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# From prenatal care to puerperium: a longitudinal study on paternity

## *Do pré-natal ao puerpério: um estudo longitudinal sobre a paternidade*

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### Abstract

#### Objective

To analyze the experience of fatherhood in primiparous men, as well as to understand the process of fathers' identification with their wives and to analyze the impacts of the pandemic.

#### Method

The method was qualitative and longitudinal, with interviews conducted during the prenatal and postpartum periods. The participants were five married men of legal age.

#### Results

Five thematic categories were developed to describe the analyses performed, named as follows: expectations versus real fatherhood; from invisibility to the leading role of the father; from identification with the mother to envy; the pandemic: from isolation to the need for privacy; and the appreciation of this new father.

#### Conclusion

The participants expressed a desire to also be protagonists of actions in the interaction with their children in a similar way to mothers. However, a lack of information and interventions was perceived, mainly by mental health professionals, that included husbands in the preparation for the pregnancy-puerperal cycle. Finally, the pandemic was felt as a possibility of protecting family privacy due to isolation and added economic concerns depending on the participants' employment relationship.

**Keywords:** Emotions; Identification; Fathers.

### Resumo

#### Objetivo

Analisar a vivência da paternidade, em homens primíparos bem como compreender o processo de identificação dos pais com suas esposas e analisar os impactos da pandemia.

#### Método

O método foi clínico qualitativo e longitudinal, com entrevistas realizadas no pré-natal e puerpério. Os participantes foram cinco homens, casados, maiores de idade.

#### Resultados

Foram elaboradas cinco categorias temáticas que descrevem as análises realizadas, desta forma nomeadas: expectativas versus paternidade real; da invisibilidade ao protagonismo do pai; da

*identificação com a mãe à inveja; a pandemia: do isolamento à necessidade de privacidade e a valorização desse novo pai.*

### **Conclusão**

*Os participantes apresentaram um desejo de também serem protagonistas de ações na interação com os filhos de modo similar às mães. Entretanto, foi percebida falta de informação e de intervenções, principalmente pelos profissionais de saúde mental, que incluísem os maridos na preparação para o ciclo gravídico puerperal. Por fim, a pandemia foi sentida como uma possibilidade de proteção da privacidade da família em razão do isolamento e agregou preocupações econômicas dependendo do vínculo trabalhista dos participantes.*

**Palavras-chave:** Emoções; Identificação; Pais.

It is known that men and women have occupied throughout history, different social roles, transforming the traditional family structure, in which the man held authority over the family and was the home provider, into a new configuration, which, according to Gomes (2021), is understood by several authors, “as a complex space of affective exchanges where identifications, conscious and unconscious alliances, acquisition of behaviors, cultural, ethical and moral values occur, which interact in the development of individual and group personalities” (Gomes, 2021, p. 95).

It is a fact that mothers, since they have entered the job market, are no longer available full-time to take care of their children, and we ought to consider that they have other interests besides motherhood. Several authors have discussed the changes in the role of men and women in society, bringing to light the transformations in the gender relations, which have led to the emergence of new values and behavioral patterns, as well as new representations regarding masculinity and femininity. It must be considered that the migration of women from the family environment to the workplace has taken away from men the exclusive task of providing for the family, and these changes have given both men and women another place to be occupied in society, both in terms of gender and in motherhood and fatherhood (Bernardi, 2017; Campana et al., 2019; Ferrari & Ribeiro, 2020; Matos & Magalhães, 2019).

Matos and Magalhães (2019, p. 153) observed the emergence of a new ideal father, “which is not restricted to imposing the discipline and the provision of financial resources, but who get involved in the care and education of children as of infancy including helping in diaper changes, feeding, doctor visits and school life”. Thus, this new father emerges to develop a closer contact with his child and feels satisfaction from this closeness. According to the aforementioned authors, it does not seem to be a reversal of roles between mothers and fathers, but rather a more complex relationship that fathers establish with their children in contemporary times. Therefore, fatherhood is no longer understood and seen only as an obligation, but rather becomes associated to the man’s desire to occupy this new role. However, for care to be part of male subjectivity, it is necessary to deconstruct the father-provider and mother-caregiver dichotomies (Denardi & Bottoli, 2017; Matos & Magalhães, 2019).

