Fathers Online: Learning About Fatherhood Through the Internet

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ABSTRACT

In the transition to fatherhood, men face numerous challenges. Opportunities to learn new practices and gain support are limited, although the provisions of father-specific spaces such as fathers' antenatal classes or "responsible fathering" programs are important advances. This article explores how men use the social space of a father-specific Internet chat room to learn about fathering. Messages to an Australian-hosted, father-specific chat room (for fathers of infants or young children) were examined, and three overlapping themes illustrated men's perceptions of their transition to fatherhood. The themes concerned recognition of and response to a lack of social space, services, and support for new fathers. The implications for fathers' perinatal education are discussed.

The Journal of Perinatal Education, *20*(3), 154–162, doi: 10.1891/1058-1243.20.3.154
Keywords: fathers, perinatal education, Internet, father-specific programs

In the course of generating a new life, every parent will undergo some transformation of self, with the attendant emotional and psychological journey (Katz-Wise, Priess, & Hyde, 2010; Raith, 2008). For fathers, this transition has been described as a journey in limbo, through no-man's land (Draper, 2003). Their path is not clearly marked by body changes, medical observation, or social recognition of pregnancy, and many fathers continue to feel that the transition to fatherhood is difficult and isolating (Draper, 2003; P. L. Jordan, 2007). However, a smooth transition to parenthood is essential to children's well-being and parent–child relationships (Bryanton & Beck, 2010; Jones & Prinz, 2005); thus, the purpose of this article is to explore one way in which fathers themselves seek to smooth this transition.

Journeying smoothly through a significant transition is facilitated by knowledge and preparation, which is the acknowledged goal of antenatal education for parents in the areas of pregnancy, labor, and birth.

Transition is a staged physical, psychological, and spiritual process consisting of movement from status quo, or normal life, through a middle period of psychological reorganization and adaption, to an incorporation of the new circumstances into one's inner and outer world (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Kralik, Visentin, & van Loon, 2006; Meleis, Sawyer, Im, Hilfinger Messais, & Schumacher, 2000). The middle period, or limen, in which one is neither

part of the old nor reoriented to the new world/life, can be the most difficult period (Draper, 2003). Journeying smoothly through a significant transition is facilitated by knowledge and preparation (Meleis et al., 2000), which is the acknowledged goal of antenatal education for parents in the areas of pregnancy, labor, and birth (Bryanton & Beck, 2010; Friedewald, Fletcher, & Fairbairn, 2005; Koehn, 2002; Walker, Visger, & Rossie, 2009).

Meleis et al.'s (2002) theory of transition suggests that a smooth transition is facilitated by people's cultural beliefs and attitudes. For example, when fathers feel incompetent or left out (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Wockel, Shafer, Beggel, & Abou-Dakn, 2007), or when they hold traumatic or negative memories of their own father (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Madsen, 2009), these feelings and/or memories will impact on the processes of reorganizing their identity, roles, and practices (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Madsen, 2009). Likewise, social "norms" and expectations that describe or discuss fathers in debilitating or dismissive ways, such as the "baby entertainer, bumbling assistant and line manager" (Sunderland, 2000, p. 249), contribute to the tenor of fathers' experiences. These expectations or "discourses" contradict contemporary notions of involved fatherhood (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Brownson & Gilbert, 2002; Daly & Palkovitz, 2004) and may add to men's "underdeveloped, fragmented and incomplete" transition to fatherhood (Draper, 2003, p. 74), which further emphasizes the importance for understanding how better to assist fathers through the perinatal period (McKellar, Pincombe, & Henderson, 2008).

Traditionally, couples have received preparation for the transition to parenthood through antenatal classes offered by hospitals and professionals. However, although perinatal education in recent years has included components for fathers in response to fathers' and society's increasing interest in involved fatherhood, it has been noted that many of the current provisions for fathers are inadequate (Goodman, 2005; Lee & Schmied, 2001) and that fathers are dissatisfied with the available services (Svensson, Barclay, & Cooke, 2006). From her review of qualitative studies of new fatherhood, Goodman (2005) concluded that not only should nurses provide fathers with opportunities to develop confidence in infant care, but also "Fathers-only classes may be offered in which men can develop competence and confidence away from their partner whom they may perceive as more capable" in order to develop a sense of themselves as a parent "beyond their partner" (p. 198).

