From belonging to belonging through a blessed moment of love for a child – the birth of a child from the fathers’ perspective

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Abstract

Background: Over the years the involvement of the partner in the childbirth process has resulted in an increasing interest in the partner’s role. Research into the partner’s experiences is still limited. This study aimed to describe the experiences of fathers at the birth of their child from the father’s perspective.

Method: Sixteen fathers were interviewed about their experiences at the birth of their child between 8 days and 6 weeks after the birth. The interviews were analysed using a phenomenological approach.

Results: The findings not only recount that the moment of birth was a life changing and overwhelming moment characterised by feelings of love and belonging, but go further in revealing the birth of a child as a movement from belonging to belonging through a blessed moment of love for a child.

Conclusion: What this finding indicates is that the birth of a child is an important experience in the quality of life of men, calling for their participation at the birth of the child and for a strategy of leaving the family alone right after this outstanding life moment of a new birth.

Introduction

Fathers began coming into the delivery room some decades ago to support the mother [1]. Over the years, the involvement of the partner in the childbirth process has resulted in shared experiences for couples [2]. Furthermore, changing professional and cultural attitudes have made men conscious of the fact that they can help by participating in the birth of their child [3,4]. Attending fathers report experiencing fulfillment and delight during childbirth [5]. They perceived themselves to be of help to their partner [4,6]. However, there was no link between the fathers’ support to the mother and the length of time in labour, the use of pain-relieving drugs, or obstetric intervention [7,8]. One study, reviewing wide-ranging research literature from professional and theoretical perspectives, revealed that the birth experience for partners is often a difficult time. They felt coerced, ill-prepared, ineffective and excluded from the event [9]. They felt in need of more support and guidance for their role during birth [10]. Thus, previous research has concentrated on fathers’ labour coaching roles, neglecting an examination of any independent roles or needs that men may have [3,11]. In an attempt to fill this gap, the aim of this study was to describe fathers’ experiences at the birth of their child from the father’s perspective. The birth of the child is defined in this study as the
moment of birth and the first few minutes after birth.

Materials and methods

Procedure

Six midwives identified couples who were then provided with verbal and written information on the study. The description included an explanation that the interview would be conducted by a researcher at the university, would be audio taped, that participants could withdraw at any time and that the interview would take about 1 hour. Confidentiality was guaranteed. Informed written and verbal consent was obtained from the fathers. After receiving signed informed consent, the researcher phoned the fathers to make an appointment. Eighteen interviews were conducted. Two test interviews were carried out, one at the university and one in the informant’s home. The fathers emphasised the importance of choosing a quiet place for the interviews. Test interview material was excluded from the analysis. The Regional Ethics Board gave permission for the study.

Setting and participants

Data gathering was carried out at two district maternity clinics. Between them these clinics conducted 2500 deliveries per year. Childbirth practice involved the use of epidural and spinal anaesthesia, artificial rupture of membranes and electronic foetal monitoring during vaginal birth. The caesarean section rate was close to 20% [12]. After a vaginal birth, babies were left skin-to-skin, covered with cloths, on their mothers’ breast for the first suckling. After babies delivered by caesarean section had been put at their mothers’ breast, the mothers were transferred to the postoperative ward for observation and care, and separated from their infants who were taken care of by the fathers.

To be included in the study, the birth of the child should have taken place between the 37th and 42nd week of pregnancy. The fathers should have been present at the birth of their child. Mother and child had to be healthy.

This study is based on 16 participating Swedish-speaking fathers of between 28 and 54 years of age. The child ranged from being their first to their fifth child. For characteristics of the sample see Table 1.

