

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# “Opening up a well of emotions”: A qualitative study of men's emotional experiences in the transition to fatherhood

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**Abstract****Aim:** To explore the emotional changes and reactions men experience in their transition to fatherhood.**Design:** This study used a qualitative design.**Methods:** Data were collected through in-depth interviews with 13 Norwegian fathers.**Results:** Through thematic analysis, three main themes were developed: (1) from self-focus to family perspective; (2) emotional vulnerability; and (3) from insecurity to self-assurance. The themes describe fathers' emotional process during the child's first year of life, ranging from positive feelings like affection and mastery, to challenging feelings like exclusion, jealousy and exhaustion. Many fathers describe taboos and shame over their own emotional reactions, although these can be considered a natural part of the postnatal period.**KEYWORDS**

emotions, fatherhood, fathers, mental health, nursing, perinatal, transition

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

Becoming a father involves major changes in roles, identity and life focus (Baldwin et al., 2018; Chin et al., 2011; Fägerskiöld, 2008). Fathers are expected to provide support to mothers and children, be breadwinners, family protectors, playmates and caregivers (Crespi & Ruspini, 2015). The transition to fatherhood can be challenging for many men and brings great emotional changes. These changes occur over time and help to form fathers' identities (Baldwin et al., 2018; Crespi & Ruspini, 2015).

Men need time to establish and develop their role as a father. This is a process that lasts throughout the entire perinatal period, from pregnancy, via birth and the child's first year of life. From a life course perspective, this period is considered a major life transition. A life transition can be viewed as a phase, a temporary state,

that involves changes linked to status and identity, and which opens opportunities for the individual to develop (Elder Jr. et al., 2003). It is also considered a vulnerable phase that can lead to both positive and negative changes, and it can influence a person's physical, mental and social health, as well as their sense of well-being (Baldwin et al., 2018; Elder Jr. et al., 2003).

## 2 | BACKGROUND

Mental health constitutes an important aspect of health. An increasing amount of research addresses the mental health of fathers in the perinatal period, but studies often focus on diagnostic symptoms related to parental stress, anxiety and depression (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010; Philpott et al., 2017). Mental health can be viewed

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from a salutogenic perspective and not merely be understood as an absence of illness, but also as an emotional and functional presence, with room for positive feelings and life functions (Mjøsund, 2021). For most men, the perinatal period is a period of joy, and positive relations and experiences (Kotelchuck, 2022). To gain a general understanding of the psychological changes linked to this role transition, there needs to be emphasis on both the inner psychological and the outer social factors, and the interaction between them (Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009). Psychological factors that have a bearing on mental health can be linked to a person's interpersonal relationships, their autonomy and competence. Social factors can include affirmation of one's actions and social acceptance (Huinink & Feldhaus, 2009).

Expectations of and demands on fathers' participation in the family vary according to sociocultural contexts (Lorentzen, 2012). In Norway where this study originates, an active fathering role is expected, and fathers have individual rights connected to, for example, parental leave (Lorentzen, 2012; Norwegian Labour and Welfare Administration, 2021).

The child health service in Norway is a free and universal service, used by 98% of all families (Statistics Norway, 2021). Midwives and public health nurses have a key role in supporting and guiding new families, including parents' mental health (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2017). The service has progressed from primarily aiming to support mothers and children, to a current emphasis on the whole family (Norwegian Directorate of Health, 2017). However, studies in Norway and other countries report that fathers do not feel fully included or regarded as independent and equal caregivers (Carlson et al., 2014; Høgmo et al., 2021; Hrybanova et al., 2019). Men also tend to seek less mental health and parenting support (Isacco et al., 2016). At the same time, studies show that fathers want more support and knowledge relating to their mental health and emotional reactions. They also need reassurance that their feelings are a normal part of undergoing a significant life event (Shorey & Chan, 2020). Professionals employed in the perinatal health services appear to lack knowledge about and have insufficient focus on these themes in relation to fathers (Hammarlund et al., 2015; Massoudi et al., 2011; Wells et al., 2017). With the aim of following up on and expanding these findings, this article explores men's emotional changes and reactions in the transition to fatherhood and argues that men's experiences of fatherhood need to be understood from an individual identity, family/couple, social and societal perspective. Thus, public health nurses and other health professionals providing perinatal health services should have a multifaceted approach to supporting fathers during this period.

## 3 | METHODS

### 3.1 | Design

The study has a qualitative inductive design, with interviews as data collection method. To explore the personal experiences of fathers, we chose to use individual semi-structured in-depth interviews

(Tong et al., 2007). We used thematic analysis, inspired by Braun and Clarke's method of analysis, with an emphasis on close examination of empirical data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The participants in the study are part of a larger research project, *New Families*. The project will contribute to service development and evaluate the universal home visiting programme *New Families*, which is an early prevention initiative in child health centres in Norway (National Library of Medicine, 2019). To strengthen the family perspective in the project, this study is one of several sub-studies with the perspective of fathers.

