

**IN LIGHT OF FATHERHOOD: HOW FIRST-TIME FATHERS MAKE MEANING
OF SPOUSAL SUPPORT**

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DECLARATION OF COMMITTEE

The following individuals certify that they have read, and recommend to the Faculty of Graduate Studies for acceptance, the thesis entitled:

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ABSTRACT

The current understanding for the role of fatherhood is complex, influenced by sociocultural factors and theoretical frameworks. Disparities in childcare and housework between the parental dyad persist, with mothers often seen as the expert parent. Spousal support—the ways fathers are supported and encouraged to participate in child-rearing—significantly influences father involvement. However, the way that fathers perceive and interpret spousal support may result in the reduction of father-child engagement. This study employs the interpretative phenomenological analysis method to explore the lived experience of five first-time fathers who describe their understanding of spousal support. The findings illustrate several distinct themes of meaning making that fathers engage in when encountering spousal support. These themes include evaluating spousal support dependability, role engagement and development, and the mediation of relief from emotional burdens. This study informs the current understanding of how fathers understand and engage with support that is offered by their spouses.

Keywords: Fatherhood, spousal support, lived experience, maternal gatekeeping theory, attachment theory

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Parenthood can be an impactful role, both in its demands and rewards. Parenthood often presents the opportunity to raise a child and accompany, teach, and guide them as they grow throughout their lifespan. Parents are often at the forefront of nurturing a child through infancy and during their early childhood, satisfying needs and supporting children as they show glimpses into the promising futures they may inhabit. Throughout parenthood, but critically during the child's infancy, parents are tasked with creating an environment through which children are safe, seen, soothed, and secure (Siegel & Bryson, 2011). Parents, simply by remaining present in the life of their child, can provide their children with the first example of how the surrounding world operates (Harrist & Waugh, 2002; Siegel, 2020). As such, parents guide the growth and eventual independence children experience as they become increasingly defined individuals.

The level to which a parent is positively involved with their child has become a recognized and important marker of child and family well-being, with increasing attention being directed towards father involvement over the past 50 years (Diniz et al., 2021; Lamb, 1987). Much research, predominantly conducted in North America, reveals that fathers have become increasingly aligned with the role of a caregiver, or a multifaceted provider, as one of the key roles which define their identity as a father (Diniz et al., 2021; Marsiglio et al., 2000). However, research on fatherhood rarely focuses upon understanding fathers. Alternatively, the bulk of current fatherhood research targets the outcomes of children, mothers' well-being, and family outcomes at large. Of the work that does centre the experience of fathers, many questions remain unanswered. The need for intentional research dedicated to the experience of fatherhood has been stressed in the recent past. Within the primary caregiving fathers literature, there is a repeated instance that an understanding of fathers' needs as a caregiver remain generally unknown (Gill et al., 2021). Continuing to ignore the father's experience of his parenthood role leaves the scientific community blind to a large portion of individual and family well-being understanding.

The few qualitative investigations which look into the experiences of men as they transition into fatherhood have revealed themes of isolation, invisibility, and loneliness as well as the awareness that fatherhood has the potential to be a uniquely important and

fulfilling role for men (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2020). As the care and attention dedicated towards fatherhood research has increased, an understanding of the lived fatherhood experience has failed to increase at the same pace. The understanding of the general parenting role which fathers hold has increased, while an understanding of fathers themselves has remained stagnant. Further in-depth qualitative research must be conducted to better understand this niche of individual, familial, and community well-being.

Qualitative research often requires the researcher to reflect upon their own life experiences as they engage in the subjective process of data analysis. I have intermittently thought about fatherhood since childhood, with these thoughts becoming more frequent and intense as my son's birth approaches. I was in the second grade when I was asked what I wanted to be when I grew up. Although I understood I was being asked about career, I knew nothing about the world of work, and my mind was drawn to imagining what it would be like to be a father. Even though I knew nothing of the world of parenting something about this identity felt closer to who I was and aligned with what I was certain I wanted my future to include. My interest in fatherhood, and the potential futures it offered remained on my mind. This fascination has coloured the rest of my life accordingly.

My interpersonal world is filled by individuals who value, and preach, the significance of family and fatherhood. The value in being a “good father” was upheld even during tense and uncomfortable moments. During one of the rare arguments with my father, whose virtues far outweigh his flaws, I found myself torn between the father I saw before me and the ideal father I aspired to be. To the best of my memory, frustrated, I screamed, “When I’m a father, I’ll never treat my children this way! I’ll be a better father than you ever were!” Now, I shudder at the arrogance of those words—how little I understood about life or fatherhood. But it is my father’s response that lingers: calmly, he said, “Good. I hope you are better than me.” My memory of that event ends here, in stunned silence, as I was rocked by this simple but almighty hope filled wish for my future as a father.

Beyond the inspiration that I derive from the general need for further understanding where I find this void of research, my own lack of understanding frightens me. It seems bizarre that the field could outline so little about such a common experience. It seems equally as strange to think that I am at a stage in life where there is an opportunity for fatherhood,

and I would be expected to adopt this identity and role. Stranger still that the current body of research provides evidence for a wide variety of experiences that a father endures interpersonally in a parental dyad or family system, yet the same foundational pool of research provides almost nothing about how a father endures these experiences nor the meaning he acquires by undertaking these trials. I am drawn forward by the professional lack of understanding which I have paired to the curiosity that took root within me when I was young. Ultimately, this work is here for the fathers, the fathers-to-be, and those who want to be fathers. The intention is to access the lived experience of fathers so that they may be better understood and approached for the good that they can offer, and for the greater good of all familial wellbeing.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Fatherhood

The meaning of the term father varies across contexts. The definition for what a father is varies depending upon the context in which it is found (Li & Tian, 2023; Marsiglio et al., 2000). These differences of the definition for father can be partially attributed to which aspects of the role or identity are regarded as valuable within each relevant context. Although the biological literature tends to place greater emphasis on the genomic and reproductive importance of the fatherhood role, the psychological literature places greater emphasis on the self-image, the social role, and the relational patterns that emerge (Li & Tian, 2023). Despite these differences, there is overlap on how fatherhood is defined. Looking across several disciplines of academic study reveals consistencies in how fatherhood is defined, including themes such as the involvement of a father in the creation or care of a child, levels of influence on the child's life, and varying degrees of continued investment in the child's wellbeing (Li & Tian, 2023; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Fatherhood, therefore, can be understood as a multifaceted, complex, and varied concept and role that is highly contextual and difficult to define.

In addition to the complexity of the term fatherhood, various shifts in the sociocultural landscape have informed how fatherhood is understood and studied (Adamsons et al., 2022). These shifts have affected the way that researchers understand and define fatherhood. Over the last 50 years, fatherhood research has gone through a gradual restructuring where much of the focus for sociological and psychological research now lies in understanding masculinity and father's roles in parenthood (Johansson, 2011).

The literature on the role of fatherhood has grown to become broad in scope (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). In part, this diversity is due to movement towards fatherhood research gaining further momentum in the 1970s and the varying topics of interests that emerged during this time. Following this, fatherhood research separated into two differing pathways of understanding: the fathering stream of research and the parenting stream of research (Adamsons et al., 2022; Silverstein & Auerbach, 1999). Although the fathering stream was focused solely upon the specifics of fathers' roles in families, the parenting stream was more likely to outline commonalities between mothers and fathers,

highlighting essential healthy characteristics that any parents—regardless of their gendered role—may exhibit. These diverging frameworks, although unique in many ways to each other, often focused upon understanding the role of fatherhood rather than the fathers themselves.

The role of fatherhood is often seen through the lens of what the father could offer the child, or spouse, in relation to familial wellbeing. With a few exceptions, such as the literature on fathers as primary caregivers, much of this research is not concerned with how fathers are affected as individuals. Even with a focused attention on the primary caregiving fathers literature, there is a continued insistence that an understanding of fathers' needs as a caregiver are generally unknown (Gill et al., 2021). This results in a field where the definition and meaning of fatherhood is often assumed based solely on the context of the scientific investigation. These assumptions are made despite how fatherhood is complex, subject to change, actively changing in relation to societal pressures, and foundationally important to the understanding of the people who inhabit this role.

Intentional-Responsive Fatherhood

Over the past 50 years, much of the fatherhood literature has continued to revolve around maternal or infant health. Research to further understand fatherhood often positions the father as a conduit for further understanding of the other family members. Psychological measurement scales for paternal health and involvement are either not readily available, or have been recently created (Singley et al., 2018). This void of attention towards the father's well-being, the father's understanding, and the father's meaning making process from within this role exists despite a general acceptance that fathers are valuable when engaged healthily with their children and spouses (Adamsons et al., 2022; Diniz et al., 2021; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Singley et al., 2018). Understanding and defining intentional-responsive fatherhood as the platform for this research to rest upon is necessary as a bridge between the current fatherhood literature and the present study.

As mentioned previously, the academic literature does not agree upon how fatherhood should be defined. Due to this, there is no consensus to aid in defining and measuring fatherhood involvement with children (Fagan et al., 2014). For the sake of this study, the term *intentional-responsive fatherhood*, the spectrum of parenting behaviours that promote

secure father-infant attachment, will be used to define fatherhood and aid in clarifying the following report. A secure infant attachment style is often regarded as a positive indicator for a child's developmental outcomes (Howe, 2023; Lamb, 1987; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Fathers often parent in relation to a mother. Borrowing from the positive father involvement literature, the definition of intentional-responsive fatherhood encourages an awareness for (a) the extent of positive engagement, (b) the warmth and responsiveness, (c) the control that the father has over parenting decisions, (d) the parenting style employed, and (e) the responsibility that a father has in relation to a child (Fagan et al., 2014; Lamb, 2010). These five elements are often negotiated and monitored, consciously or unconsciously, between a parental dyad. Intentional-responsive fatherhood, therefore, would be seen as a balanced and intentional pursuit of all five of these dimensions—with the awareness of effects from a spousal—to maximize the chances of a child developing a secure attachment towards the father. This definition of fatherhood establishes the foundation for the following sections of the study and confines the analysis to individuals whose experiences align with it. Furthermore, fathers' performance as a parent could be evaluated based upon the degree to which their actions align with this definition. Finally, as this is a relational definition, looking at fatherhood through this lens helps to develop an understanding of how fathers relate to their child and spouse.

Attachment Theory

The definition of intentional-responsive fatherhood previously provided, is grounded within the positive father involvement literature (Fagan et al., 2014; Lamb, 2010) and outlines that, in part, the goal of fatherhood is to facilitate secure attachment. The premise of this definition is that fathers will provide the necessary environment for young children to approach, and appropriately find, developmentally appropriate comfort from their father. This process of a child innately seeking comfort when vulnerable, worried, or frightened is known as attachment (Bretherton, 1992; Fearon & Roisman, 2017; Howe, 2023). While John Bowlby originally developed attachment theory as an observational account of the need for security in young children (Bretherton, 1992), attachment theory has been taken further by Mary Ainsworth and other scholars who developed it into a theory of parenting (Fearon & Roisman, 2017). Four main attachment styles are well established within the attachment

literature: (a) secure, (b) insecure-anxious/ambivalent, (c) insecure-avoidant/dismissive, and (d) insecure-disorganized attachment styles. These styles of attachment vary in their presentations and antecedents. A secure bond with the parents, both mother and father, is the cornerstone for children's cognitive, linguistic, and social development (Baldwin et al., 2018; Bretherton, 1992; Jeynes, 2015). In contrast to most other developmental psychology theories, attachment style has been reliably demonstrated to depend almost exclusively on environmental factors rather than a mix of environmental and biological influences (Fearon & Roisman, 2017).

In general, a father who supports a child in feeling safe, seen, soothed, and secure increases the likelihood that the child will develop a secure attachment style towards their father (Siegel, 2020; Siegel & Bryson, 2011). Achieving these four foundational tenets of secure attachment with a child is the outcome of intentional-responsive fathers. Intentional-responsive fatherhood, therefore, cannot exist without the relationship between a father and a child where the father is providing the platform for secure attachment. While intentional-responsive fatherhood emphasizes the importance of secure attachment and positive involvement, it is also essential to consider the complex emotional and psychological effects that the transition to fatherhood can have on men themselves.

Effects of Fatherhood

The transition to fatherhood can result in many effects upon the individual who comes to reside in this role. Not all of these effects are positive. Qualitative studies into the transition towards fatherhood for men has revealed experiential themes of loneliness, invisibility, and isolation (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2020). Paternal postpartum depression has been a reliably noted element during the transition to fatherhood, occurring in roughly 10% of the population (Adamsons et al., 2022; Scarff, 2019; Wang et al., 2021). Although positive parenting behaviours aren't unique to mothers or fathers, as growing evidence suggests that children respond similarly to the same types of behaviours from both parents (Fagan et al., 2014), it is still true that the experience of taking on these parenting behaviours may be experienced uniquely between men and women. This could be due to factors like societal expectations, identity, or personal background. This is to say that the experience of fatherhood, from the perspective of fathers, may be unique from the experience of

motherhood for mothers. Even if parenting leads to similar outcomes for children regardless of gender roles, each parent's experience can still be unique. A chance of uniqueness implies that researchers cannot carelessly equate the two experiences of parenthood and must acknowledge the differences.

An example of specific biological and behavioural differences associated with this transition was published in 2019 by Rajhans et al. Differences in paternal and maternal behaviour have been associated with sex differences in the past (Feldman, 2003). Although correlational, data presented by Rajhans et al. (2019) show that the neural activity for fathers in the presence of their own infant is different than the neural activity of the mother. Hormonal changes, such as an increase in prolactin and oxytocin, are present in both mother and father, however a father's testosterone levels decrease as they witness their own infant, whereas mother's testosterone levels increase. In addition, there are differences in the correlated neural structural changes which occur for biological men and women who are engaged with their infant repeatedly over time. The volume of the orbitofrontal cortex for fathers decreasing over time occurs concurrently with the increase of the orbitofrontal cortex volume for mothers. Lastly, there are noted interactional differences between the parental sexes and their children, such as the way that fathers-infant pairs engage in exploratory play more frequently than mothers-infant pairs. The cumulative effect of these differences in neural structural changes, and hormonal influences, may contribute to distinct paternal and maternal experience of the same caregiving styles. This unique experience may, in turn, shape how each parent interacts with and supports their child's development.

Rajhans et al. (2019) suggest that existing research largely supports the idea that many of these hormones have effects that differ by sex, and these differences are linked to variations in caregiving behaviours. For fathers, hormonal and structural changes are associated with more frequent engagement in stimulating and exploratory forms of play with their infants. In contrast, for mothers, these biological changes are connected to more affectionate and nurturing interactions with their infants. An oversimplification of this data that could result in an incomplete understanding of differences between fathers and mothers as new data continues to emerge (Rajhans et al., 2019), but it draws attention to how

fatherhood may be experienced differently than motherhood, even as influenced by the changes in neural structure.

Given the correlational nature of the evidence, a nuanced understanding of fathers' unique parenting experiences is necessary. Although mothers and fathers may exhibit similar behaviours to foster secure parent-infant attachment, the lived experience of enacting these behaviours may differ due to gendered roles. Adamsons et al. (2022) highlight that fathers can offer distinct contributions to their children's development when positively involved in infant care. In the context of intentional-responsive fathering, the processes through which fathers construct meaning may differ from those of mothers. This study seeks to explore those meaning-making processes in fathers, even as both parents aim toward similar attachment outcomes.

Fathers in Families

Many fathers live with and actively participate in the activities necessary to raise their child alongside that child's mother. For this current study, the focus is placed upon those men who are biological fathers, who are married and cohabitate with their spouse, and whose spouse is the biological mother of their child. Due to the focus of this study, it is therefore necessary to ground the understanding of fatherhood within the context of family and the parental dyad that fathers co-construct with mothers. By attending to the nature of how one experiences the transition to parenthood, and the parental dyad literature, a better understanding of how fathers and mothers interact in relation to a child will be made clear. This understanding will finalize the basis for the current research question, further display the gap in the research which must be filled, show how little researchers know about the fatherhood experience of spousal support, and form the bridge to the methodology section of this thesis.

Transition to Fatherhood

The transition to fatherhood can be immensely challenging and rewarding for first time fathers (Baldwin et al., 2018; Habib, 2012; Munsayac et al., 2025). Of the readily available literature, several themes and key points stand out as relevant towards the current study which seeks to better understand fathers' lived experience of spousal support. Due to the potential difference between the intention behind one spouse offering support as an

action, and the reception of it, spousal support is defined broadly for this study. *Spousal support* is regarded as any unintentional or intentional noted interactional patterns—through which fathers are supported and encouraged to participate in child-rearing—as they navigate life’s demands, sustain their relationship, and foster care for their child. The transition to fatherhood, much like fatherhood in general, is considered to be a complex and changing, consisting of a diverse range of possible experiences (Habib, 2012; Munsayac et al., 2025). During the mother’s pregnancy and the immediate postnatal period, new fathers experience anxiety disorders and depressive disorders more frequently than any other mental health ailment (Baldwin et al., 2018). Depending upon the global origin of the study, the prevalence of anxiety disorders for new fathers ranges from 2%-18% during the prenatal to postnatal periods. On average, depressive disorders, including paternal postpartum depression, is experienced by 10% of new fathers (Baldwin et al., 2018). The frequency and rise in severity for both anxiety and depressive disorders in new fathers underscores the finding that pregnancy, and the initial transition to fatherhood, is often regarded as the most difficult period of psychological reorganization for men’s sense of self (Habib, 2012; Munsayac et al., 2025). The process of enduring the mother’s labour and birth, however, is regarded as the most emotionally sensitive time for new fathers.

Fathers generally experience a heightened sense of both the positive and negative emotions during the process of their spouses’ pregnancy, delivery, and proximate post partum life (Baldwin et al., 2018). Many of these emotionally sensitive elements are associated with an increase susceptibility to emotional distress. Feelings of high anxiety, ambivalence, hostility, confusion, and alienation are all common attributes of the pressures faced by fathers during their psychological reorganization. Similarly, intense feelings of pleasure, a profound depth of affection, fulfillment, wonder, and exhilaration are also common experiences for new fathers during their child’s birth (Baldwin et al., 2018). Despite the value that this information provides, few studies in the transition to fatherhood literature have aimed to explore first time fathers’ experiences of the transition to fatherhood (Habib, 2012). Of those that have, most have ignored the qualitative dimension of fathering.

The majority of studies that have been conducted to understand the transition to fatherhood are quantitative (Baldwin et al., 2018; Habib, 2012). Additionally, these studies

often do not focus exclusively on fathers. Instead, they tend to center on marital satisfaction within the spousal dyad and maternal health in relation to the father (Habib, 2012). One of the most replicable findings focused on marital satisfaction highlights the positive correlation between the level of maternal relationship satisfaction and paternal competence (Habib, 2012). The paternal competence here refers to both the marital relationship strength and the fathers' successful adaptation to parenthood. It is interesting to note that even for the elements most understood about fatherhood, such as paternal competence, almost nothing is known about the experience from the father's perspective. The inquisitive incentive for fatherhood research seems to routinely lose momentum once there is sufficient understanding of how fatherhood elements impact children or mothers. The fathers themselves, their experience, is rarely considered deeply.

The few qualitative studies that review the experiences of men as they transition to be fathers indicate that this transition is often accompanied by both elated and fearful emotional responses (Baldwin et al., 2018; Habib, 2012; Munsayac et al., 2025). Many new and expectant fathers withdraw from engaging with the preparatory work of parenthood when they experience these fearful emotions (Baldwin et al., 2018). This withdrawal results in subsequent feelings of helplessness and exclusion from the process. Consequently, many of these fathers do not bond with their children quickly once they are born (Baldwin et al., 2018). The adoption of intentional-responsive fatherhood behaviours, with a general insistence that quality of time spent with a child is more important than sheer quantity for the sake of bonding, appears to take longer for fathers who experience these intense moments of fear and anxiety during their spouse's pregnancy and postnatal care (Baldwin et al., 2018). Nevertheless, when new fathers' expectations around childcare are managed and their involvement is encouraged, children tend to benefit, as fathers gain confidence in their caregiving abilities. These individual experiences of new fathers do not occur in isolation but are shaped by broader relational and societal dynamics—particularly within the parental dyad, where traditional gendered expectations continue to influence perceptions and divisions of caregiving responsibilities.

Parental Dyad

As fathers, men are at times considered relationally incompetent towards their children and require women to guide them in childcare activities (Schmitz, 2016). This view of fatherhood persists, even though fathers have become increasingly involved in parenting since at least the 1950s. The idea that fathers must be guided towards childcare, or that they are less competent in childcare than their spousal counterparts, is partially supported by both parental and paid labour imbalance data. Although there have been sociocultural shifts in the expectations for the responsibilities of fatherhood, fatherhood involvement continues to lag behind that of motherhood involvement. The disparity between motherhood and fatherhood involvement at home with children exists despite mothers working increasingly comparable hours in paid professional positions (Altenburger et al., 2018; Aytac & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2024; Olsavsky et al., 2020; Trowell & Etchegoyen, 2002). This labour imbalance, where women contribute greater hours towards childcare, despite also working professionally, has been observed internationally (Schulz, 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). Within this context, mothers are often regarded as the expert parent within the parental dyad (Morman & Floyd, 2006).

In contrast to this data, since the 1950s, fathers themselves have become increasingly willing and vocally supportive of the idea that fathers are to care for their children through actions which could be considered intentional-responsive fathering (Diniz et al., 2021). Additionally, contemporary fathers often replace their leisure time away from work with time spent with their child (McGill, 2014). Modern fathers generally do not reduce their paid work hours to take on more childcare responsibilities. However, they are increasingly willing to adjust other aspects of their lifestyle to meet societal expectations. These expectations now include taking on a more active and complex caregiving role, in addition to their traditional role as provider or breadwinner (McGill, 2014). Fathers may be unwilling to reduce their work hours to spend more time with their children at home because of real or perceived barriers—such as concerns about the family's financial stability (McGill, 2014). However, it is possible that other factors, such as the pattern of interactions within a parental dyad, also influences the engagement a father contributes to childcare.

New mothers and fathers often cope with the stress of a new-born child dyadically (Alves et al., 2020). While the particular stresses mothers and fathers face could be unique (Diniz et al., 2021), the way that couples adapt to emotional and parental stress has been widely studied and assessed to be governed by a couple-based approach (Alves et al., 2020). In this approach, known as dyadic coping, one partner's stress affects the other. Father-infant attachment tends to be more secure when the coparenting relationship is supportive and the couple manages stress effectively (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). This finding, combined with increasing societal pressure on new fathers to reduce work hours and participate more equally in childcare, might lead to the expectation that the childcare labour gap in contemporary North American families will decrease. Despite this, progress toward a parenting arrangement where mothers and fathers share equal opportunities to securely bond with their child seems to have stalled (Sullivan et al., 2018). Given this context, it is important to consider that other factors may be influencing the shift in fathers' involvement with their children. To better understand these stalled changes in fathers' involvement, it is important to examine family dynamics that influence parenting roles—particularly the concept of maternal gatekeeping within the parenting dyad.

