



## ■ FEATURE ARTICLE

# The Impact of Becoming a Father on Other Roles: An Ethnographic Study

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**Study Objectives:** To look at the transition to becoming a father and the impact on other roles. **Methods:** A focused ethnography was undertaken for which a semi-structured interview protocol was prepared based on the Occupational Performance History Interview (OPHI-II) and issues highlighted in the literature. In-depth interviews were conducted with a convenience sample of 4 Australian men and their partners who had all become first time parents during the previous year. Interviews were audio taped, transcribed, categorized, unitized, and examined for emerging themes. Triangulation included member checking and review by an independent researcher. **Results:** Although some of the themes that emerged were consistent with many of the findings in the literature there were some distinct differences: these men's occupational roles did change substantially after the birth of their first child and the importance of their working role also shifted. The themes that emerged included: becoming a father, role re-negotiation, worker role, domestic roles, leisure role, loss of sleep, couple time, adopting the father role and facilitators and barriers to adopting their new occupational role 'father'. **Limitations:** This is an exploratory study with a small sample of convenience. All of the participants were parents of girls and of Anglo European descent. No longitudinal data was collected.

**Key Words:** Father, Role, Impact, Ethnography

This study was designed to explore how the birth of a man's first child affects his participation in his various roles such as breadwinner, worker, leisure-maker and partner, and how men negotiate barriers to adopting the father role. Role theory, as described in social psychology, defines roles as characteristic behavior patterns associated with particular social positions, whereby people "hold expectations for their own behaviours and those of other[s]" (Biddle, 1986, p. 67). Roles are both assigned or chosen (Harvey & Pentland, 2002) and change across the life-span. Occupational scientists view roles within the context of occupations, as patterns of self-maintenance, work, leisure and rest (Hillman & Chapparo, 1995) which occur on a regular basis within a social and cultural context. Occupations and occupational roles define identity, enhance self-worth and provide "a sense of one's relationship to others and of expected behaviors" (Kielhofner, 2002, p. 72).

While "care-giving is still more discretionary for fathers than it is for mothers" (Maurer & Pleck, 2006, p. 101) becoming a father in contemporary Western society has evolved and now means being a provider and a guide while also performing household tasks and nurturing the new born child (Barclay & Lupton, 1999; Maurer & Pleck). This is in contrast to previous generations where fathers were given the role of breadwinner, disciplinarian, and moral

educator, while the mother took the primary carer and nurturer role (Hall, 1994; Lamb, 2000; Premberg, Hellström, & Berg, 2008).

Evidence suggests that many men in Western societies want to be more involved than their own fathers in care-giving when they become a father (Henwood & Procter, 2003; Strauss & Goldberg, 1999; Wada & Beagan, 2006) and would prefer to share the roles of breadwinner and caregiver with their partner (McDonald, 2000) in addition to their leisure and couple roles (Craig, 2006; Maurer & Pleck, 2006; Premberg et al., 2008). However, while much research has been conducted into the impact of motherhood on women (Mercer, 2004; Rubin, 1984), the impact of fatherhood seems to be under-researched (Doherty, Erickson, & LaRossa, 2006). Nonetheless, as with any life-changing event, the birth of a first child might reasonably be expected to influence the time available to participate in previous roles (Harriman, 1983) and require role re-adjustment (Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Saisto, & Halmesmäki, 2000).

The research to date suggests that a father's desire to be an actively involved parent can be met with several barriers including difficulty mastering their new responsibilities while maintaining their previous roles (Orecklin, Steptoe, & Sturmon, 2004).

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The arrival of a baby might also have a significant financial impact on a family, associated with the mother ceasing work temporarily or long term, medical bills, plus the additional costs of providing for a baby (McDonald, 2000). The resultant economic insecurity can place further burdens on the breadwinner role (Brotherson, 2004), and impact the decisions couples make about who the primary breadwinner will be and when the mother will return to work (Maurer & Pleck, 2006). Reluctance to give up their previous dual-income lifestyle for too long after the birth of their first child may prompt the father to take on more work hours (Barkley, 1993).