Interviews

Interviews took place 8 days to 6 weeks after the birth of the child, once mothers and infants had been discharged from institutional postnatal care. Fathers were free to choose the place of the interview; some chose their homes while others preferred a room at the univer-

Table 1 Characteristics of the sample

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<tr>
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<th>Civil status</th>
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sity. Some fathers wanted an early appointment while they were on parental leave during the first 2 weeks after the baby was born, others wanted to wait due to their family or work situations. The open interviews lasted 45–90 minutes. After a series of demographical questions the fathers were asked to tell their story: Please tell me about your experience? They narrated freely and the interviewer interjected questions, such as: “How did you feel then?” or “What did you think then?”. The audiotape recordings were transcribed verbatim with marks for silence, hesitation, laughing and other forms of communication. Each transcript was then number coded.

**Analysis**

Giorgi emphasised that researchers should stay close to the original data and restrain their pre-understanding throughout the phases of the analysis procedure [13–15]. Throughout the analysis process a conscious effort was made to reflect on the phenomena to avoid premature explanation, in a search for rich descriptions and an invariant structure. The analysis was carried out by both authors together, each taking turns to act as the co-reader. The analysis comprised four stages: (1) grasping a sense of the whole, (2) identifying meaning units, transforming everyday expressions into professional language, (3) synthesizing transformed meanings into constituents and (4) combining the meaning of the data into a general structure to form the essence [13,14]. In the first stage, the sense of the whole was captured while the transcriptions were read and re-read in order to gain a broad feel for the fathers’ experiences. This was a naive reading. In the second stage, the text was carefully looked through to capture every word that was to be included in the analysis and described in the meaning units. Each meaning unit was copied from the transcribed text and put into a matrix to organise the data. The meaning units took the form of paragraphs focusing on the phenomenon. Each meaning unit was examined closely and reflected upon with everyday language being carefully transformed and translated into English in a first transformation, keeping close to the original text. In the third stage, constituents were formed from meaning units related to each other and the text was again transformed still keeping close to the original text. In the fourth stage, the general structure that no longer differed within or between each of the constituents was presented as the essence of the father’s experiences at the birth of their child. An example of the analytical procedure can be seen at Fig. 1.

![Example of the analytical procedure.](https://example.com/fig1.png)
Results

The essential meaning of the phenomenon “The birth of a child” was: “From belonging to belonging through a blessed moment of love for a child”. The constituents were: “Changing perspective of life”, “Being in a relationship”, “Living through a life change”. The general structure and the three constituents that emerged from the text are presented below, illustrated by quotations from the interviews. Subject numbers are given in brackets after each quotation.

From belonging to belonging through a blessed moment of love for a child

The essential meaning of the phenomenon “The birth of a child” was characterised by belonging. Feelings of anxiety during the moment of birth could be understood as feelings of belonging. Life showed itself as fragile and easily broken, as a threat to belonging, growth and future life together. Belonging to each other as human beings, to himself, the partner and the unborn child, moved the fathers present at the birth of their child, through a “blessed moment of love for a child” at the pinnacle moment of birth. In this “blessed” outstanding life moment, a hitherto unknown series of events seemed to take place within the fathers’ minds and bodies. The blessed moment of love for the newborn was characterised by relief and happiness. Exhilaration at “the blessed moment” decreased as minutes passed after birth, and feelings of belonging again increased. As minutes passed, the fathers moved further towards deepened belonging to the newborn child, their partner and themselves as fathers, and they experienced a changed perspective of life.

Changing perspective of life

The birth of the child meant relating back to earlier knowledge and experiences, how they were brought up themselves and to their own childhood. The fact that everything turned out well without complications could not be compared with any happy event that had occurred up until then.

“I cannot compare it with anything else... happy things happen in a lifetime but nothing like this...” (10).

Even if it meant dealing with their own anxiety and worry in somewhat difficult situations, trying to stay in control.

“I saw that the staff were worried when the uterus did not contract properly and the mother lost blood, but I stayed calm and showed the baby to the mother. At the same time I perceived that the staff were more worried than they pretended to be in front of us.” (8)

Whatever had happened during the earlier experiences of labour and pregnancy, such as miscarriage and assisted conception, was now linked to feelings of happiness and relief after the baby was born. Even if they had had an unhealthy child or if something had gone wrong, the father would have been proud to have been part of the natural process over the past 9 months.

