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BECOMING A FATHER DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:  
A QUALITATIVE INVESTIGATION

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## ABSTRACT

Transition to fatherhood for men is a major life event and has been demonstrated as a period of vulnerability for new parents. Challenges such as financial concerns, low self-efficacy in childcare, and drastic changes in lifestyle and relationships are experienced during this time. Mental health difficulties such as depression and anxiety are also common among expectant and new fathers. These struggles are aggravated with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. New parents are susceptible to psychological distress during the period of adaptation to parenthood, which is an already challenging task. The pandemic resulted in a major change in life of fathers. Traditionally working outside the home and having limited opportunity to be involved in their offspring's lives, many fathers now started working from home due to the pandemic restrictions. This resulted in increased time spent with family. Previous research demonstrated that fathers during the pandemic felt closer to their children. Yet, disadvantages such as increased financial worry, fear of infection, and disrupted work-life balance were also documented. The present study aims to understand Turkish first-time fathers' experiences during the pandemic and how they interpreted the effects of the pandemic restrictions on their fatherhood journeys. In-depth interviews with eight participants, who welcomed their first children during the pandemic and concurrently switched to remote working were conducted. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the interviews revealed four themes: Emerging Self as a Father, Finding Your Place as a Father, Challenging Yet Rewarding, and The Unexpected Part of Fatherhood: The COVID-19 Pandemic. Results of the study contribute to the gap in literature on remote working fathers of infants during the pandemic, as well as making a contribution to the literature on fatherhood during infancy.

*Keywords:* transition to fatherhood, fatherhood during COVID-19, experiences of first-time fathers, paternal involvement in infancy, remote working fathers

## ÖZET

Babalığa geçiş erkekler için önemli bir hayat olayı olmakla birlikte aynı zamanda yeni ebeveyn olmuş kişi için oldukça hassas bir dönemdir. Bu dönemde ekonomik kaygılar, bebek bakımında yetersizlik hisleri ve büyük yaşam tarzı değişiklikleri gözlenmektedir. Depresyon ve anksiyete gibi ruhsal zorluklar da yeni babalar tarafından deneyimlenebilmektedir. COVID-19 pandemisi ebeveynliğe geçişte yaşanması beklenen bu zorlukları arttırmıştır. Yeni ebeveynlerin bu dönemde psikolojik zorluklar yaşama eğilimleri olduğu görülmektedir. Pandemi özellikle babaların hayatlarında büyük bir değişikliğe neden olmuştur. Çoğunlukla evin dışında çalışan ve çocuklarıyla kısıtlı zaman geçirme şansı olan çoğu baba, pandemi kısıtlamaları sonucunda evden çalışmaya başlamıştır. Bunun sonucunda ise aileleri ile daha fazla süre bir arada olma şansı elde etmişlerdir. Araştırmalar, çoğu babanın bu değişimi memnuniyetle karşıladığını ve çocuklarıyla ilişkilerinin güçlendiğini göstermiştir. Bununla birlikte, artan ekonomik kaygılar, hastalık kaygıları ve iş-yaşam dengesinin bozulması da pandeminin getirdiği zorluklardandır. Bu çalışma ilk kez baba olmuş Türk erkeklerinin pandemi deneyimlerini anlamayı ve pandemi kısıtlamalarının babalıkları üzerindeki etkilerini nasıl anlamlandırdıklarını incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Pandemi döneminde çocuk sahibi olmuş ve akabinde evden çalışmaya başlamış sekiz katılımcı ile yarı yapılandırılmış görüşmeler gerçekleştirilmiştir. Bu görüşmelerin Yorumlayıcı Fenomenolojik Analizi sonucunda dört ana tema ortaya çıkmıştır: 1) gelişen babalık kimliği, 2) baba olarak kendine bir yer bulmak, 3) zorluklarına değen bir deneyim ve 4) beklenmedik bir olay: COVID-19 pandemisi. Çalışmanın sonuçları, henüz araştırılmamış bir alan olan evden çalışan bebekli babaların pandemi deneyimleri konusunda literatüre katkı sağlamakta, aynı zamanda bebeklik döneminde babalık literatürüne katkıda bulunmaktadır.

*Anahtar kelimeler:* babalığa geçiş, pandemide babalık, yeni babaların deneyimleri, bebeklik döneminde baba dahiliyeti, evden çalışan babalar

## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Transition to fatherhood for men is a major life event, which brings about dramatic changes in self and relationships. Literature demonstrated that expectant and new fathers experience challenges as they adjusted to this new role. Compared to the traditional view of fatherhood, modern-day fathers are expected and encouraged to be involved in their children's lives from the beginning of infancy (Lista & Bresesti, 2020). Modern fathers aspire to fulfill a variety of roles other than the conventional role of breadwinner (Lamb, 2004). Research indicates that fathers today are more involved in childcare than the previous generation (Olavarria, 2003; Yogman & Garfield, 2016).

Transition to fatherhood is a vulnerable period, where new fathers face novel challenges and try to adapt to changes. Increased financial worry (St John et al., 2005; Baldwin et al., 2018), low self-efficacy in infant care (Chin et al., 2011; Kowlessar, 2012) and changed priorities (Baldwin et al., 2019; Goodman, 2005; Premberg et al., 2008) were discussed in the literature. New fathers also mentioned both positive and negative changes in the couple's relationship (Fägerskiöld, 2008; Premberg et al., 2008). Studies that investigated paternal mental health revealed that an increased sense of responsibility, disruptions in work-life balance, and challenges of infant care resulted in increased levels of stress and depression (Baldwin et al., 2019; Darwin et al., 2017; Edhborg et al., 2015). These mental health difficulties also had adverse impacts on the father-infant relationship (Cito et al., 2020; Sethna et al., 2015).

The COVID-19 pandemic has put new parents in a more vulnerable position. Fear of contamination and financial concerns have aggravated parental stress (Taubman - Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov, 2020). Loss of social support made it difficult for parents to cope with stress (Ribaud, 2021). A comparison of paternal mental health before and after the pandemic revealed a significant increase in anxiety and

depression (Cameron et al., 2020). The most significant change the pandemic brought to fathers has been remote-working. Rather than working outside the home for long periods, fathers were now at home with their families, which dramatically increased involvement (Lista & Bresesti, 2020; Margaria, 2021). Fathers reported increased closeness in their relationship with their children as a result of the pandemic (Chasson et al., 2022; Weissbourd et al., 2020). Yet, it was suggested that fathers had difficulty balancing the roles of caregiver and provider, as they took on more responsibilities in childcare and at the same time, aspired to perform well in their jobs as they felt the pressure of providing for their families (Hart & Han, 2021; Tarrant et al., 2020).

Challenges introduced by the pandemic increased parental stress, which in turn had negative impacts on parental presence and involvement (Cito et al., 2020). Father involvement has been associated with positive outcomes for child development, such as better psychological well-being and cognitive skills (Hart & Han, 2021; Steele, 2010). Therefore, understanding new fathers' experiences during the pandemic would provide valuable information regarding their challenges and needs, and would provide insight into the family environment of the children born during the pandemic. New Turkish fathers' experiences during the pandemic have been a neglected area of research. In addition, a limited number of past global studies on new fathers' experiences did not investigate the impacts of remote working. The aim of this study is therefore to contribute to the literature on fatherhood during the pandemic, as well as Turkish fathers' experiences of transition to fatherhood. In-depth interviews with eight men, who welcomed their first children during the pandemic, were conducted in order to answer the following research questions:

- a. What are the prenatal and postnatal experiences of first-time fathers and how are these experiences affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- b. How do the fathers make meaning of the effects of the pandemic on their prenatal and postnatal period experiences?

## **1.1. FATHERHOOD**

Becoming a father is inarguably one of, if not the, most significant life-altering event a man experiences in his lifetime. It brings profound changes in his sense of self and his relational world. These changes could either come as enriching or challenging to the first-time father. According to Erikson's theory of psychosocial development, becoming a parent is an important stage of adulthood. This theory suggests that each developmental stage has its particular psychological conflict. The conflict described during the stage of adulthood is "generativity versus stagnation" (Erikson & Erikson, 1998). Erikson coined "generativity" to describe the major concern of the individual during this period, which is to continue one's lineage (Erikson, 1963 as cited in Christiansen & Palkovitz, 1998). Resolution of this conflict gives rise to the virtue of "care", which is "is a widening commitment to take care of the persons, the products, and the ideas one has learned to care for" (Erikson & Erikson, 1998, p. 88). Studies confirmed the role of generativity in having children (Karacan, 2014). Although this concept has been widely employed in the understanding of parenthood, the goal of this stage is generalized as "creativity and productivity" (Slater, 2003). Therefore, generativity is not restricted to becoming parents but includes individual acts that generate novel ideas or makings. Studies confirmed the significant correlation between becoming a father and the level of generativity among men (McAdams & St. Aubin, 1992; Snarey et al., 1987). Further, there appears to be a gender difference in the level of generativity. Snarey (1993, cited in McKeering & Pakenham, 2000) found that women were higher in generativity than men in the same age group. It has been suggested that men's generativity trajectory could differ from that of women due to cultural norms and men's hesitancy about undertaking this responsibility.

Identity theory is another framework that has been employed in understanding fatherhood. This theory at its root conceptualizes the self as consisting of different identities, which emerge from one's social relations (Thoits & Virshup, 1997 as cited

in Habib, 2012). One's self is bound to shape depending on the social situation one is in. This indicates that when a man becomes a father, a fatherhood identity becomes a part of self and existing identities are reorganized (Habib, 2012). An individual plays a variety of roles in his social interactions, depending on the specific social situation, such as a sibling, friend, spouse, and so on. These roles come with expectations, which are largely determined by societal norms and past experiences. According to identity theory, identity is the byproduct of the internalization of these certain expectations (Cast, 2004; Rane & McBride, 2000). These different identities together compose the individual's self-concept. A parent identity is added to this set when a person becomes a parent, which is made up of preexisting meanings given to parenthood (Cast, 2004). It is argued that these different identities are organized hierarchically. There are certain factors that determine the subjective importance of a certain identity for the individual. It is suggested that the subjective meaning that is given to that identity, in other words, the attached value to it, is a determinant of the hierarchical ranking of this identity (Habib, 2012; Rane & McBride, 2000). The hierarchical rank of an identity determines the individual's actions. The higher one identity is in this hierarchical organization, the more the individual's behaviors will be guided by that identity (Habib, 2012; Rane & McBride, 2000). For instance, if an individual places his fatherhood identity among others, he would be more likely to engage in paternal behaviors. This would indicate that if he were to choose between different activities, such as socialization with friends and caregiving activities, a man who attached more value to his role as a father would prefer the latter. In this case, the mentioned caregiving activity would also provide more gratification to the individual. Therefore, this theoretical framework has been employed in understanding paternal involvement.

Identity theory recognizes the variance in the subjective meanings given to fatherhood among men. As opposed to preconceived paternal roles, it has been suggested that men vary in the meaning they give to fatherhood (Habib, 2012). Each individual refers to different paternal roles when reflecting on their fatherhood

identities, such as caregiver, provider, or discipliner. Therefore, their fathering behaviors are determined accordingly (Pleck & Maciadrelli, 2004). For instance, Rane and McBride (2000) investigated the relationship between the importance attached to the caring role of fathers and their level of involvement. The results indicated that fathers were more involved in their children's lives if this specific paternal role was meaningful and essential to them. The endeavor of understanding men's transition to fatherhood is therefore an investigation of how different social roles, such as husband, friend, and employee, interact with the role of the father (Marsiglio, 1995 as cited in Doherty et al., 1998). Literature on fatherhood thus demonstrates challenges regarding identity formation, settling into the new role, as well as managing existing relationships.

#### **1.1.1. Historical Changes in the Fatherhood Role**

The definition of fatherhood and the roles played out by the father have significantly transformed throughout the centuries. In the past, the common image of fatherhood was that of a father who is not involved in day-to-day childcare and whose role depended primarily on monetary support. Whereas today, paternal participation is a part of fathers' personal goals from the beginning (Lista & Bresesti, 2020). Father involvement has been on an upward trajectory. The 20<sup>th</sup> century marks the beginning of this trajectory, as a new model of a father, who happens to be involved and nurturing, has been proposed and strongly advocated (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda). The acceleration in the number of mothers joining the workforce in the 20<sup>th</sup> century has paved the way for the transformation of the family structure (Cabrera et al., 2000). The role of the father is now much broader, and a variety of paternal functions is considered to be under the umbrella of fatherhood. Not only they can be breadwinners and protectors, but they can also be and are caregivers, playmates, and more (Lamb, 2004). In contrast, for a long time in the past, fathers were considered solely as the head of the family, and the provider. In fact, the earliest conceptions of

fatherhood were mainly on the father's role as the absolute ruler of the family (Gillis, 2000). Joseph Pleck (1987) described the trajectory of the fatherhood model in the United States in three segments: the breadwinner who removed himself from the daily family matters, the role model who passed on the masculine attitudes, and ultimately the parent who was equally involved and active in his child's life. As the conventional definition of fatherhood has gone through massive changes, fathers' importance in their offspring's development and their family structure, which is not limited to being the breadwinner, is widely recognized and promoted (Cito et al., 2020).

These calls for a more actively involved father yielded desirable results. Research suggests that new fathers are more likely to participate in parenting tasks throughout their children's development, as well as other housework (Olavarria, 2003). Studies revealed a significant increase in fathers' involvement in childcare. For instance, Yogman and Garfield (2016) reported that fathers now put in at least twice as much time and effort in both taking care of their children and chores. Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. (2019) compared the amount of time fathers spent taking care of their children between generations. In the late 1900s, the time fathers in developed countries devoted to their children was found to be less than 15 minutes on a workday (Roby, 1975; as cited in Bakermans-Kranenburg et al. (2019). Whereas in 2010, these numbers quadrupled for the new generation of fathers (Craig & Mulan, 2010).

According to Fillo et al. (2015), their increasing role in childcare also brought challenges for men, especially in negotiating the balance of work, life and fatherhood. Fathers today experience far more work-family conflict. In an in-depth study, Aumann and colleagues (2011) investigated the work-life conflict experienced by fathers, and compared their data with U.S Department of Labor's dataset from 1977. The authors found a significant increase in the level of conflict fathers had reported. In families where both parties were in the workforce, men in 2008 reported experiencing more difficulty in work-family balance than those in 1977. This report



also demonstrated the changes in women's levels of conflict. A striking result was that while the women reported more struggle than men in 1977, the numbers were reversed in 2008. Fathers now were to struggle more with negotiating their responsibilities than their partners (Aumann et al., 2011). In the light of these findings, Aumann, Galinsky and Matos (2011) argued that in the modern world, men are now expected to fulfill and excel in both the provider and the caregiver roles. The authors named this novel fatherhood model "new male mystique" (Aumann et al., 2011, p. 2). They argued that these expectations have put pressure on fathers, which might account for the escalation of conflict levels in their reports.

Despite the improvements, current literature suggests that the significant gap between mothers' and fathers' levels of commitment remains. For instance, the conventional, gender-based attribution of housework is still imprinted in even more democratic families (Booth & Crouter, 1998; as cited in Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). In a more recent study, Weissbourd et al. (2020) also showed that mothers still took more responsibility in childcare. Even though fathers have come a long way in terms of involvement, mothers are still their children's primary caregivers.

### **1.1.2. Fatherhood in Turkey**

Fatherhood, although a highly subjective experience, is also a construct of the culture. Societal structure and the belief system it adheres to shape one's fatherhood practices (Bozok, 2018). The traditional structure of the Turkish family is patriarchal, in which the father's role is to lead and provide for his family (Kağıtçıbaşı, 1996; as cited in İvrendi & Işıkoğlu, 2010). The father of the family is highly valued and respected. As a reflection of the societal structure, the conventional Turkish family abides by stereotypical gender roles (Sunar & Fişek, 2005). Substantial socio-economical change in Turkey paved the way for more egalitarian families, due to more women working outside the home. Compared to the previous generations, Turkish fathers now are more involved in housework and childcare tasks, and couples

tend to abide by a more equal division of labor (İvrendi & Işıkoğlu, 2010; İzci & Jones, 2018; Sunar & Fişek, 2005). While the Turkish family structure made progress in terms of gender equality and egalitarianism, the traditional gender roles to some extent have been carried on. Boratav and her colleagues (2017) stated that the traditional and patriarchal family structure in Turkey has been carried on throughout history. Mothers are still the primary caregivers, and fathers are more likely to restrict themselves to being the provider (Ataca, 2009; İzci & Jones, 2018).

Children's relationships with each parent tend to be different by their nature. Fathers tend to be more involved in play than in childcare (İzci & Jones, 2018). In a study involving three generations of Turkish families, Sunar (2009) found that mothers were perceived as more affectionate, whereas fathers were perceived as more controlling and disciplining across generations. That being said, the perceived difference between maternal and paternal attitudes decreased throughout generations (Sunar, 2009).

It has been argued that in the context of Turkish culture, fatherhood is regarded as a developmental stage in actualizing one's masculine identity rather than a relational process that refers to the father-child bond (Sirman, 2001; as cited in Boratav et al., 2017). Boratav and colleagues (2017) found that Turkish fathers' roles in the family are reflections of their masculine identities. Fulfilling the role of the breadwinner, and positioning self hierarchically higher in the family system appeared to be crucial for the masculine identity. Their study demonstrated that this power hierarchy often hindered the father-son closeness and intimacy among Turkish families, resulting in feelings of deprivation for young men, which were carried to their adulthood. Their findings revealed that Turkish fathers aspired to form more intimate relationships with their children compared to their past experiences (Boratav et al., 2017).

In AÇEV's (Mother Child Education Foundation) large-scale study (Akçınar, 2017), paternal attitudes and level of involvement in Turkey were investigated in a diverse sample. Most fathers reported their wives as their children's primary

caregivers. Turkish fathers of children between ages 0 and 3 reported being seldomly involved in childcare activities such as putting to sleep, feeding, and bathing. Only half of the sample was above the average in putting their children to sleep and helping them to dress, meaning that they frequently or regularly took responsibility for these tasks (Akçınar, 2017). Furthermore, Akçınar (2017) found that fathers of children younger than 3 years old were less likely to engage in activities such as talking or reading to the children, compared to those of older children. This indicated that when it came to younger children, fathers tend to do fewer activities that aid in their growth and development. Work demands posed an obstacle to paternal involvement. Long business hours disrupted the work-life balance for many fathers, limiting the time spent with family. The AÇEV report (Akçınar, 2017) revealed that taking paternity leave had positive implications for paternal involvement in the first 3 years of fatherhood.

## **1.2. TRANSITION TO FATHERHOOD**

The physical implication of becoming a parent is the actual birth of the baby, its arrival to their lives as flesh and blood. Yet, transition to parenthood is a psychosocial process that begins with the initial thought of having a baby and lingers through the baby's first years of life (Glade et al., 2005). This section will present the literature on men's fatherhood experiences during the transition to parenthood. Previous research in this area will be reviewed under three sections, which correspond to the stages of transition to fatherhood: fatherhood during pregnancy, fatherhood during childbirth, and the first year of fatherhood.

### **1.2.1. Fatherhood During Pregnancy**

During the partner's pregnancy, a fatherhood identity begins to develop. Habib and Lancaster (2006) described expectant fathers' reflections on their imagined

fatherhood identity. During their partners' pregnancy, fathers imagined the roles they could play in their child's life, such as caregiver, playmate, and support figure. In fact, the meaning given to fatherhood was directly correlated with the level of attachment expectant fathers formed with the unborn baby.

Fathers in this period vary in terms of their relation to the developing fetus. While some fathers felt very involved in the pregnancy, others were hesitant regarding their place during this period. Studies investigating prospective fathers' prenatal experiences demonstrated several challenging aspects. Since they don't have a physical connection to the baby the way their pregnant partners do, fathers during this period have a hard time grasping the reality of the baby's existence. They experience feelings of detachment and isolation. This has resulted in their inability to form a bond with their unborn child (Gage & Kirk, 2002; Iwata, 2014; Kao & Long, 2004). However, as the pregnancy became more apparent in their partners' bodies, this has established the reality of the baby in the father's mind. This change enabled fathers to form an emotional bond with their babies, thus feel less detached from the pregnancy period (Dolan & Coe, 2011; Fenwick et al., 2012). Another result of the physical disconnection with the pregnancy is the struggle of finding one's role during this process. In a qualitative study on new fathers' experiences, Dallos and Nokes (2011) found that fathers felt excluded from their partner's pregnancy, as one participant described: "And I felt really out of the whole thing. . . I wasn't involved in that (the pregnancy) . . . I couldn't be because it wasn't in me... and all I could do was be there for her". Fathers during this period are considered mainly as a support figure for the mother, who is actually carrying the baby (O'Leary & Thorwick, 2006).

Changes in life begin during the pregnancy period for the expectant father. Fathers experience a lessened sense of independence and power. They face the fact that a new chapter in their lives has begun (Finnbogadottir & Svalenius, 2003). Studies demonstrated changes that fathers experienced in their habits (Wilkes et al., 2011), social circles (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003), and personal values (Kao & Long, 2004; Wilkes et al., 2011). In a qualitative study with expectant first-time fathers,

Finnbogadóttir and colleagues (2003) described participants' experiences of change in terms of feelings of responsibility and personal development. Fathers reported an increased feeling of responsibility for both their lives and the lives of their partners. They also paid more attention to their life choices and priorities, as they adopted the role of breadwinner. Additionally, participant fathers described experiencing personal growth during the pregnancy. Their focus shifted from themselves to becoming a family and felt that their self-worth increased.

Kowlessar and colleagues (2014) argued that as men are faced with the unfamiliar nature of pregnancy, they are guided by assumptions of what being a father looks and feels like. These pre-existing fatherhood scripts could be self-inflicted or invoked by societal ideals. If there happens to be a divergence from these prior expectations and beliefs, fathers experience inner conflict. Some of these scripts are derived from men's experiences with their own parents, especially with their fathers. Research demonstrated the significant impact of past experiences of parenting on fathers' current fatherhood behavior, and these influences presented themselves during as early as pregnancy. Studies suggested that fathers' level of involvement in the prenatal period could be determined by the availability of positive role models in their families of origin (Alio et al., Kaye et al., 2014). The influences of a man's relationship with his own parents continue beyond pregnancy. Beaton and Doherty (2007) found that new fathers' level of closeness with their own fathers was an important predictor of their willingness to be involved in their infants' lives. In a longitudinal study, Bouchard (2012) investigated the impact of experienced closeness with the family of origin on present paternal engagement. The results indicated that fathers who reported low levels of received affection showed less involvement during both prenatal and postnatal periods. In their reflections on their own family history, new fathers expressed their wishes to either model their fathers or differentiate from them. Especially if they felt disconnected from their fathers, these men aimed to form closer bonds with their own children (Goodman, 2005). In their study with 40 first-time fathers, Bolzan and colleagues (2005) discovered that most of the participating

fathers expressed their desire to father their children differently than the fathering they received. They talked about differences in establishing closeness and involvement in the father-child relationship. Fathers did not completely leave behind the traits they acquired from their fathers but wished to make adjustments to certain ones.

Several studies investigated expectant fathers' psychological well-being in the prenatal period. Fathers' involvement during this period is considered to be very valuable for both them, their partners' and the baby's well-being (Xue et al., 2018). Nevertheless, for some fathers, imagining the roles and responsibilities that fatherhood would bring about resulted in stress. Particularly, the novelty of this upcoming role caused self-doubt and fear (Brennan et al., 2007; Kao & Long, 2004). Darwin and colleagues (2017) found that fathers experienced distress as their partners went through pregnancy, yet doubted their right to feel so. In a systematic review, Philpott and colleagues (2017) found that fathers experienced low to moderate levels of stress in the perinatal period, and the level of stress was found to be the highest at the time of birth. The authors documented several stressors during this period, such as financial concerns, inadequate support, and problems at work. Financial concerns increased during pregnancy, as the pressure of providing for the upcoming child has begun (Darwin et al, 2017). Another aspect of concern was found to be health-related. Several qualitative studies have revealed that fathers experienced feelings of worry in regard to the health of their partner and the baby (Kowlessar et al., 2014).