Furthermore, the nature of the male work environment affects the amount of time available for other roles (Barclay & Lupton, 1999) and as women are the ones who give birth, they are given more opportunity to be away from work for a period of time (Baxter, 2000). At the time of this study, for example, the Australian social and tax systems supported a model where the female parent is the primary care-giver and the male is the primary breadwinner (Frey, 1997). Russell (1983) and Baxter have also reported that women tend to have more access to flexible work arrangements. This means that the balance of the full-time work role lies with fathers. In Australia most men who work and have children under 14 years of age, work full-time (Brouard, 1997) and hours spent at work are increasing (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2008; Lobo, 1998).

This is reflected in other Western countries and many fathers find that they are less available to participate in their new role of father than they had anticipated before the birth (Barkley, 1993; Hall, 1994; Premberg et al., 2008). This is in part due to the culture of the workplace that perceives men as not committed to their job if they take leave to be in the care-giver role. As McDonald (2000) pointed out, while government policies have led to industrial reforms they have “not provided incentives for companies to implement family-friendly policies” (p. 18). The lack of governmental and workplace support may partially account for differences in men’s and women’s child care activities. Australian data indicates that men spend 1 hour 6 minutes per day on child care activities compared with 2 hours 39 minutes by women (ABS, 2008).

There may also be conflict around what constitutes the complex role of child carer. Craig’s (2006) study found an interesting distinction in how men and women describe the tasks involved in parenting, with men preferring to undertake a more active role through playing, talking, educational, and recreational activities, rather than other forms of care. Therefore, although it has been found that fathers are as capable as mothers of being caring and nurturing, the types of activities men choose to engage in is different. This situation may arise, in part, because many of today’s fathers have to invent their own parenting style and are looking to their peers as role models (Masciadrelli, Pleck, & Stueve, 2006), because their own fathers were subject to different expectations of fatherhood (Daly, 1993; Entwisle & Doering, 1988). Consequently, there were minimal opportunities to witness men taking on nurturing roles and boys were not encouraged

to take on those roles in their play or with their peer groups as they grew up (Parke, cited in Masciadrelli et al., 2006; Russell, 1983).

The study reported here examined the experiences of a group of men undertaking the father role for the first time and its impact on their existing roles. The aim of this project was to explore how the birth of a man’s first child affects his participation in his various roles and in particular looks at the facilitators and barriers to taking on a role as a father.

## Methodology

A focused ethnographic approach was used. This is a context-bound approach to ethnography in which the experiences of a group of people who are connected by a common issue, experience, location or occupation are explored (Morse & Field, 1995). The common thread in this study was first-time fatherhood. Techniques for data collection include interviews, observations and field notes. A semi-structured interview format using the Occupational Performance History Interview-II (Kielhofner, 1998) was used, with open-ended questions that explored the couple’s perception of how the male partner had adopted the new role of father and how this had impacted his other roles.

### Participant recruitment

Potential participants were recruited using purposive sampling techniques; snowball, chain or nominated sampling (Creswell, 2003) where new parents known to the primary researcher referred others who had also become new parents in the previous 12 months. Participant information and consent forms were given to 8 couples. Of those referred to participate, 6 couples were eligible and 4 couples agreed to be interviewed. Demographic details of the 4 couples (8 participants) are outlined in Table 1. Ethical clearance was obtained through the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee at the University of Queensland.

### Data gathering and analysis

The interview questions focused on role change since becoming a father. All interviews were conducted at the participants’ homes, usually at the kitchen table, and were audio taped and then transcribed verbatim. Both the mother and the father participated in the interviews and both spoke about the role of the father. Member checking was conducted and all participants reported that the transcripts were accurate and no new information was added. The transcribed data was unitized, categorized, and coded by the first author. These codes were grouped and examined for emerging themes. The transcripts were separately coded by a colleague, a qualitative researcher, who independently identified emerging themes and explanations. Themes were then discussed and brought together, then compared and contrasted with evidence from the literature. To enhance rigour an audit trail detailing coding and interpretation decisions (Krefting, 1991) was maintained by the first author throughout the data collection and analysis phases. Reflexivity, using journaling and discussion with the