### 3.2 | Recruitment and data collection

For this interview-based study, we recruited fathers who were already participating in the research project *New Families*. The informants represent a strategic sample based on the following inclusion criteria: had participated in the research project *New Families*, had consented to participate in follow-up studies, had received at least one home visit from a public health nurse as a part of the home visiting programme, had a child who is no more than 1 year old, speaks English or a Scandinavian language.

Twenty-five fathers met the inclusion criteria and were invited to take part in the study. We sent them a letter requesting their participation and an information sheet, and a further reminder via text message. Seven fathers did not respond, five declined and 13 agreed to participate in the study. The recruitment process took place from August 2020 until February 2021.

The first author carried out individual interviews. The fathers could choose to be interviewed over the telephone or with the video conference platform Zoom (Uninett, n.d.). Seven of the participants preferred to be interviewed via telephone while six selected Zoom. All interviews were audio recorded. The duration of the interviews was 55–90 min (66 min on average). The first author transcribed the interviews verbatim, immediately following each interview.

The interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide, which reflected the aim of the study and our prior contextual understanding of the topic. The guide consisted of open-ended principal questions with the opportunity to ask more detailed follow-up questions and carry out further exploration according to the informant's responses and reflections. The fathers were encouraged to reflect on their own experiences related to become/being a father. The interview guide is given in Table 1.

### 3.3 | Data analysis

We carried out a six-phase thematic analysis of the data, inspired by Braun and Clarke's method of analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In the first phase, the first author transcribed the interviews verbatim. She made notes describing intonation, pitch, laughter and pauses in order to capture the original meaning of the data. The completed transcripts were then checked against the audio recordings to

TABLE 1 Interview guide

Open-ended principal questions	Follow-up questions for further exploration according to the informant's responses and reflections
How has this first year as a father been for you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In what way has becoming a father affected you?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about what has given you joy?</li> <li>• Can you tell me about something you have been worried about?</li> <li>• What feelings or reactions have surprised you the most after having a baby?</li> <li>• Has it ever felt too much?</li> <li>• If, when and how do you react?</li> <li>• Do you ever feel stressed?</li> <li>• How do you react to stress?</li> <li>• How is your sleep?</li> <li>• How do you balance fatherhood and work life?</li> <li>• How has your relationship with your partner been after becoming parents?</li> </ul>
How will you describe yourself as a father?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• How do you feel when you are together with your child?</li> <li>• Can you talk about a situation or experience you have had with your child, can be both positive or negative.</li> <li>• When do you feel like a good father?</li> <li>• When do you feel like a bad father?</li> </ul>

ensure accuracy. Next, the authors read through the transcripts several times to gain a general understanding of the texts. During phase two, the first author systematically reviewed the entire data set. She assessed all the material and selected analytical units that were relevant to the aim of the study. These units provided the basis for constructing data-driven codes. The codes were then sorted into potential themes. The authors discussed the codes and their meanings. The coding was carried out manually and thematic maps were used to visualize potential themes and the relationships between them. Thereafter, the authors again reviewed the potential themes: we read the codes for each theme to ensure that they were placed in the right context and to prevent overlapping of data. During this phase, we developed the final main themes and subthemes. In the fifth phase, the individual themes were given names that reflected the essence of the content. We discussed names to reach agreement on the meanings they contained. Examples of the analytic process are given in Table 2. The written results are supported by representative statements from the informants. All fathers are represented in all themes, and we use quotations from all fathers in the presentation of the results, in the text or the table. To ensure trustworthiness, we strived to carry out the data analysis in a precise and consistent manner through all the phases of the analysis described above.

### 3.4 | Ethical considerations

Only fathers who had participated in the research project *New Families* and had given their consent to be contacted for follow-up studies received a request to participate. All the informants were given written and verbal information about the study and its aim. They were informed that participation was voluntary and were given the opportunity to withdraw at any stage in the process without consequences.

All data were anonymized, treated confidentially, and stored in accordance with the Norwegian Personal Data and Health Research Acts using the Service for Sensitive Data platform (University of Oslo, 2016). We report in accordance with the COREQ checklist for qualitative research (Tong et al., 2007).

## 4 | RESULTS

The aim of the study was to explore men's emotional changes and reactions in relation to the transition to fatherhood. 13 fathers participated in the study. All of them were gainfully employed and lived in an urban environment. 12 were first-time fathers and one had two children. All the fathers were married to or living with the child's mother. Three of the fathers had grown up in another European country, while the rest had grown up in Norway. They ranged in age from 26–45 years, with an average age of 36. The children were aged from 11–18 months at the time of the interview, with an average age of 14 months. One child was born prematurely, while the others were full term. 12 of the fathers had taken paternity leave during the child's first year of life.

The data analysis resulted in three main themes, and seven subthemes: (1) from self-focus to family perspective; (2) emotional vulnerability; and (3) from insecurity to self-assurance. The themes and subthemes are presented in Table 3.