### **1.2.2. Fatherhood During Childbirth**

Fathers are now more involved during childbirth than they were before, both for supporting their partners and witnessing this major life event (Fenwick et al., 2012). Fathers' presence and support during labor have been found to have positive outcomes for both the mothers' and in the long run, offspring's mental health (Dudgeon & Inhorn, 2004; Yargawa & Leonardi-Bee, 2015). Fathers provide both

physical and emotional support to their partners during this process. Giving their spouses assurance and courage, as well as hands-on help during the labor are among their roles as a support figure (Poh et al., 2014; Premberg et al., 2011).

Studies that investigated fathers' perceptions of labor revealed that men expressed both positive and negative aspects of their experiences. Based on the accounts of 10 first-time fathers, Premberg et al. (2011) described the experience of childbirth as "an interwoven process pendulating between euphoria and agony" (p. 849). They emphasized the role of the father as the emotional support to the laboring partner. The overwhelming joy they experienced was accompanied by negative emotions. It was shown that fathers concealed their distress to be there for their spouses, and were very concerned about the health of the mother and the baby (Premberg et al., 2011). Feelings of anxiety due to the obscurity of the process were common among first-time fathers (Baldwin et al., 2019; Poh et al., 2014). At the end of the labor, finding out that the mother-baby dyad made it through safely alleviated their anxieties (Poh et al., 2014).

Some fathers during the birth felt useless and irrelevant (Chin et al., 2011; Draper, 2003; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). In a qualitative investigation (Chin et al., 2011), one of the participants used the term "spare part" (p. 21) to describe his role during his partner's labor. Kowlessar's (2012) participants also expressed feelings of uselessness and detachment during birth, even though they were a part of the event. In contrast, Premberg, Carlsson, and Hellström (2011) in a study found that fathers perceived themselves as a part of the labor process. While they were physically separate from the labor, this was not reflected in their emotional experience.

### **1.2.3. The First Year of Fatherhood**

With the birth of their child, the fatherhood identity is redefined for fathers, and new paternal roles and functions arise. Chin et al. (2012) suggested that the

physical separation of the mother-baby dyad via birth brought a clear sense of fatherhood because fathers now saw the baby as not a part of the mother but an independent being. This understanding has led to a new sense of authority, purpose, and closeness. In this section, previous research findings on the development of the father-infant relationship will be presented. Next, life changes experienced as a result of fatherhood will be explored. The literature demonstrated that men experienced changes in their personality characteristics and overall self-improvement during this period. Becoming parents also made significant changes in the couple's relationship. New fathers also faced the necessity of making changes in their lifestyles and giving up some aspects of their previous lives. Among the challenges of fatherhood, literature on paternal mental health will be reviewed. Finally, findings on new fathers' support needs and their relationship with support will be presented.

#### **1.2.3.1. The Father-Baby Relationship**

It is generally argued that the formation of the father-baby bond for men is a process. Fathers are more likely to feel attached to their infants after birth, and not during the perinatal period (Dolan & Coe, 2011; Jordan, 1990; Sullivan, 1999). Greenburg and Morris (1974) suggested that the father-baby attachment was built right after the birth of the child. They argued that the impact that the newborn baby had on the father was the building block of this attachment. They coined the term "engrossment" which they described as fathers' "sense of absorption, preoccupation, and interest" with the newborn baby (Greenburg & Morris, 1974, p. 521). They argued that this initial bond laid the foundation for future paternal involvement. In their first interactions with their babies, fathers were captivated by the infant. They were overwhelmed with the wish to look at their babies, and make physical contact. These powerful emotions resulted in intensified attentiveness toward the infant and a euphoric mood state. The experience of being "engrossed" by the infant made fathers feel confident and proud. They also compared fathers who had the opportunity to



make contact with their baby right after labor and those whose contact was delayed until the baby was moved to the caring unit. While there was no statistically significant difference between these two groups, the qualitative findings suggested that fathers who participated in the labor felt more connected with their babies (Greenburg & Morris, 1974).

It is more difficult for fathers to create father-baby time when the baby is being breastfed (Premberg et al., 2008). It has come easier for fathers to build a relationship with their offspring as time passed. According to Eskandari et al. (2017)'s findings, settling in their role as fathers required time for men. It has been argued that an important benchmark for fathers was their baby's increased interaction with them. Kowlessar (2012) suggested that in the early period, limited responsiveness of the infant negatively affected fathers' level of satisfaction with their role. However, as the children reached a certain age where they started reacting to fathers' attempts at communication, fathers became more enthusiastic about engaging and spending time with their babies (Eskandari et al., 2017). Additionally, Premberg et al. (2018) demonstrated that forming a bond required more alone time with the baby. Once fathers felt that they had a connection with their infants that was independent of the triadic relationship, the relationship became more fulfilling for them.

An important indicator of the father-infant relationship was found to be mothers' attitudes toward fatherhood and satisfaction in parents' romantic relationships. Nangle et al. (2003) suggested that mothers could enable their partners' process of bonding with their babies by encouraging them to spend time. The quality of the couple's relationship was also found to be a predictor of father-infant interaction. Lee and Doherty (2007) found that fathers were more likely to be present in their infants' lives if they were already in a marriage that they found gratifying. Specifically, these fathers spent more time with their children, and their interactions were high in affection and attunement.

Studies revealed a variety of roles undertaken by new fathers in their infants' lives. Kowlessar (2012) reported that they wanted to realize the paternal image in their mind, which consisted of many different roles: role model, teacher, provider, and so on. The role of the father as the provider has appeared in many new fathers' accounts as their duty. The capacity to financially provide for their families has been associated with the idea of 'good fathering' and doing their part as 'men', and has become part of fathers' self-image and self-worth. Becoming a father aggravated financial concerns, as they started thinking about building a future for their families (St John et al., 2005). For some, the breadwinner role has clashed with their wish to be hands-on fathers and partners (Baldwin et al., 2018; 2019). Kowlessar (2012) also pointed out that fathers found it difficult to balance the demands of different roles they wished to fulfill as they all required time and energy. As a result, they experienced conflict as they attempted to satisfy their roles as both workers and fathers.

In regards to engaging with their children, fathers highlighted their role as playmates which was considered a father-specific task. Studies showed that fathers preferred taking part in physical activities with their children, which differed from how mothers interacted with them (Deave & Johnson, 2008; Fägerskiöld, 2008; Rohner & Veneziano, 2001). Fathers in Fägerskiöld's study (2008) uttered their belief that as opposed to that of mothers, their role as fathers was to be more physically active and mischievous. Another area of comparison for the fathers is their role in infant care. Fathers varied in how they positioned themselves regarding caregiving activities. Many studies showed that fathers were willing to and did take part in baby care; yet, most of them saw themselves as supplementary to their partners (Chin et al., 2011; Deave & Johnson, 2008; Fägerskiöld, 2008; Goodman, 2005; St John et al., 2005). In a qualitative study, Fägerskiöld (2008) used a grounded theory approach to explore Swedish first-time fathers' experiences during early infancy. Results indicated that when both parents were at home, they equally divided baby care tasks among themselves. An exception to this was reasonably

breastfeeding. While some fathers felt included in the breastfeeding process, the majority felt as irrelevant and had difficulty finding their place. While other caring activities were more likely to be shared, fathers in this study viewed themselves as “important complements” (Fägerskiöld, 2008, p. 66) to their partners as opposed to primary caregivers. In their study of 9 first-time fathers in the United Kingdom, Chin, Daiches, and Hall (2012) arrived at similar findings. Some of the participating fathers considered their partners to be the leading capable parent and assigned themselves the role of secondary caregivers. Similarly, fathers in Kowlessar’s study (2012) believed that their partners were more experienced and capable in caring activities, even though they were new mothers as well. Therefore, they stated that they learned how to take care of the baby by watching their spouses do it. Kowlessar (2012) argued that because fathers perceived the mother-infant bond to be much stronger, they presumed their partner to instinctively know taking care of the baby. Similarly, Hudson et al. (2001) compared new fathers' and mothers' levels of self-efficacy in baby care. The results of the study suggested that fathers felt less capable of providing care to their infants in comparison to mothers. Fathers' hesitation regarding their capabilities seemed to diminish with time, as they gained more experience. Learning new skills also served as a coping mechanism for overcoming the unfamiliar nature of early fatherhood (Henderson & Brouse, 1991; St John et al., 2005). Increased confidence in return made fathers feel less anxious about baby care (Chin et al., 2011; Kowlessar, 2012). As they became more confident in their abilities, they started to feel more content with their role as fathers (Hudson et al., 2001).

#### **1.2.3.2. Challenges and Rewards of Fatherhood**

Fatherhood brings about changes in both men’s personality characteristics, lifestyles, and the couple's relationship. Studies illustrated that fathers experienced a sense of improvement after having a baby (Premberg et al., 2008; St John et al., 2005). Premberg and colleagues (2008) found that new fathers felt an increase in their

sensitivity and maturity. In addition, Goodman (2005) pointed out that their relationship with their babies allowed fathers to get in touch with their tender and caring qualities. Increased sense of responsibility and maturity encouraged some fathers to take better care of themselves and avoid risky behavior (St John et al., 2005). Fathers reported feeling fulfilled and accomplished as this new fatherhood identity developed. For some men, the experience of becoming a father boosted their masculine identity (Dallos & Nokes, 2011; Kowlessar et al., 2014), and self-confidence (Baldwin et al., 2019). Others emphasized that fatherhood changed their perspective on life, and provided them with a new sense of purpose (Kowlessar, 2012). Becoming a father changed men's priorities in daily life. Some made adjustments in their lives, such as holding off on leisure, socializing, and work so that they could spend more time with their families (Baldwin et al., 2019; Goodman, 2005; Premberg et al., 2008).

While these adjustments came easy to some fathers, others found it difficult to give up their individual activities and pursuits (Finnbogadóttir et al., 2003; Kowlessar, 2012). Premberg et al. (2008) found that some fathers were frustrated because of the loss of freedom since the baby by its nature became the center of their lives. Before fatherhood, men had the chance to live their life the way they desired, without restrictions. However, their schedule was now predominantly set by the baby's needs and routines. In order to cope with these challenges, Kowlessar (2012) found that fathers kept some parts of their past life, such as certain activities that were important to them.

Studies on men's transition to fatherhood emphasized the redefined relationship with the partner. On the one hand, fathers reported that their relationship had become deeper and stronger. Becoming parents gave way to a new sense of connection and unity that they welcomed (Chin et al., 2011; Premberg et al., 2008; St John et al., 2005). On the other hand, some adversities experienced in the couple's relationship were mentioned. Decreases in alone time and intimacy were some of the negative changes commonly reported by new fathers. With the arrival of the baby,

new parents faced the challenge of how the infant care activities would be distributed and managed, which usually causes stress (Fillo et al., 2015). Moreover, challenges of baby care such as lack of sleep and overwhelming crying of the baby aggravated the couple's conflict (Fägerskiöld, 2008; St John et al., 2005).

Transition to parenthood is a vulnerable period, and parents are susceptible to experiencing mental health difficulties. Paternal mental health has been rather neglected as an area of research (Baldwin et al., 2018; 2019) compared to the research on mothers. Yet, literature revealed that first-time fathers had their share of the psychological burden as well. Studies that investigated paternal anxiety levels revealed that fathers found the prenatal period to be more distressing (Condon et al., 2004; Vismara et al., 2016). Nevertheless, many fathers' worries continue beyond the pregnancy and during the first years. On the contrary, Darwin et al. (2017) argued that fathers' level of anxiety was higher after birth, as they faced the challenges of parenting. During this time, stress was experienced as the result of tiredness, disturbed work-life balance, and being responsible for their family's wellbeing (Baldwin et al., 2019). When stressed, fathers feel less confident about their parenting abilities (Philpott et al., 2019). For new parents, self-efficacy plays an important part as they are supposed to handle unknown, stressful tasks (Hudson et al., 2001). Distressed fathers therefore could get into a vicious cycle, as low self-efficacy could further contribute to their level of anxiety.

Depressed mood was also found in fathers' emotional experiences during infancy. It was demonstrated that difficulties in infant care and balancing responsibilities contributed to paternal stress and depressive symptoms (Darwin et al., 2017; Edhborg et al., 2015). Cameron et al. (2016) investigated paternal postpartum depression and revealed that similar to mothers, fathers were also at the risk of experiencing depressive symptoms as they adjusted to fatherhood. In a qualitative study with fathers who experienced depressive symptoms in the postpartum period, Edhborg et al. (2015) explored the areas of struggle for these men. These fathers found parenting to be more difficult than they ever imagined. They felt ignored and

excluded as they were unable to participate in baby care as much as they wanted, and experienced conflict in their relationship with their partners. Fathers believed that these difficulties contributed to the depressive mood they experienced. A strong association between fathers' depressive symptoms and poor marital relationship quality has been further demonstrated in the literature (Cheung et al., 2019). Studies also demonstrated that when one partner developed depressive symptoms, the other was likely to experience symptoms as well (Cameron et al., 2016; Edhborg et al., 2005). Paternal depression has negative impacts on father-infant interactions. When they are depressed, fathers initiate less contact with their babies, and the quality of communication decreases (Cito et al., 2020; Sethna et al., 2015). In order to manage feelings of depression and anxiety, fathers resorted to distractions, such as spending more time working and alcohol use, and denial (Cito et al., 2020; Darwin et al., 2017). The father role required men to let go of some of their coping habits from their previous lives, such as recreational activities. It has also been suggested that fathers were hesitant about expressing their struggles. They thought that it was not fair to their partners, because from their perspective, they were the ones who did all the work (Dolan & Coe, 2011). Consequently, this prevented them from reaching out for help.

Despite its difficulties, fathers expressed many positive impacts of parenthood on their lives. Fatherhood gave men immense joy and astonishment. Fathers discovered a level of love they did not experience before (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Premberg et al., 2008). Talking and playing with their children was rewarding for them. They particularly found great joy in witnessing their baby's developmental journey (Baldwin et al., 2019; Premberg et al., 2008). Eskandari et al. (2017) showed that being a father was a pleasurable experience despite the great effort and struggles, and saw men's consideration of having another baby as an indicator of a positive fatherhood experience.

Studies investigating challenges of fatherhood also explored new fathers' needs and experiences of support. Fathers varied in their interactions with potential

support figures. During their transition to fatherhood, fathers received support from their peers, extended family, and also health professionals. Darwin et al. (2017) reported that fathers benefited from the connections they had with the people in their lives. Instead of resorting to professional help, they preferred having informal and friendly interactions with their social circles. No matter how big or small their social circle was, fathers generally felt supported by the people around them (Bradley et al., 2004). New fathers received substantial support from their friends, who happen to be more experienced fathers. Sharing experiences with these peers consoled fathers and made them feel less alone in their struggles (Kowlessar, 2012). Especially associates from their workplace were found to be helpful, as the challenges of managing work and fatherhood could be discussed (Chin et al., 2011; Goodman, 2005). Nevertheless, some fathers preferred keeping their worries private (Darwin et al., 2017). For some men, the internet and social media also provided helpful information (Shorey et al., 2017).

Fathers generally valued all sorts of support and help they received, whether it was from their friends, family, or professionals (Shorey et al., 2017). Fathers perceived the support from their families as helpful and comforting. Kowlessar (2012) noted that as family members could look after the baby for them, this provided fathers time to rest and attend to their romantic relationship. Another way of help families provided was to comfort new fathers in times of heightened anxiety about the infant's health (Darwin et al., 2017). Fathers living in different places other than their hometowns had their families visit them and provide assistance as they adjusted to parenting (Shorey et al., 2017). Nevertheless, some studies found that fathers often received less social support from peers compared to their partners (Baldwin et al., 2018; Thomas et al., 2011). With respect to getting an opinion or asking for advice from their families of origins, fathers usually preferred their mothers and siblings over their fathers. This was because most of these men had fathers who were not involved in childcare as much as they now wished to be. Because their fathers performed a more traditional way of fathering, new fathers did not consider them as

support figures (Darwin et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2011). Although helpful and comforting, the presence of extended family and friends had disadvantages for some fathers. Fathers sometimes felt excluded from their infants' caring when support figures were intrusive (Eskandari et al., 2017).

Assistance from nurses, consultations on breastfeeding, and educational parenting programs were a few services used by fathers (Shorey et al., 2017; Thomas et al., 2011). However, fathers expressed feelings of being disregarded and excluded in their experiences with these resources. Thomas et al. (2011) reported that training offered before or after birth did not target fathers. Similarly, fathers felt that they were not recognized and incorporated by healthcare providers. Their needs during the process of adaptation to fatherhood were not addressed (Baldwin et al., 2018). Fathers felt that care was only given to the mother-baby dyad, and that they were omitted (Shorey et al., 2017). It has been argued that fathers could benefit greatly from sharing circles and formal psychoeducational support (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). There is a consensus in the literature regarding the need for more resources tailored for new fathers (O'Brien et al., 2017; Venning et al., 2021).

### **1.3. THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

Emerged in China in December of 2019, the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) has spread to the rest of the world with accelerating speed. The alarming disease was confirmed to be a pandemic on March 11<sup>th</sup> by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2020), followed by strict measures in order to control the spread of the virus, such as the closure of schools and many workplaces, face mask and isolation requirements, and intermittent lockdowns (Şimşir et al., 2021). Rapid transmission and severity of the virus, and the accompanying social restraints had adverse impacts on mental health (Ammar et al., 2021; Qiu et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020). It has been pointed out that the emotional responses people gave when faced with the pandemic, as it is a world crisis, were natural and expected (Hart & Han,



2021). According to a review by Brooks et al. (2020), psychological outcomes such as rage, signs of post-traumatic stress, and bewilderment were commonly encountered. It has been demonstrated that longer times spent in quarantine, a lack of resources and information, loss of income, concerns about getting infected with the virus, and the monotony the pandemic had brought were the main causes of stress (Brooks et al., 2020). In another meta-synthesis, Xiong et al. (2020) demonstrated that levels of depression, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms were escalated in the general population from all around the world. In a large-scale investigation in China, Wang et al. (2020) reached similar results. Over half of those they polled reported having been psychologically affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, at least moderately. Approximately 30% of their participants also expressed experiencing anxiety symptoms. People with existing mental health difficulties and chronic diseases have been found to be especially vulnerable to suffering from negative mental health outcomes (Robinson et al., 2021; Xiong et al., 2020).

Due to pandemic restrictions, people were required to stay in their homes for long periods. In their study on the psychological impacts of confinement, Ammar et al. (2021) found detrimental outcomes such as depressed mood, decreased satisfaction, and a general decline in their psychological wellbeing. In addition, the need for mental and social support increased. Esterwood and Saeed (2020) stressed the importance of routines and internal resources in managing stressful situations, which were likely to be lost in a crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. When individuals cannot rely on these coping skills, their ability to deal with uncertainty suffers from it.

Financial concerns were another common stressor during the pandemic, as many people have lost their jobs as a result of the restrictions and the threat of infection. Several studies demonstrated the correlation between economic worries and psychological distress (Brooks et al., 2020; Hart & Han, 2021; Wilson et al., 2020; Wolfe & Patel, 2021). The findings from a wide-range study involving six counties revealed that people with self-employment status encountered a loss in their income

due to fewer work opportunities (Wolfe & Patel, 2021). This downturn significantly affected their self-reported levels of happiness. Another study demonstrated that people with less employment security during the pandemic experienced more anxiety and depression symptoms (Wilson et al., 2020). The toll of the pandemic was harder on people who had already been experiencing financial difficulties. Prime et al. (2020) argued that while the pandemic caused financial worries for the majority of the population, the adverse impacts could be larger for the more economically fragile families. Similarly, the data from the US indicated that a significant percentage of individuals with low income expressed struggling with severe anxiety, whereas this was the case for only a small portion of those with moderate to high levels of income (Fowers & Wan, 2020; as cited in Hart & Han, 2021).

### **1.3.1. COVID-19 in Turkey**

In Turkey, the first COVID-19 case was announced on the 11th of March, 2020. Strict measures were implemented immediately, such as school closures, switch to a flexible or remote working model, cancellation of public gatherings, curfew on specific age groups, and occasional general lockdowns (Erdoğan et al., 2020; Mizrak Sahin & Kabakci, 2021). The initial curfew was imposed on citizens at the age of 65 or older, and the restrictions placed on this age group were not entirely lifted for a year. During the first year of the pandemic, places such as cafes and restaurants limited their services to take-away, which restricted the outdoor activities of the individuals. The longest lockdown during the pandemic took place between the 29<sup>th</sup> of April and the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 2021. June 2021 marked the beginning of the normalization phase, and the restrictions were gradually lifted. The requirement for wearing face masks in crowded areas continued even after the normalization phase of the pandemic restrictions.

Mental health implications of the pandemic in Turkey were in line with the global findings. Özdin and Bayrak Özdin's (2020) research revealed high levels of

depression and anxiety among the Turkish population. Also similar to the findings from other countries, individuals with preexisting mental health difficulties and chronic illnesses, and those who had an infected person in their close circle were more at the risk of experiencing these adverse impacts (Özdin & Bayrak Özdin, 2020). In addition, Erdoğan et al. (2020) reported that stress and despair were higher in people who found the implemented measures insufficient. Also, in the early stage of the pandemic, the majority of Turkish people were found to be underinformed about the virus and the consequences of infection. Many individuals hold the belief that they would not be able to recover from the disease if they were to be infected (Yıldırım & Güler, 2020).

Several studies investigated the impacts of the pandemic on Turkish parents. Başaran & Aksoy (2020) conducted a qualitative investigation of parents' experiences during the pandemic. The results indicated both positive and negative outcomes of the pandemic. Negative experiences involved psychological, health and educational issues. Increased parental stress was expressed especially by the participating fathers. Parents also talked about psychological difficulties they observed in their children, such as increased aggression and crying. Nevertheless, participants mentioned positive impacts of the pandemic on their family lives, such as increased engagement. Parents revealed that they engaged in more shared activities as families, and spent more time playing with their offspring. In addition, participant mothers believed that father involvement increased during this period. Arslan-Dikme and Gültekin (2021) explored the experiences of parents who worked from home during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of their study revealed that both parents experienced negative affect. Helplessness, despair and fear were among the emotional states expressed by mothers. Among the participating fathers, feelings of boredom, rage, concerns for the future, and helplessness were common emotional experiences. The findings of the study also indicated significant increase in father involvement. The majority of the participant fathers expressed increased satisfaction in their paternal roles, and increased father-child closeness.

### **1.3.2. Fatherhood During the Pandemic**

Transition to parenthood in itself is a stressful phase of one's life. New parents are faced with novel challenges and dramatic lifestyle changes. The fear and uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic have aggravated the preexisting hardships of this vulnerable period (Chasson et al., 2022; Ribaud, 2021; Taubman – Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov, 2020). Taubman - Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov (2020) assessed new parents' concerns regarding raising an infant during the pandemic, and demonstrated a strong association between parents' COVID-19-related anxieties (such as financial concerns, the health of the infant or themselves) and apprehensions about their child's healthy development. In other words, worries about COVID-19 for the parents influenced how they felt about raising a child during the pandemic. Yet, an interesting finding of their study was that COVID-19-related worries were not correlated with parental distress. Authors argued that the lack of such association could be due to the nature of parental distress. Parental distress is argued to be more related to one's internal reality, such as their schemas about parenting, than the external reality in which the individual lives (Taubman - Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov, 2020). In another study, Xue et al. (2021) investigated new parents' level of self-efficacy at the time of lockdown. The authors defined self-efficacy as "people's belief in their own abilities to complete a given task" (Xue et al., 2011, p. 2). Results of this study indicated these parents' reports of self-efficacy were lower compared to those who went through this phase of parenthood when there were no restrictions (Xue et al., 2021).

Ribaud (2021) explored the potential implications of the pandemic on the parent-infant relationship. It was argued that new parents who were deprived of social support could experience more difficulty establishing this initial bond. Nevertheless, the author also suggested that working from home during the pandemic could be an opportunity for the parents to build a relationship with their offspring. Due to quarantine restrictions, various workplaces, such as private companies, schools, and so forth, switched to a remote working model. As a result, employed fathers started

working from home for an indefinite period. For some, this remained to be the case even after the cease of restrictions. This change of modality resulted in a dramatic increase in the time fathers spent with their offspring. Father involvement has already been on an upward trajectory and COVID-19 granted fathers more time at home, which they had the opportunity to spend with their children if they chose to. Studies on fatherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic are limited compared to those on motherhood. The research focused on new fathers during the pandemic is even scarcer.