When psychoanalysis contributed to the discussion on gender differences and their influence on parental roles, we remember the importance that Freud attributed to the Oedipus Complex and castration for issues of human sexuality, highlighting important differences between boys and girls. Freud (1924/1996, p. 198) also associated motherhood to castration:

The girl’s Oedipus complex is much more unequivocal than that of the little penis-bearer; in my experience, it rarely goes beyond the replacement of the mother and the feminine stance towards the father. The renunciation of the penis is not tolerated without an attempt at compensation. The girl passes—in the course of a symbolic equation, we might say—from the penis to the baby; her Oedipus complex culminates in the long-held desire to receive a son from her father as a gift, to beget a son for him.

Therefore, the very idea that a girl feels envious of a boy when she is faced with the lack of a penis places her in a position of being “lacking” in comparison to the other (man), which perhaps, for some individuals, could be understood as an inferior position due to the “have not”. Unlike Freud, who based his theory on unconscious sexual conflicts, Donald Winnicott based his theory of emotional development or maturation on the mother-baby relationship. He initially attributed to the father a role as the mother’s caregiver, aiming for her to be fully involved in caring for the baby, in addition to providing the necessary support for the family (Winnicott, 1957/1979). However, Winnicott also discussed the importance of the father based on his own characteristics that would include him in the roster of potential caregivers for the baby.

Santos and Antúnez (2017) discussed the affective interactions observed between two fathers and their relevant babies, reflecting on the phenomenon that has been understood as a new paternity in the contemporary family. According to the authors, this is a possible reordering of the roles and functions of men and women with regard the care for their children. Through a qualitative study, the aforementioned authors state that the essential characteristics of the new paternity is, mainly, the paternal insertion implied affectively in the daily care offered to the child, which they call “affectively inscribed paternity” (Santos & Antúnez, 2017, p. 234). In this category, the father is inserted in the inscription of the child’s subjectivity, a role in which characteristics of paternal care are imprinted in the relationship with the child.

Given this scenario, in which some studies have already indicated the presence of significant emotional repercussions and psychopathological conditions in men who experience fatherhood in their daily lives, it is clear that these are still incipient data that require further scientific investigation (Monsanto, 2019; Morales et al., 2018). This study originated from a doctoral thesis that sought to investigate the experience of fatherhood from the period in which the man idealizes the birth of the child to the reality of the immediate postpartum period.

## Method

The qualitative, longitudinal clinical method was used, with interviews conducted before and after the baby’s birth. It was decided to perform a content analysis as proposed by Bardin (2016).

### Participants

Five men were interviewed, all of them adults and married and who were about to become fathers for the first time. All participants agreed to participate in the survey by signing the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF).

### Instruments

The following data were collected: a questionnaire to characterize the sociodemographic profile of the participants and a semi-structured interview, with guiding questions as a way to encourage the participant to start speaking. The interviews were recorded, with the consent of the participants, transcribed and later reviewed.

### Procedures

To begin the data collection process, the investigator contacted obstetricians, perinatal psychologists, and people she knew who could recommend pregnant women with their husbands

experiencing fatherhood for the first time. Hence, the investigator contacted potential participants to extend the invitation, after making sure that those individuals contacted met the inclusion criteria.

The interviews were conducted in person, at the investigator's own office, and remotely, via Skype, for those who did not reside or were not in the city of São Paulo at the time. And also due to the impossibility that the pandemic period, entering the research process, brought as adversity to be faced and adapted. Before starting the interviews, the objectives and procedures of the survey were explained again, and participants were asked to sign the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF).

After conducting the first interview with each participant, the investigator requested that the respondent inform her when the baby's birth would occur and asked for permission to contact the couple at a later date to confirm the news, all participants agreed to the suggestion. It is important to note that the baby's birth date would be essential, since the method required that the second interview take place within a maximum thirty calendar days from the baby's birth.

This study took into account ethics and responsibility for the data obtained, ensuring confidentiality regarding the identity of the participants, as well as the content recorded in the interviews. In addition, all participants were informed about the possibility of refusing and/or discontinuing participation at any time, if they so wished. The survey was only put into practice after approval by the Ethics Committee of the proposing Institution – Institute of Psychology of the University of São Paulo, in accordance with CNS Resolutions No. 466/2012 and 510/2016, with Approved Opinion, registered on the Brazil Platform under No. 3.518.159.

## Results and Discussion

The data relating to the survey of the participants' sociodemographic characteristics are shown in Table 1 and will be reviewed below.

**Table 1**  
*Sociodemographic characterization*

Sociodemographic data	Father 1	Father 2	Father 3	Father 4	Father 5
Age	31	33	33	36	30
Race/Skin Color	White	White	Black	White	Black
Religion	Evangelical	Catholic	Umbanda follower	Catholic	No religion
Education	High School	Higher	Higher (studying)	Higher	High School
Type of professional relationship	Private company employee (Brazil)	Private company employee (abroad)	Private company employee (Brazil)	Private company employee (Brazil)	Self-employed (Brazil)
Paternity leave	3 days	6 weeks	5 days	20 days	10 days
Gestational age	38 weeks	38 weeks	37 weeks	38 weeks	37 weeks

Source: Guidugli (2022).