The themes described the emotional process that the fathers underwent in the child's first year of life. The process includes changes related to the fathers' life perspectives, sense of self and relationships with their child and partner. The first period after the child's birth was characterized by a combination of strong feelings of love and affection together with rejection, in which the fathers often felt excluded from the mother–child dyad. Their life perspective gradually changed, as family ties grow stronger, with a heightened focus on family and

TABLE 2 Examples of the analytic process; analytical units, codes, subthemes and themes

Analytical units	Codes	Subtheme	Theme
It's different now, I feel more relaxed. There were of course things I liked doing before the baby was born, I really appreciated my private time, but it's not that important anymore. My child is the priority. I like working out, and I run a lot, and there are things I do to stay healthy and think clearly, but they take second or third priority now. The top priority is my child, and I don't feel that I'm missing out on anything. It's more like I'm thankful to him rather than regretful (Father 3)	Having a new perspective on what is important in life, feel more relaxed. I put the child first, also above my own needs. The child is the top priority, and I don't feel like I'm missing out on anything	A new life perspective	From self-focus to family perspective
At first it was pure joy, but then I reached a point after a couple of months where I felt like I had lost my identity. I felt like I lost myself, and realized that life was different now (Father 7)	At first it was joy, but I reached a point after a couple of months where I felt like I had lost my identity, I felt that I lost myself, and realized that life was different now	Grief and loss of identity	
It was pure joy when he was born, and everything went well. It's been great to see him grow, learn to walk and talk, it's absolutely fantastic. It's been such a joy getting to know him, and for us to show him off to friends and family. See that he is from us, something we have created, it's incredible (Father 4)	Joy, and pride over the child, that he's 'from us', something we have created together	The development of family love	
I can be irritable and grumpy and get annoyed at small things. Even if you can't express it, to the child, you walk around feeling constantly irritated on the inside (Father 9)	I can be irritable, grumpy, and get annoyed at small things. Even if you don't express it, you are constantly irritated on the inside	The difficult emotions	Emotional vulnerability
The first half year we're on the side-lines a bit, we just need to navigate it all to make it work. He's very dependent on his mother, not least because she breastfeeds him and other things (Father 8)	The first half year we're on the side-lines a bit, we just need to navigate it all to make it work. The child is very dependent on his mother	Feeling excluded from the mother-child dyad	
He's stronger now, he's more like an actual person. We interact, he recognizes me, it's completely different now. My emotional side, it's developed a lot more now that we have more contact (Father 5)	The relationship is stronger, he's more like an actual person. We interact, which makes the emotional side of me grow as we have more contact	Relationship through interaction and response	From insecurity to self-assurance
When I was on paternity leave, I could spend a bit more time with her, and I had sole responsibility while her mother was at work. That was a change for me, I became more robust at dealing with things than I had been before. Now, of course, it's completely different, now the role has grown, so I'm much more relaxed, plus she's getting older and easier to understand (Father 11)	On paternity leave I could spend a bit more time with her and had sole responsibility. That was a change for me, I became more robust at dealing with things. The role has grown and I'm much more relaxed	Paternity leave as a strengthening factor	

the family unit. At the same time, the fathers grieved the loss of their identity, network and relationships. During the child's first year of life, the fathers developed an increasing sense of self-assurance in their role, an enhanced sense of self and a growing bond with the child. The relationship between the father and the child was strengthened during paternity leave, when fathers were the main carers. Paternity leave gave the fathers an opportunity to interact with the child on their own terms, increasing their sense of mastery and competence.

## 4.1 | From self-focus to family perspective

### 4.1.1 | A new life perspective

Fathers described how having a child made them view life differently. They changed their views on what they considered to be important in life and what they wanted to prioritize. One father explains:

It has influenced me as a person. It's difficult to be specific because it's a gradual process in which your focus changes in all areas, and I feel very comfortable with that.

(Father 1)

Small things in daily life had greater significance than before, and they described their joy at being close to the child and having more room for play and laughter, a feeling of happiness in everyday situations and stronger relationships with the people they are close to, such as friends and family. The changes were seen as natural and part of feeling like an adult:

Focusing on the baby gives me a sense of inner peace. I feel more mature and prouder.

(Father 2)

Together with the positive perspective on life, the fathers also described experiencing a greater sense of responsibility, which felt gratifying but also frightening. Having responsibility for the life of a young child gave rise to a protective instinct that they had not felt before. Their outlook was different from before, with the child's needs taking priority in relation to thoughts of the future. Several of the fathers emphasized that they felt less egocentric after having a child, and they took fewer risks than they used to. They had become more conscious of not exposing themselves to dangerous situations, in order to protect the child. The focus on the child in the family was perceived as natural, life enriching and gave them a sense of being complete, with a future and a life ahead of them.

### 4.1.2 | Grief and loss of identity

Although the fathers reported a positive change in their life perspective, most of them also felt a sense of grief and loss of identity.

