Paternal Adaptation Through the Course of the Partner's Pregnancy

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The transition to fatherhood during the mother's pregnancy has not been well defined. Though the psychosocial changes of gravid women have been well studied,[1-3] the literature reveals little about the paternal adaptation to pregnancy. May[4] and Colman and Colman[5] described three phases of paternal adaptation, alluding to varying levels of paternal stress during course of pregnancy. Several other authors have focused on the increase in paternal stress during the course of the partner's pregnancy.[6-11] This study was based on the hypothesis that expectant fathers will report significantly different behavioral and physical changes at two different points of time during their partner's pregnancy.

METHODS

During both the first and second halves of pregnancy, identical, confidential 50-item closed-ended questionnaires and demographic data forms were distributed to 157 expectant fathers whose partners were obtaining prenatal care in university-affiliated family medicine or obstetrics clinics in central Missouri. The questionnaire took approximately 15 minutes to complete and was first given to the expectant fathers some time before 20 weeks' gestation; 112 of the questionnaires were handed to the expectant mother or father during a prenatal visit and 45 were mailed. Stamped addressed envelopes and telephone reminders were utilized to increase response rate. A Fisher's two-tailed *t* test was used to compare mean scores for responses during early and late pregnancy.

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RESULTS

Of 157 questionnaires distributed during the first half of pregnancy, 75 (48 percent) were returned. Of these 75, 57 completed a second identical questionnaire later in the pregnancy. The mean age was 27.7 years (fathers) and 26.0 years (mothers). The mean duration of the partner relationship was 4.9 years. Ninety-two percent were married, 74 percent were college graduates, and 96 percent were white; 64 percent of the expectant mothers were nulliparous at the time of entry into the study.

Initial reaction to the news of the pregnancy was generally positive (happiness, fulfillment), with few fathers reporting reactions of surprise, worry, displeasure, or disbelief. The mean scores on the scales describing initial reactions did not change significantly during the pregnancy. The degree of change in paternal social and psychological function did not vary significantly over the course of the pregnancy (Table 1). The predominant changes were positive—anticipation of fatherhood, closeness to partner, feeling more "responsible," and better relationships with relatives. More negative adaptations, such as inability to relax, missing work, and moodiness, were also reported by many. Mean scores on physical symptom scales (Table 2) were highest for decreased sexual activity, hunger, and tiredness. Only the decrease in sexual activity showed a significant change over the course of the pregnancy—becoming more pronounced. Paternal involvement in physical preparations for the baby increased significantly in two categories during the course of the pregnancy: helping to select baby furniture (the proportion of men involved increased from 49 to 68 percent) and selection of baby clothing (increased from 37 to 58 percent during the course of the pregnancy).

COMMENT

Results of this questionnaire study support many of the prior observations of those studying paternal involvement in pregnancy. The expectant fathers in this study generally

TABLE 1. PATERNAL SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL FUNCTION DURING AS COMPARED WITH PRIOR TO PREGNANCY (MEAN SCORE)

	First Half of Pregnancy (n = 57)	Second Half of Pregnancy (n = 57)	Two-tailed *t* test P Value
I'm happy about the idea of being a father	3.39	3.35	NS
I'm looking forward to becoming a father	3.14	3.32	NS
I feel closer to my partner	2.95	2.91	NS
I can't seem to relax	2.82	2.70	NS
I feel more responsible	2.79	2.95	NS
My partner wants to be taken care of	2.79	2.86	NS
I do more housework	2.46	2.42	NS
I miss work more often	2.42	2.44	NS
I get along better with my in-laws	2.18	2.19	NS
I get along better with my relatives	2.14	2.18	NS
My moods change more often	2.14	1.98	NS
I feel more sure of myself	2.12	2.30	NS
I get along better with people at work	2.09	2.24	NS
I put in more effort at work	2.04	2.14	NS
I have trouble keeping my mind on things at work	1.81	1.56	NS
Sometimes I feel a little jealous of my partner	1.37	1.19	NS

0 = strongly disagree 2 = neutral 4 = strongly agree

TABLE 2. PATERNAL PHYSICAL SYMPTOMS DURING AS COMPARED WITH BEFORE PREGNANCY (MEAN SCORE)

	First Half of Pregnancy (n = 57)	Second Half of Pregnancy (n = 57)	2-tailed *t* test P Value
Sexual activity	2.50	2.22	.02*
Hunger	2.34	2.34	NS
Tiredness	2.28	2.46	NS
Bowel problems	2.15	2.13	NS
Headaches	2.09	2.20	NS
Stomachache	2.09	2.16	NS
Nausea	2.05	2.11	NS
Vomiting	2.04	2.07	NS
Toothache	2.02	1.95	NS
Dizziness	1.96	2.04	NS
Chest pain	1.86	2.02	NS

** Significant difference between early and late pregnancy, P < .05*
0 = much less, 4 = much more

reported a positive experience from the time of initial news of the pregnancy through the latter half of the pregnancy. The ambivalence of the pregnancy experience also is evident from the significant number who reported such feelings as surprise, worry, displeasure, and disbelief initially, and moodiness and inability to relax later in pregnancy.

There are several limitations to this study. Those who responded to the questionnaires may have differed significantly from the population at large. Those who dropped out of the study, however, did not differ significantly from those who completed the two identical questionnaires. The study focused on a largely white population in a Midwestern area where findings may not be generalizable to other areas. The social desirability factor may have influenced respondents to respond positively on many items, particularly those dealing with sensitive such areas as the couple relationship.

The physical symptoms discussed by Trethowan[10] differed somewhat from those reported by the men in this study, with gastrointestinal symptoms and toothache less frequent and generalized symptoms such as hunger, tired-

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ness, and headache more frequent in this study than in Trethowan's study.

As the pregnancy progresses, the paternal experience appears to change in few respects. Increased paternal involvement in physical preparations for the baby (clothes and furniture selection) are understandable as the need for such involvement increases. Decreased sexual activity, as discussed by others,[11,12] was reported by many men in this study. The stability of responses between early and late pregnancy suggests that paternal emotional adjustment and physical symptoms present in early pregnancy will likely continue to be present later in pregnancy, and that an early assessment of paternal adjustment will predict adjustment later in the pregnancy.

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