As can be seen, participants were approximately the same age, between 30 and 36 years, which shows that they are part of, or are expected to be in a productive phase in terms of professional practice. However, out of the five participants, four were professionals working for private companies; one of them was Brazilian, but lived and worked abroad, in a country that grants extended paternity leave, which is six weeks to be scheduled as the worker wishes. The fifth participant was a self-employed professional who was significantly impacted by the pandemic due to the mandatory closure of his commercial establishment, considered a non-essential service in the city where he lived.

Regarding race/skin color, most of the participants were white and two were black. The latter presented similar discourses related to concerns about racism and the sociocultural formation of their children. Regarding religion, there was significant diversity, with two participants reporting being Catholic, one Evangelical and one Umbanda. The latter two stated that their respective religious beliefs played an important role in the meaning attributed by them to fatherhood and to the child. One of the participants revealed that he did not identify with any religious denomination.

Regarding the participants' wives gestational age, there was a difference of only one week (between 37 and 38 pregnancy weeks); this was a period of expectation for the participants due to the imminent birth of the baby, since from the 37th week onwards, pregnancy is considered full-term (Ministério da Saúde, 2012; Silva et al., 2019).

Regarding the extension of paternity leave, all participants living in Brazil were allowed a few days time off from work. Although the usual period granted is five consecutive days, one of the participants was only granted three days by the private company where he worked, and had to claim two more days to obtain what should have already been granted to him according to his labor rights. Brazilian legislation seems to be moving in parallel with the traditionality expected for families. In fact, the Federal Constitution, enacted in 1988, remains behind the sociocultural advances and distant from the current conditions, where families have new configurations and dynamics which gradually yield more egalitarian roles between men and women.

Five thematic categories were developed based on the interviews, following Bardin's (2016) content analysis proposal which is described and discussed hereafter. It is worth noting that the categories were designed in a pre- and post-birth continuum, since the interviews were conducted in the last month of pregnancy and in the first month of the postpartum period.

## 1) Expectations versus Actual Parenting

The first expectation identified concerns the father's positioning and his (im)potency. All participants raised questions regarding what they wanted to offer their offspring as references and/or models to be followed, but at the same time they understood this task to be as something that was constrained for its complete fulfillment, due to the natural desire that will be expressed in the future by the child himself. "We want to have a child and we want to instil in him what we have as a reference, but that does not mean that he will be what we want" (Father 1).

The excerpt above represents the concern and awareness of this father – as well as of other participants – that, although he wants his son to follow certain paths, he will not be able to stop him from making his own choices, even if he sometimes considers them not to be the most appropriate.

The vignettes reproduced below refer to the attempt to occupy a role/place of importance in relation to their own wives, as pregnant women and women in labor.

But if I can do it for the mother, right, since the mother will be taking care of the baby (...) I am aware that this is really my role now in the beginning, to take care of her. (Father 4)

But if it happens to be a natural birth, even helping my child to come out, if I can and if it is allowed, I will participate effectively in the event, both by giving his mother support and by helping him. (Father 3)

The statements brought to light the impotence already experienced by the fathers when they were actually trying to find a place to occupy in their imagination, concerning specific and objective situations regarding the physical and psychological condition of the woman when giving birth to the baby i.e. feeling pain and discomfort and breastfeeding, among others. These

statements demonstrated anguish due to the impotence they expected to experience, but also with the possibilities they began to find in the face of this conflict.

After the birth of the babies, the fathers seemed to have found a way out of the impotence imagined during the prenatal period. They discovered not only what had to be done, but also the exclusivity of their figure for the baby, which seems to have brought comfort and security, as the following reports show.

I feel more useful as a human being (...) I feel like a person who is needed, you know?. (Father 1)

(...) today I go into the room, I talk to him when he is crying, he stops to listen, because he knows the voice of the person who came in (Father 3)

## 2) From Invisibility to the Father's Leading Role

We found that the interviews during the prenatal period were striking considering the fathers' feeling of invisibility, whether due to the fact that they openly expressed their feelings of not being heard or seen in society, or in the sense of directing their concerns to their wives, regarding the discomfort they felt and for which they could do nothing to resolve it. The statements below demonstrate such manifestations: "At that time, the man is not seen (...) people don't worry about the child's father, that's true" (Father 1). "Ah, I felt (...) invisible there, you know?" (Father 1).

