

Parenthood experiences during the child's first year: literature review

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Background. Raising a child is probably the most challenging responsibility faced by a new parent. The first year is the basis of the child's development and is significant for growth and development. Knowledge and understanding of parents' experiences are especially important for child health nurses, whose role is to support parents in their parenthood.

Aim. The aim of this review was to describe mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenthood during the child's first year.

Method. A literature search covering 1992–2002 was carried out using the terms parenthood, parenting, first year, infancy and experience. Of the 88 articles retrieved, 33 articles (both qualitative and quantitative) met the inclusion criteria and corresponded to the aim of this review. The data were analysed by thematic content analysis.

Findings. Being a parent during the child's first year was experienced as overwhelming. The findings were described from two perspectives, namely mothers' and fathers' perspectives, since all the included studies considered mothers' and fathers' experiences separately. The following categories were identified concerning mothers: being satisfied and confident as a mother, being primarily responsible for the child is overwhelming and causes strain, struggling with the limited time available for oneself, and being fatigued and drained. The following categories were found for fathers: being confident as a father and as a partner, living up to the new demands causes strain, being prevented from achieving closeness to the child is hurtful, and being the protector and the provider of the family. The unifying theme for these categories was 'living in a new and overwhelming world'.

Conclusion. There is a need for nurse interventions aimed at minimizing parents' experiences of strain. A suggested intervention is to find a method whereby child health nurses' support would lead to parents becoming empowered in their parenthood.

Keywords: experience, infancy, literature review, nurse interventions, parents, strain

Introduction

The addition of a newborn infant to the family brings about more profound changes than any other developmental stage of the family life cycle. New roles need to be learned, new relationships developed, and existing relationships realigned (Cowan & Cowan 1995). Raising a child is probably the most challenging responsibility faced by a new parent (Ladden & Damato 1992).

Meleis (1975, 1986, 1997) has proposed that transition is one of the concepts central to nursing. Families are confronted with varying forms of transition throughout family life, and the transition to parenthood is developmental (Schumacher & Meleis 1994). Uncertainty and disorganization threaten family members with disruption, and challenge their efforts to reorganize and reconstruct their lives (Selder 1989). There are studies about the transition to parenthood as it occurs during pregnancy (Imle 1990), the postpartum period (Pridham & Chang 1992), and up to 18 months postpartum (Majewski 1987). According to Francis-Connolly (1998), mothering is a lifetime occupation for women. Although it is mothers' transition to parenthood that is most often studied, the transition to fatherhood has also been addressed (Battles 1988).

The first year is the basis of a child's development and, according to Vågerö (1997), is significant for growth and development. Parents are important models for their children, and childhood is influenced by their competence and ability to create a harmonious and secure environment for their children. Western societies today are characterized by great complexity, fast changes, and new conditions for parenthood (Socialdepartementet 1997). The number of couple separations in Sweden is increasing (Statistiska centralbyrån 2002), which is leading to many children experiencing strain during the divorce. Child health nurses are the people within the health system who will meet parents and infants regularly and whose role is to support parents in their parenthood, especially during the first year of the child's life. Therefore it seems important to understand parents' experiences.

Literature review

Aim

The aim of this review was to describe mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenthood during the child's first year.

Search method

A literature search covering the period 1992–2002 was carried out using the Medline, Cinahl, PsycLit, and Academic

Search databases. The terms used in the search were parenthood, parenting, first year, infancy, and experience. The search strategy used both the index systems and the free-text searching. A manual search in the reference lists of the studies found was also performed. The inclusion criterion for the studies was that they had to describe fathers', mothers' or parents' experiences from the first year of the child's life. Studies dealing with both experienced and first-time parents were included. The exclusion criteria were: studies of adolescent parents, ill children and ill parents, and studies limited to experiences during the first month of the child's life, and quantitative studies limited to statistical findings. About 250 abstracts were read through and a total of 88 articles were identified, of which 33 met the inclusion criteria, corresponded to the aim of this review, and were analysed (see Table 1).