Maternal Gatekeeping Factors

The nature and quality of the parenting dyad can affect other relationships in a family system (Aytaç-DiCarlo & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2025; Bornstein, 2019). These effects extend most quickly to the children that are under the care of the parental dyad. Positive developmental outcomes for children increase when a parenting dyad works cooperatively to engage with their children in a manner that does not undermine or create a competition between the parents themselves (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Family system theorists have suggested that maternal gatekeeping is one factor which could influence the extent to which fathers engage with their children (Altenburger et al., 2018; Aytac & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2024; Bornstein, 2019; Cannon et al., 2008; Olsavsky et al., 2020). Maternal gatekeeping is a set of interactions between mothers and fathers, where mothers are theorized to have influence over fathers' childcare behaviours (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). Maternal gatekeeping has been defined as the maternal influence over paternal behaviour through three dimensions; (a) control, (b) encouragement, and (c) discouragement (Fagan et al., 2014; Puhlman & Pasley,

2013). Control refers to the limits mothers set around childcare, while encouragement and discouragement refer to the actions mothers take intending to increase or decrease the engagement between a father and child. Encouragement may look like giving positive feedback while discouragement may look like giving negative feedback on the father's efforts to engage with their child within the limits of control. The Maternal Gatekeeping scale (Fagan & Barnett, 2003) measures how much mothers enact, and fathers receive, maternal gatekeeping behaviours. The development of this reliable scale shows that aspects of maternal gatekeeping are consistent enough to be systematically observed and reported. By quantifying these behaviours, the scale allows researchers and practitioners to translate the theory into measurable data.

When a theory can be supported and explored through reliable data, it becomes more than just an abstract idea—it becomes a practical tool that can inform interventions and influence parenting research and practice. However, this scale—and much of the maternal gatekeeping research—has been developed primarily from the mother's perspective (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). This means that the father's viewpoint is often underrepresented or overlooked. Subsequent studies of maternal gatekeeping have shown that many father-related factors, such as parenting self-confidence, traditional beliefs about fatherhood, and overall psychological health, generally have little impact on whether maternal gatekeeping occurs (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). The one notable exception is when fathers have low parenting self-efficacy the likelihood of maternal gatekeeping behaviours may increase (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Thomas & Holmes, 2020).

Maternal gatekeeping is an important factor in fatherhood research, especially as the theory is applied in counseling settings. Even when controlling for factors like unemployment, depressive symptoms (which relate to lower parenting self-efficacy), education level, income, living arrangements, and marital status, maternal gatekeeping continues to significantly influence fathers' engagement with their children (Fagan & Cherson, 2017). The negative and discouraging aspects of maternal gatekeeping have been largely overlooked (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020) and deserve more attention. Gate closing behaviours, such as discouragement, have recently been noted to be positively associated with a mothers' attitude towards traditional gender roles (Aytaç-DiCarlo &

Schoppe-Sullivan, 2025). Additionally, there is a lack of research on how fathers perceive maternal gatekeeping—especially how well-intentioned spousal support might sometimes be seen as a barrier by fathers. This is particularly important given findings by Fagan and Cherson (2017), who showed that fathers' interpretations of spousal support affect their involvement. When support aligns with a father's own parenting goals, his engagement with the child increases. However, if the support pushes goals that do not match the father's, it can reduce his involvement (Fagan & Cherson, 2017).

The present study simultaneously addresses two critical gaps in the literature that could be explored by investigating fathers' lived experiences of spousal support. First, there is a lack of understanding regarding how fathers interpret the spousal support they receive, despite the importance of this interpretation for paternal engagement. A qualitative approach could provide valuable insights into how different types of spousal support are experienced and how these experiences influence fathers' behaviours. Second, as noted earlier, there is currently no comprehensive account of how fathers make meaning of maternal gatekeeping factors in general, including both discouragement and control. It is possible that, under certain circumstances, fathers may even perceive control and discouragement as forms of spousal support. The process of meaning-making appears to significantly influence the effects of subtypes of spousal support that have traditionally been viewed as synonymous, such as encouragement and facilitation. This lack of understanding about how fathers interpret the impact of maternal gatekeeping represents an overlooked area of research. By exploring fathers' experiences of receiving spousal support, future studies may help to redefine maternal gatekeeping concepts, enabling a more nuanced and applicable understanding of these dynamics.

Fatherhood involvement is influenced by many different and varied factors (Aytac & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2024; Bornstein, 2019; Cannon et al., 2008; Diniz et al., 2021). Much of how these factors affect fathers is still unknown. Exploring fathers' understanding of their experiences with spousal support will significantly influence both the conceptualization and application of maternal gatekeeping theory. It is essential to appropriately consider the nuances of fathers' experiences within the parental dyad. Such research has the potential to inform and improve the practice of couple and family therapy, particularly in relation to

enhancing father engagement. Ultimately, this will contribute to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of fatherhood. Therefore, the primary aim of the current study is to explore fathers' lived experiences of spousal support. Through this research I will strive to answer the question "What are first-time fathers' experiences of spousal support?" Pursuing this question, I hope to (a) develop a nuanced understanding of how fathers make meaning of received spousal support, and (b) understand the current role of fatherhood in relation to the expectation of paternal childcare activities.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The following section will outline the underlying paradigm for the present study, the methodological assumptions that come with the paradigm, and the influences that this paradigm will have on the resulting research. I will also explain why I chose the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method and describe why this method is appropriate for the proposed research question.

Paradigm and Methodology

A *paradigm* is a set of stated beliefs that outline first principals for how the world is conceptualized (Guba & Lincoln, 1994; Pretorius, 2024; Racher & Robinson, 2003). These beliefs are assembled to construct a particular worldview that provides the foundation for the application of research methodologies. Within each paradigm, the *ontology* defines what is real, whereas the *epistemology* defines how an individual who seeks to know more interacts with what is real. The paradigm of constructivism seems best suited to create the foundation for the present study for the reasons outlined below. The ontology of constructivism states that multiple realities of the same experience exist simultaneously (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). These realities are constructed between and within peoples. These realities, which exist simultaneously to one another, are all equally true. Epistemologically, researchers who conduct studies from a constructivist paradigm view the reality of their research findings as being created through the process of research (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). For the constructivist, the categories of ontology and epistemology begin to blend into one. Reality, and interaction with it, are one and the same. Methodologically this results in researchers pursuing dialogue with participants to elicit individual constructions of understanding. Due to the nature of the present study, where I am intent on describing the meaning making process that fathers experience, the methodologically prescribed dialogue would facilitate this process of understanding. Semi-structured interviews appropriately scaffold the process of illuminating each fathers' own understanding of their experience.

Likewise, a constructivist lens leaves space for a co-creative and iterative meaning making process, where my understanding of how the fathers in this study make sense of their experience may directly lead into further interpretation. This interpretive process is facilitated

by the constructivist lens. *Hermeneutic* techniques, interpretive meaning making techniques, are often employed to align with the constructivist paradigmatic assumptions above. The hermeneutic techniques work symbiotically with the interpretative process described. Most of these techniques are qualitative in nature (Sechrest & Sidani, 1995). Knowledge created from the foundation of a constructivist paradigm is not easily generalized as each reality is understood as unique and true by themselves. Efforts to compare the experiential themes of one participant, beyond the studied individual and to another, is done with care and diligence to avoid carelessly conflating two different experiences. A constructivist paradigm provides the most fitting foundation for the present study, as it supports a nuanced, co-constructed exploration of fathers' lived experiences while honoring the individuality and complexity of each participant's reality.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The method employed for this study is Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). IPA is a qualitative method used access the lived experience of participants. The purpose of this qualitative methodology is not to measure, but rather to understand (Dodgson, 2017). Specifically, IPA is designed to understand how participants make sense of their experiences (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). IPA fits with constructivism as it is well suited to help my pursuit in understanding (a) the embodied subjective nature of reality, (b) the interpretation of gathered data, and (c) the nuanced experiences that people encounter during fatherhood. A tolerance for these three elements is necessary so that the method can account for the ontological and epistemological assumptions of generated reality from constructivism. To understand fathers' lived experience of spousal support, I must be able to capture and interpret how fathers make meaning of input from their spouse during an emotionally laden, often tumultuous, difficult, and psychologically straining period in their life (Baldwin et al., 2018; Habib, 2012). As some acts of spousal support may actively disrupt or dissuade fathers from engaging in bonding behaviours with their child, causing distress if the father hopes to form a bond with the child, research in this area requires a method that can appropriately contend with emotional moments of tension. IPA is especially potent in the pursuit of understanding participants when researchers intend to access the lived experience of ambiguity, tension, or the emotional meaning-making moments of an individual's life (Smith

& Nizza, 2022). IPA is an *experiential* method, concerned with the participant's lived experience. The IPA method is founded upon the theoretical underpinnings of Husserl's phenomenology, Heidegger's hermeneutics, and a focus towards idiographic data. Based upon the intent of this study to capture the ambiguity, tension, and emotional meaning-making moments of first-time fathers, IPA is the best suited method for this study. To fully appreciate the strength of IPA in the context of this thesis's research question, I will briefly outline the theoretical underpinnings of IPA. I will conclude by commenting upon the importance of considering the choice of method and paradigm with intentionality.

Husserl's *phenomenology*, the philosophy of experience, is grounded in the idea that people encounter themselves, and others, through lived experience (Ashworth, 2016). Husserl's phenomenology assumes that understanding the pre-reflective, subjective, embodied, lived experience known as the *lifeworld* is of key importance to understand an individual. Husserl believed that as individuals live through and within their lifeworld, they may not derive explicit meaning from their experiences, but that this lack of explicit meaning does not diminish the importance of the lifeworld. The lifeworld serves as the foundation for understanding human experience. From the perspective of phenomenology, the job of the researcher is to encounter the participants within their lifeworld. Husserl outlined that to be accurate in encountering a participant, researchers should be aware of their biases and seek to limit the extent that they influence data interpretation (Ashworth, 2016; Smith & Nizza, 2022). To accomplish this, a researcher must set aside their assumptions. This process of setting aside assumptions is known as *bracketing*. Through encountering a participant in their lifeworld, while bracketing one's own assumptions, Husserl believed that researchers could access the core of conscious experiences.

IPA is founded upon the idea that accessing the core conscious experiences of a participant is a fundamental and necessary aspect of gaining deep understanding. For the present study, it is the core conscious experience of how the father understands and receives spousal support that may influence their engagement with their child. Phenomenology and the insistence that researchers must strive for deep understanding of a participant's lifeworld enhances IPA. Using IPA and its underlying phenomenological theory helped me develop a deeper understanding of how fathers consciously experience spousal support.

IPA is also supported by the theoretical structure of *hermeneutics*, the theory of interpretation. Hermeneutics is allied with the pursuit of phenomenology, and the paradigm of constructivism, to capture the core of conscious experiences of participants. By incorporating hermeneutics, IPA becomes an interpretive endeavour (Smith & Nizza, 2022). The interpretation of a participant's lifeworld requires a *double hermeneutic*, a process where the researcher tries to make sense of how a participant interprets their lifeworld. This process is invaluable as it allows researchers to read into the lived experience of participants beyond the stated explicit meanings that are described to deepen the yielded understanding. As stated earlier, individuals do not always derive explicit meaning from the events they experience. Although participants may not explicitly state a given meaning related to an experience, the way they talk about it, or the ideas that they link to it, may contribute towards how it is interpreted. This interpretation process allows for additional meaning to be extracted from participants' lived experiences. These additional extractions are clarified and audited by the participants themselves to ensure that a researcher is not misunderstanding the participant.

As fathers relayed their understanding and engagement in the meaning making process related to receiving spousal support, I had the chance to interpret what they have said, in the context of how they said it. I used this interpretation to grasp at not only what fathers said, but also the intentions behind what they said. This helped me generate valuable insights beyond the explicit meaning that participants provided during the interviews. Through the double hermeneutic, meaningful lived experiences were recognized as impactful despite the potential lack of explicit awareness on the part of the participants. The goal of hermeneutics within the IPA framework is to dig deeper into a surface level account of a lived experience (Smith & Nizza, 2022).

Lastly, IPA is solely focused on the *idiographic*, the study of what is particular rather than general. The intention of the idiographic approach is to capture the detail of specific moments, with one participant at a time (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Single cases, when looked at in detail, can reveal nuances and key insights which would otherwise be lost in data collection. From this idiographic, intensive, case by case investigation, where a researcher is focused upon what is particular rather than general, researchers can then move slowly towards comparing across cases to illuminate similarities, differences, and patterns of

experience. The particulars of this progression to more general statements for the present study were done tentatively and is explained in greater detail throughout the IPA analysis procedure section of this thesis. While more general statements can be made, they are always done with a consideration for the various ways in which participants may have expressed a common experience differently (Smith & Nizza, 2022). In this way, the emphasis on the idiographic data is a preventative measure so that the potency of individuals' experience is not lost in the move towards statements that capture the experience of several participants. IPA's approach towards idiographic data emphasizes the importance of the individual and the necessity for nuanced understanding. Using IPA as the method to draw forth first-time fathers' experiences of spousal support honoured the unique differences and similarities the participants' lifeworld holds. The process, and importance of distinguishing divergences between participants, is covered in the IPA methods section of this thesis.

The theoretical foundation for IPA, the intentions of the research question, and the assumptions of the constructivist paradigm, unites with few issues. The paradigm of constructivism in combination with the method of IPA allowed for a deep understating of research participants in this study. I intentionally chose the IPA method and the constructivist paradigm for this study so that my ability to appropriately address my research question was increased (Reicher, 2000), and to reinforce the trustworthiness of the qualitative research design (Dodgson, 2017). By choosing this method and paradigm with intentionality, I was better able to capture the lived experience of spousal support for fathers.

Participant Recruitment

The use of the IPA method in this study is informed by the guidelines and recommendations laid forward by Smith and Nizza (2022) as well as works from Smith et al. (2022). The following is a brief explanation of the IPA method in relation to participant recruitment. IPA participant sample sizes tend to be small, with an expectation that five participants be included for a master's level thesis (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). Smith et al. (2022) outline the risk that the quality of IPA analysis may decrease as the number of participants increases. The fewer participants included, the greater the assumed analytical rigour for each transcript. In addition, as the IPA method focuses on a specific given experience, participants should be more similar demographically than they are diverse.

In this way, the sample should consist of a small set of fathers (five to seven) who have all experienced spousal support in relation to their child (Smith et al., 2022). The purpose of proposing a small, demographically homogeneous sample is to further accentuate individual differences in the meaning making process that participants undergo while having similar experiences. The differences between these meaning making processes will be revealed through the in-depth analysis of each participant and further cross-case analysis.

The focus of the present study is on fathers' experiences of spousal support. According to Statistics Canada (2023), the average age of first-time biological fathers in Canada in 2011 was 28.3 years. To ensure a feasible recruitment process within the timeframe of a master's-level thesis, the eligible age range for participants was expanded around this average. The final sample consisted of five first-time biological fathers between the ages of 22 and 40. This range was selected in relation to the ages of the participants' children. No participants had become fathers before the age of 20, as fatherhood under 20 may involve unique circumstances beyond the scope of this study (Meleagrou-Hitchens, 2020). Similarly, fathers older than 40 were excluded to avoid introducing variables unrelated to the study's focus.

Participants were also included on the further following criteria: being fluent in English, biologically male, the biological father of their child, married to and cohabiting with the biological mother of their child, and raising their first child, who had to be born within 12 months of the interview. The study was grounded in an exploration of spousal support as perceived by fathers pursuing intentional-responsive fatherhood. All demographic information is included in Table 1.

Fathers were excluded from participation if they self-reported being in an ongoing abusive relationship with their spouse, seeking separation or divorce, or involved in a legal custody dispute regarding parental rights or time spent with their child. To maintain a focused examination of first-time fatherhood, participants who had more than one child at the time of the interview were excluded. This also applied to first-time fathers of twins, as their experiences may differ significantly from those of other participants. A separate study would be better suited to capture the unique experiences of fathers of multiples.

Table 1***Participant Demographics for Spousal Support Study***

	Gary	AWL	Sonny	John	Jason
Participants' Age (Years)	32	34	37	39	Unconfirmed
Participants' Spouse's Age (Years)	29	28	37	37	Unconfirmed
Participants' Child's Age (Months)	12	9	10	4	5
Ethnicity (Self Identified)	Caucasian	Caucasian	Indo-Canadian	English, Caucasian	Unconfirmed
Annual Household Income	\$150,000	\$200,000	\$900,000	\$200,000	Unconfirmed
Household Composition	Participant, Spouse, & Child	Participant, Spouse, & Child	Participant, Spouse, & Child	Participant, Spouse, & Child	Unconfirmed
Highest Level of Education	Some College Education	Doctorate Degree	Doctor of Medicine	College Diploma	Unconfirmed
Educational System	Canadian	Canadian Undergraduate Degree, USA Doctorate	Canadian Doctor of Medicine, USA Master of Public Health	Unconfirmed	Unconfirmed
Current Province	British Columbia, Canada	British Columbia, Canada	British Columbia, Canada	Alberta, Canada	Alberta, Canada

Selecting five fathers for the study may appear arbitrary, however the IPA method suggests a way to assess when enough data, or participants, have been gathered. Common methods of assessing for when enough data has been gathered, like saturation, cannot be used for IPA. *Saturation*, the point where no new themes or insights emerge from the data, relies on a predetermined end to the data analysis, or a finite number of data analysis stages, so that the quality and purpose of saturation makes sense in the context of the study. However, due to the iterative, double hermeneutic nature of IPA analysis, the process of generating new insights or themes does not have a defined end point. The IPA analytic process could, theoretically, continue forever (Brocki & Wearden, 2006). Instead, while using purposive sampling to find a homogeneous small sample of participants, in-depth analysis takes place to develop a deep understanding of each participant's meaning making experience that is nuanced, coherent, and comparable across participants. This nuanced understanding was consistently revisited to ensure that it addresses the specific research question. These three requirements of understanding have been fulfilled by the current study, and the data can be presented suitably in a persuasive manner. This demonstrates that the IPA analysis is sufficiently complete and that the five participants gathered were sufficient for this purpose.

All participants in this study had experienced spousal support factors, such as being encouraged to increase their engagement with their child in ways that may or may not have aligned with their own parenting goals. Examples included instances where the mother encouraged the father to play with the child, teach a developmentally appropriate lesson, or facilitate an activity the child wished to engage in. Due to the small number of participants needed and the focused nature of the study, purposive homogeneous snowball sampling was employed (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Although referrals from current participants (or gatekeepers to potential participant groups) can be rare, this snowball strategy remained a strong and preferred recruitment method. In addition to word-of-mouth referrals, online recruitment posters (see Appendix A) were uploaded to Canadian-based fathers' groups on social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram. These posters explained the study's nature and purpose. Physical recruitment posters (also in Appendix A) were displayed at local community centres to initiate the snowball sampling process once initial participants were identified.

Once prospective participants made contact via the email address provided on the recruitment posters, follow-up emails were sent outlining the consent form and the inclusion/exclusion criteria. After participants passed the screening process (see Appendix B) and completed the study requirements, they were offered a \$25.00 CAD electronic gift card to an online, Canadian-accessible store as an honorarium for their time. This honorarium was provided upon completion of a secondary consent form (see Appendix C). Examples of gift cards included options for Amazon.ca, BestBuy.ca, and Walmart.ca.

Data Collection and Analysis

In the following section will outline my relationship with the research topic, describe the ways in which I collected data, provide the rationale for the interview guide (see Appendix D for interview guide), and outline of how the data has been ethically recorded and stored. This section will also elaborate upon the IPA transcription and analysis procedure, including a discussion on how exploratory notes will be made. This section will delineate between descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes. I will outline the stages of writing experiential statements, the collecting and clustering of these statements, and the compiling of the emerging themes. Lastly, I will comment on the procedure of cross-case analysis to address the resulting complexity of including five participants instead of one.

Personal Stance

Much of the context behind my personal stance towards fatherhood research can be found in the introduction to this thesis. Beyond the context already provided, I believe that fatherhood research is a vital source of untapped understanding for individual and familial health. I contend that fathers are unique from mothers, and that this uniqueness is important to consider in relation to fathers' health and wellbeing concerns. It may also be important to consider unique factors of fatherhood for the sake of familial health and wellbeing. The differences between fathers and mothers do not result in the essential inclusion of a mother and a father in the caretaking of a child for the sake of that child reaching developmental milestones or achieving extraordinary things. The differences do, however, indicate that an understanding of only mothers' health and wellbeing in the context of a child is not enough to understand familial health. The fathers' understanding and experience must also be equally considered.

My worldview of reality's ontology and epistemology is akin to critical realism. The lens of critical realism combines a realistic stance towards ontology with a relativistic stance towards epistemology. In this way, ontologically, the critical realist believes in a single independent reality, but epistemologically recognizes the limitations and context-dependent nature of human experience (Gorski, 2013). Through adopting a critical stance towards interpreting what is real, critical realism emphasizes the importance of continual questioning and discovery. Categorizing my current stance within research with this worldview is a consequence of my own developmental experiences, my faith, and my practice with counselling clients. This worldview allows me to simultaneously believe that there is a single reality and truth grounded in my faith of the Christian God, while continuing to honour that each person's understanding or interpretation of truth and reality may be different. I believe that the difference in the interpretation of reality is simply a consequence of human limitations. This worldview allows me to hold my own limitations with grace, and witness others without a sense of judgement that may otherwise blind the research process to come.

As stated previously, the chosen constructivist paradigm and IPA method has its own underlying principles for ontology and epistemology. I appreciate that my own worldview does not fully align with the constructivist paradigm. While I believe in one truth and one reality, constructivism is the position that infinite realities exist equally. This posed a risk to my interpretations of the data that have been collected and analyzed (Smith et al., 2022). I continually engaged in bracketing practices to reduce the manner in which I knowingly influenced the research data beyond the expected scope of the analytic procedure outlined in IPA.