They reasoned that the change in their life was right, but they nevertheless mourned what they had lost. This was most prominent in the first few months after the birth of their child. One father described it thus:

I have felt grief and a creeping sense of depression. I haven't been clinically depressed, but I have felt a sense of loss and that life has been turned upside down. The loss of friends and identity – I've felt those. I haven't allowed myself to dwell on it, especially to start with, because you are expected to be cheerful and happy, and I did feel that as well, but the two feelings tore me up a bit.

(Father 7)

The fathers reported that what they missed the most was the freedom to spend their free time as they wished, being able to be impulsive without having to consider anyone else's needs, and they missed being social, particularly with friends who did not have children or who were in a different life situation. Missing their independence made them feel guilty for wanting something else and focusing on their own needs. They also described a sense of losing themselves at times and searched to find out who they were as fathers and what gave them intrinsic value. One father longed to be the person he was before the child was born:

I want to be a proper person again, not 'just' a father.

(Father 8)

### 4.1.3 | The development of family love

The fathers had strong feelings of affection for their children. For some, these feelings developed gradually over time, while for others, an overwhelming feeling of love came shortly after the child was born. Several of the fathers were surprised that the feelings could be so strong. They described their feelings towards the child as a mixture of love, concern, infatuation and pride. One father expressed his fatherly love as follows:

It's like opening up a well of emotions; it's not comparable to anything else. The love that you feel for the little one – the concern – it's enormous. All the clichés I have heard have proven to be true. Now I am suddenly willing to jump in front of a bus for another person – it feels so intensely close. It's a feeling of being so filled up with love and care, an intoxication, a feeling of being in love that never ends.

(Father 5)

For the fathers who needed time to develop fatherly feelings, response from the child was often a trigger. Thus, as the child grew older and more responsive, the feeling of being a father was reinforced. This was expressed in the following way by one of the fathers:

Theme	Subtheme
From self-focus to family perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A new life perspective</li> <li>• Grief and loss of identity</li> <li>• The development of family love</li> </ul>
Emotional vulnerability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The difficult emotions</li> <li>• Feeling excluded from the mother-child dyad</li> </ul>
From insecurity to self-assurance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Relationship through interaction and response</li> <li>• Paternity leave as a strengthening factor</li> </ul>

**TABLE 3** Themes and subthemes that emerged through the data analysis process

I feel like a good father when she smiles and is happy, when she is content. When I lift her up and she squeezes herself together, lifts her knees up onto my stomach, puts her cheek against my shoulder, I think that is really nice. She just suddenly started doing it. I think it's so nice to cuddle – it's the best!

(Father 6)

After the birth of the child, the fathers' relationship with their partner changed. Having a child strengthened the relationship, but also made it more fragile, in the sense that it only took the slightest provocation to spark negativity. Their roles in relation to each other also changed as part of becoming a family. The fathers missed being lovers and receiving attention from the mothers. They described how, as a couple, they found themselves in a “state of emergency”, where they had limited time to themselves, how lack of sleep, uncertainty and vulnerability made them feel edgy. Trivial things could trigger an argument or a conflict, and when they were tired it was difficult both to see and have the energy to meet the other person's needs, as one father explained:

I think we both felt that we were on our own separate islands. I felt that I needed understanding and support when she came home, she was tired after starting to work again. I think we had the same needs, but no one gave, and no one received.

(Father 5)

According to the fathers, the level of communication between them as a couple determined the degree of conflict in the relationship. The effort of trying to understand each other, lowering their expectations, and giving each other space and time was important for the relationship. One father described it as being a “tag team”:

When you can see that the other person is tired and needs a break, then you can take over for a bit, if it becomes too much. That has been really important. You can save energy when you don't both do the same things. You become a ‘tag team’ – you can tap each other on the shoulder and change positions, say that you need a break, or see when the other person needs a break. You help each other.

(Father 6)

Support from their partners was understood by the fathers as one of the most important factors for dealing with difficult situations and feelings at this time. The feeling of being a family was very prominent, having a joint project and a common goal for the future.

## 4.2 | Emotional vulnerability

### 4.2.1 | The difficult emotions

The fathers also experienced great emotional strain in connection with their transition to fatherhood. They felt more sensitive and vulnerable than they had been previously. Several of the fathers related the strong emotions they experienced to this vulnerability. They recalled experiencing an increased level of anxiety and fear that something might happen to the child.

Their worries were mainly related to illness and accidents, but were also strongly connected to daily activities such as feeding:

There was a period when he didn't eat very much. We managed to feed him something every day, so there was no danger to his growth, but he lost weight. It was terribly frustrating – I haven't been so frustrated and upset for a long time. I remember that he wouldn't eat more than half a raspberry on one particular day. I got up and went out and cried. The frustration and powerlessness became overwhelming.

