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Expectant Fatherhood and First Pregnancy

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The expectant father has been portrayed in popular literature as a comic figure, a bumbling ignorant man whose only concern is getting his wife to the hospital on time. Even this he does poorly. This humorous portrayal is certainly inappropriate, given the increased involvement of husbands in Lamaze and other childbirth education classes, physician or clinic visits, coaching during labor and delivery, attachment toward newborns, and infant care.

Literature Review

Two important studies have looked at expectant fathers. One is Fein's study of 82 men from four weeks prior to the delivery of their first child to six weeks after birth.¹ Comparisons of pre- and post-adjustment indicated that five factors contributed to a healthy adjustment: preparation for parenting, health of the infant, support from families, support from work, and agreement about roles between the couple.

Another study of expectant fathers by Wapner followed 128 fathers from the seventh month of pregnancy through to the last childbirth class.² The major concerns of the fathers were the breadwinner role, loss of sexual drive and activity, and physical discomfort (self, not wife). LaRossa has studied the husband-wife system prior to and during pregnancy³; a more specific focus for

LaRossa has been sexuality for the couple during a first pregnancy.⁴

The literature of expectant fatherhood yielded only two longitudinal studies. Gurwitt, a psychoanalyst, described a single case study in which his newly married patient, in the course of a four-year analysis, fathered a child.⁵ Gurwitt saw his patient's preparation for pregnancy as involving "a major reworking of the past and current relationships with his father, mother, siblings, and wife as well as a shift and resynthesis of his sense of self." Bobak, in her doctoral dissertation, followed a group of expectant fathers throughout pregnancy.⁶ Bobak's phases describe vivid and descriptive clinical vignettes, yet as data for theoretical considerations they are limited.

Methods

The purpose of this initial cross-sectional study was to establish what changes take place during a first pregnancy for expectant fathers. This developmental process is believed to be linked to the biological events of pregnancy. It was hypothesized that men would undergo major changes due to the pregnancy and the anticipation of a child. These reactions have been clinically viewed as related to the trimesters of the pregnancy. The sample population was contacted by phone for consent and a mailed questionnaire was completed and returned to the researcher. The sample consisted of 83 men in the following five groups: prepregnancy (20), first trimester (12), second trimester (17), third trimester, (20), and new fathers (14).

The return rate was 75 percent, quite high for mailed questionnaires.

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The questionnaire was composed of three sections. The first section contained items on race, religion, education, income, employment, age, age at marriage, and length of marriage. The second (father) section asked questions about readiness for pregnancy, perceived happiness and satisfaction, perceived stress, general health, provider behaviors, confidence, sexual attitudes and behavior, and anticipation of labor and delivery. The third section contained seven open ended questions designed for expectant fathers to respond more personally. Since expectant fatherhood is a relatively unexplored area, this was the place for "unplanned for" data.

Results

There were statistically significant differences between the men at different stages of the pregnancy and results of practical significance as well. The first and third trimesters had high levels of lifestyle change and more positive feelings about fatherhood, the pregnancy, the marital relationship, and sexuality. The second trimester was less demanding in terms of change, but more negative feelings were reported.

The entire sample responded with favorable feelings, attitudes, and behaviors. The average for all questions and categories in the fatherhood questionnaire was in the high positive range. The score representing life satisfaction feelings remained uniformly high. There were no highs and lows of satisfaction prior to or throughout the pregnancy. These data indicate a positive adaptation despite a high degree of change in their lives.

Several demographic factors were highly related to these positive scores: father's age and length of marriage; education, occupation, and income; and religious preference and/or depth of faith. While the first two factors were expected because they represent to some degree maturity and breadwinner abilities, the religious factor was not expected and warrants further study.

With the new fathers there was a preponderance of positive responses to the bonding questions; with the infant caretaking question there is a definite indication of father involvement, with "playing with/talking to" being the most frequent activity. The least frequent activities were "feeding" and "bathing."

Comment

The concept of a developmental process was strongly supported by this study. The framework of trimesters seems to prove helpful in ordering and understanding the changes that expectant fathers were experiencing. There were clusters of concerns that "fit" with the trimester of pregnancy. For example, the first trimester found men struggling with disbelief about the pregnancy. There were doubts that their wife was really pregnant. Some of the men expressed vague ideas about the future child and their relationship with the child. Later in the pregnancy their concerns were much more specific and their questions more explicit.

Support from family and work was assessed in the open ended questions. There was slightly less support to fathers in the prepregnancy, first, and second trimester than in the third trimester. The wife was the most frequently named support throughout the pregnancy and during new fathering. Across all the groups there was a strong preference for the baby to be like the wife, much more than for the baby to be like self. The conflict with work and family was spontaneously mentioned by several men, especially by the new fathers. There was agreement that co-workers were supportive, but the structure of work was a frequent complaint.

Conclusion

It seems that expectant fathers are experiencing a "positive crisis," ie, a stressful, change producing event during which a sense of personal growth or maturity is achieved. Fathers were involved throughout pregnancy and clearly attached to their newborn. The degree of involvement was beyond that of "maternal" support. They were coparticipants in this significant life event.

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