Benefits of Internet social networking include emotional support, esteem support, and encouragement, as well as information exchange.

Male-only antenatal groups (Friedewald et al., 2005) and interactive Web use (Fletcher, 2008) have been found to be effective in both engaging men and satisfying their need for information or support. In these environments, fathers can normally be confident that all members identify as fathers (Friedewald et al., 2005; Macleod, 2008) and are able to find explicit support through interaction with other fathers (Anderson, Kohler, & Letiecq, 2002; Friedewald et al., 2005). Although all-male groups have been identified as sources of misogynistic bonding (Andronico, 1996), they also can be a setting for explorations of caring practices more commonly found among females (Tiger, 1971).

Relatively new practices can also be explored on the Internet, because it offers networks, peer interaction and community through e-mail, online discussion groups, blogging, and videos (e.g., Hudson, Campbell-Grossman, Keating-Lefler, & Cline, 2008; Lagan, Sinclair, & Kernohan, 2007). Benefits of Internet social networking include emotional support (Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2009), esteem support (Hwang et al., 2010), and encouragement (Boase, Horrigan, Wellman, & Rainie, 2006), as well as information exchange (Dickerson, Flaig, & Kennedy, 2000; D. N. Jordan & J. L. Jordan, 2002). However, although connections through Web-based support groups and chat rooms for parents are numerous, women are the predominant users of these venues (Larsson, 2009; Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2004). Fathers' use of Web sites has only recently begun to be evaluated (Fletcher, 2008; Morris, Dollahite, & Hawkins, 1999; Nicholas, McNeill, Montgomery, Stapleford, & McClure, 2003); thus, the patterns of interaction among fathers on these sites and their use of the sites to ease their transition to fatherhood have been underinvestigated.

The aim of our study was to gain insight into how the transition to fatherhood might be facilitated through (predominantly) male interactions in an Internet chat room on an Australian parenting Web site. This article explores how online discussions may allow fathers to discuss their fathering role and their needs for support. Specifically, we asked: What is the nature of fathers' discussion in the chat room, and how do they talk about their new fathering roles?

METHODS

Data Sources

The field of study was taken as a sample of 18 months of posts to a chat room on an Australian-based, government-supported, parenting information Web site, ending in November 2007. The chat room was designated by the Web site owners to be used by fathers. Eighty topics were posted in the 18 months. Topics chosen for analysis were those with the most replies (we set a minimum cutoff of 10 replies), resulting in the collection of nine topics. The chat room Web-pages were downloaded and saved as text documents. The minimum number of users in any one topic was five, and the maximum number of users was 13. At the time of data collection, one topic had received posts sporadically over 15 months, three topics received posts over 4 to 5 months, and the remaining topics received posts between 1 and 5 weeks. Table 1 shows the number of replies, users, and words in each topic.

In this online environment, we could only identify the gender of participants through the user's pseudonym and/or through other identifying text in the message (e.g., "I am a SAHD [stay-at-home dad]"). Thus, it appeared that 23 fathers were the predominant users of the chat room, although 22 women also posted replies to all but one of the topics. Men who had one or more children (18 experienced fathers, including six stay-at-home dads) outnumbered expectant or new fathers (five), and they contributed more posts over a range of issues.

The Ethics of Researching Online Communities

Although the Internet may be a "public space," the intention of users may not be one of public visibility (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Furthermore, although people expect a certain amount of open access to their communication, in online situations where groups are small or the topic is discreet, contributors are more likely to wish to protect their privacy (Waskul & Douglass, 1996), through registering or using pseudonyms, for example (Eysenbach & Till, 2001). Researchers in the field of online communication stress the importance of applying generic ethical standards to data collection, analysis, and publication in ways that are sensitive to the specific characteristics of the online community being researched (Allen, 1996; Sixsmith & Murray, 2001). In this regard, although we did not ask for consent from individuals on the site, we de-identified text concerning names and places, and considered that the purposes and methods of our study recognized individuals' differences and respected their knowledge and experiences (British Psychological Society, 2007).