Data Collection & Storage

Once the screening interviews had taken place and participants were selected for the extended interview process, they were asked to return their signed consent forms prior to the in-depth interview. A date and time for each interview was scheduled based on the availability of both the interviewee. The interviews followed a semi-structured format (see Appendix D for the interview guide). This approach yielded rich, in-depth, first-person accounts of the participants' experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Interviews were conducted either over Zoom or in person and lasted between 42 to 63 minutes. At the beginning of each

interview, I explained to participants that they were the experts of their own experience and that my role was to listen. I reminded them that they were free to take as much time as needed to respond, and that there was no pressure or rush throughout the process.

Throughout the interviews, I monitored for non-verbal, paraverbal, and verbal signs of discomfort. While achieving a deep understanding of experiential meaning-making is the goal of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), this was never pursued at the expense of participant wellbeing (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Interviews were paused or stopped entirely if a participant showed signs of distress. The resulting data—including Zoom-generated transcripts, audio, and video recordings—were stored under pseudonyms selected by the participants to protect their identities. One participant elected to be referred to by his legal name for this study. Zoom interviews were downloaded within 48 hours of completion and deleted from the encrypted Trinity Western University Zoom account.

During data analysis, all transcripts, notes, and participant-related materials were stored either in a locked physical file cabinet at my residence or under encryption and password protection on my personal computer. An encrypted external hard drive was also used to store study-related data, and it was regularly backed up to prevent data loss in the event of computer failure.

IPA Analysis Procedure

The IPA analysis procedure will be laid out in detail below. After the full explanation, an example of how a single excerpt from John's transcript was taken through each level of analysis will be provided.

Each interview recording produced a verbatim transcript, including indications of long pauses and marked paraverbal and non-verbal elements (e.g., sighs, long breaths, changes in tone, pitch, or intensity). Not all prosodic information was necessarily included in the IPA transcript (Smith & Nizza, 2022); for example, natural intonation patterns and accents influencing pronunciation or verbalization were excluded when deemed irrelevant. However, elements such as stress, intonation changes, shifts in rhythm, and pauses were documented.

Initial transcripts were generated using Zoom's transcription software. I reviewed each transcript to assess its accuracy, corrected discrepancies to match the original audio files, and

then anonymized the final versions. Each line and page of the finalized transcripts was numbered to facilitate easy reference and notation during subsequent stages of analysis. Once these preparatory steps were completed, I proceeded with data analysis.

The purpose of IPA analysis is to understand the participants' point of view and how they, as participants, made sense of their experiences (Smith & Nizza, 2022). As mentioned previously, the process is idiographic and a single participant's data should be regarded as valuable by itself. The analysis process is also iterative, meaning that previous interpretive decisions made in relation to the data from one participant can change upon further reflection. Each transcript from each participant was first examined individually before proceeding to cross-case analysis. I began by reading through each transcript while simultaneously listening to the corresponding audio recording at least once to ensure the transcript's accuracy. This initial read-through also served to deepen my familiarity with the participant's reported experience.

Copies of each transcript were digitally written upon, allowing me to annotate them directly. This method supported the analytical process by encouraging note-taking that was grounded in the specific occurrences and language of the transcript itself. Writing directly on the transcripts helped to align my interpretative thoughts with the precise phrases or ideas that prompted them (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Additionally, this approach simplified the re-familiarization process, making it easier to revisit previously analyzed transcripts during later stages of the iterative analysis. Notes placed adjacent to the relevant text sections enabled clearer understanding and more efficient interpretation as the analysis progressed.

The next stage of analysis involved reading the transcript of one participant and writing notes based on what intrigued me. While reading, I recorded my reactions to elements that piqued my interest along one margin. These reactionary notes focused on anything that appeared potentially significant or meaningful. As a new researcher employing the IPA method, I followed the standard procedure for notetaking, which incorporates a blend of descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes to access deeper levels of analysis and track areas of interest (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022). I completed this stage iteratively, beginning with descriptive noting, followed by linguistic, and then conceptual noting. Descriptive notes summarized the explicit meanings participants assigned to people, places,

objects, events, and experiences. Linguistic notes captured how participants used language—including tone, repetition, pauses, and emphasis—to convey their experiences. Conceptual notes, particularly early in the process, were often framed as questions. These were designed to help me consider implicit or underlying meanings that may not have been directly stated but were prompted by my interpretative curiosity (Smith & Nizza, 2022). Once I had reviewed each transcript at least three times using this approach, I proceeded to generate experiential statements for that transcript.

Experiential statements are succinct ideas that encapsulated the meaning of an experience expressed by the participant within a section of the transcript. To formulate these statements, I drew upon the descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual notes I had previously recorded. As I wrote these statements, my focus shifted toward interpreting the participant's psychological process of meaning-making and the broader context from which it emerged. These statements also remained linked to the initial descriptive, linguistic, or conceptual notes to ensure analytic coherence. Once each transcript had been thoroughly examined, resulting in numerous experiential statements, I moved to the next stage of IPA analysis: clustering these statements into related categories. The purpose of this clustering is to distill the key features of each participant's experience, thereby clarifying how meaning was constructed. Through this process, experiential themes emerged from the grouped experiential statements. With clusters of experiential statements established, I then created a table of personal experiential themes for each participant. For each theme, I included the relevant experiential statements that supported it, along with the page and line number where the supporting evidence could be found in the transcript. A specific participant quote was also included to exemplify each experiential theme.

These steps encapsulate the initial analysis phase of IPA analysis. This process was repeated for each participant's transcript. Once a table of personal experiential themes had been created for each participant, I identified similarities, differences, and connections between each participant's unique table of experiential themes. While noticing potential similarities at the experiential theme level, I explored where differences lay among the experiential statement level of analysis. Through the comparisons across participants, drawn from individual experiential themes, I assembled a table of group experiential themes. This

table of group experiential themes accounted for the similarities between participant experiences by the convergence of individual experiential themes. The table of group experiential themes also still honoured the divergent manifestation of the individual experience which differed between individual experiential themes. This honouring of divergence was cultivated by quoting the participants and highlighting the unique manner through which they made meaning of their experience. This process of analysis was complicated and did not follow a linear progression. Overall, I guided the process of identifying group experiential themes using two underlying questions. These two guiding questions were, “What are the key aspects that explain what this experience is like for these people? What makes them similar to each other, and what makes them different?” (Smith & Nizza, 2022, p. 56). With these stages of analysis complete, I reflected upon if my understanding of the meaning making process for fathers’ experience of spousal support, and IPA analysis, is complete. I found that my interpretation of the meaning making experience was nuanced, coherent, and comparable across participants (Smith & Nizza, 2022). As these three requirements were fulfilled, I began drafting the summary of my findings.

Once I determined that the participants’ understandings were nuanced, coherent, and comparable across cases, I reapproached the individuals who had originally participated in the study. Four of the five participants, excluding Jason, were available for this follow-up debriefing session or email containing the relevant results. During these secondary interviews, I presented both the findings derived from each participant’s own interview and the broader group experiential themes and asked for the participants to affirm or dismiss the trustworthiness of the results. All four participants who participated in the secondary interviews or email exchanges confirmed the trustworthiness of the data presented.

John: From Transcript to Theme. The following provides a summary example of how a transcript excerpt was taken from initial audit through to final inclusion as an exemplar of a group experiential theme. First, his interview—which was 46 minutes and 49 seconds long—was initially transcribed by the program Zoom. I reviewed the transcript while listening to the audio to ensure accuracy, auditing the transcript for identifying information as I did so. Once this was complete began with the analysis stages. The 15th page of John’s transcript captures lines 461 through 493 of the participant’s recording. This page presents a detailed account from the participant. He describes how he experienced his spouse’s support as they coped with the emotions that arose after they initially overlooked their baby’s infection, allowing it to worsen before it was noticed. These lines elicited descriptive notes including, but not limited to:

- Both felt guilty,
- No blaming between spouses,
- Wife received husband’s admittance of feelings, of guilt,
- Spouse offers understanding,
- Not getting blamey about it, and
- Practical support, slightly different roles, both doing as much as they can.

These lines also were accompanied by the following linguistic notes, namely:

- Obviously, and guilty, stressed words, and
- Casual tone, played off, dismissed into relaxed voice.

Lastly, these lines brought about the following conceptual idea which appeared to capture the sentiment of the emotional cradle found within the spousal support from this instance:

- Doing one’s best, that is the expectation. Imperfect, but who isn’t? Not perfect, that’s okay.

From these notes, the following four experiential statements were created:

- Massive guilt about missed care requirement,
- Consolation from spouse to ease guilt,
- Acceptance of mistakes in attempts, and

- Proactive support bolstered through overlapping yet distinct spousal roles.

This process was repeated for every page of John's transcript, resulting in a total of 68 experiential statements, each capturing elements of the spousal support John reported. All statements, along with their line numbers and associated transcript excerpts, were printed out and individually sorted into alike categories. The physical printing, cutting, and sorting of the experiential statements allowed for greater ease in comparison and eventual allocation into a table of personal experiential themes (see Appendix H).

The third listed experiential statement above, acceptance of mistakes in attempts, was sorted into iteratively more precise categories alongside similar experiential statements from his transcript. This experiential statement is directly tied to the quote from lines 478 through 481 from John's transcript. It was retained as an exemplar of John's first individual theme of spousal support: John experiences his spouse's support as mitigating feelings of guilt, failure, and frustration. This first individual experiential theme of spousal support remained consistent throughout the analysis of the analysis of the other participants' data. Finally, once all participants' individual data were organized into tables of individual experiential themes (see Appendix F, G, H, I, and J), I began the process of cross-case analysis. This often involved an iterative approach, where initial rounds of sorting individual data left some potent experiential statements insufficiently represented. These statements were subsequently revisited and re-sorted to better highlight their significance before moving on to identify patterns across participants.

John's individual experiential theme of acceptance of mistakes in attempts was compared across participants to observe if there were similar experiences. This individual theme, containing was found to be similar in quality to that of the following individual themes from the other participants:

- Gary: Collaborative learning for boundary consolidation,
- Jason: Finding emotional resilience through spousal witnessing,
- Sonny: Tension of dependence in support, and
- AWL: Mitigation of guilt, failure, and frustration.

Each of these participants had multiple experiential statements which captured a distinct element of their spousal support. Some statements from one participant captured the majority of their experience to a greater extent than others. These statements were then used to exemplify one aspect of that participants experience. These collective examples, gathered from across the five participants, resulted in the table of group experiential themes (see Appendix K). This, in brief summary, is the process by which all the final results of the study were created.

Quality and Rigour

There are many ways to assess quality and rigour within qualitative research (Dodgson, 2017). The process of outlining practices of quality and rigour are generally designed to promote trustworthiness in results of the research conducted (Dodgson, 2017). This general guideline, that rigour and quality guidelines are seen as enhancing trustworthiness, is true for IPA (Smith, 2011a). For an IPA study to be regarded as trustworthy, the paper must be

- grounded in the theoretical framework of IPA discussed previously (phenomenological, hermeneutic, and ideographic),
- transparent and easily understood by readers,
- interesting, coherent, and plausible throughout analysis, and
- for a sample size of five to seven participants, include sample extracts from at least three participants for each described theme to show sufficient density of evidence (Smith, 2011a).

Beyond these four criteria for basic trustworthiness, authors can aim for an IPA paper to be excellent by achieving these three additional elements:

- unwavering in the pursuit of the research focus
- strong interviewing and data gathering paired with in-depth interpretation, and
- engaging a reader who is feels enlightened by the reading (Smith, 2011a)

If all of these elements are met, an IPA study may be regarded as having good quality (Nizza et al., 2021; Smith, 2011a, 2011b). A publication of this nature should include: (a) a narrative that is compelling, coherent, and persuasive, (b) deep experiential accounts, (c) clear relationships between the participants' words and resulting analysis, and (d) an

explicitly stated section for the patterns of convergence and divergence between participants' experiences (Nizza et al., 2021). These requirements, while numerous, offered me clear guidelines for rigour and quality in an IPA study as I sought to fulfill them all.

To enhance the trustworthiness of the study, I thoughtfully implemented active processes of self-reflection, consultation with supervisors, and detailed notetaking to ensure transparency in my research decisions. These strategies were employed to allow readers to follow the logic and reasoning that guided the research process from start to finish. Grounded in a constructivist paradigm, this study incorporated all of these practices in addition to meeting the quality criteria outlined by Smith (2011a, 2011b) and Nizza et al. (2021). Reflective writing and supervisory consultation supported the bracketing of my own expectations and experiences throughout the interview and analysis phases. This multilayered and iterative approach to ensuring rigour and quality aligned with the standards of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Ethical Considerations

Conducting this study required careful attention to several key ethical considerations to safeguard participants' well-being. Because the interviews explored sensitive topics—such as feelings of exclusion, frustration, or conflict within parenting dynamics—there was potential for emotional distress. Additionally, the personal nature of the shared experiences raised important privacy concerns. At the same time, participation offered potential benefits, including personal insight, validation, and the opportunity to feel heard in a supportive, structured environment. Participants' contributions aimed to enhance understanding of paternal involvement and spousal support, thereby informing improved support systems and counselling practices. If any participant experienced emotional distress during an interview, the session was paused or terminated, and they were directed to appropriate support services provided in the informed consent form (see Appendix E).

Prior to data collection, participants gave informed consent after being fully briefed on the study's purpose, procedures, and their right to withdraw at any point without consequence. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained by removing identifying details from transcripts and analysis. This is with the exception of one participant who asked to remain known by his legal name. All data were securely stored on Trinity Western

University's OneDrive and an encrypted external hard drive. In accordance with APA ethical standards, anonymized data will continue to be retained securely, and any personally identifiable information will be destroyed five years after the study's publication (American Psychological Association, 2020).

The study has undergone a rigorous ethical review and approval process by the Human Ethics Research Board at Trinity Western University to ensure compliance with ethical standards. While first-time fathers are not typically considered a vulnerable population, the sensitive nature of discussing family dynamics still required careful ethical consideration. Any pre-existing relationships between the researcher and participants is disclosed and managed to minimize bias. The study maintains complete transparency, avoiding any deception, and used secure and encrypted platforms for online data collection methods, such as Zoom, to protect participants' data. These measures ensured the study upholds high ethical standards, safeguarding participants' rights and well-being while preserving the integrity of the research process.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

In the following section, the findings from the above-described research are summarized. First, the group-level superordinate themes are presented, followed by an in-depth description of each subordinate experiential theme. These group themes emerged from the IPA analysis in response to the central question: What are first-time fathers' experiences of spousal support?

Group Experiential Themes

All data resulting from the five individual transcripts were organized to generate experiential themes for each participant (see Appendix F, G, H, I, and J). These individual themes were then analysed to develop three superordinate group experiential themes (see Appendix K). The resulting group themes were: (a) evaluating spousal support dependability, (b) opportunities for enhanced fatherhood role engagement and development, and (c) mediation of relief from the emotional burden of fatherhood (see Table 2). Each superordinate theme contains subordinate themes that reflect the individual differences among participants, despite the overarching similarity in their experiences. While the convergence of experiences is evident in the grouping of superordinate themes, the subordinate themes highlight meaningful nuances across participants. These nuances are further explored below. As is the case with subjective phenomena, the themes overlap, intersect, and remain interconnected. Each theme and subtheme will be discussed in detail, drawing on participants' experiential accounts to illustrate and deepen understanding of how spousal support is perceived. Participant quotes are included to substantiate the analysis and to center their voices in the interpretation. In an effort to preserve the integrity of participants' testimony, I have intentionally chosen not to integrate additional theoretical background into the analysis. Instead, the quotations themselves serve as the primary evidence of the participants' lived experiences.

Table 2***Group Experiential Themes for Spousal Support Study*****Group Experiential Theme 1. Evaluating spousal support dependability**

- 1a. Assuming and leaning in on available support to ease strain
- 1b. Evaluating and discovering areas to first develop independent coping

Group Experiential Theme 2. Opportunities for enhanced fatherhood role engagement and development

- 2a. Finding unpressured opportunity for role exploration and growth
- 2b. Finding pressure to create or define fathering role

Group Experiential Theme 3. Mediation of relief from the emotional burden of fatherhood

- 3a. Becoming a convergent point of burden
- 3b. Opening an avenue for displacing or alleviating burden

Theme 1: Evaluating Spousal Support Dependability

All the fathers in this study experienced an awareness of the limitations affecting the support they received. This awareness emerged as they conceptualized the extent to which spousal support was openly offered, and in some cases, through a deeper appreciation of what might restrict their own ability to effectively receive the support available to them. However, the process of evaluation differed among participants based on several key factors. These included: (a) their prior experiences with their spouse, (b) the influence of their child upon their spousal relationship, and (c) the personal standard they upheld to avoid becoming a burden to their spouse. Furthermore, these fathers considered—consciously or unconsciously—whether the pattern of support they had received before was reliable, if the support offered was timely to their need, and if the support offered aligned with their needs in the moment that it was offered. This first group experiential theme highlights a shared cognitive process around spousal support. Yet, the variations among participants serve as a reminder that while this theme is broadly applicable, the ways in which individuals make sense of their experience remain deeply personal and nuanced. Three participants—Gary, Jason, and John—described spousal support as an inherently accessible and dependable aspect of their fatherhood journey. They leaned into this support with minimal doubt about its

availability or reliability. In contrast, Sonny and AWL adopted a more cautious stance, expressing hesitancy or uncertainty as they navigated the degree to which they could—or should—rely on available support.

From these experiences, two subordinate themes emerged:

1. Assuming and leaning into available support to ease strain, and
2. Evaluating and discovering areas to first develop independent coping.

Assuming and leaning in on available support to ease strain. Gary, Jason, and John describe this process as one through which they felt renewed confidence seeking relief during times of parental strain. They often reported that they experienced their spouses as reliable and dependable sources of support. In those instances when reliable support was not outwardly reported, these fathers continued to maintain a primarily interdependent coping strategy with their spouse. These implicit displays of leaning in on available support, as well as explicitly naming its availability, played a key role in easing the strain they associated with fatherhood. For Gary, these moments of actionable leaning in were routine and built into what he conceptualized as a healthy marriage:

So we we we try to... I mean, I guess I would say meals. Meals would be a really simple example. We'll take turns. We'll do meal prep. One person will kind of, you know, handle meals for a couple of days. I think we we just... we we pass it back and forth as one of us becomes more tired. (Gary, 525-529)

Though simple in content, this comment reflects a broader pattern in Gary's experience—one in which support was not only assumed to be available but also seamlessly integrated into the rhythm of daily life. His confidence in the dependability of his spouse allowed him to lean into shared responsibilities without hesitation or fear of becoming a burden. This implicit, mutual caregiving routine helped relieve strain during moments of fatigue and reinforced the sense of partnership in his fathering journey:

We'll take turns... we pass it back and forth as one of us becomes more tired. (Gary, 526-529)

Like Jason and John, Gary operated from a place of trust in his spouse's presence and reliability. Even when support wasn't overtly expressed, was not openly present, he maintained confidence that it would be there when needed. This interdependence was not just about task-sharing—it was a psychological buffer that helped him manage the emotional and logistical weight of parenting.

Similarly, Jason felt that he and his spouse maintained an awareness of each other. This level of awareness afforded the couple a capacity to ask for assistance, and reduce the parental load, when needed:

And and there is a component of that, because we do like like, keep an eye each other and help each other out, but also knowing that she'll ask for help if she needs it with something, and then also feeling that I can as well like not that I need to kind of like power through, and like to carry carry this, this, this burden and and be like a like a martyr, um, for it. (Jason, 483-488)

This moment in Jason's narrative reveals a critical internal strain between the conscious decision to reject self-imposed expectations of individual burden management, independent endurance, and first looking out solely for themselves as individuals. Jason chooses to embrace and emphasise a shared approach to parenting in the context of spousal support. This internal struggle, made externally explicit is partially captured in his use of the phrase:

...carry this, this, this burden and and be like a martyr... (Jason, 488)

This is a tension many fathers in the study experienced—the perceived pressure to manage parenting demands independently. However, Jason disrupts this notion by naming his belief that both he and his spouse can rely on one another, when needed, without guilt or hesitation.

Finally, John was aware of how his experience of fatherhood was interdependently linked with his spouse, culminating in the feeling that they were aligned in purpose and pursuit:

Yeah, yeah, I guess that's it really. I just feel a little... because we're working on something together, you know, you could have that feeling of someone looking over your shoulder, and I don't really feel that way... (John, 554-557)

In this reflection, John articulates a sense of ease and equality in his relationship with his spouse—describing their shared parenting as a collaborative endeavor rather than one characterized by surveillance, pressure, or imbalance. The phrase “*we’re working on something together*” encapsulates his perception of spousal support as embedded in mutual purpose, while his comment that he doesn’t “*feel that way*” (i.e., micromanaged or judged) further underscores a foundational trust in the dynamic. Like Gary and Jason, John spoke from a place of security in the emotional and logistical dependability of his spouse. His remarks point not only to the presence of support but to the quality of that support—fluid, implicit, and comfortably woven into the rhythm of parenting. Rather than feeling like he had to “carry the burden” alone or seek permission to lean on his partner, John appeared to move within the relationship with quiet confidence in their shared responsibility.

This sense of collaborative alignment also speaks to the broader group experiential theme regarding how fathers evaluated spousal support—often shaped by their relational history, current roles, and internal standards. For John, the absence of tension or self-imposed restraint when relying on his partner reflects a well-established interdependence. His lack of concern about being monitored or judged in the parenting space is exemplary of how prior evaluations about the reliability and timeliness of the spousal support he received had been largely favourable by his standard of conscious or unconscious evaluation. John’s experience illustrates a seamless process of leaning into the support he both expected and experienced—reducing parental strain by operating within a dependable and trusted spousal partnership.

These participants display a purposeful acknowledgement and further seeking out of the support—support they not only assumed would be available but actively relied upon to ease the strain associated with fatherhood. Their accounts conveyed a sense of ease and confidence, revealing a heuristic developed through their evaluation of spousal support. This heuristic reflected an assumed togetherness, consistently expressed through the use of “we” in describing their experiences of struggle or strain. Although each father had individual experiences of stress and relief, they

operated from the belief—shaped by past interactions—that their spouse’s support was dependable and consistently present in times of need. Evaluating and discovering areas to first develop independent coping.

Seeking and Discovering areas to first develop independent coping. In contrast, Sonny and AWL initially focused on developing their own independent coping strategies after encountering limitations—either in how their spouses could offer support or in their own capacity to receive it. For Sonny, while he viewed his spouse as dependable by many measures, certain elements of the support she offered did not align with his expectations and occasionally led to frustration. Moreover, despite the availability of spousal support, Sonny took pride in his ability to be a fully capable father. He consciously chose to reject the notion that he might need support in some areas of fatherhood, emphasizing self-sufficiency as a core part of his paternal role:

There's nothing that she does besides breastfeed, which I cannot do ... (Sonny, 454-455)

[...]