#### **1.3.2.1. Paternal Mental Health During the Pandemic**

Research on paternal mental health during the pandemic has mainly focused on fathers of older children. Hart and Han (2021) examined the relationship between the experienced hardships during the pandemic and parental mental health in a sample of 1000 parents. This study showed that financial difficulties, as well as fear of being infected and transmitting the disease, were correlated with mental distress. An intriguing finding was that the prevalence of mental health issues was substantially higher among fathers than that of mothers. The authors argued fathers' worries about failing to satisfy the expected paternal roles could account for this outcome. In addition to fulfilling their role of provider, which was harder due to financial losses caused by the pandemic, fathers also became more involved in child-related tasks (Hart & Han, 2021). Tarrant et al. (2020) also reported that the challenges of balancing these two roles were found in the accounts of fathers they interviewed. They argued that the already existing dilemma between these roles was aggravated by the pandemic. This study also revealed that fathers who were in vulnerable employment status were more susceptible to experiencing these hardships (Tarrant et al., 2020).

A limited number of studies focused on new fathers' well-being during the COVID-19 pandemic. Cameron et al. (2020) investigated the psychological distress

fathers, including those who were expecting a baby and had recently become a father, experienced during the pandemic. Fathers who were in the perinatal period reported clinical levels of depression. Moreover, the comparison of depression and anxiety levels of fathers before and during the pandemic indicated a significant increase. The findings of this study pointed out the adverse impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on paternal well-being. In a qualitative study, Poulos et al. (2021) investigated expectant and new fathers' prenatal experiences during the pandemic. According to the findings of the study, fathers were unsure whether they would be allowed in the labor since the pandemic measures were indefinite. The potential risk of missing out on the moment of birth was distressing for the fathers. Another difficulty induced by the pandemic was the loss of one's support system. On the one hand, they needed social support from their circles as they struggled with adapting to parenthood. On the other hand, they wanted to avoid the risk of infection. This was a dilemma expressed by new fathers. Fathers also found it difficult to communicate the necessity of social distancing to their close ones. Social distancing measures also restrained attendance to preparatory classes for expecting parents, which have been valuable resources during the prenatal period (Higashio & Sasaki, 2021). Not being able to participate in these prenatal courses caused new parents to feel ill-equipped for infant care (Moltrecht et al., 2022).

#### **1.3.2.2. The Effects of Remote Working**

It has been suggested that the dynamics that inhibit men from being involved fathers could be resolved as most employees started to work from their homes (Margarita, 2021). It is argued that parents' life-work balance, and consequently mental well-being, would benefit from the increased flexibility of work conditions (Cannito & Scavarda, 2020). Yet, a downside of remote working for fathers appeared to be the loss of personal space, and the activities previously enjoyed that did not

include one's family, such as social gatherings with friends or even the daily socialization with coworkers (Cannito & Scavarda, 2020).

Research on the changes in the family system during the pandemic revealed improvements in the division of domestic labor. There has been a consensus that in many families, mothers take on more responsibility at home, even though more and more women are joining the workforce. Due to the shift to remote working, fathers became more aware of the domestic workload. It has been suggested that this awareness could encourage men to take more responsibility at home (Shafer et al., 2020). Some studies investigated the division of child care and house chores from each parent's perspective. Results indicated that fathers started to be more involved in domestic tasks, and the gap between mothers' and fathers' levels of contribution narrowed (Carlson et al., 2021; Shafer et al., 2020).

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of the father has become more prominent. More time spent at home gave fathers the opportunity to take more part in their children's lives, starting from as early as pregnancy (Lista & Bresesti, 2020). Studies demonstrated increased paternal involvement due to the COVID-19 pandemic (Margaria, 2021). In a study with more than 1000 fathers in Canada, many fathers expressed that the pandemic measures had favorable outcomes for their fatherhood (Canadian Men's Health Foundation, 2021). More than half of the participant fathers reported that their relationship with their children improved and that they became more mindful about how valuable their influence as a father was on their children. A similar impact of the pandemic on the father-child relationship was demonstrated by other studies. Weissbourd et al. (2020) found that more than two-thirds of their sample reported increased closeness in their relationship with their offspring. The improvement in their relationship appeared to be due to the increase in pleasurable interactions and their understanding of their children's likes and dislikes (Chasson et al., 2022; Weissbourd et al., 2020).

#### **1.4. THE PRESENT STUDY**

It has been more than two years since the pandemic entered the lives of individuals. Since then, much research has been done on the pandemic's impacts on mental health, as well as the family structure and parents' well-being. It has been suggested that parents could be in a particularly vulnerable position in the face of the pandemic (Cito et al., 2020; Hart & Han, 2021). Parents faced novel stressors as their routines changed dramatically due to the COVID-19 restrictions. Social distancing policies restricted the individual activities of family members, and sharing the same space for prolonged periods required the negotiation of new issues. Responsibilities of child care could not be shared as daycares were closed, and family members could not provide support due to social distancing restrictions (Prime et al., 2020). These challenges resulted in heightened parental stress and hindered parenting capacity (Cito et al., 2020; Cluver et al., 2020).

Paternal presence and involvement have positive outcomes for children's development. Fathers have a significant role in stimulating cognitive development, as well as preparing the child for the demands of the external world (Lamb, 2004). A positive father-child relationship has been linked to better mental health, peer relationships, and emotion regulation (Craig et al., 2018; Sadhu, 2014; Steele, 2010). On the other hand, paternal depression and stress have adverse impacts on both the child's well-being and the father-child relationship. Depressed fathers were less likely to be involved in their children's lives (Cito et al., 2020). Moreover, paternal distress was found to have negative impacts on offspring's cognitive functions, social skills, and mental health (Hart & Han, 2021).

Ribaudo (2021) stressed that an infant's psyche is the byproduct of the parent-baby relationship, therefore the nature of this relationship directly shapes the infant's inner world. The author suggested that heightened anxiety about the virus could result in negative representations of the offspring in the mind of the parent. The mental image of the infant is an important determinant of the parent-infant interaction.



Hence, new parents' experiences of the pandemic are directly correlated with the nature of parent-baby relationship, and hence baby's development. Therefore, understanding new fathers' experiences could also provide valuable information about the children who were born into the pandemic.

Research is limited on new fathers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. While a limited number of global studies investigated new fathers' experiences of the pandemic (Poulos et al., 2021; Tarrant et al., 2020), these studies mainly focused on the impacts of the changes in healthcare policies, which restricted fathers' participation in prenatal appointments. Unlike the present study, these previous studies did not investigate the effects of remote working on new fathers' experiences, which made drastic changes in the lives of the fathers and their families. Further, to the researcher's knowledge, there are also no studies that investigated Turkish new fathers' experiences. Existing research that explored parental mental health and behavioral problems in children during the pandemic mainly focused on parents of older children. These studies revealed significant levels of parental distress, increased psychological difficulties in children, disruption of routines, and challenges in balancing responsibilities (Bıkmazer et al., 2020; Toran et al., 2021). Nevertheless, Toran et al. (2021) found that parents perceived an improvement in their relationship with their children. One study with pregnant women during the pandemic revealed that this group experienced high levels of anxiety and fear (Şahin & Kabakçı, 2021). Yet, expectant and new Turkish fathers' experiences and needs during the pandemic remain unknown. This study, therefore, aims to investigate how this neglected group has been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, making a contribution to the literature and shedding light on their unique experiences. The research questions that guided this investigation and aimed to be addressed in the study were the following:

- a. What are the prenatal and postnatal experiences of first-time fathers and how are these experiences affected by the COVID-19 pandemic?
- b. How do the fathers make meaning of the effects of the pandemic on their prenatal and postnatal period experiences?

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **METHOD**

#### **2.1. PARTICIPANTS**

In order to investigate these research questions, the primary criterion for participant recruitment was being a father who welcomed his first child during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fathers with babies who were born between March 2020 and April 2021 were recruited for the study. These cut-offs were determined by evaluating the extent of the pandemic restrictions. April 2021 was determined as a cut-off because the longest lockdown during the pandemic had taken place between April 29 and May 17, and this was considered to be a particularly stressful period for the majority of the population. Fathers whose babies were born outside of this interval were excluded from the study because the acceleration of vaccination and the normalization phase could have resulted in different fatherhood and COVID-19 experiences.

To enhance the homogeneity of the sample and better understand the pandemic's effects on the fatherhood experience, only the fathers who have worked predominantly from home during this period were included in the study. Fathers who continued working in offices would be expected to experience different challenges and worries. In addition, fathers with normal developing (babies without birth defects or neonatal illnesses) and full-term babies (refers to babies that are born between 38 and 40 weeks) were included in the study. The rationale of this criteria was to ensure that the fathers' focus is on the psychological/relational aspect of the experience with their babies, rather than the health-related concerns.

Finally, it was ensured that this was the first pregnancy and the first birth that the father has experienced. Literature suggests that a prior pregnancy and/or birth experience, either a positive or a negative one, could serve as a confounding factor and would be likely to influence the fathers' current experiences that are under

investigation (Armstrong, 2001; Campbell-Jackson et al., 2014). In addition to the possible confounding impact of a previous pregnancy, fathers who have an older child at home at the time of a new baby's arrival would be likely to have different challenges than first-time fathers.

Eight men who fit the inclusion and exclusion criteria were recruited for the study. The babies of the participating fathers were born between March 2020 and March 2021. Participating fathers varied in the extent to which the pregnancy coincided with the pandemic restrictions. The ages of the interviewed participants ranged between 32 and 39. Their self-reported socioeconomic statuses were middle class or higher. All participants started working from home during the pandemic, and some were still working remotely at the time of the interviews. Except for one participant, the remaining fathers continued in their pre-pandemic jobs and did not experience a significant financial loss. Out of the 8 participants, 5 were not allowed in during the labor due to the pandemic restrictions. 3 fathers reported getting infected with the virus after the birth of their children. Demographic information regarding the participants is demonstrated in Table 2.1.

**Table 2.1***Demographic Characteristics of Participants*

ID	Age	Occupation	Level of income	Length of marriage	Spouse's time of return to work	Infant's date of birth	Infant's age at the time of interview	Prior COVID-19 infection
P1	32	Purchasing manager	Upper-middle	4	11 <sup>th</sup> month	February 2021	1 yr.	No
P2	39	Advertising agent	Upper-middle	5	1 <sup>st</sup> month	March 2020	1 yr. 11 mos.	Yes
P3	35	Teacher	Middle	6	8 <sup>th</sup> month	May 2020	1 yr. 9 mos.	No
P4	35	Personal trainer	Middle	2	Not employed	December 2020	1 yr.	No
P5	38	IT manager	Upper-middle	3	9 <sup>th</sup> month	February 2021	1 yr.	No
P6	37	Human Resources BP	Upper-middle	9	11 <sup>th</sup> month	October 2020	1 yr. 4 mos.	No
P7	33	Financial Analysis Manager	Middle	6	5 <sup>th</sup> month	March 2021	11 mos.	Yes
P8	35	Project Manager	Middle	3	9 <sup>th</sup> month	March 2020	1 yr. 9 mos.	Yes

## **2.2. PROCEDURE**

Following Istanbul Bilgi University Ethics Committee's approval, the study and the criteria for participation were announced via PI's social media and acquaintances. Pre-interview calls were made to volunteer participants to ensure eligibility and schedule meeting. Before the interviews, the researcher shared a consent form (Appendix A) and a demographics form (Appendix B) via e-mail. Participants were asked to reply to the e-mail with a statement that indicated their consent for participation. The demographics form was developed in order to attain information about sample characteristics, as well as to further ensure that participants met the inclusion criteria.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted online via Zoom Platform. All interviews were voice recorded with the approval of the participants. During the interviews, the PI took field notes. The PI followed the interview guide created for the study (Appendix C), which consisted of open-ended questions with the aim of gaining an in-depth understanding of the participants' unique experiences. Probing questions were used, when necessary, in order to enhance understanding and inquire about details. One interview was conducted as a pilot study, in order to make adjustments in the interview guide if necessary. Because no revision was found to be needed, this interview was added to the data set. Interviews were conducted between January and March 2022. The duration of the interviews ranged from 48 to 73 minutes.

## **2.3. DATA ANALYSIS**

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA: Smith & Osborn, 2003) was preferred as the method of analysis, in order to gain an in-depth understanding of new fathers' unique experiences of fatherhood and the pandemic. IPA is considered to be well suited for investigating subjective experiences and how these were interpreted by

the individual. All interviews were transcribed from the recording by the primary investigator. Expressions such as silences and laughter were included in the transcriptions. Coding of the transcripts was conducted with MAXQDA Software. At the beginning of coding, each transcript and the field notes were read several times. Initially, the PI took notes while reading the transcripts. Then, moving from the notes, each segment was coded with condensed phrases. Some segments were coded more than once. From the codes, major and subordinate themes were developed. Themes that were mentioned by less than three participants were eliminated.

### **2.3.1. Trustworthiness**

Multiple methods were employed in order to enhance the trustworthiness of the study. First, field notes were taken as complementary to recordings. The PI logged her initial thoughts and observations, as well as her own reflectivity. PI's own reflections and perspective were taken into consideration throughout the coding process. Second, each transcript was re-read many times, and recordings were re-listened simultaneously in order to capture participants' expressions and enhance meaning. During the coding, detailed notes were taken to ensure that the meaning given by the participant was captured. Third, the thesis supervisor was involved and reviewed the process in each step throughout the data analysis. Themes and subthemes were finalized with the supervisor, and necessary adjustments and reorganizations were made. Last, the member checking method was utilized in order to ensure that the final themes captured participants' experiences.

## **2.4. RESEARCHER'S REFLEXIVITY**

I am a 26-year-old woman, who is enrolled in İstanbul Bilgi University Clinical Psychology graduate program, specifically in the child-adolescent track. At the time of the study, I have been working as a child and adolescent psychotherapist

for 2.5 years. My interest in the topic of fathers and perspective on fatherhood have been shaped by both my personal and professional experiences. Conducting qualitative research, just as being a psychodynamically oriented therapist, requires reflecting on one's own experiences and recognizing one's subjectivity. When one of my professors suggested fatherhood as the potential topic of my thesis, it highly intrigued me. Both my personal and professional experiences made it apparent that fathers play a crucial role in their children's lives. As a clinical psychology trainee, I became curious about my early experiences and had the opportunity to gain information from my parents. My mother frequently mentioned how involved my father was in child care and play, and how this was beneficial for both herself and me as a child. Born and raised in Turkish culture, I have become aware of the lack of paternal involvement in childcare and household responsibilities. While appreciating the men who have taken equal responsibilities with their partners, I was also curious about the factors that restrained paternal involvement. With the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, I encountered many men, who started working from home and thus spent more time with their children than they ever did. This has been a unique life event, especially for first-time parents. Compared to maternal leave, the paternal leave in Turkey is very short. Therefore, I was intrigued by how fathers and their infants would be affected by this unexpected opportunity of being together for long periods.

On a professional level, I observed that many child therapists, myself included, had difficulty engaging fathers in the therapy process and promoting their involvement. I believe that making an effort for understanding their subjective experiences and getting a sense of their inner worlds are crucial for building a therapeutic alliance with fathers. I have found the experience of interviewing these fathers to be enriching and highly valuable for my therapeutic work. All participating fathers reported being highly involved in child care and attached great importance to building a positive father-child relationship. It is possible that this study attracted the fathers who are more involved compared to the general population, and that my being

a woman and a psychologist could have influenced their answers. I realized that in their narratives, they emphasized the importance of supporting the mother and taking responsibility at home.





## CHAPTER 3

### RESULTS

This section presents the results of the analysis of the eight semi-structured interviews. The findings of the analysis were categorized into four themes: 1) “Emerging Self as a Father”, 2) “Finding Your Place as a Father”, 3) “Challenging, yet Rewarding”, and 4) “The Unexpected Part of Fatherhood: The COVID-19 Pandemic” (Table 2). Illustrative quotes were presented for each subtheme and labeled with the participant ID number.

**Table 3.1**

*Themes and Subthemes*

Themes	Subthemes
Emerging self as a father	Entering the unknown: fears and worries Getting ready for fatherhood: hopes and dreams Ghosts and angels of the past Transformations in self and couple Self-evaluation and comparison as a father Role of support in fatherhood
Finding your place as a father	From the outside, looking in Building of the father-infant bond Playing various roles
Challenging, yet rewarding	Challenges of fatherhood Joys of fatherhood
The Unexpected Part of Fatherhood: The COVID-19 Pandemic	A new way of fatherhood Pandemic-induced worries and hardships “You don’t think about the pandemic at that point” Effects on support

### **3.1. EMERGING SELF AS A FATHER**

The first major theme, named emerging self as a father, describes participants' experiences during the formation of their fatherhood identity. For the participants, the fatherhood identity has begun to emerge as they received the news of their spouse's pregnancy. This theme included fathers' experiences during the pregnancy, and how they made meaning of this phase. In addition, the transformations experienced in self, couple relationships, and lifestyle were discussed in this first theme. Several factors were at play as they settled in this new identity, and these factors influenced their attributions to fatherhood. Under this major category, six subthemes emerged corresponding to participants' journey into fatherhood: 1) entering the unknown: fears and worries, 2) getting ready for fatherhood: hopes and dreams, 3) ghosts and angels of the past, 4) transformations in self and couple, 5) self-evaluation and comparison as father, and 6) role of support in fatherhood.

#### **3.1.1. Getting Ready for Fatherhood: Hopes and Dreams**

This subtheme describes participants' experiences and states of mind during their partners' pregnancy, starting from the moment they received the news. For the majority of participants, a sense of readiness for fatherhood was the precursor to planning the pregnancy. For almost all participants, the pregnancy was a planned event. They contemplated becoming parents with their spouses and decided that it was the right time for them. In the emergence of this sense of readiness, age and a sense of maturation played a significant role. Fathers described the importance of especially their partners' age from a physiological perspective. It was observed that both the age of their spouses and themselves were described as a deadline for having children. Yet, their own age was not only important for a healthy pregnancy but also their sense of readiness and maturity for fathering a child. For five participants (P1, P2, P5, P6, P7), increasing age brought a desire of becoming a father.

*“We postponed it [having a child] for a long time, but at one point we said ‘let’s have a child’. Maybe with the youth coming to an end, the age... well, I’m pushing 40, since I’m getting older, I felt the need for having a child, or we got that feeling, we wanted that I mean.” (P6)*

*“Well, I have this belief that as an adolescent, the person constantly demands things, and tries to have a hold on things, whether they are material or non-material. But at one point, when the person reaches a certain level of virtue, he now begins giving back. Frankly, I felt that I reached that point.” (P2)*

As the pregnancy progressed, fathers started to prepare themselves and their environment for the baby. Three fathers (P1, P2, P5) prepared by doing research on pregnancy and baby care. They were also preoccupied with preparing the physical environment for the baby. One father expressed that his preparations were more tangible than mere imagining. This suggested that rather than imagining and aspiring for a certain way of fathering, he was more inclined to make physical preparations:

*“I didn’t plan it that much in my head, I didn’t have a plan like I would be this kind of father, or I would do this and that. It was more about what felt right and... Researching on the internet, and talking to the doctor and our families, I tried to put them in practice. I didn’t have prior thoughts like I’m going to be this kind of father (laughs).” (P1)*

During this period, fathers started to think about the near and distant future. Participants expressed their wishes to build a good life and provide for their children on the way.

*“Having a child means uncertainty. Like what is going to happen, how is it going to happen? By that I don’t mean what she will look like. More like what kind of future is she going to have? Planning this is by itself a major work.” (P1)*

Four fathers mentioned thinking about the financial aspect of having a child. One participant (P8) expressed that he began financially planning the future, and what he can provide to his child. For another father, the financial costs of parenting caused

stress. Especially hearing from others, before experiencing it himself was intimidating:

*Um, especially er, in a financial way, because everybody says things like 'strollers are this much, the formula is that much, one diaper costs 3 TL and they get through 7 a day so it costs 20 liras (laughs)' like that."* (P2)

While the majority of the participants appeared to be financially in a good place, and contemplating how to do more for their children, one father (P4) who greatly struggled due to the pandemic expressed the necessity of sufficient economic power for becoming a father: *"I would advise him not to go through with it if he is not financially stable. To be honest, I would advise the old me to wait."*

It appeared that for fathers, providing their children with quality education was important. Three participants (P3, P4, P6) mentioned their dreams for their children's education during this period. P6 expressed his wish for his son to get his undergraduate or master's degree abroad. He stated that even long before the idea of having a child was on the table, this was his dream.

When asked about their dreams regarding their unborn children, several participants described a great excitement to meet their children and intense curiosity.

*"Err actually that period is entirely about curiosity. I mean the most I remember is curiosity. What kind of a thing it will be, what kind of a thing will arrive? I mean what kind of a thing will we bring to life? What will it be like when grown up, or when little?"* (P5)

*"Well, it makes you impatient and excited, you wish to meet her as soon as possible, after a while, time hangs heavy in your hands. We were wondering what she will look like, who she will look like, how – err what will happen, like that uncertainty, err there was this need to find out."* (P7)

Three fathers mentioned that they imagined what their relationship will be like with their children, and the activities they could do together. It was observed that they hoped to pass their experiences, knowledge, and interests to their offspring.

*“I was excited about how I would raise the kid, and I always thought that my kid would be lucky. I have a brother and a sister... For example, my brother was lucky. I have a big archive of records, instruments, books, you love to travel, you have stories to tell... Like I raised by brother with these and when I know see its positive impact on him, err and because I think these will guide the child well, that excited me. I mean I was excited about sharing things with her. When am I going to share things, when will she start sleeping next to me, dancing with me, listening to music with me...”(P8)*

*“I can say this, err like the idea of someone growing up by my side, learning with me and from me, from us, and having the opportunity to raise them was nice... I would learn things, she will too, I will teach her and when I see her trying the things I taught, I would be happy” (P5)*

Five of the participants (P2, P3, P4, P5, P8) mentioned at this point that their relationship with their babies was just as the way they hoped, and these dreams and contemplations came true.

*“To answer your question, yes I had dreams, I imagined being a father to be just like this, and thanks to my daughter, she allows me to experience it as the best way possible” (P4)*

Five participants (P1, P2, P5, P7, P8) talked about imagining and wondering about what their children would look like, and wondering about the personality characteristics and physical features the baby would take after each parent. They hoped for certain characteristics from each parent, especially those which were considered favorable.

P2 stated that during his wife’s pregnancy, he hoped that their daughter would resemble her mother in terms of being energetic and outgoing. He described himself as having a more depressive mood and being more “down”. He wished that his daughter would be more like her mother instead of him. Similarly, P8 had certain wishes about his unborn child: *“... Like wishing that she would be more easygoing and positive like her mother, but more controlling and responsible like me.”*

### 3.1.2. Entering the Unknown: Fears and Worries

All participants stated that they experienced worries about fatherhood during this waiting period. Fathers varied in the level of anxiety they experienced. For the majority of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P6, P7), the idea of fatherhood stirred fear. The majority of these fears and worries were related to the upcoming responsibilities of parenthood. Not only the workload of infant care, but the general idea of being responsible for another human being, who was utterly dependent on their care was anxiety-provoking for the fathers. Fathers were emotionally ambivalent during this period, as they experienced both fear and excitement.

*“Bringing a child, a human being into the world and taking her responsibility, raising her, this is a major event I think um... You are responsible from everything about her.” (P1)*

*“I was very afraid to be honest (laughs). I was afraid, I mean because you feel anxious, you hesitate. That is, you are going to have a child, will you be able to take care of him? How will you provide for him? You are bringing a living into the world; all of his responsibility will be on you...” (P6)*

This was especially frightening for P4, whose partner’s pregnancy was not expected. For this father, having a child was not an idea he previously had on his mind. The lack of prior reflection on the thought and the initial shock he experienced appeared to arouse intense fear. He indicated that when he saw the test was positive, he experienced a level of anxiety that he had never experienced before. For P6, these fears were so powerful that made him delay starting a family for a long time. He expressed that while people assumed they could not have children, they actually postponed it because they were hesitant about taking such a responsibility.