“I believe I would have felt the same if there had been problems, if the baby had not been healthy, if there had been complications. I would still have been proud of what we have been through...” (15)

The birth of the child was a great experience for the fathers; the experience inspired the fathers to say that they felt that they became men or that they grew as humans. For one father it was like changing from being a son to being a father.

“At the birth of the child I became a man. I grew because my child was so little. It was a great experience...” (1)

Fathers also described how they cried when the baby was born even though they were brought up not to cry in front of others.

Being in a relationship

At the birth of the child the fathers’ attention was directed towards their partner. They tried to calm their partner down through body contact and by talking. At the moment of birth they perceived their partner’s relief and noticed how tension diminished when she could touch, feel and look at the baby. They experienced calmness after birth when the child was lying on the mother’s breast skin-to-skin. When the staff said the baby looked fine they felt calm both when they actually could see or when they could not see it themselves. At first sight the baby might have
seemed alien, with blood and baby fat on the baby’s body, but the picture of the child was stored in the father’s heart. The first sight of the child was a wonderful experience. fathers focused on the baby’s face, open eyes and facial expressions; something they wanted to remember for the rest of their lives.

“The baby was...he cried for a while with his chin trembling [laugh]. Then his facial expression changed quickly to one of calm with his eyes closed...like a monk you know.” (6)

The birth of the child meant that the child came closer to the father, having been at a distance in the mother’s tummy. The kicking in the tummy suddenly became a real person and the birth of the child generated immediate love for that child. The fathers described the child as pale, quiet, beautiful, clean, small and sweet with a hint of hair or no hair. They did not want to leave hold of this gift that they had just received, not even if they perceived that their partner also needed them at the same moment.

“I did not want to leave my partner, but to leave the baby with a nurse, even if I trusted them, was not a good feeling. I wanted to follow the baby to see more of it. At the same time I knew that my partner needed me. I believe she understood my priority.” (9)

Living through a life change

The birth of their child made the fathers’ think how fragile and easily broken life was, and that it should be handled with care. They described being possessed of overwhelming, indescribable feelings and thoughts and of physical reactions within their bodies. It was when they heard the baby cry that they understood that they had become fathers.

“It was at the moment of birth of the child that I realised I had become a father. In fact, at that moment I realised that everything had gone well, maybe not completely, something could still have happened, but in principle everything had gone well...” (12)

The birth of the child gave the fathers powerful feelings of exhilaration. The fathers described the pinnacle moment of the birth of their child, which then subsided as the minutes passed. At first it meant being there hysterically happy, keeping back tears by swallowing, then trying to govern feelings, being able to say single words or perhaps two, and then later being able to find self-control when talking to his partner, child or the staff. The intense exhilaration lasted only for the first few minutes. When they heard the baby cry it signified the life and happiness of a living, healthy baby, relief from worry, tension, anxiety and nightmares and from the possibility that something could go wrong, instead there was a feeling of having been blessed.

“The tension was gone, everything was calm now and it was over...As I said all anxiety and tension was as if ‘blown away by the wind’...as soon as he appeared. It was like...[the father put his hand in front of his mouth and blew to indicate anxiety and tension being blown away]...just at the moment when I heard the cry. It was like dropping a heavy burden, a feeling impossible to describe...[the father showed his relief with a deep sigh]...” (11)

The birth of the child made them take possession of a life they intended to share with the child, and they assumed their duties. Some fathers felt confident, while others questioned their ability as a father. It awoke deep existential thoughts and feelings within them.

“It was amazing. My mother died some years ago. It was the same sort of feelings, but the opposite. When life ends it is definitively the end, when a life starts it is definitively the beginning, but when someone dies you know the life they have lived. At birth something new begins. It is a totally indescribable feeling.” (3)

One father understood what he had been through when he saw his child being born. The birth of the child awoke protective feelings for his partner and the child. The three of them were at the moment of birth linked together and could not be seen as three separate lives.