Data analysis

To describe mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenthood during the child's first year, a thematic content analysis (Downe-Wamboldt 1992, Baxter 1994) was performed. Each article was read through several times, in order to obtain a sense of the content. Thereafter textual units (corresponding to all the text describing experience of parenting) were identified and marked. The textual units (a total of 534) were then condensed, and in order to look for similar descriptions, open coding of all the condensed textual units was performed. In the next step the textual units were sorted out, summed up, and categorized in six steps. The purpose was to reduce the number of categories by bringing together the ones that were similar into broader categories (cf. Burnard 1991). All the categories were then compared and a theme was identified. According to Baxter (1994) themes are 'threads of meaning that recur in domain after domain' (p. 250). The textual units were finally reread and compared against the categories. During the whole analysis process we continually discussed the construction of categories and the theme until consensus was reached. During the process we also repeatedly compared the categories with the textual units.

Findings

The findings are described from the mothers' and the fathers' perspectives since included studies separated these experiences. The analysis revealed the following categories concerning mothers: being satisfied and confident as a mother, being primarily responsible for the child is overwhelming and causes strain, struggling with the limited time available for oneself, and being fatigued and drained. The following

Table 1 Studies included in the literature review ($n = 33$)

Author, year	Type	Participants	Data collection/ data analysis	Key findings
Ahlborg and Strandmark (2001)	Qual.	10 first-time parents (5 couples)	Interviews/descriptive phenomenological method	Two categories: the baby was the focus of mutual concern. The baby was focused on at the expense of the father
Anderson (1996)	Qual.	14 first-time fathers	Interviews/the constant comparative method	Three major areas: making room for the baby, father-father relationship, and wife's support
Barclay <i>et al.</i> (1997)	Qual.	55 women (primi-paras)	Focus group discussion/ grounded theory	Six categories: realizing, unready, drained, aloneness, loss, working it out
Barclay and Lupton (1999)	Qual.	15 fathers	Semi-structured interviews/ discourse analysis	Three themes: renegotiating paid employment and household work, expectations and symbolic meanings of fatherhood, and changing relationship with partner
Blair and Hardesty (1994)	Quant.	802 parents (374 fathers and 428 mothers)	Questionnaire/statistics	The levels of depression and physical health of mothers and fathers differ. Women run a greater risk of work overload than men. Significant positive relationships between parental identification and self-esteem and health. Fathers' self-esteem is significantly associated with their employment status and the level of the household income
Delmore-Ko <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Qual. and quant.	73 primi-parous couples	Questionnaires/statistics	Both men and women express less satisfaction with the quality of their marital relationship as they adjust to being first-time parents
Gross and Tucker (1994)	Quant.	92 married parents (46 mothers and 46 fathers) first-time and experienced	Questionnaires/statistics	Maternal confidence was related to depression and all measures of child behaviour. Paternal confidence was related only to the intensity of the child's behaviour.
Hall (1995)	Qual.	3 first-time fathers	In-depth interviews/ hermeneutical approach	The fathers' experiences were interpreted as: fun and excitement, love at first sight, awakening, and joy and trouble
Hall (1992)	Qual.	8 first-time mothers and 10 first-time fathers	Semi-structured interviews and observations/grounded theory	A comparison of the two processes of role redefinition revealed a major difference between the men and the women: the women experienced significantly more role strain than the men did. The women described feeling overwhelmed by their responsibilities. Although the men described their lives as chaotic at times, they indicated that they never felt overwhelmed

Table 1 (Continued)