For five participants (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8), these worries were in part induced by the country's economic and political climate. Providing for their families became more anxiety-provoking due to increasing financial difficulties, which were further

intensified by the pandemic. P4 found the financial burden of having a child to be heavier than he expected, and therefore reflected on the decision:

*“When dreaming about becoming a father, I did not consider these possible challenges. If I knew this would happen, maybe I would have postponed it a little bit.”*

Another participant (P1) expressed fears about his unborn daughter’s safety in the future, due to the hardships and tragedies women in Turkey have been experiencing. He stated that he was negatively impacted by hearing the horrific news and felt a lot of pressure about raising a female child.

Another cause of worry during the pregnancy period has been the expectant baby’s health. For three participants (P5, P6, P7), prenatal screenings and the risk of fetus abnormalities were worrisome. The uncontrollable nature of such defects in the prenatal period was especially troubling for fathers. It appeared that fathers felt powerless as they impatiently waited for the results. The intensity of this worry was apparent in one participant’s narrative. Remembering those potential risks still seemed to disturb P6:

*“... There is of course an uncertainty during that period. I think that is the biggest fear. I mean, in that stage God forbid there are tons of diseases, I don’t want to verbalize them now. You feel very tense during that period, you don’t want something bad to happen.”*

Yet looking back, fathers realized that things did not occur as they feared. For three participants (P2, P6, P7), in retrospect, their distress was excessive and unnecessary. It seemed that fatherhood was envisioned as frightening and challenging during the imagination phase. However, once they united with their babies, fathers found themselves more at ease.

*“I realized later that some of the things I was afraid of turned out to be things that could be overcome. Because I realized after the child was born, some parts of it were, how can I put this, unnecessary and extreme fear.” (P7)*

*“... At first, I was feeling like I could not possibly change her diaper, it felt like her bones could break (laughs). But at day three, I started to change her diaper.” (P2)*

### **3.1.3. Ghosts and Angels of the Past**

When asked about their childhood recollections of their relationships with their own fathers, participants mentioned both positive and negative experiences. While reflecting on the impacts this relationship had on their own fatherhood, they talked about adopting some ways of their fathers, and their attempts of leaving out others.

*“My father was a compassionate and honest person. I think these are the two best things he can pass on... When I think about my son for example, I also want to pass on these positive aspects. I want to take these over from my father and pass them on him. You inevitably compare these things. You want to repeat some of the behaviors and some of them not.” (P6)*

Seven of the participants observed differences in attitudes towards fatherhood between their fathers and themselves. These differences were not necessarily experienced as negative, but attributed to the generational gap. Some participants believed that these differences were due to the overall change in the fatherhood model in Turkey. They talked about their own fathers' lack of knowledge and motivation in regard to infant care, and how the expectations from fathers were different in the past. Whereas, as modern-day fathers, they aimed to be more involved in their children's lives.

*“... They were not as open-eyed as us, they did not have this much resources, men could not discuss these things among themselves as much. Whereas now in a business meeting, I can end up talking to four women about children. In their time, men could not talk these things out with each other, let alone with a woman.” (P8)*



*“For example, we now research everything, we take a scientific stance. But in the past, education-wise, um, for example, both my parents were uneducated people. My father is a person who made efforts to improve himself, tried to educate his children but after all, he comes from a feudal way of living.” (P3)*

Five participants (P3, P4, P6, P7, P8) expressed that they aspired to do things differently than their own fathers. They reflected on their fathers’ attitudes and aimed to not repeat the things they perceived as faulty or harmful. They contemplated the impacts of their fathers’ behavior on the difficulties they experienced today. P3 stated that his father could never show affection to his children. Today as a father, he wanted to do things differently because he did not approve of such a distant father-child relationship:

*“Our father did not hold us and show us affection, did not take an interest in us... I did not receive that kind of compassion, there has always been a distance between us. I personally had no business continuing that kind of behavior and I think that is very wrong.”*

Similarly, P6 talked about how his father resorted to punishment when disciplining him, and that he later realized the adverse psychological impacts on himself. This motivated him to never engage in such behavior with his son. P8 talked about how as a child; his father gave him responsibilities that he now realized were too much for a 7-year-old. He was now struggling with managing his anxiety, which he believed to be connected to these past burdens:

*“For example, I am now planning on getting psychological help regarding stress management because I am an anxious person, I got used to managing everything with anxiety and stress. I am very certain that the root cause of this anxiety is my childhood. I mean, being told about so many things as a child, being informed about things, these created unnecessary stress. And I experience its impacts right now.” (P8)*

Another participant talked about his adverse past experiences, such as physical abuse and abandonment. He realized that these memories caused him to

develop a dangerous view of the world, which made him worry about his daughter's safety and well-being:

*“As children, we were beaten up a lot. Out of sight, we were beaten by our teachers, by the orphanage employee. As a child, when you don't have your mother and father look after you, people mistreat you... Therefore, I started to feel as if somebody would do something do my child, like pinch her arm when no one was looking, that sort of thing.” (P4)*

Yet, some participants also expressed contentment and gratitude when talking about their fathers' impacts on their own fatherhood. Some fathers took their fathers as role models and were pleased to be able to recreate a similar father-child relationship. When asked about the paternal influences he experienced in his parental attitudes, P1 described:

*“I think it is like copy-paste. In my opinion, there are two possibilities. One is someone who did not have a father figure and therefore takes lessons from this experience and promises himself to not be a similar father. But in my case, when I think about my father, I can easily say ‘I am going to be a father like him.’”*

Another father, P5, described himself as his child's playmate and took great pleasure in engaging in creative play activities. During his reflections, he realized that this could be an attitude passed on from his father. He remembered that his father used to enjoy playing with him as a child, and he thought that there could be an unconscious desire in him to do the same.

#### **3.1.4. Transformations in Self and Couple**

For all participants, becoming a father was a transformative experience. The arrival of the baby changed many aspects of their lives, such as their romantic relationship and priorities. These changes had both positive and negative implications. Some changes were welcomed, as they were experienced as

improvement, whereas others were challenging to adapt. The experience of loss was prominent in participants' accounts as if they left behind some aspects of their identity.

Five participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P7) experienced changes in their personality characteristics after becoming a father. For fathers, these changes were seen as an improvement and a path towards maturation. Becoming a father brought personal development. Some participants talked about increased patience and understanding, the virtues with which they felt that they struggled before. Therefore, gaining these qualities was gratifying, and made them proud.

*"I learned how to be patient; the child taught me patience. Normally, I am not a patient person, for example with work too, I usually want to do things fast and get over with them. The child really thought me patience because she puts you to test, with her crying, eating... You are constantly tested."*

For P2, overcoming his particularities has been challenging. Yet, these seemed to clash with the nature of infancy. A baby who constantly made a mess, and was unable to control appeared to serve as a systematic exposure for the participant. For this father, the value of his child's joy outweighed his own values.

P4 experienced a major transformation, which he found very surprising. As a sportsman whose training centers around physical strength and has an aggressive nature, he identified himself as a powerful and ruthless opponent. Yet, he was astonished by his gentle and sensitive attitude toward his daughter.

*"I am more understanding, patient, and calm than I have ever been in my entire life. I am more considerate than ever. Can you imagine? As a man who destroyed people in the court and who never paid attention to his behaviors, today I pay attention to everything so that my daughter does not get hurt."*

For this participant and others, becoming a father appeared to create a transformation in their self-image. A sense of responsibility and growth was also present in participants' accounts. Fatherhood brought a new way of living, and a new outlook on life. As P4 stated, *"Fatherhood as an experience matures you. You have to*

*grow up at that point, as your responsibilities dramatically increase."* Another father (P3) talked about how he used to be his own master, and independent in his daily life. However, this has lost its appeal after his child was born. It seemed that fatherhood gave him a sense of belonging and accountability.

Three participants (P1, P3, P4) also mentioned experiencing a new level of empathy and conscientiousness. Having a child of one's own seemed to increase feelings of sympathy toward disadvantaged families through identification. One participant (P1) reflected on his feelings toward refugees in the country he currently resided in:

*"Lately, many refugees started to come from Ukraine, I mean God forbid, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy. We see children and such, and one's empathy develops. I mean, I thought I was already empathetic before having a child but I guess I started to really emphasize after my wife got pregnant and her belly grew. During that period, I started to be able to emphasize easily."*

When asked about the changes in their couple relationship, fathers described experiencing both positive and negative influences of having a child. Seven of the interviewed fathers expressed that the transition from couple to parents brought challenges and losses. As the child became the priority for both parties, they experienced inevitable changes in the relationship dynamic. As P1 phrased: *"Of course, things completely change when a child enters the picture. She becomes the priority, as it should."* Participants realized that both themselves and their partners have neglected their romantic relationship, and they spent less time with each other after becoming parents. This change did not necessarily cause adversities in their relationship, yet they were well aware of the lost aspects of being a couple. There was now a third who required all of their attention and investment.

*"Our relationship has entered a new dimension. We used to spend time with each other all the time, whereas now we cannot spend that much time. Especially since because our families are with us. We have to spend time with*

*the child. As a result, we are also aware that we are neglecting each other from time to time.” (P7)*

Parenting stress also appeared to be a relationship stressor for new fathers. Five participants (P1, P2, P4, P6, P8) mentioned that the natural challenges of parenting caused increased tension between partners. In fact, sometimes minor disagreements could turn into fights as a result of weakened tolerance towards the partner. P6 stated: *“Of course, that is a stressful period. You are also stressed, sleep-deprived, and tired. There can be arguments, you can argue about the most insignificant thing, and you can see problems where there were none. Er, in that aspect, those periods um... It is a bad thing I mean, even the calmest person can get angry.”*

Two fathers (P2, P8) expressed feelings of frustration during this period, as they felt that their spouses took their distress out on them. It appeared that these participants felt helpless and hard done by their partners. P2 expressed feeling especially helpless and inadequate during his wife’s difficult pregnancy, and talked about its detrimental impact on their relationship:

*“Um, there was a bit of helplessness er, because there was nothing I could do, it was not something I was familiar with. I was trying to understand, but it was nowhere enough for her actually. Er her—The more I showed understanding and she told me that I did not, after I while I got to a point where I was like ‘Fine then, let’s see what happens when I don’t understand you at all.”*

While the majority of the fathers experienced difficulties in their marriage, positive influences of becoming parents were also mentioned. Three fathers felt that their relationship became sturdier and they felt more united with their partners. P2, who was mentioned above experiencing difficulties during his wife’s pregnancy, talked about how they as a couple found a way around the challenges of parenting. While their relationship struggled in the first three months due to high levels of stress, he felt that overcoming these hardships made it stronger. Especially for couples who

were satisfied with their relationship before the baby, parenting a child together appeared to be a fulfilling and pleasant experience.

*“You can think of it this way, my wife is also my best friend, this is very real for us. This being the case, raising the child together happened to be very enjoyable, and this enhanced our relationship” (P5)*

Overall, for all fathers, the changes that came with fatherhood had both positive and negative implications that must be negotiated.

### **3.1.5. Self-Evaluation and Comparison as Father**

Throughout the interviews, participants made remarks on certain characteristics that constituted their sense of self. These characteristics seemed to play a role in how they made meaning of their fatherhood experiences. Being a “rational” person, who made decisions based on logic and not emotions was prominent in the accounts of four participants. For these fathers, being rational and composed were qualities that differentiated them from their partners. It seemed that self-comparison played a role in the formation of a fatherhood identity. P7 mentioned mentally being in a different place from his spouse regarding having a baby. He believed that while his wife was led by her emotions, he was trying to make a decision by logical thinking:

*“After two years, my wife by both seeing other people and also developing a maternal instinct I guess, she started to experience the desire to have a child. And she was asking my opinion from time to time. But I actually, thinking about the living conditions and what an important responsibility it was... And I am someone who approaches these things logically, meaning that I act on things based on logic than emotion. Therefore, I had some concerns and biases.”*

The ability to control one’s emotions and remain calm as a parent was mentioned by P2, whose infant had to go through a medical procedure. He stated that

because small children could not be put out, she was going to be hurt. His wife asked him to hold their daughter during the procedure, as she said that she could not handle it.

Fathers also compared themselves with their partners in interacting with their babies, and the attachment their infant formed with them. All participants talked about how their infant was more attached to the mother compared to them, especially in the early months. Five participants (P2, P3, P6, P7, P8) seemed to be envious of the unique mother-infant bond, which necessarily continued beyond the early months. Some fathers expressed the desire of forming a relationship with their babies that was similar to that of mother and baby. They wished to have similar opportunities to engage with their children and to be needed by them. The perceived privileged position of the mother was expressed by P7 as follows: *“That's why during the hospital stay especially, the father can't really engage with the child that much, in an emotional sense. Of course, the mother is luckier in that regard; direct skin-to-skin contact, breastfeeding, and so on.”* Similar to P7's account, P6 also mentioned not being given the same opportunity as the mother to make contact with the newborn: *“Well, you can't immediately see her, her mother takes her in her arms, but you can't. Later, you see her through a window or something.”*

Feelings of being left out and disappointment lingered for some fathers. P8 expressed feeling disappointed when his daughter requested her mother instead of him: *“Now for example, when she calls for her mother and not me, I get upset. I feel like saying to her ‘I can do that too, tell me and let me do it, why are you calling your mother?’”* P3 also mentioned disappointment regarding his infant's excessive fondness of her mother. He hoped that he would be an equally preferred parental figure for his daughter since he was very involved in her life during the pandemic:

*“She is very attached to her mother. Um but I can tell you this, due to the pandemic and my job, I constantly spent time with her, I always took care of her, we played games, and did activities. There is nothing I don't do for her at home, but still, she is way more attached to her mother.”*

During the interviews, it was observed that some fathers had certain preconceptions of fatherhood experience. These were especially apparent in their accounts on pregnancy and the birth event. It seemed that they had certain expectations of what these events would feel like, and compared their subjective experiences with pre-existing scripts. A prominent idea among these participants was that men were supposed to experience exaggerated and overwhelming emotions when they found out about their partners' pregnancy or witnessed the birth of their children.

*"When we first got the news, I did not give a reaction like you know, those in the movies where the man jumps up and down. I mean, I love my child very much, that is a different thing, but I did not experience that kind of exaggerated rejoice (laughs)" (P1)*

*"I don't know, I never had— maybe I was very ready or I found it very normal... I never did things like punching walls, dancing on air, or feel sad, my reaction was not in the extreme..." (P8)*

On the other hand, P6 participant put emphasis on giving a "normal, expected" reaction to the birth of his child: *"I was very happy, for example I cried that day. Most of the people cry when they see their child."* It could be argued that participants felt the need to justify their emotional reactions, whether or not they were in line with some preconceived ideas and expectations. This could also be related to the previously discussed ability to "keep the head over the heart".

### **3.1.6. Role of Support in Fatherhood**

During the early stages of parenthood, participants received support from a variety of figures. Family members, especially the mother-in-law, friends, as well as professionals such as nurses and lactation consultants were mentioned as helping figures. Both financial and emotional support was described in the interviews. Almost all participants (seven out of eight) found the support they received to be helpful and



reassuring. Being able to share the responsibilities of childcare with trusted family members appeared to have a comforting impact on the new father.

*“It is a good thing to feel the support. As we raise the child, knowing that our families are beside us, will help us out... They all embraced the child, for example, my aunt said ‘we can take care of her too, you can leave her to us whenever you like’ or attitudes such as ‘we will raise her all together’ lessened our fears.” (P7)*

*“[The support] is comforting I can say, it’s like we are hustling, we have a routine of child care, it is a loop. When people come and support us in these activities, of course, there is free time for us to do little things.” (P5)*

Some fathers appreciated being surrounded by people who cared about them and having their company throughout the journey. P5 mentioned the benefits of having a circle of close friends, especially during the pandemic. With the easing of the COVID-19 restrictions, the opportunity to socialize while ensuring safety has been a protective factor. When asked about his experience with support figures, he stated:

*“Er, it was a pretty good, pleasant experience. It’s like seeing that people care about you. Um, this maybe helped us to go through that period more easily. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were always alone but then, we eased into socialization with this support in a secure environment. Therefore, it did not allow us to feel bored and confined at home.” (P5)*

Three participants (P2, P5, P7) emphasized the guidance they received from more experienced parents. Sharing of experiences among friends was not only informative but also emotionally supportive. P7 mentioned that in their social group, two other people also became fathers one after the other. He considered it an advantage to be able to share experiences and give moral support within the group. P2 on the other hand emphasized the valuable role of more experienced relatives. When they were struggling with childcare during the first months, hearing from these experienced people gave him comfort.

Apart from external support figures, five participants (P1, P3, P4, P6, P7) described their children as psychological support. For these fathers, engaging with their babies helped them cope with the stress of their jobs or the pandemic. The infants gave fathers motivation and stress relief, as well as met their socialization needs when they were isolated due to the pandemic.

*“When I was stressed with work, taking a break for two minutes and needing to run near her, for me it was really like an escape ramp... You go there, she smiles at you. The moment she smiles, you forget about all that work stress.”*  
(P7)

### **3.2. FINDING YOUR PLACE AS A FATHER**

The second major theme describes how fathers positioned themselves in their relationships with both the infant and their spouses. The name of this theme, finding your place, refers to the search and exploration of fatherhood throughout the journey. As their fatherhood identity developed, participants explored their roles and functions in these relationships. Their unique paternal identities came forward in their narratives. Three subthemes emerged under this major theme: 1) from the outside, looking in, 2) building of the father-infant bond, and 3) playing various roles.

#### **3.2.1. From the Outside, Looking in**

This subtheme describes participants’ experiences on the day of the birth of their babies. Feelings of exclusion from childbirth were found in some participants’ narratives. Even for the fathers who participated in the labor, the birth event was experienced as a separation from their partners. It appeared that fathers perceived themselves as being outside of the main event. P5, even though he participated in the birth, still described the experience as *“going separate ways”* with his spouse. It seemed that physically being there was not enough to feel included; the mother’s

experience was still significantly different from theirs. P5 expressed this difference in roles by stating that he was the one who dealt with the external world, such as answering calls and making preparations. Another participant, P3, who also participated in the labor described feelings of detachment even during the birth event. He said: *“I was very relaxed as if they brought a laboring stranger and said to me ‘help us out’”*. This quote emphasized being an outsider; as much as it was their child who was being born, fathers by nature were just observers.

For the participants who could not participate in the birth, the activity of waiting by the door was emphasized. The phrase “waiting by the door” seemed to capture the essence of their experience: they were right outside, yet could not reach. For the fathers who were not in the labor, waiting outside listening to the sounds, and trying to make sense of the situation was stressful. P7 expressed the distress of having no sense of control over the situation, and the resulting confusion as he was waiting outside:

*“It was like, you wait by the door again impatiently, you hear the voices from the inside. You wonder if everything is okay, like ‘is this a normal reaction?’. On the one hand, there is a worry, but on the other hand, you cannot stay still because of the excitement. It goes by with pacing around, just like we see in the movies (laughs)”*

P7 also expressed that waiting felt like hours even though in reality it lasted for 20 minutes. This statement emphasized the outsider position of the father and the state of increased worry. Three fathers (P2, P3, P7) mentioned the difficulty of hearing and/or seeing the laboring partner in pain. P2 stated: *“Normally I have high endurance, but when it is done to someone I love, I cannot handle it”*. Similarly, P3 stated that seeing his wife in pain *“tore his heart out”*. These statements further highlighted the fathers’ position as the observer, and the feeling of helplessness and lack of agency during birth.

For participants, the birth of their children was an extraordinary event and beyond comparison. The emotional experience was difficult to describe, as they

expressed being moved beyond words. As P6 expressed: *"It's an incredible feeling, really, certain emotions like fear for example, how would you describe it? It's like that, that feeling is very difficult to describe."* Similarly, P4 stated: *"when [child] arrived, I felt utterly different emotions, like she was so tiny and livid. That's your child now. You feel something so strange, that cannot be described, I witnessed it live."*

A number of participants expressed that the baby's birth felt unreal and hard to digest. P6 expressed his amazement with the birth of his son, which he perceived as a miracle. It took time for him to digest the reality of his child:

*"With the birth, you cannot believe it, I mean err for years you have been sleeping in the same bed with your wife, and now next to you there is another person, whom you have been waiting for 9 months in his mother's womb. And you think like 'are we really a family of three now?' I mean you find it hard to believe it for 6 months, a year. You think it is a miracle; he walks, looks, leans, and such."*

P7 also expressed similar feelings of unreality: *"On the other hand, it is a surprising subject that we still think about. Something that was not with us before suddenly came into being, it was born I mean, and now it suddenly came into our lives and became the focus of our lives."* He also indicated that this feeling lingered and that he still occasionally questioned how their child emerged into being.

Some participants emphasized being moved by the event. P6 stated that he teared up when he saw his baby. He expressed: *"I couldn't help but cry. You cry, you get emotional"*. The use of the 'generic you' implies a need for "normalizing" the emotional reaction. This participant seemed to have the need to justify his crying by emphasizing the significance of the event. This statement is also related to the subtheme of "self-evaluation and comparison as a father" as it entails fathers' "rational self", which appeared to be an important part of their identities.

### 3.2.2. Building of the Father-Infant Bond

For all participants, settling into the fatherhood identity took time. All fathers expressed that the emotional realization of being a father was delayed. As time passed, their relationship with the baby developed, and they were “feeling like a father”. Still, some fathers mentioned some signs of prenatal attachment in their narratives. For instance, P1, who previously mentioned that fatherhood made him more emphatic, stated that he realized this transformation when his spouse was pregnant and the baby bump became more apparent. His experience implies that the fatherhood identity emerges during pregnancy, and the expecting father becomes more sensitive towards other children. Yet, for most participants, the sense of fatherhood did not develop during the prenatal period. It appeared that this was due to the lack of connection with the developing fetus. Five participants (P1, P3, P5, P6, P7) indicated that during this period, the baby was more like an abstract idea from their perspective. This could be in part due to the lack of physical connection with the baby. Once the baby was born, and the fathers saw and hold their infants, their perception changed. Seeing the baby as flesh and blood allowed them to embrace her and consequently, the idea of fatherhood. This progression was described in P1’s account:

*“The fact that he is a part of you, bringing him to life and now— When he is inside her belly, it was more of a tangible, I mean intangible. Right, it is tangible, you know he is in there but you don’t know what he is, what he is like. He cannot look into your eyes, you cannot look—see him. When he comes out, it really is a strange feeling.”*

P7’s experience was similar, as he too did not feel like a father until his child was born. His interpretation was that, unlike mothers, fathers did not experience a sense of ownership, because the father did not have the same sort of physical connection with the baby. He stated: *“Of course there is a sense of fatherhood, but I suppose we don’t feel that kind of thing as much as the mother before we see the*

*child. How can I put this, a sense of belonging maybe, I suppose that kind of feeling does not fully develop.*" P3 also experienced the prenatal and postnatal periods as significantly different in terms of emotional investment toward the baby. He indicated that after her daughter's birth, he became very sensitive and protective toward her. He talked about how his heart sank even after a minor incident, whereas before the birth, thinking about a possible mishap did not have the same emotional impact.

Based on the interviews, it was suggested that even though fathers did not feel completely detached from their unborn babies and felt a sense of fatherhood, the emotional impact of seeing the baby as flesh and blood was incomparable. Fathers had difficulty describing their feelings toward the unborn baby. It appeared that the prenatal period was a time of ambiguity. While they could see the baby develop, and they undertook tangible preparations, they still did not have a clear picture of fatherhood in their minds. This ambivalence was apparent in P7's narratives. He stated that he was anxious during the prenatal period about the baby's health since the sense of fatherhood was already developed. However, later in the interview, he expressed that he was not yet emotionally involved in the process. This implies that fathers may not be certain about their place during the pregnancy.

When asked about their dreams and expectations during the pregnancy, five participants (P1, P3, P5, P6, P7) revealed that they did not, or could not, imagine their unborn baby or the idea of fatherhood. This again seemed to be related to the abstract nature of the unborn child in their minds. These fathers found it difficult to picture their babies, as they did not yet feel connected. P3 stated that as soon as he held his daughter, he began to imagine the future, which he during the 9-month period did not. He started thinking and also worrying about how to raise and take care of her.