Data Analysis

In our study, we used a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) that had two steps: a semantic analysis, followed by an analysis of the underlying or latent content of the texts. In the first step, we analyzed the chat room texts to describe *what* participants discussed. At the latent or interpretative level, we then coded the underlying ideas, thoughts, or attitudes about fathers' experiences, roles, and practices that were present across the four semantic categories. The themes presented in the findings were crafted from patterns across these coding categories. Quotations are presented as in the chat room postings, retaining the original spelling and grammatical expressions; each quotation is followed by an identification code we used to distinguish between participants.

TABLE 1
Frequency of Postings to Each Topic

Fathers' Topics	Replies	Number of Users	Number of Males	Approximate Number of Words
1. The need for new-fathers' groups	28	13	12	~3,500
2. Apprehension about fatherhood	23	9	5	~4,000
3. Difficulties for new fathers	21	12	9	~3,000
4. Views on breastfeeding in public	20	9	4	~3,000
5. Organization of outing	12	7	6	~1,100
6. Announcement of birth	11	6	4	~ 790
7. The need for a men's space	10	5	5	~1,800
8. Expectations of birth	10	8	5	~1,500
9. Dealing with work and family	10	9	7	~1,900

FINDINGS

In the semantic analysis, we first categorized the explicit content of the discussion topics into four categories. Messages within the topics concerned fathers' opinions about their relative invisibility and complaints about the lack of playgroups and family services for them and their child ("Isolation"). They also expressed their apprehension for their new role in terms of such things as how to bond with the new baby or how to look after their partner during birth ("Fathers' Practices"). They also used the chat room to discuss breastfeeding ("Social Opinion") and to make announcements ("Announcements"; see Table 2).

Through the interpretative analysis, we identified three major overlapping themes from patterns across coding categories, each of which pointed to the complex and changing nature of fathering that influences men's experience of the transition to fatherhood. The themes concerned the lack of social spaces for new fathers ("Dads left out"), the complexities involved in balancing work and family life ("Breadwinners or nurturers?"), and fathers' efforts to create a learning space for themselves ("Making a space for fathers").

Dads Left Out

Across the four semantic categories, there was a persistent theme of being "left out." Fathers felt excluded from the "normal" processes of infant–parent welfare. They had two grounds for this perception. One was a perceived lack of opportunity to discuss fathering, to share fathering with others, and especially to participate in playgroups. For example, one father wrote, "Being a new dad I'm interested in hearing from other dads that feel that up until now there is little information for us men" (3). Some fathers felt that when they did attempt to fulfill parenting activities outside their home, they were often the "only father" in playgroups, shopping centers, or baby diaper changing rooms. In response to concerns about the lack of services or the lack of information for new fathers, other men wrote in to acknowledge the difficulty of the unknown and advising on how to help the baby, the mother, and self through the early days of the newborn's life. The men shared anecdotes and stories about their own family life, and gave advice and assurances. Other fathers offered themselves as permanent "ports-of-call" and were willing to receive personal messages for more one-on-one advice.

Accompanying the perception of a lack of services for fathers with young children was a second and powerful pressure: negative reactions from in-laws and from the public to fathers as the full-time caretaker of infants. The following comments illustrate the fathers' perceptions of negative reactions:

> *I am copping a lot of flak for choosing to be a SAHD [stay-at-home dad]. Especially from my own parents, they don't think it is a good idea. They feel that [the mother] needs to bond with the baby more than I do and they think the baby will get confused.* (40)

> *I see the dirty looks I get from others when we go shopping, wondering what the hell is this bloke doing looking after a baby.* (3)

> *. . . society at large can generally be fairly negative towards stay home dads so why should they try.* (43)

