSIONS

The journey to fatherhood represents a unique and transformative time in a man's life. The aim of the research was to explore men's first experience with parenthood and the very birth of the phenomenon of fatherhood in their psyche. An in-depth interview was conducted with each of the four participants. The data and outcomes from these interviews were subsequently analyzed using an IPA approach and then compared with empirical and theoretical findings from Czech and international literature. The main contribution of the study can be seen in the results of the data analysis, which provide insights into men's experiences of the transition to fatherhood and a better understanding of how their paternal identity was shaped.

Among the different areas, the theme of responsibility and creating a conscious commitment to the child emerged strongly. The research shows that paternal identity is constructed and reinforced through a long and complex dynamic process in which men draw on experiences with different father figures or their own childhood and adult experiences. Within this process, paternal identity is also shaped through repeated comparisons and definitions of the role of the mother. Among other things, how fathers handle

childcare situations has been shown to be very important for their self-esteem, especially in moments that are stressful and challenging. The data and findings from this research can serve as a springboard for other researchers in the field of fatherhood, which remains a rather marginal topic in developmental psychology.

#### DISCLOSURE

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