Interviews demonstrated that the prenatal period was a phase of meaning-making. They attempted to give meaning to their roles, and what sort of relationship they had with their unborn babies. P1 described: *"It's a peculiar feeling, I mean the person whom you love, you married is carrying your child. It's a very different*

*feeling to be honest. I was always saying to her, 'a living is growing inside who is 50% you and 50% me'".*

After birth, participants experienced a new sense of parenthood as they now fully recognized, both emotionally and rationally, their new role. Some participants described a profound sense of ownership. The phrase "that child is a part of you" was mentioned in five participants' narratives (P1, P3, P6, P7, P8). This again indicated that fathers needed physical evidence in order to claim their children as theirs. Also, it was astonishing to see that the baby was in fact a part of them.

While some participants expressed forming a bond with their babies at the time of birth, others stated that it took time for them to feel attached. P7 mentioned how he couldn't experience the affective side of becoming a father in the early days. He believed that because fathers could not interact with their infants during their days in the hospital, and rather took care of other chores, the emotional aspect of the experience is missed. Similarly, P1 expressed the need for engagement for forming an emotional bond with the baby:

*"It is really interesting of course; I mean they give you a person you have never seen before and say 'this is your child'. The women maybe can form an attachment a little more as there is the pregnancy period, then the breastfeeding period. How can I put this, she can do that bond-forming thing but for men, fatherhood comes later, I mean, that is my opinion. Er, they gave the baby in my arms and 'wow, baby' (laughs). Rather than taking ownership immediately, as I spend more time and share more with the child..."*

This quote emphasizes not only the lack of connection with the unborn baby but also the comparison with the mother-infant bond. It appeared that men needed to interact with their newborns in order to develop their fatherhood identity and bond with their offspring. Both P7 and P1's accounts again highlight the perceived difference between fatherhood from motherhood regarding the absence of physical connection, which seemed to hinder the father-baby bond.

During the early months, the baby is naturally dependent on the mother and demands her over any other caregiver. This was prominent in the accounts of the participants. Fathers realized that their role was limited during this period and that they were there to mainly support their spouses. As a result, they were not able to engage with their children. This seemed to be one of the explanations for the delayed father-infant bond. P7 expressed the difficulty of interacting with the newborn baby: *“At first, she is of course a still and unresponsive being. Whatever you do, she has a world of her own. She does not respond much. She cries, and wants to be nursed, wants to sleep...”* More alone time with the baby, along with increased physical connection, appeared to improve the father-infant bond. P1 talked about how these interactions helped him form a relationship with his child. He felt connected with his daughter after spending a period with her alone. Because his wife returned to work and he did not work for a month, he took care of the baby throughout the day. Putting her to sleep, feeding, and changing her frequently allowed them to form a special bond. Similarly, P6 mentioned that after a while, when the baby started to engage with him, such as making eye contact and holding his hand, the emotional bond he formed became stronger: *“...Especially after she starts interacting with you, then you totally feel that she is your child and you are a father. This happens after 3-4 months.”*

All participants described having a special and close bond with their infants. Seeing the signs that their children were attached to them was a gratifying experience. Participants expressed the desire to be an attachment figure for their offspring and were pleased to see that they were demanded. P6 stated: *“Lately whenever I approach her, she reacts to me, she wants to come to me, she reaches out with her arms like she says ‘pick me up’. She cries when I leave. These are pleasing to see.”* This quote suggests that to be needed and missed is satisfying for fathers, and gives them the idea that their child is attached to them like she is to the mother. Similarly, P8 mentioned he felt proud seeing that his daughter was happy with him and that he was capable of looking after her. He further expressed the gratification he got when



his daughter called out his name when she was in need: *“At night for example, when she wakes up and calls ‘dad, dad’, it pleased me. I mean, normally when a child wakes up in the middle of the night, she would call for her mom.”* This too emphasizes fathers’ desire to be attachment figures, as opposed to being secondary to their partners. Yet, P5 mentioned that he recognized the primary role of the mother and that she was supposed to be the child’s first choice, and he was happy that as the father, he was right there after the mother:

*“... actually, the mother is a little more dominant, she is more central. But I am the second choice. I mean, the second is not the grandmother or not the aunt for example. The father is the second choice and that is very nice.”*

P3 also expressed his satisfaction with his role as a primary caregiver: *“when her mother is not here for example, she does not seek her mother. When I’m there, she does not seek anyone else. She can spend a very good time with me, she can do so many things, she can be affectionate with me.”* Similar to the account of P8, P3 too hoped for a close father-infant relationship and to be a substitute for the mother.

### **3.2.3. Playing Various Roles**

Participants played a variety of different roles in their children’s lives. They served various functions as fathers. When asked about their relationship with their infants, their accounts indicated multidimensional interactions. They wanted to fulfill these different roles and be actively involved in the lives of their children as influential figures. The experienced roles of the participant fathers were classified into two categories. While the first reflected participants’ main role as the supporter of the mothers, the second captured the unique aspects of the father-infant relationship.

### 3.2.3.1. Accompanying the Spouse

When asked about their roles in child care, all participants described high levels of involvement. Yet, their role was significantly different from that of the mother. A salient theme in their accounts was being a helping hand, rather than the primary caregiver. When describing their involvement in infant care, all participants defined their role as the helper and not the equally responsible parent.

*“I try to help my wife as much as possible, whether it’s changing diapers, feeding her, taking her out for a walk, and bathing her. These are actually my responsibilities rather than helping, that’s a different issue.” (P1)*

This statement illustrates the dilemma between being the equally responsible and capable caregiver versus the supporting actor. The change in his narrative suggests that while he attributed the role of the caregiver to the father, which is a rather modern view of fatherhood, his subjective experience was being more of a secondary figure. Other participants too described being a helping hand in childcare activities such as putting the child to sleep and changing and feeding the child. Fathers took a role in these activities when their partners needed help and asked them to, and also when the child let them. For instance, some participants talked about how their children preferred the mother at bedtime. Similarly, some fathers felt that their chance of involvement was limited because the babies were dependent on the mother and by their nature, they could not provide the motherly function. P2 explained that it was not possible to equally divide the parenting tasks, and therefore he aimed to contribute as much as he could: *“... parenting, I mean I think it is a physical thing, after all the child grows in there for 9 months, in her womb, and is born with her [the mother’s] scent, with her voice. Err I think this is a physical fact, we cannot change it (laughs) but err I think I was able to take the parenting role at least 30, 40 percent for my child.”*

P2 also talked about his experience of caregiving when his wife was out of town for a couple of days and he was alone with his daughter. He stated that although

he managed to overcome the difficulties, he recognized that he was not able to replace the mother:

*“... During that period, I somehow handled it. In fact, everyone said that she couldn’t stay with her father alone, she should either come with you or somebody should be there with [the father]. Err there were some things I struggled with (laughs), not bathing and such, but the most difficult thing was putting her to sleep. Because I think the child feels a little more insecure when the mother is not there. When she feels insecure, as much as I am the main caregiver, I am not like the mother.”*

In this quote, it was also underlined that others were skeptical about the participant father’s capability of taking care of the infant. This seemed to emphasize the general outlook on the father’s role, the belief that fathers cannot single-handedly take care of their children. Another reason mentioned for the secondary role in caregiving was that the mothers were the main decision-maker in caregiving. It appeared that mothers had the say in how these activities were performed, and the fathers followed their decisions. P5 stated that his wife educated herself and became more proficient in baby care, and he remained being the one who supported her the best he could. Similarly, P8 expressed that when he was alone with his child, he followed his wife’s instructions: *“Of course, I was asking my wife because I still cannot keep track of things that much, like the feeding time and things like that. For example, she told me to feed her at 8 and put her to bed by 9. And I was saying okay or calling her to ask.”* For these reasons, participants took a role in infant care by providing help in other areas, by easing their partners’ burden. Other than helping with the baby care activities, participants took care of other tasks at home such as grocery shopping, providing things that were needed from the outside of the home, and taking care of household chores such as cleaning and cooking. Similarly, P5 described how he provided support in other ways since he fell short in fulfilling specific motherly functions:

*“I mean as much as [the infant] could find peace with me, fall asleep with me, the mother is something different. That’s why I understood this, I can give support up to a point, but at one point the mother factor is very, very, very important. Therefore, I tried to continue my support in other things, such as providing support in other things in the house or helping my wife in other areas. But of course, still supporting the baby, holding her and spending time with her, putting her to sleep, changing her, I can say that these activities were good practicing.”*

Also, participants tried to allow their spouses to have free time for themselves. They mentioned that they encouraged their wives to spend time outside with friends by ensuring them that they would take care of the child. It appeared that these participants were aware of the draining impact of motherhood on their partners. For instance, P4 mentioned that Sundays were their father-daughter day, which allowed the mother to relax and rest.

Another important role of the fathers was found to be providing emotional support to their wives, especially during their pregnancy and the early days of parenthood. The majority of the participants (seven out of eight) indicated that this was a period of vulnerability for their spouses and they were in the need of support and extra attentiveness. When asked what advice they would give to a new father, four participants (P1, P3, P5, P6) emphasized the importance of providing support to the spouse. Participants gave moral support and encouragement to the expecting mothers during this period. P6 believed that it was important to not leave the expecting mother alone for long periods and that one should limit his working hours if possible. He stated: *“... I mean since it is a stressful time for them, they can sometimes reach their boiling point, sometimes they cannot manage their stress.”* A crucial time for support appeared to be during labor. Fathers had a very important role as supporters of the laboring mother. Both P3 and P4 were in the labor room and provided emotional support. They mentioned that their spouses held their hands

during the labor, which seemed to be the physical indicator of the strength they received from them.

Yet, participants expressed having difficulty at times when supporting their spouses. It appeared that not being able to fully understand what their partners were going through left them feeling helpless and frustrated. Moreover, providing support to a distressed individual seemed to be draining for the participants. P1 mentioned going through a very hard time after the birth because his wife's father was in hospital suffering from a terminal disease. He mentioned struggling to handle the situation, especially seeing his wife crying. The feeling of helplessness was apparent in P2's narratives as well. He expressed that his wife was emotionally distressed and agitated during her difficult pregnancy, and he found it hard to comfort her: *"Err... there was a little bit of helplessness because there was nothing I could do, it was not a situation I was familiar with. I was trying to understand her but it wasn't enough for her in any way."*

### **3.2.3.2. Interacting with the Baby**

Even though participants experienced certain obstacles, both internal and external, in participating in childcare, they appeared to take on the role of the caregiver in their relationship with their infants. They considered themselves to be active in infant care, and were proud of themselves for accomplishing it. Changing diapers, feeding and putting to sleep were the caregiving activities performed by the participants. Five fathers (P2, P3, P4, P5, P8) expressed that these tasks were challenging due to their lack of experience, yet with time, they started to feel more capable and confident. P4 stated: *"We were very inexperienced and it took us approximately a month to get over that. After one month, it became a routine, you can now change her diaper with one hand."*

Apart from this role, their interactions with their children were categorized as introducing the child to the external world and being a role model, teacher, protector,

and playmate. Accounts of five participants (P2, P3, P4, P7, P8) indicated that fathers found it important to introduce their children to the outside world. Taking them to different places to engage in novel activities and to show them new things were some of the ways they fulfilled this role. Due to the pandemic restrictions, these activities were limited. Therefore, some participants mentioned looking outside through the window with their infants and attempting to teach them about animals.

*“Sometimes when I find the time during the day, at least once I without fail take her outside. I live to do different activities with her, either to the park or if there is a small sandbox somewhere, to playing with the sand, playing with cars and dogs. It does her good, and also me. It allows me to spend time with her in a different way.” (P3)*

Five participants (P2, P4, P5, P6, P8) expressed that they aspired to be role models for their children. They wanted to make sure that they had a positive influence on their children and aimed to pass on their experiences and virtues. They were concerned with teaching their children and providing a good foundation. When asked to elaborate on his relationship with his daughter, P2 phrased: *“they say a child learns how to live from the father, and how to love from the mother. I agree with that honestly.”* This quote emphasizes the belief that the role of father as the role model and the bridge to the outside world. P5 also made an effort to provide good guidance to his daughter. He stated that he was teaching things to his child during their play and that he constantly deliberated and researched the optimal ways of passing this knowledge to his daughter.

Participants recognized their significant influence on their infants. They tried to act responsibly to make sure that they did not hurt their children so that they would not suffer from the consequences of possible unconstructive parental attitudes. P8 expressed realizing the negative impact of his attitude during play and was touched by how quickly his daughter internalized his comment:

*“The other day playing with Legos, I like Lego very much, I was caught up with the play and I said ‘don’t mess it up, you’re messing it up’... The next*

*day, while we were playing Lego, she said 'I'm messing it up'. I said to myself, 'whatever you say, whatever you do, she becomes that.'*

Three participants (P1, P4, P5) mentioned developing a protective instinct towards their children, and that one of their roles as fathers was to protect the child from danger. P5 stated: *"currently my role in her life is someone who would hold her and protect her when she is scared or anxious."* Four participants (P3, P4, P5, P7) described engaging in playful activities with their children. Even though these children were not old enough to engage in continuous, symbolic play, father-infant interactions appeared to be in a playful manner. P4 talked about listening to music and dancing with his daughter, which they found to be very enjoyable. Similarly, P5 stated that he has been his daughter's playmate from the beginning, and he considered this to be his main role as a father.

### **3.3. CHALLENGING, YET REWARDING**

Participants described the transition to fatherhood as a period where joy and worry were experienced concurrently. Raising a child brought participants happiness and fulfillment, yet at the same time, they experienced significant anxiety. Being responsible for another human being and the pressure of making the right decisions put pressure on fathers. Nevertheless, their experience of fatherhood was overall positive and gratifying. This major theme, therefore, described the complex emotional state of fatherhood and the ambivalence this transition brought. Under this theme, two subthemes were discussed: Challenges of Fatherhood and Joys of Fatherhood.

#### **3.3.1. Challenges of Fatherhood**

Participants experienced several challenges in their first year of fatherhood. This new role brought unfamiliar tasks and requirements to which they needed to

quickly adapt. Becoming a father brought them a new sense of responsibility and protectiveness, which occasionally caused frustration and exhaustion. Tiring responsibilities, worrying about the child, and compromises were discussed under this subtheme.

#### **3.3.1.1. Tiring Responsibilities**

All participants found infant care challenging and exhausting. Excessive crying, lack of sleep, and being a novice were among the challenges experienced by fathers. For some participants, hardships and tiredness resulted in aggravated stress. P2 mentioned struggling in the first three months because his daughter was not breastfeeding and constantly crying. He found it to be very distressing to manage this situation and felt desperate because he could not find a solution. P7 also felt that the early months were the hardest as both the parents and the infant tried to adapt to the new situation. Similar to P2, he also struggled with understanding and helping his baby because she was colic and excessively crying. Because she had trouble sleeping, they tried to accommodate her in every way they could, which they found to be exhausting. Not being experienced was found to be an important factor, as the unfamiliar nature of baby care caused stress. P1 mentioned that in the first week, he was anxious about the baby's health. He had trouble sleeping as he felt the need to check up on her.

Participants also indicated that even though baby care got easier with time, the children became more difficult to handle with increasing age. When children's mobility increased, so did the fathers' responsibilities. When their children started walking, looking after them became more exhausting. P4 stated: *"There is not much to do when she is a baby. You put her next to you and she just lays.... It gets difficult when she begins to walk, like now for example. She is always moving around; she goes in and out everywhere."* P7 expressed that his daughter has become more and more active, and they had trouble keeping up with her: *"Now my wife and I, we hand*



*it off to each other like 'you take over for a bit'. Because the kid has some much energy and she has to discharge it. We are not as energetic as her."*

Six participants (P2, P3, P4, P6, P7, P8) mentioned that they sometimes were tired of responsibilities. Beginning from the pregnancy period, fathers in order to ease their wives' burden, took on additional responsibilities at home. For some participants, taking care of house chores along with work demands was challenging. Also, frequently waking up at night, constantly providing for the child and the family, and the need for overseeing the child when s/he starts to walk were among the tiring responsibilities mentioned.

*"I mean for example you have to buy her diapers, constantly buy her new clothes. Everything, I mean for instance doctor visits, illnesses etc. You have a constant, never-ending marathon." (P4)*

*"Of course, like I said, there were times I struggled because you try to do many things at once. After all, apart from a mother, you also have a wife. You have a job, err there are things that need to be done, things to get." (P2)*

### **3.3.1.2. Worries about the Child**

In their descriptions of fatherhood experiences, all participants mentioned various areas of worrying. Four participants talked about their concerns for the future, which was argued to be an inevitable part of fatherhood but aggravated due to the pandemic and the economic climate of the county. P1 expressed that the period of waiting for his child to be born ignited ambivalent emotions because he was concerned about the future: *"It is a state of unpredictability, after all life is unpredictable but things like the pandemic, the state's economic and political climate and such, that was pretty um... How can I put this, it was a bitter-sweet expectation or happiness I can say."* Participant fathers wanted to prepare a good future for their children, and provide them with sufficient financial opportunities. Some participants mentioned questioning whether they would be able to monetarily do enough for their

children. P6 said: *“one wants to leave something behind for the person he brought to life so that he could sustain himself, he could live.”*

These goals and dreams gave some fathers a financial purpose; they started to work for their children. They were motivated to work harder and earn more so that they could provide their families with greater opportunities. P2 stated that after having a child, he started working more efficiently and goal-oriented. He phrased: *“I used to work the same hours but I was not getting this much work and consequently financial income in return. So, it led to some kind of maturation”*

Six participants mentioned worrying about their children's well-being and were concerned about the potential harm that could come to them. Some fathers were anxious about their infants' health, especially during the early period because they were not familiar with baby care and also babies were especially fragile. P1 stated that even when the baby slept, he could not. He was preoccupied with worries and fears, such as whether she was breathing or still in her crib. He mentioned that some of these fears were irrational as a week-old baby could not possibly move and turn. P6 appeared to be particularly anxious during this period. He stated that he became more unsettled after learning about a condition called sudden infant death syndrome. He felt the need to get up at night and check on his infant. These worries continued beyond the early infancy. P7 expressed that unlike his wife, who believed that they should not refrain their child from certain activities with the fear of injury, he was anxious and cautious about her behavior. Three fathers (P2, P7, P8) stated that they have been trying to curb their anxieties by challenging themselves to be less protective and controlling. P1 stated that he tried to manage his concerns by letting things go and not overthinking. Similarly, P7 mentioned that he was attempting to come to terms with the possibility that his daughter could get injured: *“In the beginning, I used to get really scared when she fell, I would lash out at her when for instance she fell down chasing me. I would get angry. But later I began to restrain myself, I started to normalize it.”*

### 3.3.1.3. Compromises

Six participants (P1, P2, P4, P6, P7, P8) described profound changes in their lives after the arrival of their children. Participants mentioned that as the child became their top priority, their schedules revolved around his or her needs. Due to the demanding nature of infants, fathers needed to adjust themselves to the schedules of the babies. P1 stated: *“Of course, the arrival of the child into our lives changed many things, from what we eat and drink to how we wake up in the morning and go to bed at night, from our spending to decisions we make... I mean the main individual responsible is the child (laughs).”* Many fathers had to make adjustments on the ways they used to live their lives after becoming a father. Changes in routines, free time activities and interests were prominent in participants’ accounts. This process of adaptation also meant giving up some parts of one’s identity outside of fatherhood. Frustration as a result of this loss was also found in fathers’ narratives. P2 expressed needing alone time for himself and to get in touch with his old life: *“Now I sometimes say ‘that’s enough fatherhood’, I feel the need to go play Playstation with the guys, or go out drinking, hang out with my friends, go out of town for a couple of days...”* He also mentioned that their goal as a couple was to maintain their existing lifestyle and for the child to adapt to it. He expressed feeling frustrated about not being able to implement this goal and instead, adjusting their lives entirely to their child.

*“For example, when you want to go somewhere, you think ‘oh wait, there is the child, I cannot go there’. If you are getting ready to go out somewhere, you have to think about your kid first, such as preparing his clothes or you think about whether that venue is suitable for him. I mean for example you could go build a campfire in the cold in the past, or you could go somewhere and have a barbeque, now you think like you cannot do it because the kid would be cold, we better go somewhere indoors...” (P6)*

Even though all participants enjoyed spending time with their children, their narratives suggested that the obligations that came with fatherhood sometimes felt

restrictive and challenging. The phrase “*you have to spend time with your child*” was found in three participants’ accounts. Some participants talked about giving up on certain things for either their children’s well-being or because of their responsibilities at home. They sacrificed their own needs and made compromises for their children. For instance, P6 stated that because their child was not allowed to watch TV in the first year, they also could not watch it themselves or even turn it on. He mentioned missing out on popular TV shows, and feeling left out and detached: “*For example, it turns out a new episode of La Casa de Papel was out. My friend said ‘there is a new episode, watch it’. I said ‘I watched it already’. He said ‘no not that, there is a final season out now’. I mean I missed that out so much that it had been on for 2 weeks. That night, for instance, I watched it until the morning after the child slept.*” Similarly, P4 mentioned that he did not buy himself any piece of clothing during the first year. This was both because he did not want to spend money on himself when they were financially struggling, and also, he did not prioritize this need.

Fathers expressed putting their children’s happiness above their own comfort and well-being. For some participants, this was frustrating and challenging. Yet, some interpreted it as an indicator of their selflessness toward someone they loved deeply. For instance, P2 talked about how he gave up his neatness and rigorousness as he realized that tidiness was not more important than his daughter’s happiness. Similarly, P4 mentioned that he was considering adopting a pet because of his daughter’s fondness, despite being severely allergic.

### **3.3.2. Joys of Fatherhood**

Despite its challenging aspects, participants described fatherhood as a highly joyous experience. Becoming a father seemed to put participants in a euphoric mood, and they struggled to put their feelings into words. They enjoyed spending time with their infants. P4 and P6 also expressed their desire to spend every minute with their children.

*“You want to see him every morning, every evening, during the day. You want to see him and hug him. Er... It was a beautiful, unbelievable feeling for me, I mean it was like that during the first year and it still continues that way. Delightful, delightful feeling, I mean it is an unbelievable feeling, it is a unique kind of joy really.” (P6)*

P3 talked about his experiences after the birth of his daughter. On the day of the birth, he picked her up and started to walk around. He stated that the nurses urgently warned him that it was not appropriate to walk a newborn around: *“Of course, I was totally unaware of this, after all not only I have become a father for the first time and I was inexperienced, but also there was this excitement of being a new father. Because of all that, something like this happened.”*

Some participants indicated that even though there were challenging aspects of childcare, they still found pleasure in fatherhood and the time they spent with their children. P2 stated that even though some aspects of childcare became more difficult and demanding, he enjoyed doing things for his child. It appeared that as their relationship got stronger, he found these increasing responsibilities to be less challenging. Similarly, P5 mentioned that even though childcare activities were unfamiliar and had a learning curve, he cherished these activities: *“I was never displeased or bored of doing them.”*

Five participants (P2, P3, P6, P7, P8) also indicated that in retrospect, the struggles and hardships were worth it, and overall, they had positive recollections of their first year of fatherhood. P6 stated that despite the sleepless nights and going to work tired the next day, he would like to relive that first year. Therefore, some participants stated that they would advise new fathers to savor every moment, since looking back they appreciated even the difficult times. P8 expressed the advice he gave his friend who was expecting a baby:

*“You won’t be able to do anything for two and a half years. I mean you are not going to be able to travel, maybe to hang out with us, to watch the shows you like... But it is going to be worth it in the end. This is how it is supposed*

*to happen, so don't stress about it. I mean I start with the negative but end with a positive note."*

Similarly, P2 stated that the difficulties he experienced during the early months provided him with a new perspective. After spending that period with excessive worry and despair, he realized the importance of seizing the day: *"We are now appreciating today. We no longer think about the future and worry, or think about the past and work ourselves into a depressive mood."*

### **3.4. THE UNEXPECTED PART OF FATHERHOOD: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The final major theme aimed to capture participants' experiences of the pandemic and how they made meaning of its impacts on their fatherhood. Participants experienced both advantages and disadvantages of becoming a father during the pandemic. On the one hand, this period had some consequences which they experienced as blessings, such as increased time spent at home. Nevertheless, participants also experienced additional challenges on top of the already existing struggles of fatherhood. It was demonstrated that participants varied in the degree to which they experienced the impact of the pandemic on their fatherhood. Four subthemes emerged under this major theme: 1) A new way of fatherhood, 2) pandemic-induced worries and hardships, 3) "you don't think about the pandemic at that point", and 4) effects on support.