TABLE 2
Emergent Categories From the Semantic Analysis

Category	Topic Number and Name	Issues
Isolation	1. The need for new-fathers' groups 3. Difficulties for new fathers 7. The need for a men's space	Sharing information about fathers' groups in different areas and discussion of difficulties; concern about lack of information; support for others in regard to difficulties in rearing children and in being a stay-at-home dad; protests about women posting on fathers' site
Fathers' practices	2. Apprehension about fatherhood 8. Expectations of birth 9. Dealing with work and family	Description of nervousness about becoming a father; responses regarding experience, both positive and mixed journey; questions, advice, and descriptions of birth and work–family life
Social opinion	4. Views on breastfeeding in public	Asking for others' views on breastfeeding in public, personal experiences, and emotional responses to breastfeeding
Announcements	5. Organization of outing 6. Announcement of birth	Organizing locations and times of dads' nights out; informing about Web location of men's forums; discussion of women posting on the site (difference of opinions about this); details of birth and advice, congratulations and reassurance for the new father

Fathers used the chat room to discuss their concerns of balancing economic pressures with the anticipated time pressures of new family life.

Some men concluded that exclusion resulted in inertia. Discussing the lack of groups, two fathers wrote:

> *Unfortunately there doesn't appear to be anything like it [a playgroup] down here, nor does there appear to be the demand for it. I gather that men have tried to start such groups but nothing happens.* (38)

> *The first meeting, a Sunday afternoon where we could show of[f] the kids in a local park, brought about all of one dad and son.* (4)

Fathers seemed to feel that initiatives were rare or hard to find. Combined with the perceived social reprobation (as in 43 previously), this lack of initiative contributed to discouragement and disengagement from social or public father–child activities.

Breadwinners or Nurturers?

The continuing discourse of fathers as *conflicted* about work and family roles (Brownson & Gilbert, 2002) was also in evidence, for fathers used the chat room to discuss their concerns of balancing economic pressures with the anticipated time pressures of new family life. The topic was addressed directly as the top post in one thread, but was also implicit in fathers' descriptions of their work and home life. For example, one father wrote:

> *I am about to be a first time Dad in 2 months and yes I am excited by the prospect but from what I am reading here I must be missing something . . . Don't you guys have mortgages and bills to pay??* (45)

As in the previous theme, other men responded with advice and stories of their own experiences. This father suggests that different life values and expectations are required:

> *Oops. Me thinks you be in a spot of bother. Yes, we do have a mortgage. And a car payment and bills. And yes it does get tough. But we just had to make the adjustment. It meant some serious pulling of our heads in. Unfortunately there is no other way . . . . But kids do take a lot of time. And if we want the best for [our children] then we have to be prepared to make time.* (38)

Other fathers suggested parental leave for either or both parents to facilitate the early days. As the previous excerpt indicates, one of the most potent arguments for learning to balance work and family was the primacy of the bond between parent and child. Other fathers expressed the same sentiment:

> *We made the decision that we didn't want "someone" else seeing and experiencing all the "first's" in Jr's life.* (3)

> *That three weeks [at home with newborn] went SO quickly and the first Monday I went back was hell.* (4)

> *A few of my friends are lucky with this [being stay-at-home dads] but unfortunately I am not. (14)*

This argument was also supported by fathers indicating the effect of varying types of conflict between work and family time; shift-work hours, workday length, and availability of parental leave presented difficulties such as being tired and missing out on time with children.

Two mothers also joined the discussion of fathers' options, both praising fathers for their choices. As one of the mothers wrote, "Help[ed] me realise how truly blessed we mums are" (31).