Discussion

In an answer to Hodnett, who trivialised the role of the father during birth [8], Richards stated that the birth of a child is a unique, wonderful, emotional as well as a testing experience [16]. This is in line with the present
study, with the essential meaning of the phenomenon “The birth of the child: from belonging to belonging through a blessed moment of love for a child”. In the constituent “Changing perspective of life” the birth of the child was shown as a great experience, starting a new life and developing the fathers as human beings. This can be related to work by Parse, who stated that health is a process of unfolding while living [17]. In addition, Parse talked about health as a personal commitment [17]. This can be related to the general structure of belonging and the constituent “Being in a relationship” yielding the fathers’ lived experiences of love for the baby. The mother’s love for the baby has previously been described as coming from closeness and joy [18], and with relief from the traumatic experience of birth [19]. One can speculate whether a supreme bonding experience for fathers might also reduce men’s fear of childbirth. Also, in normal birth, anxiety is associated with potential complications [20]. The father’s immediate love for the baby can be related to previous descriptions of fathers perceiving the babies immediately and successively [21,22]. In the present study belonging can be understood as a bonding beneficial to the baby, the father himself and his partner [9,21, 22].

In the constituent “Living through a life change”, the fathers experienced how life showed itself as fragile and easily broken, meaning their belonging was threatened, in line with Erikson’s study about men worried for the health and life of a partner or child [20]. A potential separation right after birth was also experienced as a threat. In “the blessed moment of love for the child” it could be understood that the fathers experienced a sense of the past and the future leaping into the present [23], as the fathers felt an unknown course of events taking place within them. The meaning of this “blessed moment” for the fathers’ future life could just be speculation. Richards argues that memories and an emotional bond might create a stronger family, after sharing one of life’s unique and precious moments [16]. Although it should be noted that men also felt threatened by the experience of being outsiders [11,24,25] and excluded from the event [9]. In addition they felt they were ill-prepared [9] and in need of increased support [1,26] rather than being excluded and replaced [8,16]. The life of the father is transformed due to the continuity of life and the presence of a newborn child in the family [11], probably irrespective of the number of children already in the family. However, this needs further investigation. In addition, further research could investigate fathers’ feelings of anxiety associated with potential complications versus a normal birth.

Limitations

The main issue is whether the reduction of the interview material has been used in a way that did not threaten the credibility of the research process [13,27]. In line with this approach the interviewer attempted to put aside personal attitudes [28]. During the analysis process the two researchers reflected each step carefully and honestly. This strengthened the conformability of the findings when challenging each other’s perspective and when looking to distil pure descriptions [13,14]. However, the researchers’ own experiences of the phenomena could never be totally disregarded, but they were at least held in check, allowing the meaning of the phenomenon to manifest itself [29]. The analysis process has been carefully described using an example of the analytical procedure. Moreover, the findings are in line with other studies in the field [1,26], which strengthens credibility [13].

This study was conducted in Sweden, but the findings can be transferred to other situations that are similar. However, one should remain reserved about transferability, even if the participants are in sufficient number for the phenomenological analysis, and their experiences wide enough to shed light on the phenomenon [13]. Fathers from other parts of the world with a similar social context might have cultural attitudes and dimensions that differ [30] from fathers in this study. In addition, the word “father” can be replaced with the word “partner”; although it was fathers that participated in this study.

Conclusion

The findings not only recount that the moment of birth was a life changing and overwhelming moment characterised by feelings of love and belonging, but go further in revealing the birth of a child as a movement from belonging to belonging through a blessed moment of love for a child.
Clinical implications

What this latter finding indicates is that the birth of a child is an important experience in the quality of life of men, calling for their participation at the birth of their child, as well as the need to leave the family alone right after this outstanding life moment of new birth. In this way the autonomy of the family could be preserved.

Fathers’ experiences and their parenting role should be discussed during prenatal education courses. The descriptions in this study might make both partners and staff reflect on the historical, social and cultural values that affect a man’s parenting role in families in relation to a father’s life world experiences.

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References