#### **3.4.1. A New Way of Fatherhood**

The most prominent aspect of the COVID-19 pandemic for participants appeared to be working from home and therefore being able to spend much longer periods with their children. All participants described an altered fatherhood model. Before the pandemic, they had a pre-existing view on fatherhood and their

expectations about their own potential parenthood were in line with this conventional model. The fatherhood model they were accustomed to involved a father who was out of the house and was not able to spend that much time with his family. With the switch to remote working, they experienced a way of fatherhood that was very different from the one they imagined. P2 stated that he was worried that he would have little time with his daughter and he would not be able to be that much involved:

*“I was thinking these things very realistically, so I always said ‘yes, I will see this child 1 hour a day, and on the weekends 6 hours, 6 hours a day. In total, I would see her for 14 hours a week, and I would try to establish a father-child relationship somehow. But life showed me that one should not be too much of a planner (laughs)” (P2)*

Similarly, P1 talked about how his life as a father turned out to be very different than he expected before the pandemic. In retrospect, he realized that he would miss out on many events if he were to go to work every day:

*“In the typical İstanbul living conditions, let’s say you leave the house at 7 in the morning. You would be back home at 7 or 8 pm at best. If it wasn’t for the pandemic, I would probably miss 90 percent of my wife’s pregnancy. I would not see it. And afterward, after the child is born, I wouldn’t encounter my child grow up.”*

Because all participants worked from home during their children’s first year, they were together in the house all day and every day. For all fathers, this allowed them to be more involved, both during their partner’s pregnancy and in the lives of their infants. Being there with their spouses during the pregnancy was experienced as an opportunity. P3 stated that he could accompany his wife to every doctor’s appointment and that they were together at every step. Similarly, P7 mentioned that he had the chance to witness every moment of the pregnancy, such as the growing of the belly and the baby’s kicks. Another advantage of being at home during the pregnancy for P6 was the elimination of the worry factor. He stated that if he was to

work outside the home during this period, he would be worried about his wife and the possibility of labor starting when he was not there.

For the participants, working from home meant increased time with their children. The time normally spent during commute was now available to spend with their children. When asked about his opinion on what would fatherhood be like if there was no pandemic, P6 stated that he would see his child a lot less than he did now and the majority of his life would pass by in traffic and in the office. Moreover, because they were working from home, they had the opportunity to create little moments where they could interact with their child. Participants experienced this as an advantage and realized that it was not possible for fathers before the pandemic. When comparing himself to a father that worked outside the home, P8 phrased: *“What they squeezed in 2 hours, we did it in 12 hours.”* Another participant, P5, believed that this profound change was a blessing for him:

*“As she is growing up, I am right in this room. I am working, but when I go get coffee or tea, or go inside to have lunch together, or I go to the bathroom, I can always just come out and see her. I can see her when I like, when I take a break, and I can spend time with her. Sometimes 5 minutes, sometimes half an hour, sometimes an hour taking a break. Mm I can say that this was pretty priceless and very valuable, I mean I can confidently say that we turned it into an opportunity.”*

All participants mentioned having had the opportunity to be a part of every aspect of their children's lives and witnessing every moment. They were thankful that they did not miss out on any events. Furthermore, taking part in every activity allowed them to form a more intimate relationship with their infants. They appeared to be more satisfied with their role as fathers. P8 believed that the opportunity to take part in everything made him more confident in his abilities: *“...You experience everything, I mean you can perform her every caring need. That is delighting, I mean having the ability to do everything with your child is terrific.”* P1 mentioned that being together and spending time with his daughter brought them closer and allowed



their relationship to be more intimate. Contemplating what their relationship would be like if it wasn't for the pandemic, he said:

*"Maybe I wouldn't feel this close to her. I mean, even if I did, um she wouldn't feel... Yes, this is the right way to think about it, she wouldn't feel this close to me most probably. This doesn't mean that I would not love her or she would not love me but um... This is a fact, after all, as much as we are related and there is a kinship, if you don't share that much with a person, there will not be much conversation going on between you. This is also true for a baby."*

As a result, all participants observed positive outcomes of the pandemic on the father-infant relationship. In fact, some participants referred to the epidemic as a blessing and an opportunity. P6 said:

*"Well, this has been a good thing for me and my wife. I'm saying that in quotes, it is a bad event for the world. Of course, I wish it did not happen. But for me and my wife, this was actually a good period. Think about it this way, since my wife's pregnancy, there have been 9 months prior and my child is now 1.5 years old, I am at home since then. I'm with my wife, I have the opportunity to see my child all the time, I see him during the day, as he grows up. Um this period, the pandemic, has been advantageous for us because we had to chance to be together."*

P7 also considered himself lucky to be able to spend this much time with his child as a father:

*"I am lucky in that sense. I mean, fathers before the pandemic of course were going to work, and they saw their children when they came home. Maybe they were coming home late and the child was already asleep, so they could not see her and spend time with her. In that sense, it has been a big opportunity for me, um witnessing her every moment."*

Three participants talked about the positive impact of their involvement on their children. They believed that being highly involved and present in their lives

during this period would be beneficial for their children's development. When asked about how their father-child relationship was affected by the pandemic, P3 expressed a positive influence. He stated: *"... because these ages are very important, it is a very critical period. You would also know, that the more time the child spends with her mother and father in this age range, it would have a very beneficial impact on her later life. During this two-year period, she had both of us near her all the time. We constantly played and spent time."* Another participant, P2, also believed that a formative family environment and positive relationships during the early years were important and that these times should be savored: *"A year later she will start school and gradually start to break loose. I saw a post the other day. When you think about it, we actually only spend one year or so actively with our child. Um, the first year passes by in turmoil, and after that, she starts school at 3, so these are the ages that we can spend quality time and actually when the foundations are laid."*

Similar to P2, the narratives of two other participants suggested that as fathers spent a lot of time with their children, they started to find the idea of separation difficult. P7 stated that one disadvantage of spending more time was getting used to it, as he was worried about starting work and leaving home. He argued that being "unable to separate from each other" could have a negative impact and in retrospect, he believed that closeness should be in moderation.

### **3.4.2. Pandemic Induced Worries and Hardships**

The pandemic restrictions and the constant threat of infection aggravated the difficulties of an already challenging phase, that is the transition to fatherhood. The interviews with the participants demonstrated several pandemic-related anxieties and challenges. Some of these were unique to the pandemic, whereas others, although were the expected challenges of fatherhood to some degree, were intensified by the pandemic. These were investigated in four categories: not allowed in the birth, trying to maintain a balance, worrying about the baby, and the experiences of infection.

### 3.4.2.1. Not Allowed in the Birth

Out of the eight participants, five (P1, P2, P6, P7, P8) stated that they did not participate in the labor. For the four of them, this was because of the COVID-19 restrictions and they were not allowed in the labor room. One participant (P7) indicated that he had the opportunity to participate, but chose not to. Those who were not allowed by the health professionals had mixed feelings about the exclusion. While two participants mentioned feeling disappointed, others expressed being indifferent. Three participants (P1, P2, P6) appeared to be unaffected because they were already hesitant about their desire to participate. For three participants (P1, P2, P7), this was because they were not sure whether they would be able to endure the sight. It appeared that these participants, including those who expressed disappointment, have overcome this setback and their narratives suggested that they perceived their exclusion as insignificant. P8 stated that he felt frustrated because he missed a one-time event and that he would have seen the child before his wife if he was allowed in. Yet, when reflecting on this experience, he indicated that there was no use in looking back and feeling regret: “*No use crying over spilt milk (olmuşla ölmüşe çare yok)*”.

P2 talked about having ambivalent feelings about not being allowed. He stated that he protested against the hospital’s rule and tried to persuade them. Even though he was disappointed about not getting the permission, he described it as “a convenient disappointment” because he was not sure if he could tolerate seeing the c-section procedure. He expressed the dilemma he experienced when he did not get the permission: “*On the one hand I said ‘what a relief!’, but on the other hand I would like to be there for my wife.*” P6 indicated that the reason he found this outcome insignificant was that at that moment, he was more preoccupied with the birth event itself than not being able to participate.

#### 3.4.2.2. Trying to Maintain a Balance

While all participants experienced the advantages of working from home, such as increased closeness with the child, they also mentioned challenging aspects. For some participants, remote working caused difficulties in work-life-family balance. Keeping up with the responsibilities at home and the work demands at the same time was stressful and exhausting. P8 believed that when it came to remote working, the combination of the pandemic and having a child was the worst-case scenario. P3 mentioned taking on many responsibilities such as grocery shopping, cooking, and cleaning, which were especially challenging when paired with work demands. For P2, falling behind on his work due to household responsibilities, such as doing the routine grocery shopping for the child, aggravated his stress. He expressed his need for alone time to focus on his work in order to restore his balance.

Specifically, some participants talked about having trouble dividing their time and attention between their work and children. While some fathers could successfully keep these two areas apart, others found it difficult to make this clear distinction. P8 mentioned that it has been difficult working from home with a child because he believed that he shouldn't neglect both. While he wanted to be involved in his daughter's daily routines, he felt the pressure of providing for his family and therefore performing well at his job. As a result, he wanted to draw a line between his child and his work schedule. By doing this, he hoped to be a role model for his child with his work ethic. P2 expressed that it was hard for him to say no to his daughter when focused on work: *"As the child grows up, she becomes interested in what you do so you start to feel guilty. I mean, when you are in there working and your child comes and asks for or shows you something and you don't respond to her, you have a guilty conscience."*

### 3.4.2.3. Worrying about the Baby

The majority of participants (seven out of eight) expressed their concerns about the impact of pandemic restrictions on their children. They were worried about the possible outcomes of not socializing enough during the first year of life. They questioned whether there would be negative outcomes of this isolation, as they believed that socializing with others was crucial for child development. P3 believed that because this period was critical, not being able to interact with other people could give rise to problems in the future. Similarly, P7 stated that this period was very important as the child's brain was processing information at its fastest and she was not exposed to any novel stimuli. He believed that this has been a disadvantage for his child, and he wished that they had the opportunity to introduce her to the outside world. P5 and P8 expressed that they were worried about whether their children would respond well to others, after being isolated for a long period. P5 said: *"We had this worry that 'will she have a negative perception of others, will she be a little distant, will she be less inclined to communicate with people?"*

Participants expressed that their children were deprived of socialization opportunities. Their children were familiar with only the mother and the father during the first year, which caused them to worry. They believed that being surrounded by more people and having the opportunity to get to know others would be beneficial for children. P6 stated that if it weren't for the pandemic, his son would be able to socialize more with his friends and their children. Because of the threat of the virus, they chose to limit their social circle. He said: *"In a world where pandemic did not exist, I have friends and they have kids, he could have played with them. He could have been a more social child."* P5 also thought that seeing a limited number of people was a disadvantage for his baby. He stated that the baby's social interactions were very restricted, and that was bad for her.

P1 indicated that the pandemic restrictions caused him to feel inadequate as a parent. Since there were no peers with whom she could socialize, providing her with

social stimulation became his responsibility. He felt that he was not going to be enough for his daughter as he did not have formal training on how to interact with children:

*“I think the fear of not being sufficient arose in us because of the pandemic. Otherwise, you would send her to school, or she would socialize while playing at the park. With the pandemic, you start to think ‘how am I going to be enough for this kid at home, how am I going to play with her?’. Even if you don’t have anything else to do, you are not busy, you feel stuck.”*

P8 reflected on his child being excluded from the outside world and her peers. Even though their relationship became more intimate and they shared many things, he was concerned whether his daughter was missing out on things that children before the pandemic had the opportunity to experience. Connection with the external world could have provided her with age-appropriate skills:

*“Yes, she learns much more from me now, but should she learn everything from ‘me’? Okay, she learned this from you, her father, for example, my daughter knows how to hold a screwdriver. She is not two yet, she is 21 months old... But this is not the thing she needs to learn at this age. Or she should learn different things instead of this.”*

Apart from the limited interaction with others, fathers mentioned being concerned about their children’s restricted connection to the external world. In their narratives, they described a sense of lost opportunities. For instance, P6 stated that he would like to travel with his son to different places, and this would be more enjoyable for both of them. Another participant, P7, mentioned that his child was “glued to the window”. He expressed the influence of seeing the world through the window on his daughter: *“For example, the animal she sees the most through the window is the crow. Normally, (laughs) children would engage with other animals long before the crow, they would show their love of animals to them. But our child’s love for animals started with the crow.”*

Participants observed adverse outcomes of lack of socialization in their children. They mentioned that children were less inclined to engage with others as a result of limited exposure. P2 was disappointed that his daughter did not want to spend time outside. Although they wanted to help her adjust to the outside world, she refused to leave the house or demanded to return when outside. P3 mentioned that their daughter used to run away from other people and did not play with other children. P7 believed that isolation hindered his child's development: *"As far as I see, when the child is secluded at home, her learning and wish to satisfy her curiosity are delayed. I see it that way. If it weren't for the pandemic, she could have this kind of advantage."*

Since they were concerned about the disadvantages of isolation, participants made efforts to overcome the obstacles and provide the child with socialization opportunities. Some participants stated that they negotiated the risks of contamination and tried to create a safe environment for the child to socialize. Participants saw favorable outcomes of their efforts. As they stimulated social interactions and exposure to the outside world, they observed that their children recovered from the initial adverse impacts of isolation. P3 stated that they tried to take their daughter out as much as possible without violating the pandemic restrictions. He expressed the importance of providing the child with these opportunities: *"We thought that she would at least see some people outside, even if it was from a distance. After all, it all starts in infancy, I mean certain social situations in human life. Therefore, we frequently took her outside, thinking that it would at least have some positive impact."* He mentioned that after some time, she started to respond positively to others, and took part in play activities. P8 expressed that they were worried that their daughter would become *"mama's/daddy's girl."* In order to avoid this, they continued traveling and social interactions in a careful way despite the pandemic, so that their child would grow up being a social person. P1 also talked about the positive impact of socialization with peers on his child. He realized that his daughter was happier and more active when she spent time with other children compared to being

with her parents alone. He said: “...*We take her to this play thing where the kids are her age, she suddenly changes. You can feel it from the way she acts. She runs after them, goes places, does this and that. I mean, she is also happy with us but the kid probably gets bored of us after some time (laughs).*”

While participants mentioned the downside of isolating the child, concerns about the COVID-19 virus dictated these measures. Six participants (P1, P2, P3, P6, P7, P8) expressed worrying about their children’s health during the pandemic. They were anxious about the possibility of infection for their infants and themselves. During P2’s wife’s pregnancy, the virus was not spotted in Turkey. Yet, he expressed that they were informed about the virus and started to worry about how they could protect themselves when it spread to Turkey. Another participant, P3, mentioned having worries about the risk of infection during birth: “*The fact that the birth happened during the pandemic had an impact. Thinking about the possibility of catching the virus for instance. Or we were in the hospital, there were people coming and going. Thinking about whether they were sick, that fear affects you negatively in a psychological way.*”

The unknown nature of the virus aggravated their worries. Scientific information on the effects of the virus was not conclusive. Some participants mentioned that the fear was much higher in the beginning, as most people were afraid that the infection would be fatal. P3 stated that watching the news and seeing horrifying scenes on the television gave him the idea that there was no way to recover from the virus. There was also no certain information regarding the impact of the disease on newborns or infants, as well as women who were pregnant or breastfeeding. The lack of information caused new fathers to feel more anxious about the health of their infants. P6 expressed that this period of uncertainty was difficult from them, and that as more information was gained on the impacts of the virus, they started to feel more at ease:

“...*Whether the virus transmitted to the infant if the breastfeeding mother was infected with COVID, that time period was a complete darkness for us, and*



*our experience fell on that period. Now it is more relieving, we know that children more easily recover from the disease, and that the virus does not transmit from the mother during the breastfeeding even if the mother was COVID-19 positive. We are more at ease now since it is more familiar.”*

Participants wanted to keep their children safe and tried not to put their health at risk. Some fathers limited their contact with the outside world in order to avoid infection. This was hard for some participants as they had to set boundaries with their close friends. P7 stated that in order to protect his child, he abstained from spending time in crowded places and having close contact with others. In addition, he tried to keep people away from his child, even if they were close friends: *“You cannot take the child outside that much, you cannot bring her to people. Or when somebody wants to visit you, even if that is your closest friend, the person you have the most contact, you don’t want them to bring them together with the child. It’s a matter of protecting her.”*

In his interview, P6 appeared to be already anxious about his child’s health. This was reflected in his experiences of COVID-19, as he was very worried about people coming to visit. He mentioned thinking about whether that person was working outside the home or was sick. It made him comfortable when people engaged in physical contact with the baby: *“For example, I know that [the visitors] usually hold the child’s hand. I used to either wipe or wash her hand every time that happened.”* He was also frustrated with the necessity of accepting visitors, as people were offended if they did not:

*“You can turn into someone you are not; you can become a worrier. You may feel the need to warn people more... You have to warn people in a particularly crowded place for example. Then, they can be annoyed. This is one of the negative aspects of the pandemic. For example, when you tell someone to not hold the baby because they are sick like they are coughing, he or she gets uncomfortable. Maybe they do not want to hold the child again, and the relationships are affected negatively.”*

It appeared that having a child intensified the pandemic-related stress. Fathers found themselves to be more worried than those men without children, or the way they were before fatherhood. P2 stated that he turned into a fastidious person in terms of hygiene. Similarly, P8 indicated that he was much more concerned with the pandemic compared to his friends: *“we cared about more than others because I had a child during the first lockdown.”* P6 also believed that pandemic fathers were more protective compared to *“normal fathers”*, the ones who did not experience the pandemic.

#### **3.4.2.4. Experiences of Infection**

Three participants in the study (P2, P5, P7) reported either themselves or their children getting infected with the COVID-19 after the infants' birth. Although this was a limited number of participants, their accounts suggested increased worry about their own health and the health of their children and difficulties of isolation. Among those participants, P2 had an exceptional experience of the pandemic. His daughter was born on the day that the first Coronavirus patient in Turkey was identified. Moreover, he mentioned that his all family was infected with the virus because this patient was placed on the same floor as the newborn unit. The unknown nature of the disease, in addition to its severity during the early period, had adverse impacts on his psychological well-being. He expressed that he experienced a severe fear of death because he had a chronic illness and it was argued that those with chronic illnesses had high rates of mortality: *“The first thing that came to my mind was ‘my child is born’... I think it was the 14<sup>th</sup> and I was nauseous, throwing up, and had a fever. I said to myself ‘I saw my child for five days and I’m going to die.’”*

All three participants (P2, P5, P7) expressed their worries about their children's well-being. P5, who was initially the only COVID-positive family member, stated that he was concerned about keeping his child and wife safe rather than his own health. He felt that he was a suspect and he was afraid of harming his

family. Similarly, P2 mentioned feeling relieved when the doctor reassured them that infants had a strong immune system and that their daughter was going to be okay. P7 had a slightly different experience than the other two fathers. His daughter was the first family member that was COVID-positive. Moreover, she was staying in the hospital with his mother during the time of the interview because she developed severe symptoms. During his interview, he was worried about his daughter's health. Yet, he also expressed that he was very afraid when the symptoms emerged, and he actually felt relieved when they found out that it was COVID-19 and not another illness. He believed that the fear and anxiety he experienced were indicators of the bond he formed with his child.

When asked about their experiences of infection, P5 and P7 mentioned the difficulties of isolation. For P5, it was difficult to isolate himself from his child because they both wanted to play with each other. Therefore, finding out that his wife was also positive happened to be more advantageous for him as they could spend time together as a family. Similarly, P7 found it difficult to not see his child, as he got used to being together every day due to the pandemic restrictions: *"For example, they are in the hospital now. Er... I mean, it is a difficult situation for me. It is the first time that we spent this much time apart. Um, I can't see her."*

### **3.4.3. "You Don't Think About the Pandemic at That Point"**

For five participants (P2, P3, P4, P7, P8), the thrill of having a baby and the challenges it brought overshadowed the pandemic. Having a child was a much more powerful life event and it demanded more attention, which pushed the pandemic into the background. Some participants expressed that their subjective experience of the pandemic was not something that they could pay attention to because there was another major event in their life and it overruled the pandemic. P2, whose child was born on the day that the first COVID-19 case was spotted in Turkey. Therefore, he stated: *"As a result, we actually, on the one hand, experienced the pandemic, but on*

*the other hand did not have the opportunity to experience it.*” This quote illustrates the superiority of the fatherhood experience. While they were largely affected by the pandemic, their focus was not on its psychological consequences. Similarly, P7 stated that they did not think about how the pandemic affected them personally, as they were busy spending time with their child.

Some fathers also believed that the overall fatherhood experience, as in the way one interacted with his children and the challenges of parenting, was independent of the pandemic. When asked about what would be different if his child was born in a time of no pandemic, P8 argued that his actions toward his child would not differ. He believed that with or without the pandemic, the first years of fatherhood would be challenging. He emphasized the importance of the parent-child relationship as the essence of this experience, and how one handles the situation. Another father, P4, answered the question of what it has been like to take care of a newborn during the pandemic as follows: *“In my opinion, this has nothing to do with the pandemic. I mean, everyone can feel the same way. You don’t think about the pandemic at that point anyway.”* It indicated that handling a baby as a first-time father would be challenging even without the pandemic.

#### **3.4.4. Effects on Support**

Due to the lockdowns, social isolation policies, and the risk of infection, many of the participants found themselves alone and unsupported in the face of the challenges of new parenthood. Their experience of fatherhood was different from the one they imagined in this aspect, as they expected to receive significant support from their families in infant care or household chores. Participants felt the absence of support from the beginning of pregnancy, and this continued beyond birth.

Almost all participants mentioned the effects of the lack of visitors, both on the day of the birth and the early days. Three fathers (P4, P6, P8) mentioned feeling disappointed because they could not share the moment with their friends and family.

P8 indicated that visiting a family in the hospital after the birth was a social event, which made the individual feel supported. Being deprived of this support was upsetting. Similarly, P4 stated that he imagined his child's birth as a gathering of his wide social circle, and was frustrated that even the closest family members were not allowed. He expressed feeling lonely, and that it was a bittersweet joy: *"It was so ridiculous. It felt like something wasn't quite right. It was just us two, and our child. This was not the way I imagined it."*

As much as it was disappointing to not be able to share the moment with loved ones, some participants expressed that it had a silver lining. Because they were worried about contamination, the social isolation policies had been for their advantage. Some fathers (P1, P3, P5, P6) indicated that they would choose not to involve their families and friends in the birth event. P6 expressed feeling disappointed, yet more at ease: *"You prefer them not to come because the risk is higher there. There is a greater risk of the baby or the mother getting COVID. Therefore, deep down you want them to come, but because of the situation, you know in your heart that it is good that they cannot."* P5 mentioned that it worked out in their favor because regardless of the pandemic, he believed that the baby and the mother should not be exposed to many people as they were more vulnerable to getting an infection.

Five of the participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8) mentioned feeling alone and struggling as a result of not receiving support. Three (P1, P2, P3) talked about how they were inexperienced parents and would have benefited from the assistance of older family members. P2 stated that being alone with an infant whom they struggled to figure out made him feel helpless. Similarly, P3 found it difficult handling the newborn as he was inexperienced and his wife was post-partum, and he felt abandoned by family members. Some participants also expressed frustration about the lack of support, whereas others indicated that they did not feel much need for support. P8 mentioned complaining about not receiving more support, even though he was aware that this was the result of the pandemic: *"I complained a lot. For example,*

*I wanted my wife's mother to come and stay until the baby is one month old. Also, before birth, I complained about them not coming to be there for her. Because that was the way I saw it happen. My mother visited my sister, she stayed for two months, everybody's mother does that. But um... Since the pandemic made it understandable...*" In contrast, P6 indicated that while they could not receive support due to restrictions, they also preferred not to because they were worried about COVID's effects on small children and did not want to put him at risk.