Making a Space for Fathers

Virtual space. Indeed, a significant issue in the chat room was the consistency with which women posted messages. Perceived often as "interloping," it provoked intense reaction. Much dialogue was taken up by both men and women in questioning or challenging the purpose of the chat room. Some fathers perceived the space as a site for interaction with other men. Here, the purposes of the chat room were to learn about fathering through feedback and advice from other fathers, and for encouragement to share, discuss, and open up feelings about children, wives, or family. The reason given for these purposes was that some men feel hesitant or cautious about discussing or sharing their feelings, particularly in the presence of women, where they may feel uncomfortable or embarrassed. For example, one father stated:

> *I see this Dads' forum as an opportunity for guys who may not otherwise feel comfortable discussing these issues. My concern is that if guys who are hesitant or cautious feel maybe even less likely to post if they feel they aren't "with the guys.*" (4)

Many felt it was important that the forum be seen as a place where fathers could feel free to be "open and honest," to discuss things with their peers, such as thoughts on breastfeeding, and have expectations of sharing the space with other fathers. Discussions about the "nature" of men, how "we" men are, "our network," about "getting bloke time" and time for "male talk," and where "we are all in the same boat" highlighted the importance of this particular space for fathers.

However, expressions of these boundaries drew reactions from others, both males and females. Some discussed the benefits of sharing information with mothers and fathers and welcomed the comments and participation of mothers who they believed may have particular experiences in child care that could be helpful to men. The following father's response illustrates this point:

> *As you rightly put it, it is a public forum and although there is the different sections I find that gaining helpful information from where ever to help me become a better father and carer for our child is paramount. There needs to be a balance and as there are more females as the primary carer for a child I think it is important to listen, read and learn from those that have been doing it for decades. There are many posts in the "Mums" section that have answered the exact question I had.* (3)

Other responses were more reactive in questioning the need for male space. For example, one woman wrote:

> *I'm really sorry but I have to admit that I did giggle a bit reading your post . . . I don't mean that in a nasty way so I am truly sorry if I've offended you by saying that . . . it's pretty heart-warming to see men on here wanting to learn stuff to be better dad's . . . I mean you aren't naked or anything!* (48)

This mother congratulates fathers while arguing against their expressed needs. She does not appear to recognize that fathers may have a legitimate need for a "male" social space where fathers can actively engage with other fathers about their fathering roles. Solutions to the conflicting purposes included responses from the chat room moderator encouraging users to "respect the wishes and privacy of the primary users of the forum." Others suggested setting up a parenting site where both genders might feel comfortable in participating.

Cultural space. Nevertheless, despite the contestation in creating a new virtual space for themselves, fathers were helping to change the quality of their culture (Draper, 2003). Their questions and advice, whether in all-male or mixed company, were efforts to establish a supportive and accommodating milieu that not only informed their new practices but also helped to "resist their marginalization" (p. 74) by establishing alternative perceptions and rituals (e.g., chat room conversations, dads' groups, and dads' nights out). Suggestions of lingering societal perceptions about "men's work" in the online messages were points of conjecture for fathers, because their discussions pointed to their adapting to the ideal of involved fatherhood. For example, the stay-at-home dad who was receiving "a lot of flak" from his own parents reframed their argument about fathers not bonding with infants as "rubbish." Fathers variously saw their involvement as contributing to fathering discussions, attending playgroup and outings with their child, or being a full-time caregiver. Others moved away from the breadwinner discourse to highlight the importance of time over money in being a "good" father. Their sense of passion and responsibility for their families was also revealed through their detailed descriptions of their children included in their online signatures, or their emotive and frank anticipation of labor, birth, and new life. About his son, one father wrote, "I Love the Morning and Afternoons when my little man is up and greets me. There is nothing more special than this" (9).

With regard to labor, another father advised, "Just remember, you[r] partner may say anything during the process, just agree and be there for her. She is the most important person in this whole process" (3). Similarly, the following father's posts show his current involvement and his thoughts about his bond with his daughter:

> *My little girl is just over a week old now. I'm still learning lots, I've only just become confident holding her.* (14)

> *At first I felt a little disconnected from her, but with a few baths and lots of nappy changes and holding her while she sleeps i [sic] think she is rapidly growing on me. Did this happen to anyone else? Did you feel a little disconnected at first?* (14)