The scarcity of studies that investigate men's feelings and experiences regarding the life changes that fatherhood brings to them, and not only in relation to the demands of their wives' support, reveals the reality of contemporary society in that it leaves little room for men to share their experiences and to (re)identify themselves as fathers, especially in the period before the baby arrives. Furthermore, this fact enhances the historical construction that men and women occupy different positions in the family and in parenthood, not only in terms of work status and financial income, but also essentially in the construction of bonds, based on the psyche of the parents, and they can also be seen as desiring subjects.

Navarro et al. (2020), in a recent study, compared the differences between fatherhood and motherhood regarding global scientific production and found four times fewer articles that addressed fatherhood, with most of them having been published in the last two decades thus concluding that there is an inequality in knowledge surrounding fatherhood compared to motherhood.

The reports above, however, show the frequent invisibility of men who desire fatherhood and are there, present and available.

After the child birth, however, we noted that parents were able to reflect on their experiences with their children in terms of the position they occupy, which gives them a leading role not felt in the prenatal period. Here are some excerpts that may better illustrate this situation:

He was in the womb, and was delivered in tears and the nurse put him on the scale, said something, and then I picked him up and said: son, your father is here. When I said that, his crying stopped in mid-air, he stopped to be able to listen, he understood who it was (...) he said: 'Wow, here's the one who talked to me when I was in the womb' (...) I realized that he felt it was me. (Father 1)

I thought that, since my wife wanted it more than me, I would have a more special role in their relationship, because she really wanted to be a mother, but now, I don't think so, it's going to be very (...) it's going to be different (laughs), I'm going to want to be closer, I'm definitely going to participate

much more than I imagined before, because the relationship is very nice and the connection is strong (...) my participation is going to be more relevant than I imagined before. (Father 2)

### 3) From Identification with the Mother to the Envy

At the beginning of the interviews (gestational period), the process of the husbands identification with their wives was perceived according to the comments of most fathers, and it was possible to associate some manifestations, of a physical and emotional nature, with what they reported about themselves. According to Laplanche and Pontalis (2012, p. 226), identification is described as the “psychological process by which a subject assimilates an aspect, a property, an attribute of the other and transforms himself, totally or partially, according to the model of that other. Personality is constituted and differentiated by a series of identifications”.

Pregnancy, with its range of physiological transformations as well as psychological meanings, is known, as discussed above, not to be restricted to an experience which is exclusive to women; fathers experience it in their own bodies, with all the new feelings and sensations that it can bring, both pleasurable and unpleasant. Men experience the gestational process in their own way, and it is common to describe physical and emotional signs of this complex process that may affect them.

According to Markowska et al. (2018), many authors have attempted to develop a definition of the Couvade syndrome, also known as sympathetic pregnancy, but this diagnosis is complex and challenging, as there are still significant discrepancies in the literature.

In our study, there were reports of manifestations that may be related to what is currently called Couvade Syndrome, such as food cravings, reflux, and anxiety; all such symptoms have been reported below by fathers. It is important to mention that, in our study, there was no intention of diagnosing this Syndrome based on such reports, as this would require another type of investigation, objective, and methodology. Some statements made during the prenatal period were highly significant, as shown below:

Man feels a lot of what a woman feels, too. For example, she felt very little desire to eat certain foods, I started going to the supermarket and to places, wanting to eat things, and I did not like that (...) It seemed like I was in the same situation as her. I don't know (...) I can't explain it (...) (Father 1)

When she started to feel more nauseous, I felt really bad too (...) and when I ate I started to have reflux, something I've never had in my life; I ate and I felt sick, so during the first few months it was really funny because I had all the same symptoms as hers, and then I don't know if it's (...) solidarity immunity (laughs), I don't know what happened, but I had really bad reflux for a week, I was eating healthy food, eating normally, but I felt really bad, but it went away, then I got better (...) we kind of suffer together, I think it has to do with anxiety too. (Father 2)

I tried to put myself in her shoes, as if it were me, if I could, I told her, I would have liked to have my baby in my belly. (Father 4)

Some of the statements made by the fathers who responded to the survey bring to light something about pregnant women that has been widely explored in the literature. Considering the vast literature on the subject and articulating the reality of the fathers' comments on this condition, the following questions arise: is pregnancy a period of transition and metamorphosis only for the woman? To what point or to what extent is the man, the father of the child, the partner of this woman in transition, affected by her transformations? Is the man static and psychologically untouchable in the face of the infinity of psychological repercussions that affect the woman?