(Father 5)

The child's crying triggered frustration, especially when they were not able to comfort and calm the child themselves. The fathers described these situations as stressful, because they felt a lack of control, as well as incompetence as a parent. Many felt irritability and anger at times, brought on by stress, frustration and a lack of sleep. For most, the irritability was something they kept inside and rarely expressed, but some of the fathers found an outlet for these feelings by directing them at their partner or the child, as described below:

I have also called her bad names, and I have a guilty conscience about that. Things like brat, damn brat, just to let out my frustration at the time. I'm not so impulsive that I can't stop myself from reacting physically,

but I do have problems controlling my language – not just towards her but also towards my partner. THAT'S when I felt really bad.

(Father 7)

The fathers who recalled finding an outlet for their frustration described verbal reactions, such as yelling or calling the mother and child names, or physical reactions in the form of slamming doors or banging the table with their fist. Regardless of the form of expression, they felt a great sense of guilt after such outbursts and that they were bad fathers or partners. In addition to anger, many felt powerless, helpless and drained of energy. These negative feelings were seen as taboo and not something they could discuss with others. The result was that they often kept their feelings to themselves and found them hard to deal with.

All the fathers had difficulty sleeping. Lack of sleep and interrupted sleep over time was considered the main reason for their emotional challenges, lack of energy to carry out their daily routines, conflicts with their partners and difficulties in achieving a work–life balance. Several of them considered sleep to be the most important factor for functioning in daily life:

Not being able to sleep when you need it. Fathers can also suffer from 'baby brain,' so it was quite tough starting back at work. Had a period with 12-hour working days, then I'd come home and there was colic and zero sleep. I think that was the hardest. I have been tired, of course, and mentally run-down. Not depressed, just tired. Notice that sleep is the most important thing. As soon as I get a good night's sleep, I recover pretty quickly.

(Father 11)

Lack of sleep was described as the direct cause of loss of vitality, of irritability, low energy levels, fatigue and feeling apathetic and depressed, as this father recounted:

Too little sleep can make you short-tempered about simple things. This is something I have experienced myself. In the beginning, everything went really well, but after a while you notice that you are starting to use up your reserves.

(Father 12)

#### 4.2.2 | Feeling excluded from the mother–child dyad

The fathers were unprepared for the strong bond between the mother and child during infancy. It made them feel excluded and constrained their efforts in finding their place in the new family unit. On the one hand, they recognized the bond as biologically natural, but on the other hand, they found it difficult to deal with. They

described a feeling of helplessness for not being able to contribute more, for not being able to meet the child's needs to the same extent as the mother. They also felt a sense of vulnerability, in that they were unable to offer the mother much relief, especially if she was breastfeeding. One father described it thus:

For me, it was hard to understand and accept the relationship between mother and baby, especially when she was breastfeeding. It made me sad at the start. I can laugh about it now and I understand it very well, but it took time for me to understand it. No matter how hard I tried to make him content, his mother could come and manage it within five seconds, just by showing him her breast.

(Father 3)

Breastfeeding was described as something positive for the child, but as negative for the fathers. It made them feel excluded and less close to the child. In cases where the child was bottle-fed, the fathers felt a greater sense of involvement and a stronger bond with the child. The fathers who felt excluded responded by trying to compensate, doing practical things around the house, or by withdrawing and "slightly disappearing," which could sometimes result in conflict with the mother.

Several of the fathers had experienced jealousy of the mother–child relationship. The jealousy could be directed towards the child, who was getting the mother's full attention, or towards the mother, who was preferred by the child. Jealousy was an emotion they were ashamed of, and they were disappointed in themselves for having these feelings:

Men can get a little bit jealous of the baby, because it's getting all the attention, while you're not getting any. You're put aside. You do the practical, boring things while the mother gets to develop a powerful love for the baby and closeness. I can feel that the baby doesn't love me the same way that it loves its mother. You feel ashamed of your jealousy and disappointed in yourself.

(Father 2)

### 4.3 | From insecurity to self-assurance

#### 4.3.1 | Relationship through interaction and response

The fathers described how the relationship with their child developed in step with the opportunities for interaction between father and child. The postnatal period was a time of insecurity for most fathers, where they were afraid of making mistakes, craved more response from their infant and felt less important. One father described his insecurity as follows:

Just lifting her, they don't have neck muscles and such like. She was so small and you're kind of afraid of everything really.

(Father 13)

The fathers' sense of relationship intensified as the child got older and developed the ability to engage more directly:

The feelings the child is showing are now one hundred per cent real. If he's happy, he smiles and laughs. If he's not happy, he cries. It's amazing to see how happy he is when he sees me. It's a wonderful feeling, I had no idea that's what it was like. It gives me a lot of energy in my daily life, if my work is stressful, it doesn't matter, there is someone who will be happy to see me when I get home.

(Father 3)

When the child responded directly, it made the fathers feel recognized and included, and that they are more important to the child than in the postnatal period. The fathers described the child's ability to initiate contact, respond through smiling, laughing, sounds and physical contact, as important for their sense of closeness. Play, preferably physical play, was described as the most conducive arena for interaction, and an area where they felt that they could offer something different from mothers.