I think one thing is that, like one challenge that I sometimes struggle with is that, um, so this is the first time in a long time where I've really had to rely on her to for things that I need. (Sonny, 661-664)

These excerpts reflect Sonny’s nuanced experience of spousal support, marked by an acute awareness of its limitations and his own internal boundaries. His comment about breastfeeding clearly identifies a specific domain where he interprets his spouse’s unique role as a limit to his ability to share caregiving equally, highlighting a structural boundary to support availability. Furthermore, Sonny’s acknowledgment of the struggle to rely on his spouse reveals an ongoing negotiation with his personal standard for independence—a standard that values self-sufficiency and a reluctance to become a burden. Sonny’s experience exemplifies independent coping. Unlike Gary, Jason, and John, who leaned confidently into accessible and dependable spousal support, Sonny actively appraised the fit of the support offered, sometimes finding it misaligned with his experiential needs—Sonny had not yet grown comfortable being interdependent with his spouse in this way and accepting

spousal support at times. This led him to emphasize his capacity to cope independently, shaping his fatherhood role around resilience and autonomy. This stance connects directly to the broader cognitive process identified in the study: fathers' evaluations of spousal support are filtered through prior relational experiences, the evolving impact of their child on the marital dynamic, and deeply personal standards designed to avoid burdening their spouse. Sonny's narrative reveals how these factors can cultivate caution or hesitancy in reliance, driving a strategic shift toward self-reliance when support is perceived as limited or mismatched.

Similarly emphasizing self-sufficiency, AWL differed slightly from Sonny in that he perceived a lack of available spousal support. Rather than choosing independence, AWL felt pushed into it. The absence of support surrounding his experience of fatherhood, coupled with the strain he felt, led him to develop independent coping strategies out of necessity. This, in turn, reinforced his desire not to be a burden on his spouse:

I think there's this attempt to not put too much of that on her (?), and to find my own strength, and find my own resources to help me get through that period (?), and not just relying on my partner for that like I might in other hard times, because she just wasn't as available. (AWL, 525-529)

This excerpt illustrates AWL's keen awareness of the limitations affecting the support he could receive from his spouse. His phrasing—“not put too much of that on her” and “she just wasn't as available”—underscores a dual recognition: both a conscious effort to protect his partner from additional strain and a palpable experience of her limited availability to provide spousal support. Unlike Gary, Jason, and John, who leaned confidently into dependable spousal support, AWL's pathway was shaped by an external scarcity of support, which propelled him to rely heavily on his own inner resources.

AWL's testimony reveals how the absence or unreliability of spousal support can create a context where independence is less a choice and more a necessary adaptation. While AWL shares the value of self-sufficiency with Sonny, the impetus

differs: AWL's independent coping arises from constrained support availability, not just personal preference. Whereas John, Gary, Jason, and Sonny each reported some degree of natural reliance on their spouse during early fatherhood—regardless of how actively they engaged with that support—AWL felt unable to do so. Over time, he came to understand his experience as one marked by a decreasing capacity to rely on his spouse, as the demands of early fatherhood continued:

[...] because you're you can't really rely on your spouse as much, or at least I couldn't. (AWL, 910-912)

The lack of support that AWL received—especially in contrast to the experiences of the other participants—seemed to heighten his awareness of the potential burden he might place upon his spouse, whether intentionally or unintentionally. His perception that he had to carry the weight of fatherhood largely alone seemed to intensify his sense of pressure and emotional strain. In contrast, Gary and Jason, while aware of the challenges and strains of early fatherhood, felt reassured by the knowledge that they could rely on their spouses for dependable support. This perceived reliability appeared to lessen the intensity of strain and allowed them to experience fatherhood with greater openness and less emotional encroachment. Across participants, discussions of spousal support revealed that its perceived dependability was closely linked to self-reflection and emotional awareness. Each father engaged in a process of meaning-making—evaluating their partner's support and adjusting their perception of fatherhood's burden in response.

Theme 2: Opportunities for Enhanced Fatherhood Role Engagement and Development

The spousal support received by all participants offered unique opportunities to engage in processes that contributed towards growth and understanding of their fatherhood role. Fathers experienced this support in one of two ways: either a *passive container*—an unpressured space in which they could freely explore and define aspects of fatherhood on their own terms—or as a *pressured catalyst* that prompted them to clarify and act according to a more self defined paternal role. John, Jason, and Sonny described their journeys as relatively unpressured. The support they received created an environment conducive to exploration, experimentation, and self-discovery. Their experience of fatherhood was guided

by intuition and evolved fluidly over time. In contrast, AWL and Gary's experience functioned as a foil to those of the other three participants. For them, spousal support came with an explicit or implicit pressure that served to catalyze the process of understanding the role that fatherhood played in their lives, as well as how to enact this role. It prompted reflection on how they *should* be acting as fathers in addition to what the role of fatherhood meant in their lives. This second superordinate theme of experience highlights that when fathers received spousal support, it often initiated a process of specifying or exploring the implicit and explicit meaning derived from the role of fatherhood. While the pathways varied, the outcomes converged around meaningful insights. Some participants found that support enhanced their appreciation for key aspects of their paternal role. Others recognized supportive feedback that encouraged them to repeat certain actions aligned with their values. Still others experienced support as a general freedom to continue growing in their understanding of what it means to be a father.

Finding unpressured opportunity for role exploration and growth. John, Jason, and Sonny each found that their experience of spousal support was accompanied with a freedom to discover the limits and nature of their paternal role. For John specifically, spousal support facilitated a process of role development rooted in emotion rather than externally imposed expectations. His understanding of fatherhood was allowed to unfold through feelings and lived experience, rather than being shaped by rigid definitions or prescribed the spousal support they received offered them the opportunity to engage in fatherhood with unguilted authenticity. The spousal support they experienced provided a space for intuitive exploration and freedom to discover what being a father meant to them. What united their experiences was a notable absence of pressure to define or perform a particular version of fatherhood roles:

...I guess I mean, first I was... I hadn't really thought about it exactly in those terms so just trying to trying to think of something. I mean, I guess I have certain gut feelings about, you know, how being a father feels, but, I hadn't really defined it. (John, 25-29)

John's early awareness of fatherhood as a feeling-driven experience rather than a prescribed role. His mention of "gut feelings" and his admission that he "hadn't

really defined it” points to a more fluid fatherhood role that was still in formation—guided more by instinct and reflection than by external scripts. Importantly, the absence of urgency or pressure in his tone mirrors the larger context in which this development took place: a supportive partnership that allowed fatherhood to unfold organically. John’s experience of spousal support was characterized by his spouse offering a kind of scaffolding for understanding their daughter. Aware of the time constraints in John’s life, his spouse provided thoughtful insights that helped him connect with his daughter more effectively. This support enabled him to engage with her in ways that were developmentally attuned and responsive, enriching his exploration of fatherhood:

[...] she's the more informed one, and she keeps me informed like up on-, oh a-, kind of what milestone [redacted daughter name] should be at at this time or that stuff... Um, and and I think she, you know, sees that like she understands that I'm not as like, when would I read that stuff right? So she's, you know, looking after that more which she's not like really expec-... She hasn't been like, “hey? Why haven't you read this yet?” She's more, you know, like just informing me which is nice. (John, 403-410)

John’s understanding of himself as a father was fostered by the freedom to explore interactions with his daughter, supported by the insights his spouse provided. This unpressured space for role development allowed for a growing self-awareness—of both who he is and who he is not as a father—while simultaneously deepening his relationship with his child. John experienced spousal support not as pressure to conform to a particular paternal ideal, but as a gentle invitation to engage. He openly admits that his spouse takes a more informed role in tracking developmental milestones and, significantly, that she does so without expectation or criticism. Her role as an informant—rather than an enforcer—was received as a created space for John to step into fatherhood on his own terms.

The tone of this quote, particularly his appreciation *that “she’s more... just informing me, which is nice,”* reflects the theme of unpressured role discovery. Rather than

being chastised for not reading parenting literature, John is supported through quiet scaffolding—his partner keeps him in the loop without demanding immediate expertise. His development was not sparked by external demands but nurtured through low-stakes support that respected his pacing. Spousal support, in this case, operated through trust and nonjudgment, allowing him to discover his role as a father through incremental engagement, absent from performance anxiety.

Similarly, Sonny was able to act from a place of authenticity in his role as a father, as he did not feel external pressure from his spouse to behave in any particular way. This absence of pressure supported a sense of autonomy and genuine engagement in his developing fatherhood role:

I never have any sort of like guilt, because I never have this any sort of like... You know, sometimes I feel, yeah, people do have a guilt where they feel like they didn't do enough for their interactions with a child, or like trying to overcompensate or anything that. [...] there's never this feeling of like, I missed anything intentionally, or wasn't trying to always be there for the family (?). So yeah, I feel like I'm able to have a more authentic reaction, because I'm not trying to compensate for anything else in some other ways... (Sonny, 567-577)

[...]

And I, but I don't feel guilty if I do have to take a phone call because she knows it's not just like a social phone call. (Sonny, 590-591)

Sonny's internal clarity around his role as a father—a clarity made possible by the unpressured environment his partner helped maintain—is cradled by an absence of guilt in a similar manner to John's. The phrase "*authentic reaction*" captures his sense of emotional and behavioural freedom, while his insistence that he does not feel guilt signals the absence of external demands to "*make up*" for perceived shortcomings. His language underscores a fatherhood experience that was not shaped by defensiveness or pressure, but instead by sincere and grounded presence. This kind of support allowed Sonny to feel confident in the choices he made, including moments when work responsibilities required his attention. As he explained:

I don't feel guilty if I do have to take a phone call because she knows it's not just like a social phone call. (Sonny, 590–591)

The absence of guilt in this context is telling. It suggests not only personal security in his priorities, but also mutual understanding between partners—a subtle yet powerful form of support that allowed him to parent without second-guessing or compensating for perceived failures. Sonny was able to explore and affirm his role through a more creative and intuitive process. There was no implied critique to resist or accommodate. Instead, the support he received helped sustain a clear sense of contribution without defensiveness—he understood his spouse's support to communicate that what he had done was sufficient and done with intention. His experience reinforces the idea that freedom from pressure can be just as constructive as direction, enabling fathers to act from a place of grounded presence and personal conviction.

Despite the time constraints imposed by his work, Sonny experiences a sense of freedom at home to engage with his child. This freedom—created through the openness and support of his spouse—allows him to envision how his role as a father might continue to evolve over time. The absence of pressure fosters a space for paternal role development, enabling Sonny to define his own philosophy of fatherhood in a way that feels authentic and self-directed:

My philosophy is, you know, like parenting will change when he's older, like 3, 4, like we'll have to like talk about the world and rules. But for the next little while it's just exploration, but it just kind of, but I don't want to explore from a distance, [...] not just a safety supervisor, where I'm just like standing back, letting him play, making sure he doesn't cry, because I think that's kind of doing the minimum. (Sonny, 287–295)

Ultimately, this points towards a journey of role development that Sonny was able to undertake as a direct extension of the spousal support they receive. Jason's experience echoes this theme, illustrating how the lack of pressure lays the foundation—one that allows his understanding of fatherhood to adapt in ways that best support the evolving needs of his child:

From a from a journey standpoint, I think my spouse's support is, has has allowed for an evolution of... an evolution of my relationship with my daughter as well as, um, allowing it to kind of evolve in in whatever way it needs to be. I I think that's probably an important aspect... (Jason, 558-562)

This excerpt encapsulates the essence of unpressured paternal development. Jason's repetition of "*evolution*" underscores a process that is dynamic, responsive, and unconstrained by rigid expectations. The phrase "*whatever way it needs to be*" reflects not indifference, but trust—in both the unfolding relationship with his child and the space provided by his partner to navigate it organically. Jason's account exemplifies an experience where support functions not as instruction, but as quiet permission to experiment and engage without fear of failure. His spouse's presence, rather than imposing a fixed structure, offered emotional freedom that enabled his role to develop with flexibility and presence. What distinguishes Jason's experience is the emotional tone—calm, deliberate, and grounded. As with John and Sonny, there is no mention of guilt, correction, or pressure to perform fatherhood in a particular way. Instead, the spousal support he received opened up space for him to follow his instincts, adjust in real-time, and remain attuned to the evolving needs of his daughter. The result is a relaxed yet intentional approach to parenting. Jason's fatherhood role developmental arc was not forced but facilitated through relational trust and mutual support. His narrative strengthens the understanding that fathers benefit not only from clear guidance, but also from environments in which not knowing immediately is acceptable, and where their engagement can be led by experience rather than expectation.

Specific instances of unpressured role engagement and growth varied in form, yet the unifying felt sense among these fathers was one of relaxation. This relaxed environment—shaped by the support offered by their spouses—fostered a creative and open-ended process of role discovery, development, and engagement. While this experience of spousal support provided meaning and opportunity for John, Jason, and Sonny, the experiences of AWL and Gary stand in contrast. For them, spousal support

was accompanied by a different emotional tone and served a distinct role in shaping their fatherhood identities.

Finding pressure to create or define fathering role. For AWL and Gary support was accompanied by a pressure to respond—to act in accordance with perceived or expressed expectations from their spouse. These responses prompted deeper reflection on their roles as fathers and shaped the meaning they ascribed to those roles. This pressure originated from both expectations they held for themselves, and the relationship with their spouse. These pressures led to pivotal and defining experiences in their fatherhood journeys. For AWL, this pressure manifested as a desire to be actively supportive, and a belief that his fatherhood role would, in part, be defined by his commitment to sharing parenting responsibilities equally with his spouse:

...like I was saying, we were both trying to do everything 50/50 and that included researching things, or like when breastfeeding wasn't working like I was there helping, like all of those things were 50/50, and it attempted to be. And then it just didn't work. (AWL, 425-429)

When AWL's attempts to offer care in the same manner as his spouse did not yield the outcomes either of them had anticipated, he began to feel the pressure of his own limitations, the practical demands of the household, and subtle influence from his spouse. These factors combined to prompt a re-evaluation of his role—ultimately leading him to seek a version of fatherhood that both he and his spouse would regard as genuinely useful and contributive:

So you know because I'm doing everything with her here that now I'm tired, too. Now the house isn't getting as clean. Now I can't work as many hours, and so it's like, you know, you're both up at night trying to help her sleep when in, you know, 9 times out of 10, [...] she just ends up nursing. I'm not really used there. (AWL, 440-447)

In response to these constraints, AWL chose to adapt—shaping his adjustments around the unique strengths each partner brought to the parenting dynamic. Feeling that spousal support for him was already limited, he intentionally stepped away from

the ideal of 50/50 shared childcare. Instead, he redefined his understanding of fatherhood by leaning into a model of mutual trust: trusting his spouse's approach while also trusting himself to manage parental and household responsibilities independently:

And so I think, coming, coming out of that, letting her do her thing, trusting her, let me do more in other ways, and I think if if she had had maybe more difficulty or needed me more through that as we've transitioned into 9 months now, I think I probably wouldn't have had been able to play other roles that I have been able to play those supportive roles.(AWL, 451-457)

AWL defined his role as a father by enacting patterns of trust in response to perceived pressures and lacking spousal support. His experience of fatherhood was shaped by stepping into parental and household responsibilities that his spouse had left unaddressed. This dynamic, in turn, influenced how AWL conceptualized spousal support—not as shared day-to-day involvement, but as moments of reconnection, mutual alignment around shared goals, and attunement to one another's needs:

I suppose it means to me, kind of seeing the other person and seeing what their experience is like. And even if it's just communicating with them about it. Just just kind of that at the end of the day, connecting that you're on the same team and and listening in and hearing what the other person needs, and trying to... Even if you don't have much energy to give, depending on the phase you're in trying to to give it and to be present for them. (AWL, 468-475)

Gary also found that his experience of spousal support was punctuated by instances where he felt called to action. Similar to AWL, he perceived this support as a form of pressurized incentive to define and step into his fatherhood role. However, Gary's response diverged—rather than adapting his role to shape around his spouse's, he actively insisted on sharing parental expertise. This insistence was catalyzed by the pressure he felt to match his spouse's demonstrated competence in parenting, which served as both a challenge and a motivation to assert his own capability:

*We sometimes will facetiously say to each other, "You know you're **so** good at that. Maybe you should do it.", and so I think that can be a point of conflict*

*where we say like, if she becomes the expert in our child, then it's sometimes difficult to allow me to step in and shoulder the load if I'm not **doing it right**. If I'm not doing it exactly right then, you know, there's that saying like, "if you want something done right, you do it yourself". (Gary, 564-570)*

Through pushing for an equality of expertise in parental duties, Gary also found that he and his spouse had to collaborate to resolve the tension that was created. To reconcile the tension between each other, while coming to understand their identities as parents, they drew on communication skills they had fostered before their child was born:

Sometimes it can result in in conflict where I'll just say, like, Okay, fine. You do it. That definitely comes up from time to time. And so we'll usually have to kind of like, okay, take 10, then let's come back to it so. Thankfully, we had a couple of years before we had a kid of us being married where we could kind of understand how the other person deals with conflict or you know, frustration. (Gary, 592-598)

Ultimately, Gary found that his role as a father—shaped by the pressure to establish himself as an equal caregiver—led to a division of responsibilities in which he and his spouse shouldered different burdens. These differences became justifiable to him, as he came to feel a personal calling to carry specific aspects of parenthood. While certain elements of parenting could, in theory, be shared equally between mother and father, Gary recognized that they need not be. His experience fatherhood role in relation to spousal support became grounded in embracing the particular responsibilities that felt most aligned with his role and strengths:

I do think that men have a a different role in the way that we carry, we carry a different weight on our shoulders. Again, everyone has weight on their shoulders. I feel that we're called to have a different kind of weight on our shoulders. (Gary, 742-745)

[...]

I think it's the it's the mother suffering with a difficult child, a sick child. Those are the types of things that, it's a burden that is on a mother's heart. But

the I feel like the, I don't know the more intense like this. I, the idea of like the Bible doesn't call your wife to ever lay down her life for her husband ever, not anywhere. But it's very clear that that husbands are called to do that if it's necessary. (Gary, 767-773)

[...]

And I I feel like that is definitely the case for for fathers, and the and the weight that they're supposed to carry. A woman could do it just as well. But I think that we are different. And there's a reason for that. Yeah. (Gary, 793-796)

The experiences of the five fathers in this study reveal two distinct, yet equally meaningful, pathways for fatherhood role development, each shaped by the nature of spousal support they received. For John, Jason, and Sonny, spousal support created a relaxed and trusting environment in which their roles as fathers could emerge organically. In the absence of pressure or expectation, these fathers engaged in a self-guided process of exploration, allowing their roles to evolve intuitively in response to their children's needs and their own authentic perspectives. This unpressured support fostered emotional safety, flexibility, and confidence in their developing identities.

In contrast, AWL and Gary experiences of spousal support were accompanied by a sense of pressure, whether internalized or relational, that prompted more deliberate and immediate responses in how they defined and enacted their fatherhood roles. For AWL, the challenges of attempting equal caregiving led him to shift toward differentiated responsibilities grounded in trust, practicality, and coordinated partnership with his spouse. Gary, in response to his spouse's demonstrated parental expertise, perceived a reluctance to share caregiving responsibilities unless he could demonstrate equal competence. In turn, he asserted his presence and role, guided by a value-driven understanding of fatherhood responsibility. Both cases reflect a more structured and intentional negotiation of paternal roles, forged under perceived or actual pressure.

Despite the distinct nuances that differentiated each participant's experiences, all engaged in reflective processes that deepened their understanding of what

fatherhood meant to them. Whether through intuitive exploration or in response to pressure, spousal support consistently functioned as a catalyst for growth, enabling each father to calibrate his role in ways that were personally and relationally responsive. These findings underscore the complex, dynamic interplay between support, self-perception, and evolving engagement. They suggest that the nature of spousal support, whether it offers unpressured freedom or prompts action, plays a critical role in shaping how new fathers come to define and inhabit their paternal role.

Theme 3: Mediation of relief from the emotional burden of fatherhood

All fathers in this study experienced spousal support as a key factor shaping their emotional burden in fatherhood. This support influenced them in two distinct ways: either through their spouse becoming the primary focal point for emotional weight, or by opening a pathway for emotional displacement. For Sonny, AWL, and Jason, spousal support, or lack thereof, was marked by moments in which their spouse either alleviated emotional strain or, conversely, became a source of increased stress. In contrast, Gary and John described receiving spousal support that helped diffuse emotional burdens through rationalization, empathetic responses, and actionable suggestions. The difference between the two groups of fathers lies in the mode of support: in the first, the spouse holds and embodies the emotional weight; in the second, the support facilitates a shared redirection of that burden, so it does not rest solely on either partner. This third and final superordinate theme illuminates how the spouse's pivotal role in mediating the emotional experience of fatherhood—amplifying or easing the father's emotional load depending on how support is interpreted by the father.

Becoming a convergent point of burden. Utilizing his spouse as a convergent point for emotional burden—whether as a source or a site of relief—Sonny was acutely aware of how relational strain, particularly conflict with his partner, could spill over into his interactions with his child if left unaddressed. He acknowledged that his spouse often absorbed this frustration, even when it was difficult for her to do so. This act of emotional containment provided Sonny with a sense of relief, enabling him to engage with his child unencumbered by residual tension and more aligned with his aspirations for fatherhood:

I feel like if there was a lot more interpersonal conflict between us, and especially there, a lack of support, then I think there would be also this resentment that built (?). It's hard not to have that bleed into the relationship with the child, too. (Sonny, 627-631)

This quote captures Sonny's acute awareness of emotional transference—the risk that unresolved frustration with his partner could unintentionally affect his child.