The investigation that originated this article certainly cannot answer all these questions; however, the reflection that they spur is especially important in the current times in which men have positioned themselves in the family and social context differently, simultaneously with the repositioning that women have made of themselves. It is clear, however, according to the fathers' comments, their identification with the feelings of their pregnant wives.

Such identification can only occur if there is a genuine involvement in the process of waiting for the child, with all the concerns that an unknown situation may bring to the caregiver, faced with the situation of the development of a dependent being. Winnicott (1956/2000) commented about the identification capacity between people and its importance in playing a facilitating role in the environment; it is a matter of emotional maturation. It is important to mention that the statements reported, for the most part, were brought by the participants in such a way that they only realized their reality when answering the questions, that is, they themselves had not noticed that the symptoms presented were similar to those of their wives, and they were only able to reflect on the subject at the time of the interview.

During the postpartum period, fathers reported many episodes in which they reproduced behaviors that their wives were also displaying, which were based on feelings, desires and fantasies that are very present in motherhood. Some statements (highlighted) show strong identification and a positioning that seems to be subjective, from the mother's perspective:

Everything, I didn't miss anything. I went in the morning, got admitted, stayed and slept in the hospital; two days in the hospital with her; I wouldn't leave her for anything, I stayed there the whole time. (Father 1)

Yes (...) ] exactly, as a matter of fact, yeah, I did the same thing, I really thought I wasn't tired. It could be that too, it could be that maybe she didn't even feel any pain, because, in her head she just wanted to take care of the baby, which occurred to me too. I said: 'I'm fine, I took a nap here on the couch, I'm fine (laughs) but the day I actually slept, I realized that I couldn't wake up the next day, I couldn't get out of bed, I was so tired'. (Father 2)

As a mother, I don't know if I would have another child (...) It's all very extreme, the emotions are extreme, the baby was born, wow ] your emotions, your love, your happiness are through the roof, you know, it's on edge, but everything else is too, the stress of whether she's going to breastfeed, whether she's going to be able to breastfeed, whether she's going to latch on, the tiredness from sleepless nights, everything is very tense; so since I was involved in everything, I think just one would be enough (laughs), I don't want to go through that again. (Father 4)

Klein (1957/1991) made an important contribution to psychoanalysis by studying and discussing the concept of envy. According to the author,

The first object to be envied is the nourishing breast, for the baby feels that the breast possesses everything he desires and that it has an unlimited flow of milk and love which it saves for its own gratification. This feeling adds to his resentment and hatred, and the result is a disturbed relationship with the mother. (p. 214)

Some of the fathers' statements demonstrated, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the unconscious manifestation of envy as described by Klein (1957/1991). Unconsciously, the fathers associated the image of their relevant wives with those who had what they, themselves, would like to have to offer their children, but were not able to. One of the participants expressed a desire to perform tasks with the baby that was much more intense than an equal participation between the husband and his wife; instead, he showed the need to take the mother's place in the relationship with the baby, fantasizing about bodily experiences that are only possible for the female body.

The generation of life, childbirth and breastfeeding, which are known to be exclusive to women in terms of physiology, are experiences that can generate feelings of envy in men due to the fact that women have this visceral experience, while men seem to resent it when they say “if I could, I would have had the baby in my belly” or “the only thing I can’t do is give milk”, and even, if I could wake up and breastfeed I would, but I am not able to do that”. Klein (1957/1991, p. 212) explains that “envy is a feeling of anger against a person who possesses and enjoys something desirable – the envious impulse to take that something away or to spoil it”.

Winnicott (1957/1979), in turn, brings a valuable contribution about the father’s initiatives happening almost as a form of replacement for the mother:

It must not be supposed, at any rate, that it is a good thing for the father to come into the picture prematurely. People are so different from one another. Some men seem to think that they would make better mothers than their wives, and in that case they can become really annoying. This is especially true when they can, with the greatest ease, be immensely patient “mothers” for half an hour, and then, with the same ease, disappear forgetting that mothers have to be good mothers twenty-four hours a day, and day after day. And then there may be some fathers who really would make better mothers than their wives, but the truth is that they cannot be mothers even then; so some way out of the difficulty must be found without the mother disappearing from the picture. But usually mothers know that they are competent in their own right, and can therefore let their husbands come into the picture if they wish. (p. 128)

In the fathers’ reports, it was noted that they understood the privacy of the mother-baby relationship during breastfeeding, but there were also fathers who expressed their discomfort and feeling of exclusion for not finding a satisfactory way to participate in their child breastfeeding setting. Thus, they demonstrated unconscious envy by even referring to the possibility of using other means if there were any difficulty or impediment to the baby being breastfed, as if he could then be taken out of the scene and replaced by something that the father himself could offer as his contribution.