#### 4.3.2 | Paternity leave as a strengthening factor

Twelve of the 13 fathers had taken paternity leave during the child's first year of life. They experienced this period as positive and a turning point in their relationship with their child, their self-confidence as a caregiver and for the dynamic of their relationship. However, the first days and weeks of their leave period were challenging. It was the first time for many fathers to be completely alone with the child over a longer period. They felt stressed due to their lack of control in relation to routines, worried about whether they were doing things right, and were afraid that they would not be able to calm the child. One father described the first days of his leave period as follows:

At the start of my paternity leave, the first days I was alone with him, that was a very stressful time for me. When we went for a walk, it was near his mother's work. I was afraid I would not be able to cope if he started crying, so I had to be near her, she's breastfeeding and can fix everything. My concerns faded over time, and I learned how to calm him down. It was no longer as stressful for me. Now, when we are together just the two of us, it's pure joy, without stress. I don't worry, I know I'm fine now, no matter what happens. If he cries, I know I can cope, I know what to do.

(Father 3)

Having sole responsibility led to a change, and the fathers considered themselves to become more robust in their role as a father. Being at home required them to take on more responsibility. They also found that their male role was challenged and that both parents gained a deeper understanding of each other's roles. Further, they felt that responsibilities were more equally divided following the leave period. In the words of one father:

It's healthy for us men, that we alpha males are forced into other roles with other values that challenge us. You can empathise with the women, who often take overall responsibility. Being alone with the child and seeing what was involved, it did me good. Women automatically take more responsibility, and men let it happen. She was both the architect and the director, but after my leave period it was more equal.

(Father 5)

The fathers also felt lonely at times during the leave period. They missed having contact with other adults, and most only had a small network available to them during the daytime. This was a factor that made the paternity leave more challenging:

I got out sometimes but felt isolated and lonely. It ended up that when I was out with my child and saw a nursery, we would stay ten metres away and observe, it was a bit strange, but it was a way of trying to get social contact.

(Father 10)

The dynamics between the parents changed during the leave period. The fathers found that the child became more attached to and more dependent on them. A few fathers explained that the mothers found this hurtful and that they felt rejected by the child. One father described this as a repeat of the first days of the postnatal period, but with the parents' roles reversed. This also gave him a deeper understanding of the mother's vulnerability. The period of paternity leave strengthened the parental relationship and was a determining factor for feeling equal as parents.

## 5 | DISCUSSION

The fathers described their transition to fatherhood as a process that brought about profound changes in their life perspective. During the child's first year of life, the fathers' strong self-focus gradually evolved into a family focus with an appreciation of the familial relationship. They described the dynamics of the new family triad – father, mother and child – as something that needed time to develop, and as a process that gave rise to multiple strong emotions.

The fathers experienced unexpectedly strong, positive and overwhelming feelings towards their child. They described fatherly love as a mixture of love, concern, infatuation and pride, mixed with



vulnerability and a sense of responsibility. Some experienced this as soon as the child was born, for others it was something that developed over time and was reinforced through interactions with the child. The emotional connection that parents feel towards their child is often referred to as parental bonding (Kinsey & Hupcey, 2013). It is considered one of the most important and central psychological processes in the perinatal period, and a prerequisite for developing positive parental behaviour (Schaber et al., 2021). Bonding is typically associated with the mother-child relationship. "Paternal bonding" is a lesser-used term, despite being considered an equally important emotional relationship for fathers (Schaber et al., 2021). The fathers in our study described bonding as a sense of fatherly love. "Father love" is defined in one research article as a feeling that involves warmth, supportiveness, comforting, caring, nurturance and affection (Rohner & Venazio, 2001). The fathers described the feeling of love as an important fundamental emotion that was often felt at an early stage, but which also needed time to develop. Fatherly love is just as important for the child's development as motherly love (Rohner & Venazio, 2001).

Lack of or delayed bonding can be related to mental health challenges in both parents (Parfitt & Ayers, 2014). Positive feelings towards the child develop more slowly in parents with such challenges, which points to the importance of supporting and helping parents' bond with their child as soon as possible (Parfitt & Ayers, 2014). Fathers can compensate and encourage bonding by getting involved in the practical care of the child early on. However, some fathers will not fully bond with their child until it is older, when they have an opportunity to be more involved in the care (Sihota et al., 2019). Fathers may expect that they will experience bonding when the baby is born and are disappointed in themselves if this does not happen (Baldwin et al., 2018).