However, what stands out is his recognition that the absence of conflict, and the emotional containment his partner often performed, afforded him relief and resilience:

It's not like the kid's just laughing, having a good time like sometimes he's very fussy, he's crying, but even in those moments there's no sort of like... I don't know. I'm not like frustrated with him, but, and which might be a virtue of me taking out some sort of frustration I have on my partner, but I think the lack of that makes me a lot more patient as a father and a lot more like carry a lot less negative emotions, even if there's it's a hard time like if he's crying, or if he's frustrated, I don't feel any sort of frustration or negativity in that moment (?). (Sonny, 635-644)

Sonny used this spousal support to shift the emotional burden of frustration. The emotional shift allowed this father to prioritize the care of his child, even doing so might have otherwise been difficult. Sonny perceived that he and his spouse are united by shared passion to prioritize the care of their child even when it required strain upon themselves. Through her qualities as an individual and role as a mother,

she offered Sonny reminders of what qualities he can aspire to live out in his role as a father in his child's life:

She's the most like engaged present focus, like kind of kind, positive person I've ever met. So like she's really like a good reminder for me, like what is important in life (?) (Sonny, 369-372)

Sonny attributes this emotional insulation in part to his partner's temperament, describing her as *"the most... kind, positive person I've ever met"* (Sonny, 369-370). Her emotional steadiness not only grounded their relationship but also served as a buffer for him during difficult parenting moments. In this way, her emotional labour not only absorbed strain but recalibrated Sonny's emotional climate, making space for more measured and gentle paternal responses. Furthermore, to reach these aspirations of being engaged and present focused, kind and positive, Sonny reached out to the support his spouse offers in moments of frustration. He recognizes the toll this may take on her and expresses appreciation in return:

So I try not to just take for granted like that that's her role, like, you know, that's not her role like she does that for the family. She doesn't have to do that, so I try to be grateful when I can, like as often as I can to thank her for doing that part, and then I think I try to then try to show my appreciation. (Sonny, 379-384)

Importantly, Sonny does not take this labour for granted. His reflection—*"that's not her role... she doesn't have to do that"* (Sonny, 380-381)—reveals a deep awareness of the invisible work his partner performs, and a commitment to acknowledging it with intentional gratitude. This gratitude, in turn, further strengthens the emotional partnership that underpins his fathering. Sonny's experience exemplifies how spousal support can act as an emotional convergent point, regulating the father's capacity to show up with clarity, warmth, and patience for his child. While this dynamic can be emotionally taxing for the partner, Sonny's narrative shows the importance of recognition, reciprocity, and emotional attunement in sustaining this form of support. This dynamic of relief and appreciation is sustained by the way Sonny receives the support his spouse offers. Through her actions and

emotional availability, she creates space for him to release the emotional burden he may feel in the moment, allowing him to be more fully present with his child. This support enables Sonny to embody the qualities of fatherhood that he aspires to—engagement, kindness, and emotional presence.

AWL's experience of spousal support parallels Sonny's in that his spouse played a central role in shaping his emotional burden. However, while Sonny often experienced his spouse as a source of relief and emotional release, AWL's emotional strain was, at times, intensified through his relationship with his spouse. The emotional strain he carried was not just his own—it was compounded by ongoing relational tension, the absence of consistent support, and the shared exhaustion that characterized their parenting dynamic:

And so I think that was a dynamic, and I think there was even some resentment toward me because of that... (AWL, 183-184)

Periods of fatigue and emotional distance left AWL feeling isolated. While Sonny found support by leaning on his spouse during difficult moments, AWL recognized that his spouse, already carrying a heavy load as a caregiver, often had little capacity to offer him emotional relief. The dynamic between them sometimes contributed to his sense of emotional depletion. Rather than being a space to displace frustration, his relationship with his spouse could become a source of that frustration either through misaligned expectations, emotional disconnection, or an imbalance in caregiving roles:

I've described her, her ability to just do things very well in terms of taking care of my daughters impacted me in the supporting roles I mentioned, but I think it was just so much to take on me going back to work and and her now being, you know, at home with with our daughter. I think she didn't have any room to give me support for quite a while. And so there is very much... There was this sense of loneliness, or you know you're... there's kind of everybody jokes like you have the sense your life is over... (AWL, 480-488)

Despite the strain, AWL's reflections reveal a deep awareness of his spouse's own challenges. His emotional burden was shaped by an understanding that she, too,

was overwhelmed. This awareness did not reduce the strain he felt but reframed it; rather than seeking relief from her, he adopted a posture of endurance, perceiving his own difficulties as secondary to hers:

You sort of look forward to coming home to see them, but you also sort of look forward to going to work. (AWL, 506-508)

This tension reveals how spousal support, when absent or strained, can shift the father's experience of home from a site of emotional restoration to one of depletion. Rather than being buffered from emotional hardship by his partner, AWL was pulled deeper into it—his emotional landscape shaped by the very dynamics that might otherwise have offered relief. The emotional fatigue created a household atmosphere where neither parent had sufficient reserves to support the other:

Um, just because it was a break. right? And and sometimes it was just “oh, it's another bad night”, and you're tired. Everybody's tired. Everybody's grumpy, and you know she's screaming and it, yeah, it's not fun at all. And, but you kind of know that it's gonna pass right? And you you kind of work through it. And I think the thing for me I kept thinking, is just that whatever I'm kind of dealing with my wife has it harder because she's the one taking care of my baby... (AWL, 514-521)

The emotional fatigue created a household atmosphere where neither parent had sufficient reserves to support the other. The phrase “*everybody's tired. Everybody's grumpy*” (AWL, 515) encapsulates this mutual depletion, underscoring how, as the spouse became the convergent point of burden, stress was left unprocessed and persistent. While AWL maintained empathy for his partner—“*whatever I'm kind of dealing with, my wife has it harder*” (AWL, 520)—this awareness did not reduce his own sense of isolation. Instead, it further complicated his ability to voice or seek support for his needs, as he perceived his own struggles as less valid by comparison. While Sonny found opportunity in his partner's support to alleviate his strain and become more present with his child, AWL appeared to internalize much of the strain, remaining actively engaged in fatherhood while silently managing the emotional weight. His spouse remained a central figure in his

emotional landscape, but unlike Sonny's experience of emotional relief, AWL's dynamic involved navigating a mutual strain without clear avenues for emotional release through his spouse.

Jason's experience of spousal support aligns with both Sonny and AWL's in that his spouse serves as a central figure in how he processes the fatigue of fatherhood. Like the other two fathers, his spouse functions as a conduit for emotional relief but with a notable difference: while Sonny offloads frustration and AWL absorbs emotional strain with quiet endurance, Jason's spouse takes on a more active, interventionist role. She disrupts emotional spirals and helps restore balance, not by passively receiving his emotions or co-enduring the weight, but by intentionally stepping into the burden with him—whether through conversation, acts of care, or pre-emptive gestures that shift Jason's emotional state:

*Without the support and being able to to have have someone there to kind of, to to **be** that emotional support, **be** that sounding board, uh share the emotional burden with. Cause I I cause I don't necessarily like, I don't think we necessarily like to to in one way that that first aspect I mentioned, we reduce the amount of emotional kind of low points that we had, but then, for the kind of inevitable low points we're able to bounce back faster. (Jason, 406-413)*

Jason views his spouse not only as a support system but as a collaborative emotional partner—someone who actively reduces the duration and intensity of his emotional lows. Her engagement enables him to recover more quickly from inevitable stress, distinguishing his experience from AWL's internalized endurance and Sonny's relief through emotional venting:

One aspect is like pulling, pulling me out of a, pulling me out of a spiral. So if it's it's easy when, when like... a lot of the time it happens like when I'm physically dysregulated as far as like hungry, tired, haven't exercised, kind of those basic physical needs that that humans have. If those aren't being met, and then there's there's something that happens... (Jason, 428-434)

In these moments, Jason's spouse offers both emotional connection and physical reprieve. She assumes caregiving responsibilities to allow Jason space to step back and recharge. Her gestures are not interpreted as abstract or symbolic; they are concrete, responsive actions that meet Jason in his emotional state, and help prevent the escalation of further emotional strain:

So it's kind of interrupting that that spiral and that kind of building and saying, "Okay", like either it's like a physical interruption of being like, "Hey, I'll I'm gonna take, take the baby and like, Go do do something that's gonna like recharge you", or or just take a break for a second, or it's more more of a like an an emotional sport like, "Hey?" Like, just like, "How are you? How are you feeling?" like, and then find that, like empathy and compassion so that you don't feel necessarily alone, or that your... feel feelings are are off, so. (Jason, 437-446)

Jason recognizes his spouse's consistent attention to both his physical and emotional wellbeing. This pattern of action shapes a support dynamic where he does not need to carry or suppress emotional weight in the same way as AWL, nor rely primarily on expressive release, as Sonny does. Despite these differences, all three fathers experienced their emotional burden as converging around their spouse. Through her, they found either a place of relief or moments of endurance. In contrast, Gary and John experienced spousal support not as a container or co-processor of emotion, but as an external avenue through which emotional burdens could be redirected or alleviated.

Opening an avenue for displacing or alleviating burden. Gary and John both received spousal support that redirected emotional burden away from their spouses (rather than towards them). In this form of spousal support, neither individual carried the weight of the burden; instead, the couple engaged in a shared process of understanding and displacement. For Gary, spousal support was not a one-directional but a mutual practice of care and recognition. Unlike Sonny, AWL, and Jason who each experienced their spouse as either the recipient of strain or as the direct channel of relief, Gary's dynamic was characterised by a collaborative, mutually beneficial, emotional regulation. It was grounded in attentiveness to each partner's preferences for giving and receiving support. Rather than transferring the burden from one partner to the other, their emotional strain was diffused through a relational rhythm of reciprocity and affirmation:

*Spent a lot of time with the whole family through the day. I was helping with meal prep, and just kind of being really actively involved. And at the end of the day my spouse says to me, like, "you were an **amazing** father today, I so appreciate all your help". And so for me, my love language is definitely words of affirmation. So she could have bought me a candy bar, said, "Hey, thanks for your help today". It's her thanking me for the help that makes all the difference for me. So I think we we have really tried to understand each other's love languages, and we try to support each other. In a way that makes the other person feel most appreciated. (Gary, 375-385)*

Gary and his spouse express appreciation in personalized ways that speak directly to each other's emotional needs, turning acts of support into moments of emotional reinforcement. These moments of affirmation do more than just reduce tension - they replenish what Gary describes as a "love tank," an internal emotional reserve that, when full, motivates mutual acts of service and cooperation. Through this relational conduit of spousal support, emotional burdens are not only alleviated for Gary but also shared and lightened for both partners:

We have that that saying like, "I'd walk over broken glass for a person". So when when someone feels like when when when my love tank is full, to use

that analogy from the 5 love languages. When my love tank is full, like you asked me to pick up the like, take out the trash. You asked me to do anything. I'll do it absolutely. Whatever you need. And and and vice versa, when her love tank is full. Whatever I ask for, like we we are... We're a lot more keen to serve the other person. (Gary, 442-449)

This system of care is not only reactive, but pre-emptively restorative. Emotional labour is not simply divided or handed off but dynamically navigated through subtle exchanges of care that reinforce partnership. As Gary explains:

When my love tank is full... you ask me to do anything. I'll do it absolutely. Whatever you need. And vice versa... we're a lot more keen to serve the other person. (Gary, 445-449)

This dynamic reveals a system of care where strain is managed not through individual sacrifice but through mutual replenishment. During difficult times, when both partners feel emotionally depleted, Gary and his spouse do not expect one another to absorb the full weight of the difficulty. Instead, they engage in a shared process of diffusing strain- making practical decisions that ease the burden for both and acknowledging their mutual limits without judgment:

Meals are a excellent example, and then, if both of us are at a 2 out of 10. We're both exhausted. It's been a tough week. Well, then, we, you know, we can always order food out like, take out. (Gary, 532-535)

In this model of spousal support, emotional and logistical burdens are navigated together, rather than transferred between partners. Relief is found not in offloading, but in alignment—in being seen, understood, and responded to in ways that reflect each partner's needs. For Gary, this coordinated form of support defines what emotional support means in fatherhood: It is not just about feeling lighter, but about feeling truly partnered in carrying the weight.

Lastly, John's experience of spousal support reflects a quiet yet impactful model of shared burden management, closely aligning with Gary's experience of spousal support coordination. Together, John and his spouse navigate emotional uncertainty through a collaborative approach in which neither partner bears the

emotional weight alone. Instead, strain is diffused through a shared acceptance of imperfection, mutual reassurance, and the steady comfort of non-judgment:

And so, but I, you know my wife wasn't... I wasn't blaming. My wife wasn't blaming. We were just like, "Hey, we don't know what we're doing." So you know, we're just both, you know, you know, I would say, like, "I feel guilty". And and my wife was like, "it's fine. We don't know what we're doing. We're just trying to do our best.", you know (?). (John, 468-473)

The emotional burden of new parenthood is neither denied or ignored between John and his spouse—it is named and acknowledged. Yet rather than directing difficult feelings such as guilt and uncertainty towards one another, they meet these emotions with a shared ethic of compassion. In doing so, they protect each other from the internalization of failure and create an environment where vulnerability is met with grace, not critique:

*...all times when you feel like kind of drop the ball and you're your spouse just saying like... *Coughs* Excuse me. That that's gonna happen sometimes, and you know, just not not getting upset or blamy about it, but being supportive, that we're we're doing our best... (John, 479-483)*

This shared emotional dynamic closely mirrors Gary's account of spousal support. Like Gary, John experiences relief not as a product of emotional unloading, but of reciprocal emotional presence. In both relationships, support arises not from the absence of strain, but because they choose to buffer each other's distress through affirmation and alignment. In both relationships, neither partner is expected to fix the emotional tension. Instead, they share in the knowledge that doing one's best is enough and that compassion, not critique, is the foundation of their support.

The relief John experiences does not stem from redirecting his emotional weight, but from the absence of critique—a deliberate stance his spouse adopts to de-escalate anxiety. Instead of holding each other to impossible standards, they affirm their joint learning process, normalizing mistakes as an expected part of becoming parents together. This posture of grace allows emotional strain to be diffused through mutual acceptance rather than defensiveness or blame:

... like my wife's not going to be critiquing me (?) is is kind of a relief (?), like, you know cause cause cause my daughter, you know my daughter is my wife's child, too, you know... You could see her kind of saying like, "oh, how could you... You know, how could you miss these things?" And rather, she's just like, "Hey, we're, you know [redacted daughter name] is okay, and we're doing our best." So I guess that yeah, it just made me feel a little less anxious (?), I suppose, just knowing that we're that at least on on the front of of my wife, I don't have to worry about like criticism, you know. (John, 531-541)

As with Gary, this shared space becomes emotionally restorative. The emotional regulation within John's relationship is co-constructed, ensuring that neither partner carries the strain alone. Through his calm, measured reflection, John articulates a model of support that is emotionally balanced, characterized by low judgment and high empathy. In this space, emotional burdens are not simply managed but gently held between them, lightened through mutual understanding and sustained by trust, before gradually being released.

The mediation of relief in fatherhood took varied forms across all participants, yet a shared theme emerged: the spouse plays a crucial role in shaping how emotional challenges are navigated. Two distinct forms of spousal support emerged in the fathers' narratives, each reflecting different relational dynamics and coping strategies. Collectively, these accounts illustrate that the quality and form of spousal support can either ease or exacerbate the emotional demands of fatherhood, depending on how emotional needs are given, received, and responded to within the couples' relationship.

The examples and instances that make up the three above superordinate themes of spousal support demonstrate a nuanced meaning making process undertaken by these new fathers. While the participants' experiences converged in key areas, allowing for the development of shared thematic structures, the subordinate themes captured important variations that preserved the individuality of each account. These subtleties were explored in greater depth to provide insight into how first-time fathers' make sense of spousal support in the context of early parenthood. The

interwoven, overlapping, and subjective nature of these experiences resists clean separation; rather, each informs and deepens the understanding of the others across participants' narratives.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

In this final chapter, I reflect on the study's key findings. Focusing on both spoken and unspoken meanings, I show how these fathers were shaped by the spousal support they received—and how their interpretations of that support influenced its impact. Following a reiteration of key findings, I draw attention to the interplay between and across the superordinate themes adding depth to the interpretation of results. I then connect the overall findings to background literature and theoretical frameworks. I also offer a critical appraisal of the study, highlighting its strengths, limitations, and the role of researcher reflexivity. This study offers various contributions to researcher's understanding of early fatherhood. Based on these contributions, I propose further implications for theory, counselling, and future research. The chapter ends with directions for further study and reflections on the research process.

Key Findings

This study uniquely centers fathers' subjective interpretations of spousal support, an area underexplored in paternal engagement research, which traditionally prioritizes maternal perspectives. This study sought to understand how first-time fathers make meaning of spousal support. The three superordinate themes—evaluating spousal dependability, opportunities for enhanced fatherhood role engagement and development, and emotional burden relief—each reveal different facets of this meaning-making process. Each of these three superordinate group experiential themes are conceptualized below and presented in relation to the original research questions. The primary aim of the current study was to explore fathers' lived experiences of spousal support. Through this pursuit the question “What are first-time fathers' experiences of spousal support?” is answered in part. Below, I lay out (a) a nuanced understanding of how fathers make meaning of received spousal support, and (b) a description of the current role of fatherhood in relation to the expectation of paternal childcare activities.

As participants evaluated the spousal support dependability available to their experience of fatherhood, in conjunction with their ability to receive support, they adjusted their perception of the burden they carried as new fathers. Recurring patterns of stable spousal support informed fathers' conceptualization of “we-ness” with their spouse, while

encountering limitations—either in how their spouses could offer support or in their own capacity to receive it—guided fathers’ pursuit of independent coping. Across the group, participants described spousal support as deeply connected to their own self-reflection and emotional insight. Each father actively made sense of his experience by assessing the reliability of his partner’s support and reshaping how he understood the challenges of fatherhood.

Participants’ evaluations of the dependability of their partner's support reveal that spousal support is not simply a background factor, but a dynamic element actively shaping how fathers experience and interpret their paternal role. Their reflections indicate that spousal support influences practical aspects of fatherhood and the emotional processing and role formation. The emergence of “we-ness” illustrates that consistent support fosters shared roles within the parenting partnership, suggesting a collaborative meaning-making process. Conversely, when fathers encountered limitations—whether due to their partner’s capacity to support or their own ability to receive support—they often shifted toward independent coping strategies. These adaptations point to nuanced, individualized interpretations of what support means in the context of early fatherhood. The connection between spousal support and fathers’ emotional insight also contributes to understanding the current role of fatherhood. Participants’ reflections suggest that modern paternal roles involve a depth of emotional engagement and introspection, challenging older models of stoic or distant fatherhood. Spousal support, then, becomes not only instrumental but also transformative, influencing how men perceive their responsibilities and emotional presence as fathers.

Participants also experienced spousal support as opportunities for enhanced fatherhood role engagement and development. This interpretation of spousal support played a key role in shaping each father’s understanding of his paternal duty and self reflection. Some fathers described the support as open and pressure-free, giving them space to explore fatherhood on their own terms. For others, it acted as a catalyst, pushing them to define and commit to a more intentional paternal role. In both cases, support created opportunities for growth. The fathers who were able to freely explore and define fatherhood shared the absence of pressure to adopt a specific model of fatherhood. Though the ways they navigated role growth varied, many described a sense of ease that allowed for open-ended self-

discovery. Supportive, low-pressure environments encouraged creativity and exploration in defining their roles. In these cases, emotional safety and flexibility allowed paternal roles to emerge naturally in response to personal values and the needs of their children.

In contrast, fathers who encountered a different emotional tone in their spousal support—which prompted response or action—shaped their fatherhood roles in more directive ways. The fathers who experienced support alongside a sense of pressure—whether internally driven or arising from their relationship with their spouse—felt pushed to act in response to perceived expectations. This led to more deliberate, value-driven decisions about how to define and perform fatherhood roles. These experiences involved navigating challenges, negotiating roles, and asserting responsibility in ways shaped by both self-reflection and partnership dynamics.

Across both pathways, fathers engaged in meaningful reflective work. Whether unfolding gradually or forged through pressure, spousal support consistently acted as a foundation for growth, helping each father define a role that felt authentic, responsive, and evolving.

These findings illustrate that support is not only a resource but a developmental context. Fathers experienced spousal support as a key enabler of role engagement and self-discovery, shaping both their practical involvement in childcare and their internal sense of responsibility as fathers. The emotional tone of support—whether open-ended or directive—played a pivotal role in how fathers experienced their own growth. In both cases, fathers were not passive recipients of support; they actively made sense of it in ways that aligned with their self-perception, personal values, and relationship dynamics. With respect to the current role of fatherhood and the expectation of childcare, these findings suggest that contemporary fatherhood is marked by intentionality and reflexivity. Rather than adopting a predefined role, fathers used spousal support as a springboard to construct individualized models of fathering. Whether through gradual emergence or deliberate action, the result was a role deeply informed by emotional insight, mutual partnership, and a responsiveness to both personal and familial needs. These findings challenge monolithic views of fatherhood by showing that the role is both personally negotiated and relationally co-constructed.

Across all participants, spousal support shaped how fathers navigated emotional challenges. Two distinct patterns emerged—one centered on shared emotional intensifying

and buffering, the other on emotional diffusion—each reflecting a different relational dynamic. Some experienced their partner as a central figure in this burden—either easing their stress or intensifying it. Others received support that helped redirect emotional strain through empathy, practical advice, or shared problem-solving. The key difference lies in how the father perceived the function of the support. In some cases, the spouse absorbed the emotional load; in others, support allowed for its diffusion across or away from the partnership. Three fathers centered their emotional burden around their spouse—finding either relief or strain directly in that relationship. In contrast, the remaining two viewed spousal support as a means to redirect or ease emotional stress, rather than as a shared emotional space. Emotionally easing support in either of these two patterns of interpretation came not from the absence of strain but from choosing to respond with compassion rather than critique. This theme highlights how spousal involvement either amplified or eased emotional pressures, depending on how fathers interpreted and received that support. Ultimately, how couples gave and received support influenced whether fatherhood's emotional demands were eased or intensified.

These findings add a final deepening to the response for the central research question. Emotional dynamics within the relationship shaped fathers' navigation of early parenthood. Spousal support was not experienced uniformly; instead, it played either a buffering or intensifying role depending on the relational context and the father's interpretation. This reveals the emotionally complex nature of support, demonstrating that it can be both a source of comfort and a site of strain. These findings show that emotional interpretation is central. Fathers who experienced shared emotional buffering often saw their partner as someone who actively eased their burden through empathy, shared responsibility, or non-judgmental presence. In contrast, fathers who experienced emotional diffusion found support helpful insofar as it allowed them to process or redirect stress without over-relying on their partner. In both cases, fathers engaged in reflective appraisal—evaluating not just the presence of support, but the quality and emotional tone of that support. This experience demonstrates that emotional labour is a central part of many fathers' internal experience of the paternal role. Rather than solely focusing on physical involvement or task-sharing, participants revealed that managing emotional strain is a core component of fatherhood. Spousal support, then,

becomes a mechanism through which fathers either share that emotional labour or find ways to carry it differently. This underscores a contemporary shift in understanding the fatherhood role—toward greater comprehension of the emotional engagement, psychological processing, and partnership-based meaning-making that is actively ongoing.