Five participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8) felt that their workload in the house increased as a result of not receiving outside support. Some mentioned struggling and feeling overwhelmed. P8 said: "I was getting tired of supporting. As a consequence of not receiving support, I had to give more support. After a while, I came to a state where I said 'all right enough!'" P3 talked about how his wife was unable to keep up with the house chores, and even though he was someone who took part in these activities, he mentioned struggling because all responsibilities fell on his shoulders and there was nobody to provide support. In addition, because they were isolated, he was his wife's only source of emotional support. He expressed that this was a challenging position:

*"It would be different if she had her mother, or a sibling, or a relative by her side. Because of the pandemic, nobody could come. Because we were alone, it was just the two of us, I can say that I was the one who was the most burned-out."*

The accounts of four participants (P1, P2, P4, P8) suggested that they have experienced growth as a result of their struggles during the pandemic. They indicated that their self-efficacy increased after successfully managing parenthood without support. P1 said: *"Of course when we look back now, we can say that we struggled but now we have dexterity in child care tasks. We quickly understand what she needs, which is an added value."* Furthermore, he indicated that this increased self-efficacy may have given them the confidence to start a new life in a foreign country without support.

P4 was someone, unlike the other participants, who financially struggled during the pandemic as he lost his job and home. He believed that going through such a difficult period and rising over the challenge now made him feel more capable and fearless:

*“... To be able to provide my child with her needs in those difficult times, it was a very different experience. I feel that I got stronger, I mean now if anything happens, I am prepared, I can do it, I can manage it. I got over of the anxiety of not being able to handle it. In this one year, I have fought this battle very easily and I believe I have overcome it.”*

Five participants (P1, P2, P3, P4, P8) also expressed that due to the lack of support, they took strength from each other as a couple and help each other to overcome the challenge. Also, they expressed that they ended up feeling closer to each other as a family. P1 stated that being alone with their child caused them to quickly adapt to parenthood and embrace their child. Similarly, according to P2's opinion, being left alone allowed them to bond as a family. As they could not receive support, P4 and his spouse coped with the challenges of parenthood by sticking together and encouraging each other.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **DISCUSSION**

The present study investigated new fathers' experiences during the lockdown period of the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants of the study were eight first-time fathers, who welcomed their children between March 2020 and April 2021. Fathers' experiences during the pregnancy, childbirth, and the first year of fatherhood, and how they interpreted the impacts of the pandemic on these experiences were investigated with in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the interviews revealed four major themes and 15 subthemes. The first theme, "Emerging Self as a Father" presented the formation of the fatherhood identity and described participants' experiences during pregnancy, as well as the transformations of self and relationships. This theme comprised six sub-themes: "Getting Ready for Fatherhood: Hopes and Dreams", "Entering the Unknown: Fears and Worries", "Ghosts and Angels of the Past", "Transformations in Self and Couple Relationship", "Self-Evaluation and Comparison as Father", and "Role of Support in Fatherhood". The second theme, "Finding Your Place as a Father" portrayed participants' journey of exploration of fatherhood roles and how they positioned themselves in their children's lives. This theme included three subthemes: "From the Outside, Looking In", "Building of the Father-Infant Bond", and "Playing Various Roles". The third theme, "Challenging, Yet Rewarding" presented the difficulties fathers experienced during their first year of parenthood, as well as their positive experiences. The theme contained two subthemes: "Challenges of Fatherhood" and "Joys of Fatherhood". The final theme, "The Unexpected Part of Fatherhood: The COVID-19 Pandemic" described the experienced impacts of the pandemic on participants' fatherhood, and involved four subthemes: "A New Way of Fatherhood", "Pandemic Induced Worries and Hardships", "You Don't Think About the Pandemic at That Point", and "Effects on Support". This section will discuss the



findings of the study, and the clinical implications of the results. Study limitations and recommendations for future research will be presented.

#### **4.1. EMERGING SELF AS A FATHER**

The first major theme “*emerging self as a father*” aimed to capture participants’ journey of forming a fatherhood identity, beginning from the pregnancy and continuing beyond the first year. The findings of this study demonstrated that changes in self began with receiving the news of the pregnancy. Studies on the transition to fatherhood marked the beginning of this journey as pregnancy (Chin et al., 2011; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). Further, Glade and colleagues (2005) indicated that the transition to parenthood began even before the pregnancy, as the idea of having a child occurred to the individual. The participants of the study stated concerns about fulfilling the paternal role, as well as becoming protective over the unborn baby and planning his or her future. These findings suggested that even though they did not develop a complete sense of fatherhood, the first steps of transition were taken during the pregnancy.

First subtheme, which is named “*getting ready for fatherhood: hopes and dreams*”, consisted of participants’ accounts on the sense of readiness, preparations, and imagining the unborn baby. Participants in this study mentioned age and maturity as the precursors of having a child. They expressed reaching to a certain point in their lives where they felt ready to become a father. Findings of a qualitative study with new fathers (Chin et al., 2011) also revealed that the desire to have a child emerged after a certain level of fulfillment in the couple's relationship. Furthermore, participating fathers expressed having an active role in the decision of having a child. In the current study, almost all participants waited for feeling ready and reaching a consensus with their spouses. For instance, P7 stated that even though his wife was ready for having a child, he had worries which made them postpone the event.

Studies revealed that in order to gain mastery of the unfamiliar nature of the prenatal period, expectant fathers educated themselves on pregnancy and infant care, and made preparations at home (Poh et al., 2014; Kao & Long, 2004). In accordance with these findings, participants in the present study expressed that they did research on prenatal period and child development in order to prepare themselves. It appeared that most fathers made preparations on a physical level, such as purchasing necessary, or sometimes not-so necessary items. Participants did not talk about preparing themselves mentally for fatherhood. Men's preference of engaging in physical preparations was revealed in other studies (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Poh et al., 2014). This could be related to the expectant fathers' feelings of detachment from the pregnancy, therefore engaging in physical preparations rather than mental.

When asked about their dreams during the prenatal period, some fathers expressed imagining their roles as role models, teachers, and playmates. The accounts of the participants resonated with previous research. In their metasynthesis, Genesoni and Tallandini (2009) demonstrated that men during the prenatal period imagined themselves as fathers and contemplated the roles they wanted to play in their children's lives. Imagining the child's future was also found in participants' accounts; they wanted to provide a good life for their children. Three participants talked about their dreams for their children's education. Previous studies yielded similar results; in the later stages of pregnancy, fathers start to think about the future of their unborn children and themselves as fathers (Kao & Long, 2004; Vreeswijk et al., 2014). Nevertheless, in contrast to Kao and Long (2004)'s findings, accounts of some participants indicated that they did not go through a phase of imagination and fantasizing. This could be related to the lack of connection to the pregnancy and the developing fetus.

The pregnancy was a phase of emotional ambivalence for the participants. They experienced excitement and fear together. The fear appeared to be the result of the unknown nature of fatherhood. They were worried about the upcoming responsibilities and whether they could manage them. Worries about the unborn

baby's health, as well as concerns about the financial aspect of raising a child were also common in participants' narratives. Finnbogadottir et al. (2002) reached similar findings, indicating that prenatal period was a time of ambivalence for fathers. Specifically, expectant fathers questioned their capabilities, and were insecure about the future. Participants in the present study also expressed their desires to be good fathers and were worried about their abilities. Similarly, Kao and Long (2004) demonstrated that expectant fathers worried about whether they would be able to fulfill the paternal role that was expected of them. Research on paternal anxiety demonstrated contrasting results. While some studies showed that fathers' levels of distress were higher during the prenatal period (Condon et al., 2004; Vismara et al., 2016). Darwin et al. (2017) argued that anxiety was higher after the birth. They suggested that facing the challenges of parenting caused more stress in fathers than the uncertainty of prenatal period. In the current study, it was found that while the unknown nature of the prenatal period caused distress, participants experienced fatherhood as getting easier with time. Based on the interviews, this seemed to be related to participants' increased confidence in infant care and also, increased sense of control. Finnbogadottir et al. (2002) argued that fathers felt distressed during the prenatal period as they had no control over the situation. Yet, after fathers saw their children as tangible beings that were now separated from the mother, it could be argued that their sense of control over the child increased.

The literature emphasizes the influence of one's experiences of being parented on their own parenting. Ribaud (2021) indicated that positive past experiences with one's own parents created a base for one's relationship with his own child. These parents could implicitly provide their children with a similar environment that is affectionate and secure. Nevertheless, those parents that experienced adverse childhood experiences could encounter difficulties as they do not have a positive experience to model. Beaton and Doherty (2007) suggested that past father-child closeness could predict future paternal involvement. While positive past experiences inarguably provide fathers with similar parental schemas, it was also suggested that

negative experiences could motivate men to perform a different fathering. Research on fatherhood demonstrated that those who did not receive care or affection from their fathers, as well as those who were mistreated, could either make attempts to perform a different fathering or in contrast, model these behaviors (Lamb, 2004). Participants in this study indicated that they wanted to let go of the behaviors they found to be harmful while keeping those they found beneficial. They made efforts to not repeat the paternal attitudes they received if they experienced negative outcomes later in their lives. These findings confirm previous qualitative studies with new fathers. It was found that fathers contemplated on the fathering they received, as well as its impacts on their characteristics. These considerations resulted in their decisions to either model their fathers or diverge from them (Deave & Johnson, 2008; St John et al., 2005). In line with the study findings, previous studies mentioned that fathers tried to compensate for the deficiencies they experienced in their families of origin in their current fatherhood. For instance, P4 mentioned growing up with a distant father, and how he wanted to do the opposite with his daughter. Compensating the absence of paternal affection in the past with a close father-infant relationship today was demonstrated in previous studies (Bolzan et al., 2005; Goodman, 2005).

The findings of this study indicated that fatherhood was a transformative experience. Participants described changes in almost every area of their lives, such as relationships, habits and personality characteristics. The interviews with the participants revealed both positive and negative changes. Almost all participants described becoming a father as self-improvement. They expressed increased maturity, empathy, patience, and understanding. These findings cohere with previous research on new fathers. Premberg and colleagues (2008) revealed that fathers experienced higher maturity and sensitivity after having a baby. Similarly, Glade et al. (2005) reported changes in values, emotional experiences, and maturity. A large body of research is devoted to the changes in the couple's relationship during the transition to parenthood. Accounts of the participants resonate with the previous findings. Coherent with the past studies, the findings of this study indicated both positive and

negative impacts of parenthood. Participants expressed that while they experienced their relationship as stronger, and they felt more connected to their spouses, they also faced adverse impacts. It was revealed that parenting stress was a relationship stressor. New parents were found to experience higher stress because of inexperience. Fillo et al. (2015) indicated that performing childcare tasks and how to distribute them were novel stressors for these couples. Therefore, this is a vulnerable period for new parents regarding their romantic relationship. Similar to previous findings (St John et al., 2005; Fagerskiöld, 2008), participants in the study mentioned that couple conflict increased during stressful times, such as excessive crying and sleeplessness. In this study, P2 mentioned that in the first months of parenting, being unable to soothe the infant increased their distress, which had negative impacts on the couple's relationship. Participants also mentioned deprioritizing the romantic relationship as they could spend less time with each other and their focus was on the infant. Previous studies revealed that during the transition to parenthood, the couple's relationship became less intimate (Baldwin et al., 2019; Chin et al., 2011). While these studies revealed men's dissatisfaction with these changes, such as in terms of decreased sexual intimacy, participants in this study appeared to normalize the focus shifting to the infant. Participants seemed to cope with these changes by reminding themselves that they were temporary.

Results of the study demonstrated that participants engaged in self-comparison when making meaning of their fatherhood experiences. Accounts of a number of participants suggested that rationality and the ability to control emotions were characteristics that separated them from their spouses. It seemed that for these fathers, being driven by logic rather than emotions was a quality to which they attached value. For instance, P7 stated that while his wife wanted to have a child after developing a maternal instinct, he evaluated the situation in a rational way in order to decide whether it was a suitable time for becoming parents. Controlling emotions and being able to stay calm during stressful situations were also qualities that participants mentioned. In addition, an analysis of the linguistic content of the interviews

indicated that participants had a tendency to “laugh it off” after talking about a difficult subject. This could be related to gender differences in stress management strategies. Matud (2004) investigated the differences in the experienced levels of stress and the coping styles between men and women in a large sample. The results showed that men relied more on rational thinking and emotional detachment. It is argued that these qualities are related to traditional gender roles. Not showing emotions and being in control are characteristics associated with the masculine identity, and consequently, a sense of competence (Dolan & Coe, 2011).

Participants also compared their relationships with the infants with that of mother-infant. They expressed that their bond was unique and more intimate. While participants found this difference expected and natural, they also expressed feeling left out. Some participants felt disappointed as they did not have the same opportunities to form a bond with the newborn, and counted the mothers lucky in that aspect. This finding echoes the results of previous studies on new fathers’ experiences. In a longitudinal study with first-time fathers, Barclay and Lupton (1999) found that fathers saw their spouses as privileged as activities such as breastfeeding allowed them to bond during the early stages. Fagerskiöld (2008) also demonstrated fathers’ experiences of exclusion and not feeling like an equally important figure during breastfeeding. A more recent study with new fathers (Baldwin et al., 2018) also found that fathers wished they had a closer bond with their infants that was similar to the mother-baby bond.

## **4.2. FINDING YOUR PLACE AS A FATHER**

Participants’ narratives indicated that the father-child bond developed gradually, rather than instantly. Their relationship developed with time. For most of the participants, the actual realization of fatherhood did not arrive until the birth of the infant. Previous studies also revealed that fathers were more likely to experience feelings of attachment to their children after they are born (Dolan & Coe, 2011;

Jordan, 1990; Sullivan, 1999). Even though there is a consensus in the literature that the transition to parenthood starts even before pregnancy, there are varying views regarding when men acknowledge the fatherhood role. Habib and Lancaster (2006) dated the development of the paternal role to the early times of pregnancy, as fathers started contemplating their future relationship with the child. Yet, consistent with the findings of this study, most studies on fathers' experiences suggested that men had difficulty bonding with their unborn children (Baldwin et al., 2019; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Iwata, 2014; Kao & Long, 2004; Longworth & Kingdon, 2010).

Lack of physical connection with the unborn baby was considered to be the main reason for this delay in bonding. In a comprehensive meta-synthesis of research on the transition to fatherhood, Genesoni and Tallandini (2009) found that settling into the fatherhood identity was postponed for men because they did not undergo similar physiological changes. Yet, they experienced increasing changes in their lives, which gave them a sense of transformation. Therefore, fathers could not grasp the reality of the infant until birth, when they saw the baby (Baldwin et al., 2019; Longworth & Kingdon, 2010). These findings are consistent with participants' accounts. Several participants indicated that they did not feel like a father during this period because the unborn baby was an abstract idea rather than a real child. Nevertheless, it was observed that participants did not feel completely detached from their unborn babies. In fact, some participants' narratives suggested that there was a bond during the pregnancy, which was in progress. One participant expressed that a paternal instinct emerged during his wife's pregnancy, yet the actual fatherhood experience took place after the birth. Findings seemed to reflect the ambiguous nature of the prenatal period for fathers that was demonstrated in the literature (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009). Several participants indicated that they either did not or could not imagine their unborn babies. When asked about their dreams during the prenatal period, they had difficulty expressing them. Again, this could be related to the abstract nature of the unborn baby and the feelings of detachment from the pregnancy period. Genesoni and Tallandini (2009) suggested that during the prenatal period,

men found it difficult to adapt to their new roles. The lack of connection with the fetus made it difficult to form a representation of the child.

Although the birth event was the hallmark of becoming a father for most participants, the bonding did not immediately follow the birth. Lack of engagement during the early period, newborn's unresponsiveness to father and the central role of the mother during early infancy appeared to be factors that held off the father-infant bond. P7 stated that during the early days, he was busier with the practical tasks than engaging with the newborn. It appeared that this delayed the emotional realization of fatherhood. Inability to initiate contact with the newborn during the early days was a common struggle among fathers (Barclay & Lupton, 1999). Higashio and Sasaki (2021) found that the father-baby bond improved as a result of continuous interactions. This was apparent in P1's accounts. He mentioned that he did not experience an immediate transformation in his fatherhood identity after birth. Yet, he stated that he felt the most connection with his baby after taking care of her by himself. Another milestone for the father-child relationship was found to be the infant's increased responsiveness to the father. Some participants indicated that they had difficulty engaging with the infant beforehand. After the baby started to react to the father, fathers felt more satisfied in the relationship. Previous studies also demonstrated that increased communication had positive outcomes for both father-child closeness and fathers' satisfaction with their role. Eskandari et al. (2017) found that as fathers felt more confident in their communication with their children, they were more actively involved in their lives. Higashoi and Sasaki (2021) also found that fathers enjoyed the time they spent with the infants more after receiving reactions of joy from them. Increased understanding of the infants' responses made fathers more confident.



#### **4.3. THE UNEXPECTED PART OF FATHERHOOD: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC**

The major theme, “the unexpected part of fatherhood: the COVID-19 pandemic, described how participants interpreted the effects of the pandemic on their fatherhood experiences. It was observed that although the focus of the study was becoming a father during the pandemic, interviews were largely devoted to the overall fatherhood experience. It seemed that for the participants, becoming a father was a more prominent event than the pandemic. Development of the themes attempted to reflect the powerful aspect of the fatherhood experience. Since participants laid stress on the aspects of fatherhood that were independent of the pandemic, the majority of the themes were devoted to the transition to fatherhood and these experiences were separated. Under this theme, both advantages and disadvantages of the pandemic were discussed. Participants were grateful for the opportunity of spending more time with their children and becoming more involved. Yet, challenges induced by the pandemic restrictions and health concerns were common in their narratives. It appeared that participants varied in terms of the difficulties they experienced during the pandemic. Financial status, access to support, infant’s temperament, personal traits and quality of the couple's relationship played roles in their adjustment.

Many participants saw a silver lining in the outbreak of the pandemic, as the switch to remote working model allowed them to be a part of the child’s journey beginning from pregnancy. The fatherhood schema in their minds was the way it was before the pandemic, where most fathers worked outside of home and had limited time to spend with their children. The pandemic introduced them to a novel way of fatherhood. Those who started working from home during their spouses’ pregnancy experienced an increased sense of togetherness and saw themselves as a part of the journey. Studies on fathers’ experiences of the prenatal period during the pandemic mainly focused on the impacts of being excluded from prenatal appointments, which

resulted in feelings of detachment and insignificance (Poulos et al., 2021; Tarrant et al., 2020). Such a policy was not employed in Turkey; therefore, participants did not express feeling excluded by healthcare professionals. In fact, P3 indicated that attending prenatal check-ups together contributed to his sense of involvement. Nevertheless, feelings of detachment due to a lack of physical connection with the unborn baby remained.

Because fathers did not expect being this active and involved in their children's lives, the pandemic in this aspect was seen as a blessing. Accounts of the participants suggested that they experienced profound joy and satisfaction in their paternal roles. It has been suggested that when fathers' level of self-efficacy increased, they started to find fatherhood more gratifying. Being at home with their infants for prolonged times allowed fathers to be more active in infant care. AÇEV's report (Akçınar, 2017) revealed that Turkish fathers reported low levels of involvement in infant care. Active involvement described by the participants in this study could be attributed to the pandemic. Both the increased exposure to childcare tasks and the lack of support figures to share the responsibilities could have allowed fathers to more quickly adapt to the responsibilities and feel more confident. Consequently, this could explain participants' sense of competence, as well as their enjoyment of fatherhood. Apart from the pandemic, high levels of involvement among participants could be attributed to their socioeconomical status and educational levels. It has been demonstrated that father involvement was higher among those with higher educational status (Maridaki-Kassotaki, 2000; Torres et al., 2014). These findings cohere with the results of other studies on fatherhood during the pandemic. Fathers reported improvements in their relationships with their children as a result of the pandemic (Canadian Men's Health Foundation, 2021; Weissbourd et al., 2020). Research on Turkish fathers yielded similar results. The majority of fathers expressed that they enjoyed fatherhood and got to know their children better during the pandemic (Arslan Dikme & Gültekin, 2021). Another study

revealed that Turkish fathers spent more time playing with their children compared to pre-pandemic (Karadeniz & Çakmakcı, 2021).

As the result of the pandemic restrictions, some fathers could not attend the birth. Feelings of exclusion and disappointment were found in their narratives. When asked about their reactions to not being allowed, some appeared to undermine the significance of this experience. This was considered as an attempt of coping with the disappointment. This again could be related to the masculine ideal and the associated coping mechanisms such as emotional detachment. In addition, some participants expressed that although they were disappointed with the hospital policy, they were comfortable accepting the rule as they were already hesitant about participating. Childbirth is a difficult event for fathers because they found it difficult to endure their spouses' pain, and also were uncertain regarding their role (Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Premberg et al., 2011). Participants in this study, although desired to support their wives and witness the birth moment, could have felt indifferent, or even relieved that they could not participate because of these worries.

Participants talked about the difficulties they experienced in maintaining a work-parenting balance as a result of remote working. While they took on more responsibilities at home, such as childcare and household chores, they also had work demands that they wanted to excel in. Literature indicated that level of work-life conflict has increased over the years, even before the pandemic. It was argued that as expectations from fathers increased, contemporary fathers aimed to fulfill various roles. Rather than solely being breadwinners, fathers today are encouraged to be involved in various areas of their offspring's lives (Auman et al., 2011; Fillo et al., 2015). Participants of the study also expressed their desires to be primary caregivers, while also aspiring to fulfill their roles as providers. This already existing dilemma appeared to intensify during the pandemic. Participants talked about struggling to keep up with the responsibilities of parenthood while working full-time. Creating a work environment at home and finding time to focus solely on work were among the challenges they experienced. These findings resonate with the results of previous

research. It was argued that in addition to the increased responsibilities in childcare, fathers were also concerned with their families' financial stability as the pandemic brought a risk of unemployment and financial struggles (Hart & Han, 2021). These findings could account for participants' prioritization of their work schedules, even though it was hard to manage when working from home.

While all participants experienced the negative impacts of the pandemic during their first year of fatherhood, it appeared that becoming a father as a life event was much more powerful than the worries of the pandemic. Some participants found it difficult to reflect on the effects of the pandemic on their fatherhood. One possible explanation for this could be that since this was their first-time experiencing fatherhood, they could only talk about their expectations of what could be different if the pandemic did not exist. Another possible explanation is that the significance of this life event and the transformations experienced could have overshadowed the struggles of the pandemic. Some participants expressed that they were not in the position of thinking about themselves and how they were affected by the pandemic because they had a much bigger responsibility. A number of participants also believed that even though the pandemic made things more difficult for them, it was their attitudes as fathers and the relationship they built with their children that mattered. This finding is in compliance with Taubman-Ben-Ari & Ben-Yaakov (2020)'s findings regarding parenting in pandemics. They found that the pandemic-related anxieties were not directly correlated with parental stress. This suggests that even if parents experienced anxiety regarding COVID-19, such as financial and health concerns, it is possible for their emotional experiences of parenthood to be positive.

The lack of support stirred additional challenges for fathers, for whom baby care was a novel activity that caused stress. Nevertheless, some participants expressed that overcoming these challenges, although difficult, allowed them to be more confident and capable in caring activities. For instance, P1 indicated that being able to successfully take care of their child alone encouraged them to start a new life in

another country. These findings could resonate with the concept of “posttraumatic growth”. Prime et al. (2020) also argued that some families could experience “posttraumatic growth” as a result of the pandemic. This concept refers to the personal and relational improvements that could be experienced as the result of adverse life events (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2014). Calhoun and Tedeschi (2014) mentioned “more meaningful interpersonal relationships, an increased sense of personal strength, changed priorities, and a richer existential and spiritual life” (p.1) as possible outcomes of overcoming adversities. This concept especially resonated with the experiences of P4, who could not continue his work because of the pandemic restrictions and experienced severe economic struggles such as losing his house. Compared to others, this participant experienced the most adversities and therefore had a more negative outlook on the pandemic. Previous research also demonstrated that people without job security were more susceptible to experiencing psychological distress (e.g., Wilson et al., 2020). Yet, this participant indicated that struggling to provide for his family and overcoming these challenges made him stronger and more prepared for possible future challenges.