DISCUSSION

To better understand men's needs during transition to fatherhood, we explored the messages that

fathers exchanged in a father-specific chat room on an Australian parenting Web site. We used Draper's (2003) theory of ritual transition and Meleis et al.'s (2000) theory of transition to frame the study. The negative experiences of fathers in this time are well known (for a review, see S. Hanson, Hunter, Bormann, & Sobo, 2009), and Draper's study pointed to why this transition is a particularly challenging path, despite its everyday occurrence. The limen, the middle period, when the father is in neither the old nor the new world, is a particularly difficult time because there is less acknowledgment of the psychological and spiritual reorganization, and there are fewer rituals to accompany the journey, rendering it opaque and joyless.

The findings from our study identified several persistent conditions that make becoming a father a troublesome process. Most fathers in the chat room, expectant and experienced, felt there were not enough resources to support their education, spaces to support their involvement, or recognition of their experiences and feelings about pregnancy, labor, birth, and fathering. Specifically, expectant and new fathers were interested in antenatal information about labor and birth, and postnatal information about bonding and parenting. With regard to space to support their involvement, messages from stay-at-home fathers illustrated the lack of social or supportive venues for fathers to comfortably interact with their child (up to 5 years old). This discomfort extended to the public spaces of everyday life, such as supermarkets and welfare agencies. It also extended to continuing concerns fathers have about their work and family roles, concerns that are shared by many other fathers (Daly & Hawkins, 2005). These tensions contributed to a pervasive feeling that fathers' feelings of dislocation and disruption were unacknowledged social factors in the family's formation.

However, like-minded individuals in similar places of limbo may form communities to support each other (e.g., Byrne, 2007; Høybe, Johansen, & Tjørnhøj-Thomsen, 2005; Hwang et al., 2010; Nicholas et al., 2003). Common feelings brought these men to the chat room, their explicit purpose in seeking and giving help, to be "here for you guys." The men were proactive in creating individual responses to their perceived social challenges; as is noted in the men's help-seeking literature, men were doing it differently than women, but they were doing it nevertheless (Smith, Braunack-Mayer, Wittert, & Warin, 2008). Many advice posters were generous in their intentions to facilitate each other's growth, some of which were motivated by fathers' appreciation of their own behavior. Acknowledging the historical–cultural shaping of their emotional and experiential background gave these men a reason to seek space only with other fathers, and to request that their endeavors to create a new "quality of culture" (Draper, 2003, p. 74) were not undermined by a lack of respect for differences.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings reported here add to the weight of evidence directing childbirth services to expand their notion of appropriate care to include the father of the baby (S. Hanson et al., 2009). However, the online postings examined in this study also suggest an alternative approach to fathers' needs. Expanding childbirth services to include fathers may involve not only offering more information to fathers and facilitating more father involvement in the clinical aspects surrounding the birth of their child, but also providing space where groups of fathers can informally share information, identify common perspectives, and communicate support. The father-only antenatal education groups reported in the literature are one way to meet this need, but the evidence from our study and others (e.g., Grant, Hawkins, & Dollahite, 2001) suggests that virtual spaces may also be appropriate meeting places.

The possibility of facilitating fathers' access to Internet-based resources, allowing for the diminished access by fathers from low socioeconomic groups (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2004), is an important consideration. In an era when educators and childbirth services more generally face multiple demands from health-care reforms, from pressure for evidence-based care, and from fluctuations in demand (Budin, 2010; L. Hanson, VandeVusse, Roberts, & Forristal, 2009; Walker et al., 2009), the possibility of facilitating fathers' access to resources outside of the clinic may reduce the extra workload implied by including fathers. Given the rapid growth of the Internet's interactive capacity, the task for childbirth professionals may be to stay abreast of developing technological sites for fathers, and act as a facilitator and guide rather than a provider of information and social support. As the findings from our study indicate, receiving encouragement and education that supports involved fathers is welcomed by many men. Although fathers' contribution to their children's well-being varies across cultures and roles (Lamb, 2010), the effect of a father's positive involvement reaches far into the future of the child's social, emotional, and cognitive well-being.

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