Interdependent Superordinate Themes. As mentioned within the results chapter, the above themes are subjective phenomena. They overlap, intersect, and remain interconnected. These connections add context and depth to the understanding of how fathers make meaning of spousal support. Three key interactions between these superordinate themes appear most important to the following discussion:

1. The evaluation of spousal dependability influencing the management of emotional burden,
2. Perceived spousal dependability creating the conditions (supportive or strained) in which fathers either freely explored or were pushed to define their paternal roles, and
3. The sense of paternal roles affected how they experienced and managed emotional strain.

Firstly, fathers' perceptions of spousal dependability appear to play a defining role in how they processed and managed emotional burden during early parenthood. When fathers evaluated their partner's dependability, they determined how they could share their emotional load or whether they needed to manage it alone. Their perception of their spouse's trustworthiness and emotional availability then shaped how offered support functioned—either as a space to hold their emotions or as a way to help release them. When fathers viewed their partners as emotionally reliable and consistently responsive, they experienced spousal support as a stabilizing force that could be channeled—one that fostered emotional relief and cultivated a sense of connected and united strength within the relationship. In these cases, emotional support often functioned as a shared resource: something both partners contributed to and benefited from. Alternatively, when fathers perceived their spouse's support as inconsistent, emotionally unavailable, unacceptable due to their own limitations, or conditional, they tended to internalize their distress and shift toward independent coping strategies. These fathers described emotional burdens as theirs alone to carry, often framing the absence of dependable support as a signal to self-regulate without relational input. The

act of evaluating spousal dependability may be a key interpretive tool through which fathers gauged whether emotional strain could be safely shared or required personal containment. Whether support helped hold emotional stress or helped release it depended less on how much stress was present, and more on how emotionally safe and trusting the relationship felt to the father during vulnerable moments. During this evaluation, the father integrated his own ability to receive support into the level of trust he felt in the relationship. In this way, dependability was not simply a trait of the spouse, but a dynamic perception that shaped how emotional challenges were framed, processed, and resolved within the partnership.

Secondly, fathers' perceptions of their spouse's dependability also fundamentally shaped the environment in which they developed their paternal roles. When fathers viewed their partners as reliable and emotionally available, they often experienced a supportive, low-pressure context that encouraged open-ended and intuitive exploration of fatherhood. In this space, role formation unfolded naturally, allowing fathers to define their roles fluidly and authentically in response to personal values and their children's needs. Conversely, when fathers perceived spousal support as inconsistent or experienced pressure—whether explicit or subtle—they responded by adopting a more deliberate and structured approach to defining fatherhood. This pressure often created a sense of urgency, compelling fathers to clarify and commit to specific paternal roles grounded in core values and relational expectations. These reactionary steps could be seen as attempts to stabilize and structure the dyadic parental relationship. With decided and firm parental roles set as a standard, the parental role becomes increasingly simplified to a finite set of relatively predictable expectations. This may, in turn, limit the amount of emotional burden caused by otherwise mobile role expectations and adjustments. Though the fathers of this study had dominant patterns of experience—either routinely finding reliable or inconsistent spousal support—they all had moments where the alternative was true. Dependability functioned as a frame of reference for fathers as they determined whether they felt secure enough to engage in flexible self-discovery or whether they felt constrained to resolve role engagement questions quickly and decisively. Trust in a partner's ability to offload or diffuse emotional burden potentially caused by acting upon opportunities for role exploration was instrumental in whether or not fathers would risk moments of organic and fluid role construction. Trust in their partner's support thus became

the foundation for the emotional safety required to navigate the complex, evolving process of role engagement and development during early fatherhood.

Thirdly, the way fathers formed their paternal roles had a direct impact on how they experienced and responded to emotional strain in the context of spousal support. As highlighted through the relational dynamic of role development and evaluating spousal support, fathers who felt free to explore fatherhood without pressure often described carrying a lighter emotional load. For them, the fatherhood role emerged organically, shaped by intuition, self-reflection, and the evolving needs of their children. This open-ended approach offered flexibility, allowing them to adapt to new challenges with curiosity rather than anxiety. In contrast, fathers who developed their roles in response to internal or external pressure still gained emotional clarity, but the process was more restrictive and, at times, emotionally reactive. These fathers reported that defining a clear role—though often prompted by a call to action or responding to their spouse’s support—helped them manage emotional challenges with greater focus and intention. Regardless of the pathway, fatherhood role clarity served as an emotional anchor. It offered stability amid the unpredictable demands of early fatherhood and helped fathers reframe emotional strain as either a manageable part of growth or, when clarity was lacking, as overwhelming pressure. This interplay reveals how the spousal support received not only shaped the father’s sense of self but also influenced the emotional tone of his parenting experience and later emotional relief. These three superordinate themes—evaluating spousal dependability, role engagement and development, and emotional burden relief—are not isolated processes. Rather, they form a dynamic, interrelated system through which fathers interpret, adapt to, and grow within the early experience of fatherhood. Each theme of spousal support experience both shapes and is shaped by the others, revealing the complexity of spousal support as a lived, relational, and meaning-making experience.

Contributions to the Literature

This section places the study’s findings in context with existing literature. I connect the previous insights to broader research on fatherhood, with a narrowing focus on how this study reflects robust findings within attachment theory literature. After that, I explore the main intention of this study and how current findings contribute to literature on the parental

dyad and maternal gatekeeping. These connections help clarify the value of viewing spousal support from a father's perspective.

Fatherhood and Attachment

As noted earlier, there's no universally agreed-upon definition of fatherhood across cultures or academic disciplines (Li & Tian, 2023; Marsiglio et al., 2000). As sociocultural contexts shift, so do the ways fathers are studied and understood (Adamsons et al., 2022; Berman & Long, 2022; Diniz et al., 2021; Lamb, 1987; Li & Tian, 2023; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Schmitz, 2016; Smiler, 2004). One way to define fatherhood is by referencing the overlap between the various definitions of fatherhood across disciplines of study. This comparison reveals consistent themes: the creation or care of a child, influencing a child as they grow, and a sense of motivation towards promoting a child's wellbeing (Li & Tian, 2023; Marsiglio et al., 2000). Recognizing fatherhood as complex, multifaceted, and deeply personal helps explain why it is so hard to define in a way that captures every aspect of the experience.

For this study, fatherhood is defined using the consistent themes previously mentioned in addition to key elements from the positive father involvement and attachment literature. From the perspective of positive father involvement, intentional-responsive fatherhood includes: (a) the father's level of positive engagement, (b) warmth and responsiveness, (c) an involvement in parenting decisions, (d) chosen parenting style, and (e) the responsibility he takes for his child. (Fagan et al., 2014; Lamb, 2010). Drawing from attachment literature, I framed intentional-responsive fatherhood as positive fatherly actions aimed at fostering secure attachment. Secure attachment is a strong predictor of positive developmental outcomes in children (Lamb, 1987; Marsiglio et al., 2000) and was justified as a reasonable outcome to expect of fatherhood that was deemed healthy. Therefore, intentional-responsive fatherhood is the spectrum of parenting behaviours that promote secure father-infant attachment.

Attachment refers to a child's innate drive to seek comfort when feeling vulnerable, anxious, or scared (Bretherton, 1992; Fearon & Roisman, 2017). As noted earlier, when a father helps a child feel safe, seen, soothed, and secure, it increases the likelihood of the child forming a secure attachment to him (Siegel & Bryson, 2011). These four elements are the

core building blocks of secure attachment and, as such, serve as key indicators of intentional-responsive fatherhood. In this view, intentional-responsive fatherhood is inseparable from the father-child relationship and is rooted in the father's ability to build a secure emotional bond with his child. Unlike many other developmental theories, attachment research consistently shows that attachment style is shaped mainly by environmental factors, with little evidence pointing to a strong biological influence (Fearon & Roisman, 2017). This denotes attachment as a key indicator of parental engagement and responsiveness with a child. If the goal of parenting—of fathering—is to support secure attachment between father and child, then viewing attachment through a family systems lens may offer a deeper understanding.

Participants often saw their spouse as inseparable from their attachment with their child. All the participants engaged in defining their fatherhood roles, and justifying their resulting actions, influenced by an interpretation of their spouse's actions or inactions. This finding suggests that fathers do not form their parental roles in isolation from their spouse with their child; they construct them through a relational process entangled with spousal support. Fathers actively responded to the emotional tone of their partner's involvement—whether their spouse offered channels of emotional diffusion and flexibility or, intentionally or unintentionally, imposed pressures and expectations. The evaluation of dependability was not merely a characteristic of the spouse, but a shifting perception that influenced how emotional difficulties were interpreted, managed, and resolved within the relationship. These responses shaped how each father developed his paternal role, explored or engaged with his child, and the expression of intentional-responsive fatherhood actions which followed. This suggests that the fathers in this study assessed the encouragement and flexibility from their spouses as a threshold of necessary spousal support. This threshold appears essential before they could engage with their child and develop their parental abilities, and risk integrating components of paternal roles. Trying something new, such as fostering the qualities needed for secure attachment, requires space for mistakes and learning. In these moments of trial and error, fathers who perceived their spouses as dependable and supportive felt more at ease as they explored their developing parenting skills.

Parental Dyad and Maternal Gatekeeping

This study contributes to literature on the parental dyad and maternal gatekeeping. New parents often handle the stress of caring for a newborn through shared, couple-based strategies (Alves et al., 2020). Although mothers and fathers face different stressors, research shows parental adaptation usually relies on dyadic coping (Diniz et al., 2021). Stress in one partner affects the other (Alves et al., 2020). When the father's relationship with the mother is supportive and they manage stress together well, father-infant attachment security tends to improve (Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020).

According to Diniz et al., (2021) father-mother relationships as determinant of father involvement and engagement has been frequently studied. Through their meta-analysis, Diniz et al., (2021) indicate that a father's report of relationship quality within the dyad can moderate engagement with a child. The present study indicates that the interpretation of spousal support may be a key element of how fathers assess their relationship quality. Fathers in this study often highlighted the two-way impact of stress and emotional regulation within the parental dyad. Their stories add nuance to the concept of dyadic coping as spousal support didn't just transfer stress evenly between partners. Instead, it helped redirect or ease the emotional burdens fathers carried. Fathers also judged the reliability of this support based on past experiences with their spouse, how their child affected their relationship, and their own efforts to avoid burdening their spouse. Additionally, they evaluated the reliability of support by considering if past support had been consistent, whether the support was provided when needed, and if it met their immediate needs at the time it was given. This assessment involved both external observations and internal reflection, showing that dyadic coping is as much an intrapersonal process as an interpersonal one. This insight refines dyadic coping theory by emphasizing the father's personal appraisal of spousal support and subsequent engagement with their children. This appraisal plays a key role in how fathers value and interpret support while managing emotional stress.

The quality of the parents' relationship and their dyadic coping affect not only parental well-being but also broader family dynamics (Bornstein, 2019). These effects show up most clearly in children's development. Kids thrive when parents cooperate and avoid undermining or competing with each other (Teubert & Pinquart, 2010). Family systems

theorists highlight maternal gatekeeping as a key factor shaping fathers' involvement (Altenburger et al., 2018; Aytac & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2024; Bornstein, 2019; Cannon et al., 2008; Olsavsky et al., 2020). Maternal gatekeeping has been defined as mothers' behaviours that either encourage or limit fathers' childcare engagement (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015). The negative, restrictive side of maternal gatekeeping has been understudied (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). Crucially, no research has deeply explored how fathers interpret or internalize maternal gatekeeping—especially when supportive actions feel controlling or discouraging. This gap is important, given Fagan and Cherson's (2017) findings: it is not just the presence of spousal support that matters, but how fathers perceive and align that support with their own parenting goals. Fagan and Cherson (2017) provide evidence that when mothers' support style matches fathers' parenting ideals, paternal involvement rises. When the support aligns with the mother's goals but not the father's, involvement may drop.

This study reframes maternal gatekeeping as a relational and interpretive process rather than a strictly behavioral one. That is, the father's internal evaluation of the emotional tone, intention, and consistency of support plays a critical role in whether such behaviors are experienced as facilitating or inhibiting. This interpretive framing extends the work of Fagan and Cherson (2017), who showed that paternal engagement increases when the support offered aligns with fathers' own parenting goals. The current study suggests that even well-intentioned forms of control or discouragement—typically viewed as gate-closing behaviors—can be perceived as supportive, provided they are experienced as emotionally safe, aligned with shared values, or grounded in mutual trust. This nuance has been largely overlooked in existing research, which tends to treat gatekeeping dimensions as having fixed valences (i.e., encouragement as good; discouragement as bad). Sometimes, behaviours labeled as “encouragement” felt coercive or invalidating to fathers, revealing a gap between intent and impact in spousal support. How partners managed their emotional needs either eased or increased the psychological pressures of early fatherhood. This suggests that the usual categories of maternal gatekeeping may need refining to better capture fathers' experiences, especially how they emotionally process these dynamics. The findings therefore complicate binary classifications of maternal behaviors and support a more fluid, context-sensitive understanding of gatekeeping.

The present study uses this finding as a foundation to support Fagan and Cherson's (2017) claim: In addition to the intended meaning of spousal support offered, the father's interpretation of the support—both in the quality and intention—may additionally shape the engagement efforts of the father. Fathers in this study used dependability of support as a reference point to assess whether they felt emotionally secure enough to explore their evolving role with flexibility or pressured to resolve it quickly. Trust in their partner's ability to share or absorb emotional strain played a key role in whether they felt safe enough to engage in the uncertain, ongoing process of becoming a father. In this way, partner support formed the emotional foundation for paternal role development in early fatherhood. If the offering of support was not sufficient to convey dependability, the father may not engage in the same quality or quantity of interaction with his child, regardless of the intention behind the support given. The effect of the spousal support offered depends on many factors, all aiding the interpretive process.

Further, the study introduces the novel idea of spousal support as a developmental context for paternal role formation. Rather than merely assisting with tasks or buffering stress, support from one's partner created conditions in which fathers engaged in reflective role formation. Depending on the emotional tone of support, two distinct pathways of role development emerged: one in which low-pressure, open-ended support enabled exploratory and emergent fathering roles, and another in which more directive or emotionally urgent support catalyzed intentional, value-driven fatherhood roles. Both pathways fostered growth, but through different mechanisms—emphasizing that the quality and tone of support shape not only what fathers do, but how they come to understand who they are in the context of fatherhood.

Additionally, this study advances current theory by placing emotional labor at the center of paternal role development. Much of the maternal gatekeeping literature to date has emphasized behavioral involvement, often omitting the psychological and emotional dimensions of fatherhood (Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020). The present findings show that emotional strain, processing, and meaning-making were not peripheral concerns, but central to how fathers constructed their parenting role. Spousal support influenced whether fathers felt able to engage with the emotional uncertainty of early parenting or whether they retreated

into self-reliant coping strategies. This supports the assertion by Schoppe-Sullivan et al. (2015) that emotional safety within the parenting dyad can influence the degree and quality of paternal engagement. However, the current study goes further by illustrating that managing emotional stress and role uncertainty is itself a central component of modern fatherhood, and that spousal support—whether buffering or redirected—is the context in which this work unfolds.

Despite these complex interactions, the participants connected with their children in various ways, while maintaining some awareness of how their actions influenced or were influenced by their spouse. They sought balance between their spouse's and child's needs—wrestling with internal pressures to meet their own standards of good fatherhood while navigating the shared interdependency with their spouse. Altenburger et al. (2018) highlight that the quality of paternal involvement tends to decline as maternal gate-closing behaviours increase. Building on this, the present study suggests that one mechanism linking maternal gate-closing to reduced paternal engagement lies in the formative role of the spousal support in shaping paternal roles. These findings indicate that a father's capacity to engage meaningfully in parenting is deeply influenced by the quality of the partner relationship and the emotional and relational opportunities it affords. Many participants said their understanding of fatherhood was inseparable from their view of their spouse's motherhood experience. These findings suggest that the impact of maternal gatekeeping—and related factors such as attachment security—is shaped not only by maternal intent but by the father's interpretation of gate-opening and gate-closing behaviours. It is this interpretive nuance that ultimately influences the quality of paternal engagement.

Taken together, these findings call for a reframing of maternal gatekeeping theory to account for paternal interpretation, emotional tone, and developmental timing. These findings suggest that maternal gatekeeping behaviors cannot be fully understood in isolation from the father's internal meaning-making process and underline the need for a more dynamic, relational model of co-parenting. Future research and clinical practice should attend more carefully to how fathers interpret support behaviors, particularly during the transition to parenthood, when parental roles are most fluid and relational dynamics most formative. By focusing on the father's perspective, this study adds to a growing but still limited body of

work recognizing men as active, emotionally aware members of family systems. These findings call for a broader view of spousal support—not just as a factor in paternal involvement, but as a key relational process that shapes fathers’ paternal role.

Relevant Reflection Elements

In this section, I reflect on the study’s limitations and strengths. I also discuss aspects of researcher reflexivity and conclude with an overall evaluation of the study.

Limitations

The IPA method offers deep insight into specific meaning-making processes. However, its strict participant recruitment criteria limit how broadly the findings can be applied. This is a common and accepted trade-off in IPA studies, chosen to strengthen other aspects of the research. A potential limitation in this study lies in the small, homogenous sample. This combination, guided by IPA principles, lowers the study’s information power (Malterud et al., 2021). Information power depends on the richness and diversity of data collected. Using a small, narrow sample may limit the variety of perspectives, which is intentional in IPA but can reduce information power. To address this, the study’s aim is deliberately focused on a specific lived experience within a parental dyad. If key standards of rigor are upheld throughout the IPA process, the quality of participant dialogue should remain strong. These standards will be discussed further in the research evaluation section below.

Another limitation of this study is the time-intensive, demanding nature of interpretation (Smith et al., 2022). As a researcher, I struggled to balance giving each insight enough space to develop with the urge to accept initial interpretations of the fathers’ experiences. During these moments of uncertainty—deciding when to move forward or revisit findings—I questioned the value and strength of my interpretations. I often relied on IPA method texts as step-by-step guides for support, a common challenge for novice researchers (Smith, 2011b). This reliance may have limited the depth of understanding I could have reached. Moving too quickly through analysis stages might have caused me to miss important findings from these fathers.

It is also important to acknowledge that the fathers who participated in this study may represent a relatively positive or high-functioning subset of first-time fatherhood experiences. The voluntary nature of participation and the topic of spousal support may have

attracted individuals who are more reflective, communicative, or engaged in their family lives. As such, the findings may not fully capture the range of difficulties or negative experiences some fathers may face, particularly those who experience minimal support, higher conflict, or greater isolation in their parenting journey. This potential bias may limit the applicability of findings to fathers in more strained or unsupported circumstances.

Future research could address these limitations by recruiting more diverse samples that represent a broader spectrum of cultural, socioeconomic, and relational contexts. For instance, exploring the experiences of fathers from racialized communities, lower-income households, or non-traditional family structures would offer a more comprehensive understanding of paternal engagement and the influence of spousal support. Additionally, longitudinal research could examine how fathers' meaning-making processes around spousal support evolve over time, from the early postpartum months into later stages of fatherhood. These extensions would contribute to a richer, more inclusive picture of fatherhood and support the development of tailored clinical or community-based interventions that reflect the diversity of modern parenting experiences.

A final limitation stems from incomplete demographic data. Detailed information on age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, education, and household composition is available for only four of the five participants. While all participants met inclusion criteria (see Methods), one participant did not provide specific demographic details. This limits readers' ability to judge how relevant the findings are to their own contexts. Though IPA studies do not aim for generalizability, they seek transferability—allowing readers to decide if findings apply to similar situations. Without full demographic data, readers cannot accurately assess this relevance. Additionally, the lack of context challenges researcher reflexivity and interpretation.

Strengths

Despite these limitations, this study has several strengths. The data align with foundational psychology research while offering nuanced insights. It supports established work on attachment theory and maternal gatekeeping, standing out as the only study to explore how fathers experience maternal gatekeeping through spousal support. While more

research is needed to refine fathers' experiences, this study provides a valuable starting point for understanding maternal gatekeeping from a paternal perspective.

Beyond key markers of high-quality IPA research (discussed below), the study included a secondary confirmation interview or email. This follow-up was not recorded for transcription, but notes were taken as participants reflected on preliminary individual and group findings. Four participants completed this interview in-person, on the phone, or reviewed an email to confirm that their experiences were accurately and respectfully represented. They were given the chance to review the findings and agreed that the analysis captured the relevant elements of their stories. Their feedback strengthens confidence that this research faithfully reflects participant experiences and supports the analysis process, boosting the study's credibility. The consistency between fathers' accounts also suggests that my use of bracketing helped limit interpretive bias and maintain accuracy in reporting their experiences.

Researcher Reflexivity

Qualitative research inherently involves the researcher as part of the inquiry. I acknowledge that my background, worldview, assumptions, and evolving life circumstances shaped both the research process and the interpretation of findings. This reflexivity statement examines how my positionality—as a researcher, counsellor, and soon-to-be father—shaped the lens through which I engaged with participants and made sense of their narratives.

At the outset, I underestimated the emotional and intuitive demands of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). Although I understood its methodological structure (Smith et al., 2022; Smith & Nizza, 2022), I was unprepared for the internal tension between IPA's iterative demands and my self-imposed timelines. This urgency hindered deeper interpretive work. Only through reflection and support from colleagues, my supervisor, and family did I slow down enough to engage more meaningfully with participants' experiences. One example of the shift from quick analysis to deeper interpretation took place between revisions the results chapter of this thesis. With each edit, I was given the opportunity to reflect and deepen my understanding of each father, guided by prompts and aided by my supervisor.

My connection to fatherhood also shaped how I approached and interpreted the data. Since childhood, I have envisioned becoming a father—not as a distant role but as a meaningful identity. This longstanding aspiration has influenced how I perceive the emotional and relational dimensions of fatherhood. I often see fatherhood as one of the most meaningful identities I can inhabit—perhaps the most meaningful. That deep sense of meaning drove me to feel a strong responsibility to honor the lived experiences of the fathers who participated in this study. I have become a father through the course of this study, and I recognize that my evolving identity may have subtly shaped my attunement to certain themes, particularly those involving hope, uncertainty, or a desire for guidance. As I noticed these biases come about, mostly through a tendency to avoid the difficult aspects of lacking support the participant AWL was experiencing, I engaged in purposeful grounding exercises before I worked further with the data. I asked myself, “what do I notice, what am I ignoring, and what might still be there?” each time I engaged with a transcript, setting a timer every 15 minutes to remind myself of this practice. Not only did this aid with the bracketing of my own biases to ignore uncomfortable truths, that support may be lacking, but it also actively deepened my analysis process for those elements I was already fond of. The participants’ testimony of often finding security, firm understanding in core values, and finding one’s pathway was contrary to how I envisioned the experience of new fatherhood to be. It revealed a level of trusting one’s own sense of direction and growth that I had not anticipated.