Author, year	Type	Participants	Data collection/ data analysis	Key findings
Hall (1994)	Qual.	10 first-time fathers	Semi-structured interviews/ grounded theory	The fathers' experiences consisted of coping with many demands from children, partners, and jobs. These men redefined their roles as fathers after their partners returned to full-time employment
Hartrick (1997)	Qual.	7 mothers	In-depth interviews, focus group/thematic analysis	Defining the self includes: non-reflective doing, living in the shadows, and reclaiming and discovering the self
Horowitz and Damato (1999)	Qual. and quant.	95 women	Questionnaire/content analysis	Four categories: roles, tasks, resources, and relationships. The subcategories were identified as areas of stress and as areas of satisfaction
Kaila-Behm and Vehviläinen-Julkunen (2000)	Qual.	25 first-time fathers, and 29 public health nurses	Interviews, essay/ grounded theory	The fathers described being a father as being a bystander, supporter of the spouse, partner, and head of the family
Killien (1998)	Quant.	142 first-time mothers	Questionnaire/statistics	Fatigue was by far the most prevalent symptom reported at 1 and 4 months postpartum. The fatigue scores remained high during the entire postpartum year
Lupton (2000)	Qual.	20 women	Interviews/qualitative analysis	Difficult to achieve the ideals. An ambivalent 'love/hate' relationship with the child
McBride and Shore (2001)	Quant.	Studies with both first-time and multiparous women	Literature review	A greater appreciation of the complexities involved. Maternal attachment can no longer be described as simply present or absent postpartum, for maternal competence and satisfaction change with the circumstances
McVeigh (1997)	Qual.	79 first-time mothers	Questionnaire/content analysis	Major category: 'conspiracy of silence' and five minor categories about being unprepared, fatigue, loss of personal time, and the partner as the main support person.
Mercer and Ferketich (1995)	Quant.	136 multi-parous mothers and 166 primi-parous mothers	Measurement/statistics	Self-esteem was a consistent, major predictor of maternal competence for both groups.
Olsson <i>et al.</i> (1998)	Qual.	5 midwives, 5 women and 3 male partners	Video-recorded consultations/ phenomenological hermeneutic analysis	The analysis of the meaning of being a mother revealed a complex and difficult situation of being both needed and dependent. The meaning of being a father revealed a struggle between distancing from and closeness to the child. The mate relationship was indicated as important and under strain
Pruett (1998)	Qual.		Literature review	The depth and rapidity of the attachment often amazed the fathers themselves. They did not, however, consider themselves to be 'mothering'
Reece (1992)	Quant.	105 first-time mothers	Measurement/statistics	Those mothers who had higher self-efficacy early in the transition to parenthood had greater confidence in parenting and less stress 1 year after delivery, thus establishing the predictive validity of the instrument

Table 1 (Continued)

Author, year	Type	Participants	Data collection/ data analysis	Key findings
Reece and Harkless (1998)	Quant.	85 couples first-time and experienced	Questionnaires/statistics	Self-efficacy in parenting increased significantly between the last trimester of pregnancy and 4 months after delivery for mothers and for fathers. The stress scores remained the same for mothers and increased for the fathers
Rogan <i>et al.</i> (1997)	Qual.	55 women (primi-paras)	Focus group discussion/ constant comparative method	Six categories: realizing, unready, drained, aloneness, loss, working it out
Sethi (1995)	Qual.	15 mothers (primi-paras and multiparas)	Interviews/grounded theory	A core variable 'dialectic in becoming a mother' and four categories: giving of self, redefining self, redefining relationships, and redefining professional goals
Tarkka <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Quant.	271 first-time mothers	Questionnaire/statistics	Positive correlation was found between the mother's competence, attachment to the child, health, depression, relationship with the spouse, sense of isolation and role restriction, and the mother's coping with child care
Tarkka <i>et al.</i> (2000)	Quant.	258 first-time mothers	Questionnaire/statistics	The first-time mother's successful coping with childcare when the child was 8 months was associated with her own resources and attachment to the child, as well as the activity of the child and breastfeeding.
Tiedje and Darling-Fisher (1996)	Qual.		Critical review	Many fathers want to increase the amount of time spent with their children. They derive a great deal of satisfaction from fathering, and feel that the father role is more salient than their work role
Tiller (1995)	Quant.	30 first-time fathers and 12 experienced fathers	Questionnaire/statistics	By the time the children were 1-year old, 58% of the fathers reported that they helped with childcare approximately as much as they did at 3 months, 37% reported that they helped more and 5% reported that they helped less
Troy (1999)	Quant.	28 primi-parous women	Measurement/statistics	Women were more fatigued and less energetic at 14–19 months than they were at 6 weeks postpartum
Walker <i>et al.</i> (1998)	Quant.	87 new fathers	Questionnaire/statistics	A healthier lifestyle was related to less perceived stress, more parenting confidence, and fewer health symptoms
White <i>et al.</i> (1999)	Quant.	91 mothers and 91 fathers	Questionnaire/statistics	At 8 months mothers reported more role conflict than during pregnancy, clearer communication than their partners, greater mutuality and greater individuation. Foetal attachment was greater in fathers than in their partners
Zabielski (1994)	Quant. and qual.	42 first-time mothers (21 preterm mothers and 21 fullterm mothers)	Semi-structured interviews, and measurement/content analysis, statistics	Eight commonly discussed themes: role expectations, role partner contact/interaction, role acknowledgement, role qualities, role actions, role readiness, self-continuity, and role change
Östberg and Hagekull (2000)	Quant.	1081 mothers	Questionnaire/statistics	When mothers saw their domestic work as arduous and demanding, they also regarded their child as more fussy and difficult, and their parenting stress was higher