Despite the adverse psychological impacts of COVID-19 demonstrated in the literature, in addition to the challenges of new parenthood, the majority of the participants in this study expressed surviving the pandemic with “minimal damage”. Even though they were deprived of social support, some participants found joy and strength in their family relationships. Prime et al. (2020) indicated that strong family relationships could serve as a protective factor in overcoming difficult life events such as the pandemic. Participants described satisfying couple relationships, which appeared to help them cope with these adversities. In fact, it has been found that when partners provide support to each other during difficult times, they experience improvements in their romantic relationship as well (Xue et al., 2021).

In terms of personal protective factors, Taubman - Ben-Ari and Ben-Yaakov (2020) found that self-mastery, which refers to one’s feeling of having control over

their life, is a protective factor against parental stress during this time of uncertainty. Findings of the current study suggested that when fathers believed that they could protect themselves and their families from the disease, they experienced less distress. For instance, P8 indicated that since both he and his wife worked in the health sector, he was confident about taking the appropriate measures.

Chasson et al. (2022) stated that one's perception of life as meaningful could be a protective factor for parental distress. Meaning of life was described as the value found in life and one's existence in the world (Reker & Wong, 1988, as cited in Chasson et al., 2022). This could account for the participants' experiences of the pandemic. Becoming a father boosts men's self-confidence and masculine identity, as well as giving their life a new meaning (Baldwin et al., 2018; Dallos & Nokes, 2011; Dolan & Coe, 2011). In this study, participants also mentioned that becoming a father was much more significant than the pandemic. The findings of the study demonstrated that children were also support figures for the fathers during this period. The warmth and closeness of the father-infant relationship alleviated fathers' stress and worries. Also, preoccupation with the infant served as a coping mechanism during the pandemic. Based on their investigation of psychological distress during COVID-19 and the associated factors, Filgueiras and Stults-Kolehmainen (2020) found that having children during the quarantine period lowered the risk of developing depressive symptoms.

#### **4.4. CLINICAL IMPLICATIONS**

During the journey of transition to fatherhood, new fathers are susceptible to experiencing psychological distress. Even though the majority of research on parental mental health focused on mothers, paternal depression and anxiety during this period are not uncommon (Cameron et al., 2016; Darwin et al., 2017). The COVID-19 pandemic had further negative psychological impacts on fathers. Fathers had difficulty balancing their roles as caregivers and providers (Hart & Han, 2021;

Tarrant et al., 2020). Cameron et al. (2020) also found that depression and anxiety levels increased during the pandemic among fathers. Paternal mental health difficulties have adverse impacts on father-infant relationship quality. For instance, reciprocal communication decreases among the dyad when the fathers are depressed (Cito et al., 2020; Sethna et al., 2015). Fathers have a crucial role in infant development, and the positive outcomes of paternal involvement in the early stages are well documented. The findings of this study provide valuable insight into new fathers' challenges during the pandemic. Professionals working with children and parents should pay attention to fathers' experiences during the pandemic and how they managed these stressors. This would help get the picture of the family environment during children's formative years, who were born into the pandemic.

These findings also highlight fathers' need for support during the transition to fatherhood. Literature indicates that men are less likely to seek help for physical and psychological difficulties (Yousaf et al., 2013). Studies showed that fathers attempted to cope with psychological difficulties through distractions (Cito et al., 2020; Darwin et al., 2017). Rather than seeking professional help, they are more likely to resort to their social circles. Further, some fathers prefer keeping these matters to themselves (Darwin et al., 2017). Psychotherapists working with this group should pay attention to the help-seeking behaviors of fathers, which are likely to be different from that of mothers. Fathers in this study mentioned feeling left out from the mother-infant dyad. Similarly, fathers could feel out of place and insignificant during the counseling sessions with parents. Therefore, mental health professionals could make additional efforts to include the fathers in the therapy process. In this study, it was demonstrated that fathers view themselves as rational individuals, who could successfully manage their powerful emotions and make decisions with logical thinking. When talking about painful affect, some participants engaged in coping attempts such as laughing or minimizing the experience. Literature on masculine identity and men's coping behaviors supported these findings. The results of this study therefore could have implications for therapy. It is important for psychotherapists working with this group

to acknowledge this difficulty in emotional expression and set therapeutic goals accordingly.

Participants of the study expressed seeing positive effects of paternal involvement on their children and the father-infant relationship. These children seemed to develop close relationships with their fathers and had more opportunities to learn from them compared to those whose fathers spent most of the day outside the home. A downside of the pandemic that the participants experienced on their children was the lack of socialization opportunities. As mentioned in the discussion of the findings, social interactions during children's formative years are essential for certain developmental achievements. The findings of this study provide some information, although limited to the experiences of fathers and to a narrow time period, regarding the decreased socialization opportunities of infants born during the pandemic and the observed negative outcomes. Psychotherapists working with children could gain valuable information by making a retrospective evaluation of these children's socialization opportunities during the pandemic. It appears that while some children could quickly recover from the effects of isolation, others could have difficulties when being introduced to the external world.

This study also investigated the intergenerational transmission of paternal behaviors during the transition to fatherhood. Exploration of the recollections of the fathering received by the participants provided rich narratives. The findings provide valuable information regarding the formation of participants' unique fatherhood identities. The results suggest that understanding and working through fathers' past experiences in regard to the fathering they receive could generate positive outcomes in the psychotherapy process. Fathers could gain significant insight by reflecting on the effects of these experiences on their own parenting today.



#### **4.5. LIMITATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The present study makes a contribution toward filling the gap in the literature on Turkish new fathers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of global studies, this study is unique in terms of its participation criteria for remote working. While there are a few previous studies that focused on the experiences of new fathers during the pandemic (e.g., Poulos et al., 2022; Wells et al., 2022), these did not investigate the impacts of remote working on the fatherhood experiences. The pandemic was a unique period for providing fathers with an opportunity for higher involvement. Furthermore, the focus of these previous studies was mainly on the effects of the changed healthcare policies, which in some countries restricted fathers' participation in prenatal appointments. Therefore, this study is unique in providing an in-depth, rich understanding of various aspects of the fatherhood experience.

The aim of qualitative studies is to reach an in-depth understanding of subjective, lived experiences. The small sample size allows a rich understanding of each person's unique way of making meaning of these experiences. However, this also means that the findings of these studies lack generalizability. In addition, convenience sampling resulted in a sample that was low in diversity. All participants had either bachelor's or graduate levels of education, and they reported middle to high levels of income. Apart from the pandemic, high levels of involvement among participants could be attributed to their socio-economic status and educational levels. It has been demonstrated that father involvement was higher among those with higher educational status (Maridaki-Kassotaki, 2000; Torres et al., 2014).

The participant fathers also had employment security during the pandemic, except for one participant (P4), whose divergent experience was discussed in the previous section. It is recognized that fathers experienced more distress during the lockdown period if they did not have steady employment status (Wilson et al., 2020). Therefore, this study could not provide much information regarding fathers' financial concerns during the pandemic. In addition, it is possible that individuals who showed

interest in participating in such a study did so because they were above the average in terms of paternal involvement, and were satisfied with their paternal roles. Studies that include more diverse samples are required to grasp a richer understanding of Turkish first-time fathers' experiences of the pandemic. Specifically, fathers that experienced financial difficulties or had different socio-economic backgrounds should be the focus of future studies in Turkey.

The main focus of this study was the fatherhood experiences during the first year of the infants' lives. However, the transition to fatherhood is a journey that begins during the pregnancy. Hence, it was important to understand fathers' representations of their unborn children, as well as how they imagined fatherhood in order to gain a better understanding of their subjective experiences. Investigation of the pregnancy and the childbirth experiences, in addition to the first year after the birth, increased the magnitude of the data. Therefore, considering the limits of the study, not all data could be presented in this paper. Future studies could place their focus on specific periods of the fatherhood journey, in order to better grasp the uniqueness of each stage.

In this study, accounts of the participants did not involve any adverse effects of poor paternal well-being or marital conflict on their offspring. Nevertheless, it is argued that when one parent experiences high levels of distress, this has negative effects on the whole family's functioning (Prime et al., 2020). Longitudinal studies that investigate the long-term outcomes of these adversities expressed by the participants in children's development, such as social isolation during infancy and their own psychological distress would provide literature with valuable information. Furthermore, this study took into account the fathers' lived experiences and perspectives. Mothers and fathers, although sometimes overlapping, have different parental roles and aspirations. Their experiences of becoming parents during the pandemic could be vastly different. Also, as mentioned above, one family member's distress impacts the whole family system in which the child develops. Future research

could investigate mother-father dyads together and how the experience of one interacts with that of the other.

All participants described being highly involved in infant care. However, they also defined their roles as secondary figures in caring activities. It is possible that participants were less involved than they described, which could account for their positive experiences during the pandemic. Moreover, the narrative content of the interviews suggested the employment of defense mechanisms. Participants used distancing language, such as the impersonal you, and normalizing the experience. From a clinical perspective, participants appeared to be defensive and they refrained from expressing painful affect. In the present study, this finding was discussed in relation to masculinity. However, this could also be a response to the traumatic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and adjusting to fatherhood during a difficult time period. It is recommended that narrative analysis be conducted for the interviews in order to examine the implicit meaning of the narratives, which could yield more adverse impacts in fact experienced by the first-time fathers.

## CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate first-time fathers' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Participants were eight Turkish fathers, who welcomed their children during the first year of the pandemic and worked remotely during this period. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to understand their experiences during the phase of transition to fatherhood, and how these experiences were affected by the pandemic. This was the first study that investigated the pandemic experiences of new Turkish fathers. Although a limited number of studies from other countries explored this subject, the effects of remote working were not examined. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) of the interviews revealed four major themes: 1) emerging self as a father, 2) finding your place as a father, 3) challenging, yet rewarding, and 4) the unexpected part of fatherhood: the COVID-19 pandemic.

The participants' accounts indicated that the transition to fatherhood began during pregnancy. Yet, participants varied in their attachment to the unborn baby. The majority of fathers expressed difficulty bonding during the prenatal period. This appeared to be due to the fathers' lack of physical connection to the fetus. For the majority of the participants, the fatherhood identity, and the father-child bond developed at the time of birth. For a number of fathers, difficulties in bonding continued beyond pregnancy. Some fathers expressed that they did not have similar opportunities to bond with their infants because the infant was physically dependent on the mother. The father-infant relationship improved with time and more engagement. As the quality of this relationship increased, men started to feel more satisfied with their roles as fathers. Transition to fatherhood was a time of dramatic transformations, both in self and the marital relationship. Participants experienced a sense of improvement after becoming a father. In terms of the couple's relationship, the fathers mentioned both positive and negative changes. While some experienced

an improvement in the relationship quality, others mentioned adverse outcomes such as decreased level of intimacy and increased conflict.

The aim of this study was to investigate the effects of the pandemic on new fathers' experiences. However, participants' narratives suggested that the experience of becoming a father overshadowed the pandemic. Fathers mentioned both advantages and disadvantages of the pandemic and remote working. All participants expressed a silver lining of the pandemic, which was the opportunity to spend more time with their children and build close relationships. Working from home allowed them to be involved in their children's lives starting from the very beginning. Yet, the pandemic brought challenges to the new fathers such as concerns about their children's health and social development, lack of support, increased parental stress, and disruptions in work-life balance. Overall, participants in this study believed that the pandemic provided them with an opportunity to achieve their aspirations of fatherhood, and to be highly involved fathers starting from the prenatal period. The findings of the study have implications for psychotherapies that include fathers, as well as children who were born during the pandemic.

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## APPENDICES

### APPENDIX A – Informed Consent Form

Sayın Katılımcı,

Bu çalışma, İstanbul Bilgi Üniversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yüksek Lisans Programı öğrencisi Sumru Duraner tarafından Dr. Öğr. Üyesi Zeynep Maçkalı'nın danışmanlığında, COVID-19 pandemi döneminde ilk kez çocuk sahibi olmuş babaların deneyimlerini araştırmak amacıyla yüksek lisans tezi kapsamında yürütülmektedir. Nitel yöntemle yürütülen bu çalışmanın amacı pandemi döneminde ilk kez çocuk sahibi olmuş babaların hamilelik, doğum ve doğum sonrası yaşadıkları deneyimlere ışık tutmak ve bu deneyimlerin babalık süreçlerine etkisini incelemektir. Araştırmaya katılım gönüllülük temeline dayanmaktadır. Bu araştırmaya katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde 50-60 dakika sürecek çevrimiçi bir görüşmeye katılmanız beklenecektir. Görüşmeler esnasında izniniz doğrultusunda ses kaydı alınacak ve araştırmacı not tutacaktır.

Bu araştırma bilimsel bir amaçla yapılmakta ve katılımcı bilgilerinin gizliliği esas alınmaktadır. Verdiğiniz tüm bilgiler gizli tutulacaktır. Ses kayıtları araştırma süresince yalnızca araştırmacı ve danışmanın erişimi olan bir harici bellekte muhafaza edilecek, araştırma sona erdiğinde silinecektir. Araştırma bulgularının sunumu ve raporlamasında kişi isimleri kullanılmayacak, elde edilen bilgiler toplu olarak değerlendirilecek ve bilimsel yayınlarda kullanılacaktır. Görüşme kaydınız ve kişisel bilgi formunuz çalışmanın bitiminden 5 yıl sonra tamamen silinecektir.

Bu görüşmeye katılmanın, olumsuz bir etki yaratması beklenmemektedir. Ancak görüşme sırasında yanıt vermek istemediğiniz, size kendinizi rahatsız hissettiren sorular olursa bu soruları yanıtlamadan geçebilirsiniz. Görüşme sırasında dilediğiniz zaman kaydın durdurulmasını isteyebilirsiniz. Görüşme başlamadan önce, görüşme sırasında veya sonrasında dilediğiniz zaman soru sorabilirsiniz. Katılmayı kabul ettiğiniz takdirde çalışmanın herhangi bir aşamasında herhangi bir sebep göstermeden

arařtırmadan çekilme hakkına sahiptir. Arařtırmadan çekildiđiniz durumda verdiđiniz bilgiler deđerlendirmeye alınmayacaktır.

Bu alıřma katılımcılara, terapi ya da psikolojik destek vermek amacını tařımamaktadır. İstemeniz durumunda size psikolojik yardım alabileceđiniz yerler hakkında bilgi verilecektir.

Arařtırma ile ilgili bilgi almak, soru sormak veya yorumlarınızı paylařmak isterseniz, arařtırmacı **Sumru Duraner** ile **sumruduraner@gmail.com** adresinden iletiřime geebilirsiniz.

Eđer bu arařtırmaya katılmayı kabul ediyorsanız bu formun size iletildiđi e-postaya cevaben **“Ekte gnderilen Bilgilendirilmiř Onam Formunu okudum ve anladım. alıřmaya katılmayı ve ses kaydımın alınmasını kabul ediyorum.”** cmlisini ve **adınızı-soyadınızı** yazmanız gerekmektedir.

Zaman ayırdıđınız ve arařtırmaya verdiđiniz deđerli katkılarınız iin teřekkr ederiz.

alıřma hakkında daha fazla bilgi almak iin Bilgi niversitesi Klinik Psikoloji Yksek Lisans Programı đrencisi Sumru Duraner veya Dr. đr. yesi Zeynep Makalı (e-posta: zeynep.mackali@bilgi.edu.tr) ile iletiřim kurabilirsiniz.

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## APPENDIX B – Demographics Form

1. Yaşınız:
2. Eğitim durumunuz:  
☐ İlkokul    ☐ Ortaokul    ☐ Lise  
☐ Üniversite    ☐ Yüksek Lisans    ☐ Diğer (belirtiniz):
3. Mesleğiniz:
4. Normalleşme öncesinde (Mart 2020 – Haziran 2021 tarihleri arası) çalışma şekliniz nasıldı?  
☐ Evden    ☐ Ofisten    ☐ Diğer (belirtiniz):
5. Normalleşme öncesi dönemde çalışma saatleriniz:
6. Ekonomik gelir düzeyiniz:  
☐ Alt    ☐ Alt-Orta    ☐ Orta    ☐ Orta-Üst    ☐ Üst
7. Eşinizin yaşı:
8. Evliliğinizin süresi:
9. Eşinizin eğitim durumu:  
☐ İlkokul    ☐ Ortaokul    ☐ Lise  
☐ Üniversite    ☐ Yüksek Lisans    ☐ Diğer (belirtiniz):
10. Eşinizin mesleği:
11. Eşiniz çalışma hayatına bebeğiniz kaç aylıkken geri döndü? (Eşiniz çalışmıyorsa bu soruyu geçebilirsiniz):
12. Çocuğunuzun doğum tarihi:
13. Çocuğunuzun cinsiyeti: ☐ Kız    ☐ Oğlan
14. Doğum zamanı:  
☐ Vaktinde  
☐ Erken (ay olarak belirtiniz:    )  
☐ Geç (ay olarak belirtiniz:    )
15. Doğum sırasında bebeğiniz herhangi bir sorun yaşadı mı?  
☐ Evet (sorunu belirtiniz:    )    ☐ Hayır

16. Doğum sırasında eşiniz herhangi bir sorun yaşadı mı?  
0 Evet (sorunu belirtiniz: ) 0 Hayır
17. Bebeğinizle ameliyathanede buluşabildiniz mi? (Kucağınıza verildi mi?)  
0 Evet 0 Hayır
18. Doğum esnasında hastanede yakınınız var mıydı?  
0 Evet (kim/kimler olduğunu belirtiniz: )  
0 Hayır
19. Doğumdan sonra eşiniz kaç gün hastanede kaldı?:
20. Doğum sonrasında hastanede eşinize kim refakat etti?:
21. Gebelik esnasında veya doğum sonrasında siz ve/veya eşiniz COVID-19 geçirdiniz mi? (Uygun seçenekleri işaretleyiniz):  
0 Hayır  
0 Siz (tarih belirtiniz: )  
0 Eşiniz (tarih belirtiniz: )
22. Çocuğunuzda herhangi bir yenidoğan hastalığı oldu mu? (Yeni doğan sarılığı, yeni doğan ishali, isilik, fıtık, pamukçuk vb.)  
0 Evet (hastalık/hastalıkları belirtiniz: )  
0 Hayır
23. Doğum sonrası herhangi bir psikolojik zorluk yaşadınız mı?  
0 Evet 0 Hayır
- a. Evet ise, yardım türü ve süresi (uygun seçenekleri işaretleyiniz):  
0 Psikoterapi/psikolojik danışmanlık (süresi: )  
0 Psikiyatrik yardım/ilaç kullanımı (süresi: )

## APPENDIX C – Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Merhaba, öncelikle bu çalışmaya katıldığınız için teşekkür ederim. Bugün sizinle pandemide yeni bir baba olmak hakkında konuşacağız. Size pandemi sürecinde eşinizin hamileliği, bebeğinizin doğumu ve sonrasında yaşadıklarınız hakkında sorular soracağım. İhtiyaç duyduğunuzda ara verebiliriz.

### PANDEMi:

Babalık deneyimlerinize ilgili konuşmaya başlamadan önce pandemi sürecinin sizi kişisel olarak nasıl etkilediğini sormak isterim.

1. Pandemi günlük rutinlerinizi nasıl etkiledi? (Gerekirse: İşinizi, sosyal hayatınızı nasıl etkiledi?)
  - a. Evden çalışmak nasıl bir deneyimdi?
2. Pandemi süreci sizi nasıl etkiledi? Kendinizi nasıl hissediyordunuz? (Gerekirse: Ruhsal olarak nasıl hissediyordunuz? Kaygılarınız, korkularınız var mıydı?)
  - a. Tam kapanma periyodları sizin için nasıldı?

### HAMİLELİK:

Babalık deneyimlerinizden konuşmaya ilk olarak doğum öncesi sürecinizle ilgili bazı sorular sorarak başlamak istiyorum.

3. Çocuk sahibi olmaya nasıl karar verdiniz? (Gerekirse: Planlı mıydı?)
4. Baba olacak olmakla ilgili nasıl hissediyordunuz?
5. Hamilelik süreci sizin için nasıldı? Siz baba olarak neler yaşadınız? (Prompts: Kendinizi nasıl hissediyordunuz? En iyi, en zor kısımları nelerdi?)
  - a. Pandemi süreci bu deneyimlerinizi nasıl etkiledi?
6. Bazen ebeveynler daha çocukları dünyaya gelmeden onu hayal etmeye başlarlar? Sizin bebeğinizle ilgili ne gibi düşünceleriniz vardı? (*Baba olmakla ilgili hayallerinden bahsetmezse: Baba olmanın nasıl olacağını hayal ediyordunuz?*) (Gerekirse: Endişeleriniz oldu mu?)
7. Hamilelik döneminde kimler size destek oldu?

Evet ise: Bu destek size nasıl geldi?

Hayır ise: Destek alamamak size nasıl geldi?

### **DOĞUM:**

Şimdi kısaca doğumla ilgili konuşmak isterim:

8. Doğumun gerçekleştiği günkü deneyimlerinizden bahsedebilir misiniz?  
Doğum sizin için nasıl bir deneyimdi?
  - a. Doğuma katıldınız mı? Neler yaşadınız? Neler hissettiniz?  
(Katılamadıysa): katılamamak nasıl geldi?
  - b. Doğumun pandemi süreci içinde gerçekleşmiş olmasının sizce nasıl etkileri oldu? (Gerekirse: Endişeleriniz var mıydı?)
9. Doğum sonrası ilk günler kendinizi nasıl hissediyordunuz? (Gerekirse: Ruh durumunuz nasıldı? Zorlandığınız anlar oldu mu?)
10. Doğumdan sonra siz ve eşiniz kimlerden bir destek aldınız? Bu destekle ilgili nasıl hissettiniz?

### **DOĞUM SONRASI:**

Şimdi de çocuğunuzun hayatının ilk 1 yılında yaşadığınız deneyimleri merak ediyorum:

11. Bu dönemde baba olmak sizin için nasıl bir deneyimdi?
  - a. Pandemide yeni doğan bir bebeğe sahip olmak nasıl bir deneyimdi?
  - b. Bebeğinizle nasıl bir ilişkiniz vardı? (Gerekirse: Bebeğinizle ilişkinizi nasıl tarif ederdiniz?)
  - c. Bebek bakımında nasıl bir rol oynuyordunuz?
  - d. Pandemi döneminde aile olarak oldukça fazla sürelerle birlikte evdeydiniz. Peki kızınızla/oğlunuzla yalnız kaldığınız, ona sadece sizin baktığınız zamanlar sizin için nasıldı?
  - e. (Katılımcı COVID geçirdiyse): COVID olduğunuz süreçte neler yaşadınız? (Gerekirse: bu dönemde çocuğunuzla birlikte olmak nasıldı?)
12. Şimdi geriye dönüp baktığınızda, bebeğinizle devamlı evde olmanın nasıl bir etkisi olduğunu düşünüyorsunuz?



13. Bebeğiniz pandemiden önce doğsaydı sizce neler farklı olurdu?
14. Pandemi süreciyle de birlikte düşündüğünüzde, bebeğinizin ilk yılında eşinizle ilişkinizi nasıl tarif ederdiniz?
15. Bazı kişiler için kendileri babalığı deneyimleyince, onların kendi babalarıyla yaşadığı deneyimler tekrar canlanabilir. Sizin bebekliğinize dair, babanızın bu dönemde sizinle kurduğu ilişkiye dair neler anlatılırdı? (Gerekirse: Babanızla ilişkinize dair aklınızda neler var? Nasıl bir baba-çocuk ilişkisi hatırlıyorsunuz?)
  - a. Sizce bu deneyimler sizin babalığınızı nasıl etkiledi?
16. Kendi deneyimlerinizden yola çıkarak düşünürseniz; bugün pandemide ilk kez çocuk sahibi olan bir babaya neler önerirdiniz/söylediniz?
17. Benim sormadığım ancak pandemide ilk kez baba olmakla ilgili önemli gördüğünüz ve eksik kaldığını hissettiğiniz herhangi bir şey var mı?
18. Bitirmeden önce sormak istediğiniz herhangi bir soru var mı?

Çalışmaya katıldığınız ve verdiğiniz samimi cevaplar için çok teşekkür ederim.

## **ETHICS BOARD APPROVAL**

Ethics Board Approval is available in the printed version of this dissertation.