Table 1: Demographic Details of Participants

	Name	Age	Work Type	Work Situation	Location
Family A	Michael	37	Fitter & Turner	Full time	Regional centre
	Leanne	37	Public Servant	Not working	
	Sally	9 mo	N/A	N/A	
Family B	Geoff	38	Management	Full time	Suburb of state capital
	Sarah	34	Research	Not working	
	Samantha	9 mo	N/A	N/A	
Family C	Adam	38	Printer	Full time	Suburb of state capital
	Peta	34	Banking	Full time	
	Rosie	12 mo	N/A	N/A	
Family D	David	30	Research	Full time	Regional centre
	Melissa	29	Allied Health	2 days per week	
	Caitlyn	10 mo	N/A	N/A	

NB: Fictitious names were assigned to participants.

second author, who was the research supervisor, also continued throughout the project.

## Results

This was an exploratory study and the findings must be viewed in that light. Participants came from a small sample of convenience in Australia and time constraints did not permit follow-up interviews. It is also of note that all the babies were girls. All participants were aged over 28, with an average age of 35.75 for the men and 33.5 years for the women. The couples were all of Anglo European descent. Two of the men had white collar occupations (e.g., health or business professional) and two had blue collar occupations (e.g., tradesman, factory worker, or driver). English was the primary language spoken in each participant's home. The themes that emerged from the analysis paralleled many of the findings in the literature; however, there were also some differences. Overall the participants' roles did change substantially after the birth of their first child, but how this occurred was unique in each situation. The response to the change in role depended on the ability to be flexible in adopting the parenting role, the flexibility of the father's workplace, the amount of time the mother spent out of the workforce, how the couple planned to balance the domestic and breadwinner roles, and their usual coping style. There were two main themes, becoming a father and the process of becoming a father, both of which had four subthemes. Note that fictitious names have been assigned to participants throughout the discussion.

### Becoming a father

The men interviewed in this study did not reduce the time spent in their worker role to incorporate the demands of the father role; however, they did alter participation in leisure, partner roles, domestic roles and resting occupations. Examples of specific role changes are detailed below.

### Worker role

The following statements by the fathers illustrated how they valued their worker role and continued to derive a great deal of self esteem from it.

*If there's a problem [at work] and it needs to be fixed, it's about fixing it rather than going home, I suppose. (Geoff)*  
*I'm the link between government regulators and the business. (Geoff)*

*Yeah, if you weld something incorrect, a car could crash off the track. (Michael)*

*... keeping the colour right through out the whole run, so making sure ... keep everything where it's supposed to be. (Adam)*

*It's really at the cutting edge of science what we are trying to achieve... you don't just walk out when it is knock off time. (David)*

None of the men who participated in this study significantly changed their worker role in response to becoming a father while all of the women had a minimum of 9 months away from work. All planned to or had already returned to part-time work within the first 12 months after the baby's arrival. Each of the 4 couples commented on the change in lifestyle that had resulted from the loss of the second income.

*You've got to think of the quality of life as well, you don't want to live like a hermit, you want to be able to go out if you [want to] ... (laughs). (David)*

Most of the men felt that they would not need to increase their worker role if the mother returned to work.

*I figure [if] we need more money... Leanne's going back to work 1 day a week. If we want more money, then Leanne can go back 2 days a week, or 3. The traditional role would have been, well I'll just work more overtime, so it's a completely different time. (Michael)*

### Domestic roles

The couples in this study negotiated sharing domestic roles around the number of hours each spent at home. There also appeared to be some degree of flexibility in the sharing of domestic responsibilities. When the mother was not working, she generally had greater responsibility for the home:

*Well the routine changed ... I used to come home and cook tea [dinner], but now Leanne cooks tea because it's something different for her to do, so I come home and feed bubs.* (Michael)

*I'll do the vacuuming, the ironing, Sarah doesn't do any of the ironing, I'll change the bed linen, do all the washing up, do a bit of the cleaning up, walk the dog, mow the lawns, that's probably it.* (Geoff)

#### **Leisure role**

Each father reported a reduction in time spent on leisure and non-urgent domestic tasks. The most significant change was in time spent playing sport, watching television and sleeping. When asked what he missed now Adam replied:

*... just time to sit around, if I wanted to do nothing I could just do nothing, but now there's too much to do.*

Often couples felt that it required a great deal of planning to participate in leisure activities outside the home.