Constant et al. (2020) state that fathers actually realize the importance of their role in breastfeeding, but for various reasons they feel insecure about how they can participate in the process. Gonçalves (2018, p. 38) states that, “on the father’s part, the act of breastfeeding can cause feelings of envy, jealousy and rivalry towards the baby, which can negatively interfere with the practice of breastfeeding”. Marraccini and Figueiredo (2021) point out that despite the initial controversies regarding the presentation of the concept of envy by Klein (1957/1991, p. 182) “the notion of primary, complex and multidetermined envy has been fully incorporated into psychoanalytic thought since then”.

#### **4) The Pandemic: from Physical Distancing to the Need for Privacy**

The first interviews (father 1 and 2) took place in October 2019, with no repercussions from external factors occurring during that period. However, the last three participants were initially interviewed between May and June 2020 in the framework of the most impactful event of the century, the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. Cardoso et al. (2022, p. 2) state that

In this connection, the current coronavirus pandemic has become the main focus of national and international public health agents imposing new habits and routines in several countries simultaneously. One of the measures with the greatest impact on the population’s lifestyle and mental health was social distancing, which also affected social and economic sectors through changes in the ways of working, studying and leisure.

It can be said that the COVID-19 pandemic brought the unprecedented experience of physical distancing and quarantine, recommended by most health agencies and endorsed by the World Health Organization. In our study, the prenatal interviews conducted in the COVID-19 scenario indicated some concerns related to: financial constraints due to the sudden interruption of professional practice for the participant who was a self-employed professional; fear of going into a risky situation with the wife and/or baby and demanding a maternity hospital that would be safe with regard to coronavirus contamination; impossibility of preparing for the baby's arrival, both in terms of purchasing layette and furniture, photo shoots, among others, which had to be done remotely; and also, the imposition of the separation of important and significant people in the couple's life, with the only safe option being to monitor the progress of the pregnancy through technological means.

Despite the difficulties mentioned, we were struck by the fact that fathers also reported a benefit obtained from the physical distancing situation, i.e. the possibility of monitoring their wife's pregnancy full-time, from work – whether because of work interruption or by changing from in-person to remote work. In this regard, we can reflect on the capitalist “logic”, which makes it difficult for men to be present in the family nucleus when expecting a child. There is much debate about the position of men in society and it is often noted that they are truly absent – and there are many – who have difficulty assuming paternity with all its grandeur, rights and duties. However what stands out is the oppositional duality of a demand for presence in order to allow men to monitor the development of their wife pregnancy thus becoming part of the process but this is not favored. If it were not for this, perhaps the secondary benefit of physical distancing would not be mentioned in the participants' statements as noticed in this survey. Below are some reports:

We prepared ourselves for the event, so we didn't count on this pandemic thing, of being a little worried, not only about work and finances, but also about the risks and the fact that the baby was born, about having a small baby and needing help from a hospital, something like that, and things being very compromised. (Father 5)

We ended up doing a lot of things online, you know, all his things were bought digitally. (Father 3)

It was really good for me, right? I can't complain about the pandemic, because with my work and college routine, it would have been difficult for me to have been there for the entire pregnancy and so close, in the final period of the pregnancy; after all how could I have been there otherwise, right?. (Father 3)

After the birth of their children, the respondents revealed a kind of resentment for being separated from their families. However, ambivalence was evident in the participants' statements, as they were significantly uncomfortable with the unsolicited recommendations frequently made by family members and people close to them, which they would not want to accept. They recognized the good intentions implicit in the recommendations offered by the family, but felt the need to have their own space to discover the best care for the baby, based on the relationship established with their child.

It is pertinent at this point to recall Winnicott's concept of intrusion. The author calls intrusion anything that interrupts the continuity of the baby's being, something that arises from the environment, from the way it presents itself and functions dynamically in the reception and acceptance of the baby who does not have a sufficiently developed psyche to deal with instabilities, unforeseen events and invasion. The mother is, initially, the representation of the environment, and as such needs to offer sufficiently good care, as does the father who later embodies the environment and must offer, in harmony with the mother, a safe and stable presence (Abram, 2000).

Based on the safety and stability of the environment for the healthy beginning of the maturation process, parents, already in adulthood, also need adequate care to be able to offer their children what they ought to receive, in the stage of absolute dependence, a term used by Winnicott to describe the condition of the baby who initially needs the mother's womb to be able to develop and, at birth, needs the mother to attend his/her needs (Abram, 2000). Family intrusions will cause in parents, as well as in babies, similar to a cascade effect, the impulse to react. According to Abram (2000, p. 32), "The reactions to the intrusion that occur in a given period are responsible for the damage caused to the personality, which results in fragmentation".

