

THE INSTITUTE FOR CLINICAL SOCIAL WORK

THE EXPERIENCES OF FIRST TIME EXPECTANT FATHERS

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Conception of the Problem

The formulation of this dissertation project was conceived out of attempts to combine my clinical and theoretical interests in psychodynamic development and family process theory. Since becoming a parent describes an individual's evolving progression to a family relational structure, the topic of first time parenthood offered a meeting place for individual and relational bodies of theory. During the Spring of 1985 and Fall of 1986, two independent research courses helped to focus the investigative position.

The topic was initially approached through readings on attachment theory including Winnicott, Melanie Klein, and Bowlby. These theorists emphasized the biological origins of mother-infant relations but recognized that the father must and does become an "object" in the relational world of the child. Terese Benedek's (1959) "Parenthood as a Developmental Phase" raised a need to differentiate the experience of parenthood for men. To examine relational structure, it therefore seemed logical to eliminate the biological base in the investigation by concentrating on men.

Three topics of interest emerged: (1) how the family assists in establishing identity and separateness; (2) ways dynamics for fathering

develop in men; and (3) the effects of family organization and nurturance on a father's parenting capacity.

A second independent reading course in family systems theory followed the developmental inquiry. Bowen's theory "On the Differentiation of Self" (1972) and "Toward the Differentiation of Self in One's Family of Origin" (1974) were studied. We considered the topics of interest to the study in the light of Bowen's theory. We questioned "what happens psychodynamically for a man in the transition from couple to parent?" and "what are the factors that enable a man to be or become a 'good enough' father (intuitive, empathic, caretaking, and nurturing)?"

The questions stimulated in independent studies took form in the initial research questions:

1. How do first time fathers anticipate and experience personal or developmental change, if any, over time during pregnancy?
2. What factors are recognized by expectant fathers to influence identity, attitudes, and anticipated role behaviors in fatherhood?

Gestation of the Question

A first proposal drafted in January, 1986 was submitted but miscarried along with what proved to be good advice. It was suggested that rather than approaching the study from a variety of theory bases, I do a qualitative study with a small sample using a generative research model as described in Glaser and Strauss (1967). Over the next nine months and more, the investigation took new form.

In order to become better acquainted with first time fathers and to develop a "feel" for this population group, I conducted a weekly

evening group for new parents and their babies at a suburban parent drop-in center. I met with professionals involved in fathering services to discuss the research. I talked to every expectant father encountered socially. And I thought about my biases and preconceived ideas on the subject and speculated about personal motivations in studying fathers beyond clinical and theoretical interest.

Dissertation consultation began in Spring, 1986 with a focus on the current research on new fatherhood. A pregnant teacher at the school where I worked as family therapist learned of my research interest and suggested I talk to her husband. In meeting with this first time expectant father, I was struck by his enthusiasm to have the opportunity for attention to just what he was thinking and feeling, and in the way he organized his thoughts. The methodology of grounded research was making more and more sense as a way to connect personal meanings to the men's experience.

Birth of the Research

In designing the research plan, 1987-88 involved studying the methodology of grounded theory. Another year passed in conducting a pre-study as a way of evaluating the method and process of data collection. (Pregnancies do take nine months.) By the time my proposal was accepted in March, 1989, the father who participated in the pre-study was expecting a second child!

The investigation paralleled the men's emerging fatherhood experience as perspectives developed. For each man, the experience was unique to his situation and viewpoint. For this researcher, there were many experiential variations to translate into theory from the men's

insights apart from the existing theory. The theoretical task was to make the most of these insights by developing them into systematic experiential theory.