*The only thing that is difficult is that I don't have time to fit anything else. I wouldn't mind joining a Pilates class and Leanne hasn't been to the gym for a while, we have to get that organised. So well, one of our new goals, you have that time but you've got to pre-cook dinner and have everything pre-set, it's not as if you can just walk off!* (Michael)

Frequently activities and tasks had to be revised or re-negotiated to find an appropriate time. Michael put it this way:

*I feel like probably your life gets in your road and some of [the] roles that I did before, they've sort of gone on the low priority list, before I could do the garden but now I have to check with Leanne when I can do those things.*

#### **Partner role**

Men also reported that time spent in the role of partner or husband was substantially reduced after the arrival of the baby.

*The bit of time, social time we had to ourselves has now totally gone so, unless you have a babysitter, and it's got to work with my time off.* (Adam)

Many couples had difficulty accessing or affording a babysitter so that they could spend time together.

*We're limited on babysitters too because we don't go outside the family for baby sitters and um Adam's parents are the closest but they already have her twice a week so we don't want to impose.* (Peta)

*We were fairly social, we always went to the pictures [movies], or we did a lot of things together. [Now] to go out ... I'd say to Leanne 'I'll mind the little one and you can go out with your friends'.* (Michael)

#### **Process of becoming a father**

##### **Facilitating agents**

When asked to describe the kind of father they wanted to be, the participants identified being a role model to their child.

*Being a role model – but that's not for a while. In the meantime I think it is providing the right environment – a caring environment.* (Geoff)

*... to be loving, caring, positive, a sort of role model, nurturing.* (Michael)

Others wanted to be able to blend the caring with practical and 'traditional' roles. Michael stated:

*I think my roles have been the traditional role of fixing and doing things, doing the gardening, so I've still got the traditional roles of going to work, ... then coming home doing things around the house and then [when] I come [home], first thing I do is bath the baby, feed the baby, change the nappies (laughs) all those things.*

#### **Role models**

Two of the male participants described their own fathers' role as breadwinners, but not care-givers or nurturers:

*I've thought about his role in those days, they were working extremely hard and then probably came home later and seemed to be doing extra things to support the family.* (Michael)

*He showed me a lot of things, um ... probably not a lot of interaction, Dad being in the army and away a lot ...* (Adam)

The other two could recall how their fathers were caring and involved in their lives.

*He was very caring, always there for me, took me to lots of places. He was very loving. His family was such an important part of his life.* (Geoff)

*He always had a hand in what I wanted to do, you know, you've got a problem, you go and bounce it off him. He was more of a mate than a Dad.* (David)

#### **Barriers**

The male participants identified a number of barriers to adopting a fathering role. Geoff was uncertain about his father role from the beginning:

*There doesn't really feel that there's much to do. There doesn't seem to be a clear role for you. You can do the mechanical things like changing nappies [diapers] or do whatever or try to help getting her [to] sleep, but in terms of her [the baby] there is no reading to or playing... or those sorts of things.*

Geoff reported that he felt under-prepared for parenting:

*I don't think I knew what to expect. I don't really think I had any expectations, any sort of feeling. That's one thing that struck me – how little I knew about development. Even though I'd seen five nieces and nephews grow up – I had no conception of what they were [like] at different stages of their lives.*

Michael also felt unable to acquire the necessary skills for parenting as quickly as his wife, as he had less time to spend in the parenting role.

*I think it's because, in general the mother's at home all the time so they know the situation better.*

It also appeared that adopting the fathering role is difficult when there is a lack of social and family support. Michael stated:

*I think the hardest thing had been lack of support for men ... I think they [Michael's parents] see parenting as the baptism of fire. They'd be challenged if you're coping and you're happy. So that's the... really major disappointment.*

Michael also felt that he could not complain about things that were difficult for him as this would not be viewed favourably.

*Especially I think because the woman goes through more,*

*so you've really got to bite your tongue, you can't complain because you haven't gone through the same level of hardship, you've only had maybe one tenth of it.*

#### **Facilitating development of the role as father**

Most fathers became the principal support to their partner as she managed her new role. Although the mothers who were interviewed expressed their gratitude to their spouses, it was evident that most men felt that their role was minimal and quite unfulfilling in the early weeks and months.