Mothers	Fathers
Being satisfied and confident as a mother	Being confident as a father and as a partner
Being primarily responsible for the child is overwhelming and causes strain	Living up to the new demands causes strain
Struggling with the limited time available for oneself	Being prevented from achieving closeness to the child is hurtful
Being fatigued and drained	Being the protector and provider of the family

Table 2 Theme and categories of mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenthood (living in a new and overwhelming world)

categories were revealed for fathers: being confident as a father and as a partner, living up to the new demands causes strain, being prevented from achieving closeness to the child is hurtful, and being the protector and the provider of the family. The unifying theme identified was 'living in a new and overwhelming world' (see Table 2). The theme and categories are presented below and illustrated by quotations from the articles.

Living in a new and overwhelming world meant that both mothers and fathers experienced overwhelming changes in their lives during the child's first year. There were similarities and differences in mothers' and fathers' experiences, as well as both positive and negative feelings about being a parent. Most of the categories, however, reflect different kinds of strain.

Mothers

Being satisfied and confident as a mother

Being a mother includes feelings of complete love for the infant(s) (Sethi 1995, McVeigh 1997, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Lupton 2000), satisfaction and pride (Barclay *et al.* 1997, Horowitz & Damato 1999). In several studies (Sethi 1995, Rogan *et al.* 1997, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Lupton 2000, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001) satisfaction was expressed as amazement and enjoyment in being a parent, and at the emotional closeness to the child (Olsson *et al.* 1998, Lupton 2000). Being satisfied and confident also meant sharing the concerns of childcare (Olsson *et al.* 1998), and feelings of mutual solidarity and togetherness with their partners (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). It also meant experiencing a special sensitivity to the needs of the child (Lupton 2000), and having the opportunity to rest as breastfeeding mothers (McBridge & Shore 2001). Satisfaction and confidence were related to self-esteem and health (Blair & Hardesty 1994), and increased between the last trimester of pregnancy and 4 months after the delivery (Reece & Harkless 1998).

The importance of support was mentioned in different studies. Help and support from the partner (McVeigh 1997, Tarkka *et al.* 1999, 2000), from others (Tarkka *et al.* 1999, McBride & Shore 2001), and from the public health nurse

(Tarkka *et al.* 2000) were felt to be a source of strength, as was learning from more experienced women (Barclay *et al.* 1997):

I don't know how to put it into words what motherhood is like. It is the most true love I have experienced in my life. It is happiness, it is frustration too, and it is devotion and sacrifice. (Sethi 1995, p. 237)

Being primarily responsible for the child is overwhelming and causes strain

Being primarily responsible for the child was described as feelings of constraint (Hall 1992, Zabielski 1994, McVeigh 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Lupton 2000, Östberg & Hagekull 2000, McBride & Shore 2001) and overwhelming role strain (Hall 1992, Sethi 1995, Barclay *et al.* 1997, Rogan *et al.* 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Lupton 2000, McBride & Shore 2001).

Expressions of role strain were feelings of powerlessness and inadequacy as a mother (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001) and feelings of guilt, loss, exhaustion, ambivalence, resentment and anger (Hall 1992). Women longed for peace away from the baby (Lupton 2000) and felt tied up (Olsson *et al.* 1998), and some felt an increasing role conflict from the third trimester of pregnancy to 8 months postpartum (White *et al.* 1999). Mothers stated that their lives had become far more restricted since the birth of their babies, compared with those of their partners (Lupton 2000).

Being a mother implied possession of an infant for some women (Zabielski 1994). For others it meant being the self-evident carer of the child and the one responsible for its development, which gave rise to stress (Horowitz & Damato 1999). Women were unprepared for what it would be like to be a mother, and feelings of disappointment (McVeigh 1997), loneliness and isolation (Sethi 1995, Barclay *et al.* 1997, Rogan *et al.* 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998) were expressed. Caring for the child was experienced as heavy and demanding work (McVeigh 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Tarkka *et al.* 1999, Östberg & Hagekull 2000), and the baby's crying caused severe strain (Lupton 2000, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). Women who felt that they could not stand staying at home all day with their infants found it difficult to express this

opinion to others for fear of incurring social opprobrium (Lupton 2000). Mothers were resentful about the lack of support and help from their partners (Hall 1992, Barclay *et al.* 1997, Barclay & Lupton 1999, McBride & Shore 2001), and the lack of social support (Mercer & Ferketich 1995). A loss of sense of self, confidence and self-esteem were experienced by women (Mercer & Ferketich 1995, Barclay *et al.* 1997, Rogan *et al.* 1997), and some felt less competent as mothers at 8 months than they had done at 4 months (McBride & Shore 2001):