My philosophical stance—critical realism—also informed my interpretive lens. Rooted in my developmental background, Christian faith, and work as a counsellor, this position allowed me to honor participants’ experiences as partial yet real accounts of a shared reality. It helped me hold both conviction and humility: conviction that truth matters, and humility in recognizing the limits of my understanding. This framework guided my efforts to bracket assumptions and engage with the data openly. By paying close attention to each participant as a unique example of lived experience—and letting go of the expectation to sort their lives into a false binary of right or wrong—I came to deeply appreciate the nuances, strengths, and struggles they shared.

My presence in this research is undeniable. My values, identity, and life stage informed how I listened, what I noticed, and how I interpreted meaning. Yet through sustained reflexivity and a grounded interpretive approach, I sought to represent each father's account with respect and openness. This work is offered as both a personal inquiry and a professional contribution to a more nuanced, humanizing portrayal of fatherhood.

Evaluation of Research

Using Nizza et al.'s (2021) guidelines, I compared this study's efforts against four markers of high-quality IPA research. This section reviews that comparison to highlight the study's strengths and weaknesses.

The study shows key markers of quality IPA research, demonstrating a strong commitment to IPA's idiographic focus. Through rich, detailed accounts from Sonny, AWL, Jason, Gary, and John, the analysis captures the complexity and uniqueness of first-time fathers' experiences with spousal support. The data reveals diverse emotional dynamics—from moments where the spouse absorbs emotional burden to times when the couple shares emotional regulation and mutual support. This range reflects IPA's demand for idiographic sensitivity and analytic depth (Nizza et al., 2021), showing how fatherhood's emotional challenges vary by relational context and individual interpretation. Extensive participant quotes anchor the analysis in the fathers' own voices, preserving the emotional texture and authentic lived experience IPA seeks to reveal. The thematic structure is clear and well-organized, distinguishing between different types of spousal support—emotional offloading, endurance, intervention, and coordinated burden sharing—offering a nuanced view of spousal support in new fatherhood.

While the study excels in many areas, some aspects of analytic rigor and transparency could be improved to boost its overall quality and trustworthiness. The interpretative depth, strong in capturing obvious meanings, could have been deepened by exploring latent or implicit elements in the participants' narratives. This would mean probing contradictions, ambiguities, and emotional subtleties beneath surface descriptions to reveal richer layers of meaning. As noted earlier, my tension to push the project forward rather than move with its insights may have limited the depth of understanding achieved. Additionally, greater contextual sensitivity would enhance the study's resonance and transferability. The lack of

detailed demographic data from one of the participants further reduced its potential relevance to other settings.

In terms of presentation, participant quotes illustrate key points well, but selective editing and clearer integration into the analytic narrative could improve readability and keep the analysis focused and impactful. I deliberately chose longer quotations to highlight the convergence among participants and preserve the nuance in their own words, prioritizing their voices over my interpretations. However, I recognize this choice may weaken the flow of the narrative.

Implications for Counselling Practice

Guiding the next section is a quote I often reflect on in counselling practice and find relevant here: “Psychotherapy is both art and science; research shapes the broad contours of practice, but the human encounter at its center remains a deeply subjective, nonquantifiable experience.” (Yalom & Lescz, 2005). While recognizing that this research can shape but never replace the deeply personal experience of fatherhood, I aim to outline some implications for counselling practice.

This study highlights the complex and interpretive nature of spousal support for first-time fathers, offering important insights for counselling. Although interest in paternal engagement is growing, psychological research—and by extension, counselling practice—has yet to fully embrace fathers’ nuanced, subjective experiences. This study helps fill that gap by showing that support is not always experienced as positive, and that fathers’ engagement depends largely on how they interpret, rather than just receive, their spouse’s behaviours.

Counselling interventions may be more effective if they start by recognizing the relational nature of fatherhood. Research shows that fatherhood is not isolated; it is co-created within the family system, especially within the parental dyad (Bornstein, 2019; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Fathers in this study said their early parenting roles and identity were strongly shaped by how they saw their spouses’ support. This matches previous findings that link fathers’ sense of competence with maternal relationship satisfaction and support (Fagan & Cherson, 2017; Habib, 2012). For clinicians, this means therapy with fathers—especially new fathers—should explore not just the types of support

offered but how fathers receive and interpret that support in relation to their own parenting goals, developing roles and identity.

A key concept from the literature and participants' stories is maternal gatekeeping—mothers' behaviours that encourage, discourage, or control a father's involvement with the child (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). Although mothers may intend to be supportive, fathers often reported subtle gatekeeping, such as correction, restriction, or unsolicited advice, which they sometimes felt undermined them. Research shows fathers' parenting confidence drops when they perceive discouragement or control from mothers (Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015; Thomas & Holmes, 2020). Counsellors working with couples or families in early fatherhood should recognize these dynamics and help partners explore how their interactions might unintentionally limit paternal involvement, even with good intentions.

To address this in therapy, clinicians can incorporate structured co-parenting exercises that promote mutual understanding of parenting roles and reduce unconscious gatekeeping. Tools such as the “parenting roles dialogue,” where each partner outlines their own goals and expectations for parenting, can open space for productive conversations and clarify intentions behind certain behaviours. These structured conversations can help prevent one partner's well-meaning support from being perceived as criticism or control.

Therapists should start by recognizing that fathers actively interpret spousal support. This study shows support works best when it matches the father's sense of purpose and parenting roles. Several participants felt supported when their partner's actions aligned with their caregiving goals. This backs Fagan and Cherson's (2017) finding that encouragement boosts engagement only when it fits a father's own aspirations. Therapists can help fathers clarify what support feels helpful and why, using this to shape personalized, values-driven interventions. Encouraging open dialogue between partners ensures support is defined together, not assumed—especially important since most research focuses on maternal views (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Some participants reported that well-meaning support sometimes felt controlling or conditional, reflecting maternal gatekeeping dynamics (Puhlman & Pasley, 2013). Addressing these perceptions in therapy

can shift the focus from assumed best practices to shared relational understanding, promoting healthier engagement and mutual respect in the parental dyad.

Narrative therapy techniques, such as externalizing conversations or identity mapping, can help fathers articulate their evolving sense of self in the transition to parenthood. For example, a therapist might invite a father to describe his “father identity story” and explore how that story has been shaped by his partner’s support—or lack thereof. Helping fathers recognize how their identity, and the roles found within, is being constructed in relationship to others can foster clarity, self-agency, and improved communication with their partners.

This study reinforces that dyadic coping—the shared effort of partners to handle stress—is key to strengthening father-child attachment and easing role strain (Alves et al., 2020; Kotila & Schoppe-Sullivan, 2015). Counsellors can use dyadic frameworks to help couples understand how they manage emotional burdens together. Helping both parents see how their stress responses and communication affect each other builds empathy and promotes shared caregiving responsibility. When couples tune into each other’s emotions and offer support that feels genuine, parenting becomes more unified and supportive. One evidence-based approach is the use of emotion-focused couple therapy (EFT) techniques to build emotional attunement between partners. Therapists can facilitate exercises where each partner shares how they interpret the other’s support and what they emotionally need during challenging parenting moments. These discussions, guided by EFT principles, can enhance bonding and reduce miscommunication about roles and expectations.

Finally, these findings call for a shift in how support is viewed in counselling. Instead of assuming all support is helpful, therapists should help clients explore how some actions—though called encouragement—may feel evaluative or controlling. One father in the study noted that even good intentions can feel like micromanaging. This gap between intention and perception echoes Fagan & Cherson (2017) and suggests counselling should validate each partner’s interpretive experience. This study adds to a growing body of research that challenges simple views of fatherhood and highlights the role of experience, interpretation, and context. Counselling must evolve to see fathers as active, meaning-making participants in their parenting journeys. By focusing on the father’s inner world, his

relationship with his spouse, and the wider pressures he faces, counselling can help build healthier, more engaged family systems.

Future research

Although this study centers on fathers and treats mothers and fathers as distinct (Adamsons et al., 2022), its findings support systemic views of family. Family systems theory sees family members as interconnected, each influencing the others' experiences (Cox & Paley, 2003). Unlike most systemic research, which asks what "factors promote or inhibit father involvement with children" (Adamsons et al., 2022, p. 8), this study examines the internal meaning-making process underneath. It shows that fathers construct meaning in ways that shape their involvement with their children, their spouse, and their evolving roles as fathers. While this study offers an entry point into that process, more research is needed to understand its broader impact.

Future research could build on this study by exploring how fathers interpret spousal support over time—through evaluations of dependability, role development, or emotional burden sharing. A longitudinal approach could track how paternal perceptions of encouragement or gatekeeping shift from the prenatal stage through early childhood. This could reveal patterns that align with—or diverge from—Fagan and Cherson's (2017) findings on goal alignment. It could also clarify whether fathers move between different modes of meaning-making in response to changing family dynamics. Mixed methods research could further strengthen this area by comparing fathers' self-reported experiences with their partners' perspectives. Doing so would help address the current overreliance on maternal reports in gatekeeping studies (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2015) while avoiding the limitations of focusing solely on the father's narrative to assess family well-being.

Finally, the findings suggest promising directions for couple-based interventions. Spousal support, as shown in this study, does more than assist with practical parenting—it can shape paternal roles, relieve emotional burden, or add stress. Parenting programs and perinatal counselling could use this insight to help couples intentionally calibrate support in ways that reinforce secure father-infant attachment (Fagan et al., 2014; Lamb, 2010; Singley et al., 2018). By viewing fathers as active meaning-makers influenced by relational

dynamics—not just as subjects of comparison with mothers—these programs would respond to long-standing gaps in fatherhood research and practice (Gill et al., 2021; Schoppe-Sullivan & Fagan, 2020).

Conclusion

This study offers a deeper look at how first-time fathers experience and interpret spousal support. Rather than viewing support as something simply present or absent, participants described it as something they made sense of—shaped by how safe they felt in their relationships, how they saw themselves as emerging parents, and how they coped with emotional challenges. While current research increasingly highlights the emotional role of fathers, this study adds nuance by showing that paternal engagement is not just influenced by external factors like resources or personality. It is also closely tied to how fathers perceive and process the dynamics within their relationship.

Three key themes emerged—evaluating a partner’s reliability, developing a father’s sense of his paternal roles, and managing emotional burdens. When fathers felt their partner was emotionally present and dependable, they often described parenting as an opportunity for growth and self-discovery. This sense of safety gave them space to explore who they were becoming. But when they sensed inconsistency, emotional pressure, or even their own difficulty accepting support, they tended to adopt more rigid, task-oriented approaches to stabilize their role. In both cases, support from a partner wasn’t just helpful—it shaped the entire emotional landscape of early fatherhood. It either created room for growth or pushed them to define themselves more quickly and in reaction to the pressure they perceived. How they understood their partner’s support directly affected whether parenting felt collaborative or isolating.

This research builds on existing theory in several ways. First, it expands attachment literature by showing that a father's bond with his child is often rooted in the emotional tone of his relationship with his partner. Second, it adds to models of dyadic coping by emphasizing that support only helps when it is understood and felt as genuine—its impact depends on how it is interpreted, not just whether it is there. Third, the findings offer a new lens on maternal gatekeeping, revealing that even well-intentioned support can feel

controlling or invalidating when there's a mismatch between what's offered and how it is received.

Importantly, this study underscores that support is relational—it matters how it is given, how it is taken in, and what it means to the person receiving it. Dependability wasn't just a quality of the partner; it was a perception shaped by each father's readiness, trust, and evolving sense of self. By centering fathers' lived experiences, this work pushes back against oversimplified views of paternal involvement. It shows that fatherhood is not just about doing tasks—it is about making sense of one's role in a shared emotional space. These insights suggest that perinatal and postnatal support should take fathers' emotional needs seriously, not as an afterthought, but as part of a healthy family system.

This study contributes both theoretical depth and practical relevance. It connects threads across attachment theory, relational stress, and parental role formation, while making a case for including fathers' emotional perspectives in conversations about family well-being. Fatherhood, in this light, is not just action—it is interpretation, relationship, and paternal roles in motion.

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APPENDIX A

Recruitment Poster



 **TRINITY WESTERN**
UNIVERSITY

First-Time Fathers are needed for **Fatherhood Research**

Being a father, and navigating parenthood with a spouse, can be complicated.

We Want to Understand Your Experience!

- Are you a father between the ages of 25 and 40?
- Was your first child born within the last 5 years?
- Can you reflect on how your relationship with your spouse may impact your relationship with your child?
- Would you be willing to discuss these experiences?

Interviews will be approximately 1.5 hours long.

\$25 honorarium in appreciation of your time.

If interested, please contact: Dane James


APPENDIX B

Screening Interview

Note: wording from this script may be adjusted for clarity with specific participants.

General Introduction:

- Hello, my name is Dane James. I'm a master's student at Trinity Western University, currently completing my Master of Counselling Psychology.

Study Focus:

- I am contacting you regarding your email/phone call showing your intent to become a participant in my study regarding father's perception of spousal support.
- I'd like to quickly tell you more about the study and see if you would like to participate based upon knowing some further information.
- I'm looking to get a better understanding of the experiences of support that new first-time fathers receive from their spouses. To understand your experiences, I would ask you to have a conversation with me that will last an hour or so. This conversation will be guided by some specific questions I have for you and will be recorded so that I can reflect on and better understand your experience. Once I have had the chance to better understand your experience, I will also ask to have a second interview with you to make sure I am understanding you correctly. This second interview will not be recorded but it will help ensure that this project remains accurate to your experience.
- Now that I've explained the process a bit further, do you have any immediate questions?
 - o Do you still feel like you would be interested in participating?
- Either:
 - o (a) (yes) Since you're interested in participating, we can take a moment to clarify a few important points which have to do with whether or not you meet the criteria to participate.
 - o (b) (no) I understand. Thank you for your time and if you change your mind, you're welcome to reach out to me again.
- Check the following inclusion and exclusion criteria:
 - o Are you fluent in English? (*Necessary "yes"*)

- Are you between the age of 22 and 40 years old/what is your current age?
(*Necessary “yes”*)
- Do you have a child between 0 and 18 months old? (*Necessary “yes”*)
- Are you the biological father of your child? (*Necessary “yes”*)
- Is this child currently your only child? (*Necessary “yes”*)
- Are you currently married to the biological mother of your child? (*Necessary “yes”*)
- Are you currently living with the biological mother of your child? (*Necessary “yes”*)
- Are you currently seeking legal separation from your spouse or in an ongoing legal custody trial over parental rights with your child? (*Necessary “no”*)
- Would you describe your current relationship with your spouse as abusive?
(*Necessary “no”*)
- Could I confirm your current location of province and city? (*For the provision of the tailored support page*)

Thank the participant for their time and set up interview time for the recorded session:

- If at any point the participant is screened out of the participant pool, or declares that they no longer wish to participate, make them aware that the current phone screening was not recorded and the information they had provided so far will be immediately digitally/physically shredded in relation to notes taken during the screening process. As this information will be destroyed, make them aware that I will not have further access to it, and that they will not have access to it either.

APPENDIX C

Informed Consent

Studying the Lived Experience of Spousal Support for First-Time Fathers

Principal Investigator: Dane James, MA Counselling Psychology Student, Department of Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University

Faculty Supervisor: Dr. Larissa Rossen PhD, RCC, Assistant Professor, Department of Counselling Psychology, Trinity Western University, BC

Second Reader: Dr. Sonia Molloy PhD, Associate Professor, Human Development and Family Studies, Penn State York University, PA

Purpose: You are invited to participate in a research study focused on understanding the experiences of first-time fathers in relation to spousal support. The goal of this research is to explore how spousal support, in all aspects, influences first-time fathers' involvement with their child. I am interested in how first-time fathers make meaning of these influences in relation to parenting tasks and parental decision-making.

Study Procedures

As a participant, you will engage in two interviews conducted either via Zoom or in person, based on your preference and convenience. The first interview will be recorded for accuracy, while the second will provide you with the opportunity to provide feedback on the work conducted.

- **First Interview:** This interview will last approximately 60 minutes. You will be asked to discuss your journey as a first-time father, particularly focusing on how spousal support has affected your role in parenting. After this interview, you will have the opportunity to choose a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. This pseudonym will replace your real name in all records, and any identifying information will be removed from the transcript throughout analysis and publication.
- **Second Interview:** This session will serve as a way to show you the preliminary work of the study. I will ask you to review a summary of your transcript and provide feedback to ensure the findings accurately represent your experiences.

Potential Risks and Discomforts: Participating in this study involves minimal risks, such as discomfort from discussing personal views and experiences related to parenting dynamics

with a researcher who may be unfamiliar to you. I will create a supportive environment to minimize discomfort. If you feel distressed or uncomfortable at any point, you can pause the interview or choose to end your participation.

Potential Benefits to Participants and/or to Society: Your participation will contribute to a deeper understanding of the challenges faced by first-time fathers and their experience of spousal support. This knowledge aims to inform better support systems and counselling practices for fathers in similar situations. Additionally, by sharing your experiences, you may find validation and support and contribute to a broader societal understanding of paternal involvement and family dynamics.

Confidentiality: All information collected during this study that can identify you will be kept confidential and will only be disclosed with your explicit permission or as required by law. Audio recordings and transcripts will be stored securely on password-protected devices and in locked cabinets. They will be retained until the completion of the research, in compliance with Trinity Western University's thesis requirements. Any Zoom recordings will be stored temporarily on Zoom's servers in the USA for a maximum of five days before being transferred to a Canadian server for long-term storage. Zoom's security and privacy policies can be reviewed at <http://www.zoom.us>. Data used for the purpose of this study will be physically and digitally shredded three (3) years after the completion of the project.

Remuneration/Compensation: As a token of appreciation for your time, a \$25.00 e-gift card to any store of your choosing which has a Canadian outlet/website which is accessible online will be provided upon completion of the study. Gift card options will be discussed at the start of the interview. Popular options include Starbucks/Tim Hortons/Amazon.

Contact for Information about the Study: If you have any questions or require further information about this study, please contact the principal researcher, Dane James, by phone at [REDACTED] or via email at [REDACTED]. You may also contact Dr. Larissa Rossen, the faculty supervisor, at [REDACTED]. If you have any concerns about your treatment or rights as a research participant, you may contact the Ethics Compliance Officer in the Office of Research, Trinity Western University at [REDACTED] or [REDACTED].

Consent: Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary, and you may decline to participate or withdraw at any time without consequence. Once your data is anonymized and used to inform the data analysis of other transcripts, withdrawal of your data is no longer possible as it will be impossible to withdraw the effect of your responses or the understanding of how your responses and other responses relate to one another. After the point of data analysis, if you no longer consent to the second interview, you are welcome to decline to participate without consequence. Your signature below indicates that you have had your questions about the study answered to your satisfaction and have received a copy of this consent form for your own records. Your signature indicates that you consent to participate in this study.

Written Consent:

Research Participant Signature

Date

Printed Name of Participant

APPENDIX D

Interview Guide

Research Question: What are first-time fathers' experiences of spousal support?

Method: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA)

Interview Structure: Temporal funnel

Introduction

- Briefly explain the purpose of the research and the structure of the interview.
- Emphasize confidentiality and the participant's right to withdraw at any time.
- Obtain verbal consent in addition to written consent before beginning to record the interview.

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me what being a father means to you?
 - Descriptive prompts: What were some of the first thoughts that go through your mind? What are some emotions that stand out to you the most?
 - Reflective prompts: How did you imagine fatherhood would change your life?
2. If I were watching you interact with your child, describe to me what I would notice about you as a father?
 - Descriptive prompt: In practice, what does being a father involve? Where and how do you find yourself spending your time and energy as a father? Where do you anticipate you will spend your time and energy as a father in the future?
 - Reflective prompt: What do you think your child is coming to learn about you as a father?
3. How has your partner played a part in your experience of fatherhood?
 - Descriptive prompt: How did her involvement make a difference?
 - Reflective prompt: What does spousal support mean to you?
4. Can you describe a time when your spouse's support significantly impacted you as a father?
 - Descriptive prompt: What happened and how did it affect you? How did the support influence your interactions with your child?

- Reflective prompt: How do you think her support has shaped your fatherhood journey? In what ways has her support or feedback been most valuable? In what ways has her support or feedback been a challenge to receive?
- 5. Having reflected upon these elements, how would you describe the experience of being a father?
 - Reflective circular prompt: To the best of your knowledge, how does your partner feel about your fatherhood experience? How do you feel about your experience?

Conclusion

- Thank the participant for their time and insights.
- Offer the opportunity for the participant to add any additional thoughts or experiences they feel are relevant and debrief:
 - “Thank you very much for participating in this interview. Your contribution is invaluable to this study, which seeks to deepen our understanding of how first-time fathers perceive and make meaning of the support they receive from their spouses. I hope this research will provide insights into fathers’ unique experiences and help to address assumptions about spousal support during the early stages of fatherhood. Ultimately, this work aims to guide mental health professionals in supporting fathers more effectively, recognizing the nuances of their experiences and challenges.”
- Again, thank you for sharing your experiences. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to reach out
- Discuss the next steps, including how they will be later contacted to consider the superordinate themes and validate or invalidate the data based upon their experience.

APPENDIX E

Support Resources

Mental Health Support

310Mental Health Support

Call 310-6789 for emotional support, information and resources specific to mental health.

1-800-SUICIDE

Call 1-800-784-2433 if you are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including thoughts of suicide.