Therefore, the pandemic or more specifically physical distancing, despite being seen as a painful experience insofar as there was no sharing of pregnancy and postpartum with the family and other loved ones, on the other hand, it protected parents from the presence and potential interference of family members, according to common sense and discussed in the literature. Let's look at the excerpts below:

It's obvious that we miss being close to friends, family and everything else, but with the birth of "X" (baby's name) it was more of a relief, because I would really be very uncomfortable with this much contact (...) you know, the child is 10 days old and a lot of visitors come to the house to hold him and (...) man, I say, in reality, with or without COVID, I think that before three months, few people would hold him, because I wouldn't let them. (Father 3)

So Sunday is a day that (...) I take it off to rest, it would be a day that I would want to spend even more time playing with my son, enjoying my wife and that we would, in fact, enjoy this phase, but then it would be the day that all the relatives would be off work, and they would come to the house all the time, knock on the door and talk, and want to laugh and relatives who arrive and don't want to leave the house anymore, believing that every day is a party; that would really irritate me to the point, I'm even afraid that one day someone will knock at the gate and I simply won't open the gate, I didn't invite anyone to come here, they won't come in (laughs) (...) so, I'm even thankful that I already know myself and that these things would start happening and really, I don't want to keep picking fights. (Father 5)

## 5) The Appreciation of this New Father

The pregnancy-puerperal cycle, when experienced for the first time by the couple, brings with it the need to appropriate and manage new sensations in light of the changes that occur biologically in the woman and in terms of the psychological and social aspects for both. In the case of the man who does not experience pregnancy in his own body, pregnancy is an endless source of doubts, fears and fantasies, still little described in the literature which is one of the reasons that motivated us to carry out this investigation.

During prenatal care, it was noted that fathers had difficulty receiving information about what they could do during this stage in which the woman is pregnant. They often do not know what they can or cannot do, or how they should explore this phase. The issue of sharing information as well as the difficulty and even impossibility of talking about the subject proved to be significant for all fathers.

Since this is my first time as a father, and she is also the first time as a mother, we won't know, understand what it means to cry from an earache, what it means to cry from colic, so I worry a lot about this and I'm even looking for videos on the internet in my spare time to watch so I can start to enter this world (...) I think I'll have some difficulty. (Father 1)

There's a lot of information missing. You can find a lot of things for pregnant mothers, such as how to behave, how to feel about the body, but we don't find much material or places to exchange

ideas with other men, like 'what are the main difficulties that a father faces in the first moments or during pregnancy'? Maybe if other men knew that all of this is normal, up to a certain point, that they really need to do it, that it will be very good for the woman and the couple and maybe even a benefit for the baby later, I think they would change their behavior a little, not completely, because of machismo, because he thinks that his main role is only to procreate and teach people not to swear and play soccer, things like that. If this kind of conversation were more common, I think we would have better fathers. (Father 5)

Not being familiar with the newborn, as well as the fear of not knowing how to take care of the baby, are common and frequent manifestations, which demonstrate the unconscious encounter of the adult subject – mothers and/or fathers – with the helplessness that characterizes the baby due to his/her condition of exclusive dependence on another person who will provide the baby with means of survival above everything else.

In traditional psychoanalysis, it is understood that the feeling of helplessness arises from the first experiences of life, since babies are beings in need requiring interaction with the world around them and depending exclusively on it. The baby will inevitably call on the adult not only to take care of him/her but to insure survival. The following are reports from parents during the postpartum period:

If we receive any support from outsiders, any support is welcome, but we can't count on it, so I kind of conditioned my brain not to get frustrated if there was no support for me, you know? But yes, I feel that sometimes I needed help too. (Father 4)

Women find a support network a little more easily to exchange experiences, to help each other more easily than men and (...) men have difficulty asking for help, a lot of difficulty in doing so, and I noticed that the experience of a man who has already been a father, who has already experienced motherhood (a slip of the tongue?), is very different from that of a man who, even though being close, has not yet reached his moment. (Father 5)

Thanks, thanks a lot, you know?! It was cool to participate too, because it makes us think a little, right? It helps us think a little about the whole process. (Father 2)

All of the above reports revealed the fathers' genuine concern for adequate preparation so that the care they provided to their child would be appropriate and safe. They also demonstrated the need for guidance, which led them to seek help especially on social media, which is currently an accessible resource with endless information – with or without good content – and also to share with other men who were experiencing fatherhood and had some experience that could add more knowledge to provide care for their child.