It has been so hard looking after the baby 24 hours a day. No one told me it would be so hard. (McVeigh 1997, p. 341)

You don't have much faith in yourself; it's funny how your self-esteem and just your whole confidence goes plummeting down... I used to see myself as a confident person before I had her. (Barclay *et al.* 1997, p. 724)

Contradictions in advice from experts and people around them made mothers feel confused (Barclay *et al.* 1997, Rogan *et al.* 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998), as did contradictions in role demands (Hartrick 1997). Less satisfaction with the quality of the marital relationship was expressed in several studies (Barclay *et al.* 1997, Rogan *et al.* 1997, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Delmore-Ko *et al.* 2000, Lupton 2000). Women also reported that they had no sexual desire, but felt aware of unarticulated expectations from their partners (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001).

Struggling with the limited time available for oneself

Women expressed awareness that life had changed and that there was no turning back (Sethi 1995, Barclay *et al.* 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001) and there were feelings of loss concerning their previous lifestyle (Barclay *et al.* 1997, McVeigh 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Lupton 2000). Caring for the baby took most of their time (Barclay *et al.* 1997, McVeigh 1997, Rogan *et al.* 1997, Lupton 2000, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). Having unmet personal needs created stress (Hall 1992, Barclay *et al.* 1997, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Lupton 2000) and some women stated that they were looking forward to returning to paid work (Olsson *et al.* 1998, Lupton 2000). However, feelings of stress were also caused by the thought of going back to work and leaving the baby (Horowitz & Damato 1999), by having the same expectations of themselves after returning to work and discovering that they could not meet those expectations (Hall 1992):

Once you decide to have a child, it is a commitment. You really can't come out. You better be looking after that baby. Oh, there is no turning back. (Sethi 1995, p. 239)

Being fatigued and drained

The all-consuming nature of mothering made women feel exhausted and drained of physical and emotional energy (Rogan *et al.* 1997, Lupton 2000, McBride & Shore 2001). They felt stressed by not getting enough sleep (Barclay *et al.* 1997, Horowitz & Damato 1999, Tarkka *et al.* 1999, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). The level of maternal fatigue was felt to be unbearable (McVeigh 1997) and women cried a great deal (Barclay *et al.* 1997). According to Killien (1998) and Troy (1999), women were fatigued and less energetic during the entire postpartum year:

It's like, if you have a baby that doesn't sleep, you can't sleep...I had no back up whatsoever...I just cried every day. I was tired more than anything. (Barclay *et al.* 1997, p. 723)

Fathers

Being confident as a father and as a partners

Fathers expressed feelings of deep engagement and attachment to the child (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Pruett 1998, Barclay & Lupton 1999) and an increased responsibility for childcare (Hall 1992, Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Olsson *et al.* 1998). There were expressions of joy and fun in the relationship with the infant (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Barclay & Lupton 1999, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001) and a sense of being a family (Hall 1995, Anderson 1996). Being a father was experienced as being needed by the child, as togetherness and closeness (Olsson *et al.* 1998) and sensitivity to the child's needs (Hall 1994, 1995, Tiller 1995, Anderson 1996, Kaila-Behm & Vehviläinen-Julkunen 2000, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). Fathers had a desire to spend as much time as possible with the family (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Tiedje & Darling-Fisher 1996).

Fathers viewed parenting as a partnership (Anderson 1996) and said that they felt allowed by the mother to take responsibility as a father (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). Men experienced their marriage as warm and confiding (Reece 1992, Pruett 1998), and found meaning in life and a deep feeling of togetherness (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001).