In addition to experiencing paternal love, the fathers felt a heightened sense of togetherness with their partner. The child brought them closer together as a couple and strengthened their relationship. At the same time, they experienced the postnatal period as a fragile time. They felt vulnerable and reflected that their relationship could easily be negatively impacted by this fragility. This mirrors research showing that becoming a parent is a major adjustment that presents considerable challenges for the couple relationship (Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Kluwer, 2010). Parents not only develop new roles and relationships in relation to the child, but also in relation to each other (Kim & Swain, 2007; Pacey, 2004). This can bring the couple closer together, but it can also test the relationship (Kluwer, 2010). A loving and positive relationship between the parents is an important protective factor for the child, and it also has a bearing on how much fathers are involved in care (Fagan & Palkovitz, 2007), and on the fathers' level of bonding (Schaber et al., 2021). Challenges in the couple relationship are a risk factor for impaired mental health. Studies have identified an association between low level of satisfaction in the couple relationship and depressive symptoms in fathers (Kim & Swain, 2007; Parfitt & Ayers, 2014). It has also been shown that if one part of a couple is dissatisfied with the relationship, this can have a

negative impact on the other partner's mental health despite them being satisfied with the relationship (Røsand et al., 2011). Fathers often struggle to find a balance between their own challenges and meeting their partner's expectations (Gemayel et al., 2021).

Communication is described as a key factor for the development of the couple relationship during this period, and for the couple being able to express their feelings and needs whilst also recognizing and addressing those of their partner (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006; Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Gemayel et al., 2021; Kluwer, 2010). The fathers in our study understood the importance of communication but noted that it requires both parties to have enough energy, which is often difficult in the busy everyday life of parents with young children. Partner support was considered one of the most important factors in managing difficult emotions and situations during this period of their life.

Several of the fathers also experienced strong feelings of exclusion in relation to the mother-child dyad, including jealousy. These emotions were unexpected and difficult to relate to, and consequently led to feelings of shame and disappointment. Jealousy and other difficult feelings can negatively affect their relationship as a couple and as parents, particularly during the early stages. Several studies describe how fathers can feel jealous about the attention the child receives from their partner (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006; Olavsky et al., 2020; Pacey, 2004; Sihota et al., 2019). Jealousy is often experienced when a relationship that is highly valued is threatened (Buss & Haselton, 2005), and it can be particularly shameful when it arises in connection with the new parenting role (Pacey, 2004). The feeling is characterized by a fear of rejection (Olavsky et al., 2020). The mother-child relationship can often leave the father on the side-line, which can trigger feelings of jealousy of the strong bond and intimacy between mother and child, but also in relation to the child taking the father's place in the relationship (Kim & Swain, 2007; Olavsky et al., 2020; Pacey, 2004). When this happens, the child becomes a factor that creates distance between the parents instead of bringing them together (Ahlborg & Strandmark, 2006). This distance seems to be increased if the mother is breastfeeding the child (Sihota et al., 2019). Studies have shown that if fathers do not experience paternal bonding or need time for it to develop, breastfeeding can reinforce the sense of exclusion from the mother-child dyad and feelings of jealousy (Sihota et al., 2019). This can result in the father withdrawing from family life (Baldwin et al., 2018; Olavsky et al., 2020).

Most of the informants had experienced some degree of grief for the loss of their identity after they became fathers. Although the changes in their life felt right and positive in a life course perspective, most underwent a process in which they had to redefine their identity. The loss of identity was most prominent in the first few months after the birth. Integrating a new role requires time as well as acceptance that a new life phase has now begun (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Habib, 2012). This role change occurs later in men because they do not have the experience of pregnancy. Men can feel a reduced sense of independence and lack of control in their new life situation (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). The changes in social

structures and social life when becoming a family can impact the fathers' identity and self-image. How it impacts will depend on the status they are given and the acceptance they meet as fathers from others (Habib, 2012). A key factor is the extent to which mothers involve and recognize fathers as important caregivers (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). The identity of a father is also closely linked to his own childhood and his experiences with his own father (Habib, 2012).

The fathers also described difficult, negative emotions related to becoming/being a father. Although many of the fathers' emotions could be signs of depression, anxiety or parental stress (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010; Philpott et al., 2017), none of them used the term "postnatal depression" or related their emotions to this concept. These challenges are regarded as the most common health problems for fathers in the perinatal period (Paulson & Bazemore, 2010; Shorey & Chan, 2020). Studies show that depression, anxiety and parental stress are closely linked, and that the lines between them are blurred (Philpott et al., 2019; Shorey, 2021). Fathers do not tend to link difficult emotions to mental health, but often associate them with practical challenges in relation to lack of sleep, eating habits or trying to manage the work-life balance (Darwin et al., 2017). Although fathers experience a wide range of challenging emotions, they often underestimate the significance of these. They also worry that by drawing attention to themselves, mothers, who need it the most, will be deprived (Darwin et al., 2017).

The fathers described how lack of sleep and the infant's crying were two of the main triggers of stress, frustration and fatigue, with lack of sleep being regarded as the main cause of negative emotional reactions. Several studies suggest that sleep deprivation is a direct cause of emotional exhaustion in parents (Darwin et al., 2017; Philpott et al., 2017). Lack of sleep and disturbed sleep patterns are both considered risk factors for fathers reduced physical and mental health (Kotelchuck, 2022).