Interventions with groups of pregnant couples are common today; however, it is worth noting that the focus remains on women, with no significant group work dedicated specifically to men in the process of becoming fathers.

## Conclusion

Initially, we realized that the space for fathers to speak up through the interviews, in itself, became therapeutic for the participants, who mentioned the possibility of listening, visibility and reflection, which was not stimulated by the social environment in which they were inserted. This proves once again that the changes that have occurred in the family and in contemporary society, regarding gender equality, are incipient in view of the traditional model hegemony. Thus It was found, that the participants demonstrated that they felt pressured by the position of provider and

caregiver, as well as desirous of someone caring for and listening to them, in the sense of being able to share their emotions, difficulties and potential conflicts in the face of the unprecedented experience of fatherhood.

The invisibility of fathers became evident not only in the reports, but also in the scarce scientific literature in the fields of psychology and psychoanalysis that addresses the psychological aspects of the father as a subject, with desires, expectations, fantasies, anxieties, loneliness and any other psychological repercussions. The literature, for the most part, reports studies that investigate the father as an agent promoting care and protection, whether for the child or for the wife. He is often placed in the background with regard to his emotional conditions and, as a result, depressive episodes can also occur, in addition to difficulties arising in the marital and family spheres.

The participants reported emotional experiences similar to those described in the literature about women in the pregnancy-puerperal process. From the analysis of the thematic categories developed, we observed that the fathers' expectations during the gestational period involved fantasies about the place or role to be occupied by them, as well as their powerlessness when compared to the mother-baby relationship, especially the exclusivity of breastfeeding, as it makes it difficult for them to establish a bond with their child. It is understood that in this aspect, the social focus attributed to the mother-baby dyad contributes to the father feeling excluded and unseen. However, the fathers' desire presented itself as a mobilizing force for them to carve a position of importance in this relationship.

The process of identification of husbands with their wives was observed, starting from the gestational period, and those husbands were surprised by emotional and physical changes, just like their wives, in a synchronicity of their experience in this phase of life. The *Couvade* phenomenon was present, but we did not understand it as being symptomatic or pathological, but rather as a result of the fathers' identification with the will-be mothers and consequent attempt to process the changes that fatherhood brings with it. Manifestations of envy, considering the Kleinian concept, were also perceived, expressing a singularity of these participants who sometimes wished to perform functions typically of the female body like, for example, having the child in their belly or still being able to breastfeed, but having as a possible satisfaction the continuous presence, day and night, of tasks concerning the care of the babies, almost superseding those performed by their wives.

The need for protection of the family nucleus was proven, especially against possible intrusions from others, especially those caused by the couple's own family. As a result, the pandemic, a catastrophic event that crossed the path of this study, was experienced by the participants in an ambivalent way. On the one hand, there was the separation of families and the prevention of sharing moments of the pregnancy and postpartum as it always happened, generating sadness and resentment because these were moments that could never be experienced again. On the other hand, the need for physical distancing, as indicated by the global health authorities, was considered a sort of protection against invasive family members yet in a milder way than if the couple had to deal directly with such situation.

Based on the results of this investigation, it was found that fathers need a therapeutic space and work aimed at them, since the prenatal and postpartum periods are sources of ambivalent feelings for men and especially for women whose feelings have been widely discussed in the specific literature. Sharing information and experiences is an evident demand revealed in our study, and it is important that further studies be carried out based on information and/or therapeutic groups offered specifically to men who are about to become fathers.

It can be concluded that men, as desiring subjects, just like women, have the same condition of taking over the role of effective and affectionate caregivers of a baby who exclusively needs the care of an adult to survive and develop psychologically. Psychoanalysis, initially restricted to the old days when men played only the role of financial provider for the family group, while women took care of the house and children, requires updating in its concepts through new research addressing contemporary times. With family arrangements very different from the traditional model that prevailed in the past historical period, it is possible to contribute to scientific knowledge by listening to this population with the aim of updating and expanding theoretical articulations.

As mental health professionals, psychologists and psychoanalysts, ought to listen, revisit concepts and collaborate towards a more up-to-date vision that adds the old and strengthened themes to contemporary findings. Therefore, we believe that it is possible for men to be “good enough” fathers, paraphrasing the Winnicottian term of good enough mother, since the main characteristic to consider to be a good enough mother is the temporary availability for a single task, which implies first of all desire, something that the fathers participating in this study clearly demonstrated they also had.

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