Men experienced increasing self-efficacy (Reece 1992, Tiller 1995, Anderson 1996, Pruett 1998, Reece & Harkless 1998, Barclay & Lupton 1999) and a health-promoting lifestyle (Walker *et al.* 1998) as leading to greater confidence in parenting and parental identification as leading to physical well-being (Blair & Hardesty 1994). They were proud of their children (Barclay & Lupton 1999, Kaila-Behm & Vehviläinen-Julkunen 2000), and derived a great deal of satisfaction from fathering (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Tiedje & Darling-Fisher 1996):

She teaches me in a way, see I'm very comfortable with her, I don't feel emasculated, it's not a sign of weakness or vulnerability to be a goofy father. (Anderson 1996, p. 318)

Living up to the new demands causes strain

Just like women, men experienced extensive changes in their life (Hall 1995, Anderson 1996, Barclay & Lupton 1999, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001), which they found trying (Hall 1995 and difficult to handle (Barclay & Lupton 1999). Men experienced role strain if they felt that the quality of childcare provided by others (e.g. babysitters, nursery staff) was not good, and because they did not have enough time for themselves and their spouses to meet their own individual needs, and their needs as a couple (Hall 1992, 1994). They felt required to change their behaviour and attitudes (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Barclay & Lupton 1999), and expressed frustration at having less time for themselves, and being less free as individuals (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001).

Trying to understand the new situation, fathers became confused because of lack of guidelines and role models (Barclay & Lupton 1999) and lack of support from relatives and friends (Hall 1994). They experienced chaos in their life and conflict between several aspects of equal value in life, for example work, hobbies, friends and family, including the infant (Hall 1995). Fathers had a fear of being isolated (Olsson *et al.* 1998), had not expected the infant to be as non-social and demanding as it proved to be, and felt deeply unhappy (Barclay & Lupton 1999). Some men stated that they felt less confident about parenting the baby than the mother did (Gross & Tucker 1994), and there were men who felt increased stress for 4 months (Reece & Harkless 1998).

In several studies (Hall 1992, 1994, 1995, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Delmore-Ko *et al.* 2000, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001) men expressed a feeling of marital conflict and dissatisfaction. Some felt (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001) that their wives did not have any feelings to spare for them. The babies were the focus of their mothers' love feelings at the expense of the fathers, who did not feel emotionally confirmed. Men also expressed feelings of sadness at not having had any sexual relations after the birth (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001).

Paid employment influenced the amount of time available for men's parenting (Barclay & Lupton 1999). They were tired from working (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996) and from lack of sleep (Hall 1994, Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001). Some felt that they had made sacrifices at work because of the child (Hall 1994). When the woman returned to paid employment, the role demands and strain escalated (Hall 1992), and fathers felt anxious about leaving the infant in the care of others (Hall 1994, Pruett 1998):

But I hope...it's a bit sad that we haven't had any intimate relations yet, L and me, after the birth of D...In a way, she has no feelings left over for me. It's only D that counts. I actually knew it could be like this, from what friends have told me. But does it need to take so long. (Ahlborg & Strandmark 2001, p. 322)

Being prevented from achieving closeness to the child is hurtful

Fathers expressed feelings of distress and hurt at being continually excluded from taking care of the infant. They wanted to help but felt prevented from doing so (Barclay & Lupton 1999). They felt hurt by being alienated and excluded from the close mother-infant bond and because the mother played the leading role in the family (Anderson 1996). Men expressed how they felt sadness at being more distant from the child than they wanted to and at being the second best person for the infant, and how it seemed that the mother was the only one who could really meet the baby's needs (Barclay & Lupton 1999). Men were aware of the powerful advantage that breastfeeding gave the woman in establishing intimate and frequent contact with the child. This made them feel more detached than they expected or wanted to be (Barclay & Lupton 1999):

When you want to help it has not necessarily been wanted or welcome. I think I can rock a baby as well as anyone else, but I'm not allowed to do that. There are times when you go to help or offer to help and she says, 'No'. (Barclay & Lupton 1999, p. 1016)

Being the protector and provider of the family

Fatherhood was expressed as being the economic provider for the family (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Barclay & Lupton 1999, Kaila-Behm & Vehviläinen-Julkunen 2000). Fathers also realized how helpless the baby was and felt a strong need to protect both the infant and the woman and be the bridge to the outside world (Anderson 1996). For some men fatherhood was exercised by supporting the woman's mothering (Anderson 1996, Olsson *et al.* 1998).