*I think he under-stated what he did in the first few months. When I was doing all that expressing he was getting up in the middle of the night and bottle-feeding Samantha and doing all that sort of stuff. He was helping a lot. (Sarah)*

*It was just mechanical stuff, it doesn't mean you're accomplishing in terms of doing anything. (Geoff)*

Most of the men in the study indicated that being able to do things with the baby enabled them to really feel they had become fathers. However Adam noted that he enjoyed parenting more when their baby was a bit older and he developed a clear caring/nurturing role after his wife returned to work.

*Being involved with Rosie I find's important, spending a bit of time with her is important, ... I suppose I enjoy picking her up from crèche and wherever she is and the interaction through that and in the car and the playtime we have.*

#### **Discussion**

This study explored how the birth of a man's first child affects his participation in his various roles. The study participants identified that the lack of time the father had due to the demands of their working roles, their limited knowledge of child development, and lack of meaningful interaction with their newborn child were all barriers to the development of the role. All the male participants indicated that doing things with their child assisted them to develop their new fathering role; however they did not feel that they were being a father when the tasks were "*mechanical tasks such as nappy [diaper] changing*". These findings are consistent with previous studies which report that "mothers and fathers differ in the rates at which they become comfortable with parenting tasks and the degree to which they enjoy being a parent" (Watson, Watson, Wetzell, Bader, & Talbot, 1995, p. 46) and that as men generally have less exposure to child care they feel less confident about their abilities in comparison to their spouse (Elek et al., 2002). This experience suggests that men prefer to undertake a more active role in playing, talking, educational, and recreational activities rather than other forms of care such as nappy changing. As new born babies are not developmentally ready to engage in complex activities, fathers can initially feel that there is not yet a role for them to play (Craig, 2006).

A number of barriers to taking on the new fathering role that were found in this study were also highlighted in the literature: lack of role models (Daly, 1993; Hall, 1994); the

need for time to develop the father role and conflict with their working role (Brouard, 1997); poor societal support for men to take up their fathering role (e.g., unsupportive government policies, a lack of family friendly work practices) (McDonald, 2000) and a different interpretation by men and women of the components of parenting (Craig, 2006).

The men interviewed appeared to be able to define a broad range of roles and ascribe meaning to each of them. Each man seemed to derive a great deal of self esteem from his working role as reflected in the literature (Christiansen & Townsend, 2004; Kielhofner, 2002). Interestingly, after the birth of their children, the participants reported an overall decrease in the importance of their working role and a shift toward developing self esteem through the fathering role. However, the worker role remained important in a new way because of an ongoing desire to financially support their family. While they perceived being a breadwinner was integral to being a father, all the participants reported that they had decreased the amount of time spent on leisure, rest and partner roles.

A major barrier to adopting the fathering role, both in the literature (Brouard, 1997; Hall, 1994; McDonald, 2000) and from the participants, was the perceived lack of support provided by society and social policy. Interestingly, none of the men in this study took extended leave from work after becoming a father and only one of the fathers changed his work routine to accommodate his baby. However, this father had flexible working arrangements prior to the child's birth. The fathers also noted that there was a distinct lack of support and education for them in the ante- and post-natal phases. Two fathers wanted support for men in birth education and one would have liked to know more about child development.

#### **Conclusion**

The occupations and roles of people in the Western world define identity, enhance self-worth, and shape perceptions of relationships and behavioural expectations. Becoming a father is a period of role change that impacts worker, domestic, leisure and partner roles. For this group of men, adopting the fathering role was a time of role definition and role transition. The father role meant being a breadwinner, a provider, and a guide; it meant sharing the domestic roles while adopting new care-giving roles with their partner.

Many of the men reported struggling to balance their competing roles and having some difficulty defining the tasks involved in being a father. Limited access to family-friendly work policies, and changing role expectations appear to be barriers to adapting to this new and complex role. More in-depth, longitudinal studies investigating change in occupational roles over time could enhance knowledge of the barriers and facilitators to being a father, assisting new fathers to fulfill their role successfully and become models for the next generation of new fathers.

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