Several of the fathers described how they often displayed aggression towards their child or partner when the emotional strains became too much. Strong negative emotions were considered taboo and not something they could discuss with others. Keeping such feelings to themselves could be difficult for the men to deal with. Parental conflicts seem to increase in the postnatal period and can result in avoidance behaviour and more aggressive forms of expression towards partners (Kluwer, 2010).

The relationship and bonding with the child appear to develop in step with the opportunities for interaction between father and child. The fathers' self-confidence as independent caregivers with equal status to the mothers was strengthened as their confidence in handling the child grew. It was also reinforced when opportunities for direct responses from the child arose during paternity leave when they spent more time with the child. Paternity leave also led to the parents gaining a deeper understanding of each other, and gave them the opportunity to share responsibilities, which in turn strengthened the relationship.

Paternity leave is an important opportunity for fathers to develop their own role as a caregiver and is crucial for paternal bonding (Schaber et al., 2021). It is not only the amount of time a father

spends with his child that determines how the relationship develops, but also how engaged he is and the closeness of the contact. It is therefore important that fathers take individual parental leave. The introduction of universal, individual parental leave for both parents means that fathers are now more likely to avail themselves of this opportunity (Kvande, 2022). Mastering fatherhood can boost fathers' mental health (Baldwin et al., 2018). Studies indicate that fathers suffer less anxiety and depression during the perinatal period if they can take a lengthy period of paternity leave. This enables them to be more actively engaged, master their parenting skills, and obtain more social support (Philpott et al., 2019). Paternity leave could also be difficult however, with the early stages in particular, being characterized by insecurity and, occasionally, loneliness. Fathers often lack role models and a sense of community with other men, which reflects the importance of facilitating social arenas for fathers during the leave period, preferably with people who are in the same situation (Darwin et al., 2017; Höfner et al., 2011).

## 5.1 | Limitations

The study has some limitations. With respect to setting, it was conducted in Norway, where individual parental leave during the postnatal period is considered standard and fathers are expected to play an active role. This may influence the fathers' expectations of and experiences with the transition to fatherhood, which may differ from fathers in other contexts.

The socioeconomic background and life situation of the informants were relatively homogenous. Thus, transferability is limited, the informants represent and reflects the experiences of fathers in this relevant group.

One possible weakness of the study, which focused on men, is that the interviews were conducted by a female researcher with a background as a public health nurse. Her professional background may have influenced the interviews, despite the efforts of the researchers to maintain neutrality in both the interview situations and in subsequent analyses. On the other hand, the same interviewer conducted all the interviews which increase dependability. Several researchers participated in the analysis process, which strengthened this part of the work. More specifically, interpretations of the data and the development of themes were discussed and agreed by the research team. Further, the findings are presented with verbatim extracts included to aid the readers judgement of the transferability of the findings.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

During their transition to fatherhood, men experience considerable emotional changes and reactions. It is a vulnerable period of their life, with wide-ranging emotions spanning from positive emotions such as fatherly love and a sense of mastery, to challenging emotions such as feeling excluded, jealous and exhausted. The emotional

changes develop throughout the child's first year of life and are related to the father's life perspective, sense of identity and relationship with their child and partner.

Much of the basis for the father's emotional development during this period can be related to his degree of bonding with the child and his sense of belonging, inclusion and mastery of the new role. How fathers' feelings are understood and addressed is crucial. Many fathers describe how negative emotional reactions are felt as taboo or associated with shame, despite them being a natural part of the postnatal period. The key to accepting and understanding these feelings seems to be to help fathers open up more about their own reactions, as well as normalizing and recognizing fathers' emotional register. Factors such as a good relationship with their partner and paternity leave seem to have a positive effect and help to promote fathers' mental health.

## 7 | RELEVANCE TO CLINICAL PRACTICE

Research on fathers' mental health in the perinatal period is often aimed at mental health challenges, symptoms and diagnoses. There are few studies that focus on the range of emotions fathers experience, including the positive ones. Such knowledge is important for healthcare professionals caring for new families, in order to recognize and meet fathers' needs for support and to enable them to distinguish between natural emotions and reactions and symptomatologic changes. Furthermore, fathers' emotional reactions affect different parts of their life as we have shown. To be credible as a service encompassing the whole family, fathers must be recognized both as an independent caregiver and as part of the family unit. The family triad is closely bound together, and it is important to understand the family as a whole, but also, and perhaps most importantly, how it is influenced by the individual needs and interactions between its members.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

All authors have agreed on the final version and meet at least one of the following criteria [recommended by the ICMJE (<http://www.icmje.org/recommendations/>)]:

- substantial contributions to conception and design, acquisition of data or analysis and interpretation of data;
- drafting the article or revising it critically for important intellectual content.

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### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

We have no known conflict of interest to disclose.

### ETHICAL STATEMENT

The study was conducted in accordance with the Helsinki Declaration (World Medical Association, 2013), and approved by the Regional Committees for Medical and Health Research Ethics (Reference number: 2018/1378) and the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (Project number: 735207).

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