Men prioritized their own needs for leisure time before considering their spouses' need or before childcare (Hall 1994, Olsson *et al.* 1998, Barclay & Lupton 1999). Some did not feel that it was proper for men to be involved in childcare (Barclay & Lupton 1999) and that parenting was primarily the woman's responsibility (Hall 1994). The clear expectations of the woman to participate in childcare and household tasks (Hall 1994, Anderson 1996, Barclay & Lupton 1999) made some men feel guilty about being lazy (Barclay & Lupton 1999) or feel internal stress from being expected to do things that they were not good at (Anderson 1996). In one study (Barclay & Lupton 1999) men declared that they did

not consider that the tasks of the household and infant care held the same status or demands as paid employment:

I don't do much, but there is not much I can do. I'm still going to work and paying the bills that is part of it isn't it? (Barclay & Lupton 1999, p. 1015)

Discussion

The aim of this literature review was to describe mothers' and fathers' experiences of parenthood during their child's first year, and the analysis shows that there are similarities and differences in these experiences.

The overarching theme was 'living in a new and overwhelming world'. Being a parent during the first year was experienced as a new and overwhelming situation in different ways. Imle (1990) claimed that experiences of transition to parenthood are individual to each parent according to the degree of change in their daily life. Transitional events or non-occurrence of an anticipated event may affect how the parent copes with the demands for developing new response skills and, ultimately, a new role. In the studies analysed, some parents were overwhelmed by feelings of love and joy inspired by the infant and new situation of being a family. Their satisfaction and confidence seemed to be connected with feelings of sharing the concerns of childcare and mutual solidarity with their partner, as well as support and guidance from others. These findings appear to be in accordance with those of Hakulinen *et al.* (1999), who showed that parents who reported a low level of strain and who received support from public health nurses or social support experienced family stability. Parents who expressed satisfaction and confidence also seemed to be satisfied with their partnership. It may be that feelings of sharing and mutuality are a prerequisite for satisfaction and confidence in both marriage and parenthood. Majewski (1987) emphasized the importance of partners' support for mothers to facilitate the transition into motherhood. Probably fathers have a similar need for support.

While some parents experienced satisfaction and confidence, the majority in the studies analysed were overwhelmed by different kinds of strain. There were a large number of textual units concerning marital conflicts between parents who experienced strain during the child's first year. The impact of the first child on marital happiness is shown by Dalgas-Pelish (1993), who found that people with 24-month-old children had lower marital happiness scores than those who had 5-month-old children. These findings are consistent with those of the studies included in this review, although our analysis is based on both first-time parents and experienced

parents. The findings can also be compared with those of Tomlinson and Irwin (1993), who showed that marital distress and later family disorganization patterns were related, in part, to changes in the relationship that started during the early transition to parenthood. According to Pancer *et al.* (2000), fathers generally expressed lower levels of marital satisfaction than did mothers.

In the studies analysed, mothers' experiences of being primarily responsible for the infant were expressed predominantly as feelings of powerlessness, insufficiency, guilt, loss, exhaustion, ambivalence, resentment and anger. These experiences were overwhelming and caused strain, and led to feelings of being fatigued and drained of physical and emotional energy. Although both mothers and fathers were strained, their experiences differed to a great extent. Fathers experienced difficulties in living up to the new demands of being a father, and felt frustration, role strain, confusion, lack of confidence and tiredness. Differences between men's and women's experiences are described by Cowan and Cowan (1995), who state that transition-to-parenthood processes are not the same for men and women. According to Pancer *et al.* (2000), at least some of the differences in reactions to becoming a parent can be explained by the fact that women tend to have a more prominent role in caring for the child, and tend also to experience greater disruption in their lives and careers when their children are born than men do. The importance of social support was shown by Koeske and Koeske (1990), who found that parental stress was associated with lower role satisfaction and maternal self-esteem for mothers with less social support.

The strain experienced by mothers can be understood on the basis of Stern (1998a) description of the process of becoming a mother. He addresses the relationships that a mother requires to regulate her maternal or parental capacities, which enable the infant to develop appropriately. The motherhood constellation means that when a woman becomes a mother, she starts to form a new mental organization. This motherhood constellation remains prominent for months or years, and never goes away. Mothers experience their primary concern as being to keep the baby alive and protected. Stern (1998a) declares that this powerful feeling often leaves a woman exhausted and overworked, and most mothers do not know how to cope with the fear and fatigue. It is very hard to confront these feelings alone and this requires a positive supporting environment. According to Stern (1998b), it may be assumed that men pass through a similar process to that which women go through. McHale and Fivaz-Depeursinge (1999) believe that the new network or motherhood constellation is important to understand. One reason is that it serves a supportive function if fathers fail to

What is already known about this topic

- Being a mother or father during the child's first year requires a great deal of energy.
- The transition into parenthood is a period of multiple changes.
- Mothers' experiences have been explored to a greater extent than fathers' within nursing research.

What this paper adds

- A description of mothers' and fathers' experiences during the first year of the child's life.
- The great variety of experiences and the differences between mothers' and fathers' experiences.
- The importance of child health nurses in creating opportunities for parents to discuss and reflect upon parenthood as a part of child health care programmes.

shoulder their caring roles. If fathers resist their caring responsibilities, women can draw support from the extended female network.

The fatigue experienced by mothers in the studies analysed was present during the whole first year after the delivery. These findings are the opposite of those of studies, which claim that fatigue will disappear after the first months (Troy & Dalgas-Pelish 1997, Elek *et al.* 2002). Among others, Lee and DeJoseph (1992) have shown that fatigue interferes with successful adaptation to the maternal role. It may be this feeling of being fatigued and drained that contributes to the experience of strain for mothers, which in turn leads to the difficulties for fathers.

The descriptions of experiences of motherhood and fatherhood in our analysis might reflect the two categories of relations described by Stern (1998b) as traditional and egalitarian. In a traditional arrangement the father assumes that the mother will take full responsibility for the infant's care, and that his primary role is to support his partner and be a buffer zone against the outside world. The egalitarian couple, on the other hand, believes in sharing equally the tasks of caring for the infant, as well as other domains of family life (Stern 1998b). Some men in the studies analysed felt hurt at being prevented from achieving closeness to the child, and some mothers may want to keep control and exclude their male partners because motherhood is a source of power and maternal efficacy. Mothers might believe that being a good mother is having the whole responsibility for the child. Teti and Gelfand's (1991) study supports the premise that maternal self-efficacy is a central mediator of relations between mothers' competence with their infants and factors

such as maternal perceptions of infant difficulty, maternal depression and social-marital supports.

According to Lupton and Barclay (1997) there are several paradoxes and tensions in the meanings of fatherhood that influence the ways in which men see themselves as fathers and practise fatherhood. For example, fatherhood is commonly portrayed as a major opportunity for modern men to express their nurturing feelings and to take an equal role in parenting. Lupton and Barclay (1997) claim that this 'new' father archetype is one of the dominant notions circulating in relation to how men are expected to behave. Men are generally still expected to participate fully in the economic sphere and to act as providers for their families, and are encouraged to construct their self-identities as masculine subjects through their work role. Lupton and Barclay (1997) also argue that little use is made of the opportunities of fatherhood, that men tend to have fewer chances to engage with their children as infants, and that this, more than inherent gender differences in parenting, may be a major source of perceived differing styles. Consequently, the so-called traditional father probably also wants to have close contact with his infant, but is prevented from doing so by his paid work.

In summary, the findings showed that parents during the child's first year felt overwhelmed by the new situation and had a need for and were helped by support from their partner, their own network and public health nurses.

Limitations of the study

Culture influences the experience of parenthood. Since the majority of the studies analysed reflect experiences from Caucasian populations, the findings should be read with this in mind. There was a mix of first-time and experienced mothers and fathers in the studies included in this review. Since Ferketich and Mercer (1995) found that experienced and first-time fathers demonstrated a similar trajectory in the development of paternal role competence, this might not have influenced the findings. The studies illustrate experiences during different periods of the child's first year. As the experiences of parents change during the process of transition, this might affect the findings. On the other hand, the whole span of experiences should be considered, since the analysed studies reflect the first year.

Nursing implications

A nursing implication of the findings is the importance of child health nurse interventions aimed at minimizing the parents' experience of strain. One fruitful intervention could be to develop an IT-based method for use both in prenatal

parent groups and during the child's first year. Midwives' and/or child health nurses' support could lead to parents becoming empowered in their parenthood. Moreover, it seems important that nurses should help parents to talk about the strains that they experience. The findings also indicate that fathers should be encouraged to spend as much time as possible with their infants from the very start of the child's life. Having special fathers' groups led by men could help men to find the new role as a father. There is a need for further research into the prolonged fatigue of women, as well as into nursing interventions which facilitate fathering as well as mothering. Research about how networks support parents in their parenthood would also be desirable in identifying new nursing interventions.

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