Counselling Services

- **Provision of at least 2 options to be sent to participant based upon their location confirmed in the screening interview.*

General Information & Support

- Talk to your family doctor or visit a walk-in clinic
- Call the Mental Health Support Line at 310-6789 (no area code) for information about services closest to you
- Find your local mental health centre or programs at this link
 - You may need a doctor's referral to access some programs
- Find your local Canadian Mental Health Association branch at this link and ask for information about local services
- Contact a local senior's support organization or group and ask for advice. You can search for organizations at this link

APPENDIX F

Personal Experiential Themes from Gary's Analysis

EXHIBIT 1.1 Table 1 of Personal Experiential Themes from Gary's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 1. Collaborating learning for boundary consolidation		
Subtheme 1. Passive challenges		
Watching spouse take responsibility for change	548-549	<i>...a mom was being cautioned, to not become the expert in your child.</i>
Withdrawing from conflict with perceived lack of parental expertise	559-560	<i>...nothing I do in this moment feels like I'm able to do it properly.</i>
Challenged to share load of parenting despite internal/external resistance	575-576	<i>You have to be able to pass it back and form. So I'd say, that's been one of the challenges.</i>
Subtheme 2. Course correction: Trials, communication, and rehearsal		
Striving for balance among divided parental roles	390	<i>...we do really try to divide up the roles...</i>
Alleviating imbalance through communication facilitated action	396	<i>...so again, we communicate.</i>
Refining support throughout redistribution shifts	417-418	<i>So there's definitely a redistribution conversation that keeps coming up from time to time...</i>
Receptive towards spouse's parental ideas	304-305	<i>And we've kind of played with what that dynamic would look like.</i>
Subtheme 3. Finding reliable patterns of support reception		
Freely providing unfiltered honesty	533	<i>We're both exhausted... But we tend to pass the role back and forth...</i>
Making concerted effort to understand spouse's support preference	382-384	<i>...we have really tried to understand each other's love languages...</i>
Intellectualizing support received for optimization	368-369	<i>So there's this idea that we all express and show love and receive love in different ways.</i>
Empowered service through love received	446-447	<i>You asked me to do anything. I'll do it absolutely.</i>
Subtheme 4. Savouring moments of refinement		
Relaying positive affirmation in response to appreciation received	377-378	<i>...my spouse says to me like, "you were an amazing father today..."</i>
Palpable relief of responsibility burden with support	516-517	<i>Its just easier when you're well supported.</i>
Appreciation for spousal confirmation of effort	677	<i>She'll say I'm a wonderful father...</i>

EXHIBIT 1.2 Table 2 of Personal Experiential Themes from Gary's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 2. Aligning of higher order spousal understanding		
Subtheme 1. Shifting priority importance		
Fulfillment of aspirations to become a father	9	<i>I would say, it... has always been a goal...</i>
Satisfaction in fulfilled expected steps towards life plans	72	<i>...it would be really satisfying...</i>
Certainty of daughter's importance in his life	227	<i>At least at this point. My daughter is the priority</i>
Subtheme 2. Adjusting to reorient towards spouse		
Takes time for faith-informed spousal conversations	297	<i>...we talk about it a lot.</i>

Guarded navigation of modern world with traditional views	306-307	<i>...we're, we're trying to navigate this parenting thing together...</i>
Acceptance of the shaping impact of spouse	343	<i>So we definitely try to like keep each other sharp...</i>
<i>Subtheme 3. Finding stability</i>		
Conflicted in processing anticipated shifting priorities	59-60	<i>I wasn't actually sure what that impact would have on my, sort of my...</i>
Impressed upon by paradigm shift	652	<i>...it's it's changed the way that I set goals.</i>
Finding alleviation of pressure from perceived failure through comparison	697-699	<i>But then, when you talk to other couples... everyone has their own battles that they're going through.</i>

EXHIBIT 1.3 Table 3 of Personal Experiential Themes from Gary's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 3. Forming cyclical heuristics between parental roles		
Subtheme 1. Finding stability in the known		
Differentiating between spousal roles and "Mom" and "Dad"	317	<i>...Mom is different from Dad and and...</i>
Carrying a different weight than spouse in parenthood	744-745	<i>Again, everyone has weight on their shoulders. I feel that we're called to have a different kind of weight...</i>
Subtheme 2. Sensing internal or external reflection of differences		
Reflecting on self as filling the supporting role	376-377	<i>I was helping with meal prep, and just kind of being really actively involved.</i>
Feeling excluded in childcare	566-568	<i>...if she becomes the expert in our child, then it's sometimes difficult to allow me to step in...</i>
Witnessing an imbalance of emotional labour	401-402	<i>There's the idea of the emotional labour of the parent.</i>
Subtheme 3. Reaffirming assumed strengths		
Capitalizing upon known strengths	183-185	<i>...women typically require more sleep than men in order to have. You know, healthy brain function</i> <i>A woman could do it just as well. But I think that</i>
Seeking security in the role divisions	795-796	<i>we are different. And there's a reason for that.</i> <i>Yeah.</i>

EXHIBIT 1.4 Table 4 of Personal Experiential Themes from Gary's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 4. Pursuing relationships of value		
Subtheme 1. Satisfying future family role		
Finding reliability in hope for future despite difficulty of present	165-166	<i>My hope is to be able to keep doing the mornings...</i>
Tailoring experience to wife and daughter's perceived needs	118	<i>...I take the first shift...</i>
Exposed to higher order alignment of marriage through child	663-664	<i>I think it just, it changes the way that we set goals.</i>
Subtheme 2. Satisfying spousal dyad relationship		
Jointly creating world of experience for daughter with spouse	315-316	<i>So we really have a lot of conversation about the role, the type of parents that we want to be...</i> <i>My hope is that she'll be the one that takes risks</i>
Parenting now with goals for the future of child	253-255	<i>with me knowing that she can rely on me to hold her...</i>
Subtheme 3. Satisfying daughter relationship		
Enthralled by daughter's enjoyment of his company	103-104	<i>...I would say, my relationship with her is very fun, playful...</i>
Identifying daughter as most important, and first focus	197-198	<i>I know that even if the rest of the day goes totally sideways...</i>

Anticipating involvement in exploration and development	280-281	... "I'm going to be the one that teaches you to ride a bike..."
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EXHIBIT 1.5 Table 5 of Personal Experiential Themes from Gary's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 5. Trusting in unrealized, but tested, strength		
Belief in reliable spousal support	517-519	<i>I just think life becomes easier, and and the burden is lighter when people are sharing it.</i>
Sharing humour with spouse to ease tension during instability	163-164	<i>So we kind of joke just when we think we have it figured out, and we've got a good routine... ...and if we can do that, we figure everything else</i>
United with spouse in pursuit if happy marriage	475-477	<i>becomes easier when you have a really strong relationship.</i>
Receiving coarse refinement of self through spousal relationship	341-342	<i>...you know that saying, "iron sharpens iron".</i>
Deriving security in life from security in family	473-475	<i>...our goal as parents is to have the happiest and healthiest example of a of a good marriage for our daughter...</i>

APPENDIX G

Personal Experiential Themes from Jason's Analysis

EXHIBIT 2.1 Table 1 of Personal Experiential Themes from Jason's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 1. Finding emotional resilience through spousal witnessing		
Spousal compassion for his struggles	865-866	<i>And I think, like the compassion from my wife for like... it's, and and for myself</i>
Spousal witnessing and action	440-441	<i>... "Hey, I'll I'm gonna take, take the baby and like, Go do do something that's gonna like recharge you"...</i>
Pulled up from dysregulation by spouse	228-229	<i>...One aspect is like pulling, pulling me out of a, pulling me out of a spiral.</i>
Spouse affirms father through reminders of appreciation	748	<i>...she's she's she's very proud and grateful.</i>
Finding emotional resilience through spousal split of emotional burden	411-413	<i>...but then, for the kind of inevitable low points we're able to bounce back faster.</i>

EXHIBIT 2.2 Table 2 of Personal Experiential Themes from Jason's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 2. Connecting freely with child		
Aspiring to raise fulfilled and happy child	107-108	<i>And then there's the overarching kind of, uh, aspect of not of of wanting to raise, like a good human...</i>
Surprised by ease of current parenthood	173-175	<i>...I have a lot of a lot of gratitude surrounding it. Just based on how I feel with my partner, with our baby, with our life circumstances...</i>
Open cultivation and enjoyment of shared father-daughter understandings	245-247	<i>...whether she's happy or unhappy, and then I can pick up on that, and to kind of address them, and she seems to be enjoying herself.</i>
Finding joy of fatherhood through spouse	384-385	<i>... I don't think either of us would experience the joy that we have raising our daughter, if we are doing it by ourselves.</i>
Surprised by depth of father-daughter appreciation	731-733	<i>I kind of figured I'd have the level of connection with my daughter that that I do (?) But I didn't really know what to expect.</i>

EXHIBIT 2.3 Table 3 of Personal Experiential Themes from Jason's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 3. Receiving affirmation and autonomy		
Appreciation for parental allowance from spouse	585-586	<i>...but she kind of just allows my daughter and I to have our relationship...</i>
Spouse trusting his expertise and comfort	851-852	<i>... And so we're able to kind of lean on my ability to kind of develop these routines...</i>

Spouse understanding, with gentle insistence, on what is needed for father	830-832	...with my wife saying like, "go on a hike" like that's... That's something that I think wouldn't necessarily had been as top of mind...
Invitation for evolving fatherhood relationship	559-561	... has allowed for an evolution of an evolution of my relationship with my daughter as well as, um, allowing it to kind of evolve in in whatever way it needs to be.
Trust in spousal transparency for ability	484-487	..., but also knowing that she'll ask for help if she needs it with something, and then also feeling that I can as well like not that I need to kind of like power through...

EXHIBIT 2.4 Table 4 of Personal Experiential Themes from Jason's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 4. Empowered and Secure		
Supporting daughter by addressing her needs	338-339	We attempt to give her the feeling of support with what her needs are...
Passive awareness	484	... keep an eye each other and help each other out...
Provision of positive space with daughter	507-509	... it just gives more space for for interactions with with like a positive mindset.
Reception and integration of parenting suggestion	630-631	And my wife was like, "Maybe let's not do that." And I was like, "fair. Okay".
Empowerment to collaborate in times of household difficulty	843-844	I think my wife and I both kind of were like, "okay, this, let's let's do this".

EXHIBIT 2.5 Table 5 of Personal Experiential Themes from Jason's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 5. Finding equilibrium in family unit		
Subtheme 1. Interpersonal initiation		
Integration of self-understanding into spousal relationship	805-807	It happ-. It... It did affect my wife and I's relationship, and how we communicate.
Seeking out ways to better understand each other	905-907	... be able to get together and it's been super useful in like how we learned how to communicate with each other for then having a baby.
Empowered to optimization	511-512	... I'm showing up as like the best version of myself for her like...
Subtheme 2. Intrapersonal initiation		
Aware of potential parental weaknesses	41-43	... then, um, also went to couples therapy kind of pre-emptively (?) to work on our communication...

Coming to appreciate substance of his personal needs	430-432	<i>... a lot of the time it happens like when I'm physically dysregulated as far as like hungry, tired, haven't exercised...</i>
<i>Subtheme 3. Embracing combinatory equilibrium</i>		
<i>Relaxing in role</i>	608-609	But I've I've had less of like a particularness, particularless-ness....
<i>Self-acceptance and compassion when imperfect</i>	122-123	... I understand that, like perfection's impossible. And so I haven't had that expectation for myself.
<i>Dawning of understanding depth of emotion through fatherhood</i>	202-203	... And the emotion that comes with that that you feel towards towards your child.

APPENDIX H

Personal Experiential Themes from John's Analysis

EXHIBIT 3.1 Table 1 of Personal Experiential Themes from John's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 1. Mitigating guilt, failure, and frustration		
Finding annoyance is directed towards himself	161-163	<i>...I kind of more feel {} *hums* not, not... helpless isn't the right word, but like... like a little incompetent kind of...</i>
Consolation from spouse to ease guilt	469-470	<i>... My wife wasn't blaming. We were just like, "Hey, we don't know what we're doing."...</i>
Acceptance of mistakes in attempts	478-481	<i>... all those times when you feel like kind of drop the ball and your your spouse just saying like... *Coughs* Excuse me. "That that's gonna happen sometimes"...</i>
Differences in ideas expose learning, rather than challenges in spousal relationship	633-634	<i>...so I would say, that's the closest to a challenge (?) is just kind of like these, you know, there's certain enrichment things...</i>
Moment of defensiveness around parental knowledge	647-648	<i>...my first impulse is to just kinda go back to my usual feeling of like, "that's not that important." ... , I kind of have to like, sort of put my... not ego,</i>
Viewing challenges as areas for personal growth	660-662	<i>but like natural skepticism of everything aside a little bit...</i>

EXHIBIT 3.2 Table 2 of Personal Experiential Themes from John's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 2. Empathetically enabling growth		
Receiving support created in the manner he most needed	517-519	<i>... just knowing that, like I don't have... even if I'm not, like, doing a perfect job, my wife will just... understands and is not upset about it, you know?</i>
Relieved by spouse's approach to support	531-532	<i>... I guess it's just just knowing that, like my wife's not going to be critiquing me (?) is is kind of a relief...</i>
Empowered and relieved of pressure in his parenting choices and actions by spouse	552-553	<i>I guess it just yeah, I don't know. Just puts me more at ease.</i>
Struck by depth of spousal empathy	607-609	<i>... I kinda do things a little wrong, and my wife's like okay, you know, "we're just doing our best" that-, I would say that's probably that's probably the most valuable thing.</i>

EXHIBIT 3.3 Table 3 of Personal Experiential Themes from John's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 3. An emphasis on effort		
Shared spousal levity	289	<i>... my wife joke, and I joke around about just at the moment...</i>

Remining informed on best practices through spouse	443-445	<i>My wife was like she's like, "oh, she's not quite reaching yet, like we should be working on trying to get her to reach for things like it's this is that point."</i>
Assured by spouse's evaluation of his enjoyment	750-751	<i>I think she she sees how much I I enjoy it. ... I think she has a positive view of, like, the</i>
Spouse stresses effort in father	758-760	<i>amount of effort and the amount of energy I put into it.</i>

EXHIBIT 3.4 Table 4 of Personal Experiential Themes from John's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 4. Finding shared strength through accepting parental role differences		
Distinctly accessible to child both with and without spouse	351-352	<i>... if that she knows that we kind of have her, we and I have her back...</i>
Allowing spouse to inform development as expert	487-488	<i>... I was anticipating us maybe sharing that more, and my wife was like, "no, no..." ... you know, sees that like she understands that</i>
Mutual spousal understanding of practical constraints lacking guilt	406-408	<i>I'm not as like, when would I read that stuff right? So she's, you know, looking after that more which she's not like really expec-...</i>
Called into providing support in the areas where they don't conflict with work	384-386	<i>...there's just some nights where my wife's like, "I need you to handle a couple of the couple of the wake ups."</i>
Proactive support bolstered through overlapping yet distinct spousal roles	485-487	<i>It's not exactly mirror images. We have slightly different roles in terms of like, just from a practical point of view...</i>

EXHIBIT 3.5 Table 5 of Personal Experiential Themes from John's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 5. Leaving space for identity discovery		
Supporting daughter in becoming person she will become	11-13	<i>... being ready to support my daughter, to kind of become the person that she's gonna become...</i>
Little pressure to define fatherhood	27-29	<i>I mean, I guess I have certain gut feelings about, you know, how being a father feels, but, I hadn't really defined it.</i>
Fatherhood provides global purpose and shapes experience	694-695	<i>You know, it gives you a lot, it gives you a lot of purpose right?</i>
Fatherhood answered question of life goals/task	805-807	<i>And now that I have a child. It's like, "oh, I know exactly what I'm doing with my life."</i>

Provision of great responsibility eased tension of purpose	833-835	<i>...“oh, like there was... the reason I was feeling that way was because there was this big responsibility I was supposed to be doing at this stage of my life that I hadn't done yet”...</i>
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APPENDIX I

Personal Experiential Themes from Sonny's Analysis

EXHIBIT 4.1 Table 1 of Personal Experiential Themes from Sonny's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 1. Holding tension of dependence in support		
Envisioning a lack of energy, focus, and joy without support	623-625	<i>... I think I'd probably have less energy and less ability just to focus on the child, and it'd be less of a joy the whole experience.</i>
Mutual spousal support facilitates joy in children	633-634	<i>... I think that having that support allows her to be a lot more...</i>
Frustration of father absorbed by spouse	639-640	<i>... which might be a virtue of me taking out some sort of frustration I have on my partner...</i>
Spousal support buffers against resentment	627-630	<i>I feel like if there was a lot more interpersonal conflict between us, and especially there, a lack of support, then I think there would be also this resentment that built</i>
Father's reliance on spouse can bring frustration	633-634	<i>... so this is the first time in a long time where I've really had to rely on her to for things that I need.</i>
Dependence on dyad structure reveals differences	668-669	<i>We have a lot of autonomy like she's intelligent, she does her own thing.</i>

EXHIBIT 4.2 Table 2 of Personal Experiential Themes from Sonny's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 2. Receiving validation and emotional freedom		
Subtheme 1. Dignified engagement		
Spouse gives credit to effort delivered	537-538	<i>...or there's never a feeling of like, "Oh, shit! You have to do that."</i>
Never known guilt from spouse	567-568	<i>...and there's never, and there's never any sort of like guilt...</i>
No pressure for father to overcompensate or lack of engagement	572-573	<i>... like I never have any of that, because there's never this like, um... yeah.</i>
Subtheme 2. Being addressed with understanding		
Spouse facilitates all father self-care	529-530	<i>Even one thing is like to facilitate all my like, you know...</i>
Spouse beings with understanding of father	532-533	<i>My wife understands who I am and like...</i>
Understanding spousal support as anticipation and provision of kindness	437-439	<i>... whether that's expressed or unexpressed needs, and then, helping facilitate that.</i>
Knowing expressed and unexpressed needs	439-440	<i>... I feel like you know, she had a bad sleep at night, so it's like, say, some nights were harder where I know she's...</i>
Subtheme 3. Enabled authenticity		
Spouse facilitates father's authenticity in family	573-575	<i>... there's never this feeling of like, I missed anything intentionally, or wasn't trying to always be there for the family.</i>

Able to be authentically present with family	575-577	...I feel like I'm able to have a more authentic reaction, because I'm not trying to compensate for anything else...
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EXHIBIT 4.3 Table 3 of Personal Experiential Themes from Sonny's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 3. Transforming identity and emotions without infringement		
Caught off guard by profound changes	30-31	..., I would say, to have my own family, and it's even changed the way, like my wife...
Vulnerability of fatherhood moulding his humanhood	51	... And then, all of a sudden, now I'm like intimately vulnerable...
Evolving with his child's growth	77	And it's also growing and changing because... ...one of the few things in my life that's like will
Fatherhood forever changes him and worldview	760-762	forever have changed who I am, and how the view I view the world...
Making existential world make sense	773	It's made the world make a lot more sense...

EXHIBIT 4.4 Table 4 of Personal Experiential Themes from Sonny's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 4. Empowerment found through witnessing		
Empowered by family to prioritize them	112-113	I feel like I belong less to the world and more to my immediate family.
Witnessing wife provide best example of engagement with child	371	So like she's really like a good reminder for me...
Allied with spouse in the pursuit of child play/fun	411-412	The 3 of us together, you know, like when he's in bed, and he's kind of rolling in between both of us and playing...
Appreciates spouse's genuine admiration of child	415-417	I really appreciate, you know, like that. She's genuinely like having fun admiring him like thinking about how beautiful the experience is like that...
Finds massive return on investment in his family	951-953	I think that's like the bare minimum, you know? And that would probably really impact the relationship I have with my wife, you know...

EXHIBIT 4.5 Table 5 of Personal Experiential Themes from Sonny's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 5. Sharing response and mutual contribution		
Spouse taking on responsibility for family beyond defined roles	379-380	So I try not to just take for granted like that that's her role, like...
Anticipating and providing for spouse's needs	381-382	She doesn't have to do that, so I try to be grateful when I can...
Experiencing fatherhood as inseparable from motherhood	405-406	...whatever my experience of fatherhood is always kind of with her there as a mother as well, too.

Confidently sharing childcare responsibilities in mind and actions with spouse	454-455	<i>There's nothing that she does besides breastfeed, which I cannot do...</i>
Shared spousal trust in developed ability	466-468	<i>...because it's not this, like intuitive knowing what she needs, and then just knowing what the baby needs...</i>

APPENDIX J

Personal Experiential Themes from AWL's Analysis

EXHIBIT 5.1 Table 1 of Personal Experiential Themes from AWL's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 1. Redefining the spousal relationship		
Despair for self and cost to wife	175-176	<i>And so I think she had this expectation it would be more balanced when in reality, you know...</i>
Enduring resentment	183-184	<i>I think there was even some resentment toward me because of that...</i>
Stuck playing the fatherly role he plays	310-311	<i>So you take... That's your role. So you take on that role.</i>
Shifting unease as plans for childcare didn't work out	428-430	<i>And then it just didn't work. *Laughs* It just didn't really work that way. And it wasn't sustainable once I started working again.</i>
Determination to empathize with wife	519-521	<i>... I kept thinking, is just that whatever I'm kind of dealing with my wife has it harder because she's the one taking care of my baby, and so...</i>

EXHIBIT 5.2 Table 2 of Personal Experiential Themes from AWL's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 2. Transcending through to healing and growth		
Rounding the edge of a tough phase	127-128	<i>... I may be like rounding a hard part and kind of feels like I'm finishing a hard part.</i>
Allowed to support child through different means	480-482	<i>... her ability to just do things very well in terms of taking care of my daughters impacted me in the supporting roles...</i>
Being supported through difficulty allows for transcendence of struggle	622-623	<i>It it sort of makes you feel like you've you've transcended to a new level, in a in a sense.</i>
Reestablishment of connection helps him be the father he aspires to be	632-633	<i>I think, in helping me to become the father that I want to be, and in reestablishing our connection.</i>
Feeling purposeful in role and alignment in life	754-755	<i>... I kind of know my direction like as much as things are demanding...</i>
Gained appreciation for evolution of experience	804-806	<i>... my answers would have been maybe a little more heavy or negatively skewed. But I feel like we're in a great place now...</i>

EXHIBIT 5.3 Table 4 of Personal Experiential Themes from AWL's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 4. Feeling lost in void of insufficient support		
Subtheme 1. Being forgotten		
Sense of partner loss	156-158	<i>The first few months is definitely a sense of you... don't have your partner like you lost your partner?</i>
Loneliness in initial fatherhood isolation	486-487	<i>There was this sense of loneliness, or you know you're...</i>

Lamenting time spent struggling without support	579-581	<i>It's a very intensive and you you just don't have your person that you're used to relying on for hard times.</i>
Spousal relationship weakened by demand of one-sided childcare	597-598	<i>...100% our relationship was far worse for the first few months...</i>
Facilitating current spousal harmony by dismissing idea of resentment	662-663	<i>So there's no, there's no resentment at a lack of support early...</i>
Subtheme 2. Lacking community		
Attempts to not burden spouse	525-526	<i>...I think there's this attempt to not put too much of that on her (?), and to find my own strength...</i>
Lack of spousal support reveals lack of community resources	644-645	<i>... I think as a male, you just don't have...</i>
Lost as to where he may otherwise find support	649-651	<i>... or I could go, maybe some friends but didn't really have that relationship with my dad...</i>

EXHIBIT 5.4 Table 3 of Personal Experiential Themes from AWL's Analysis

	Line	Quote
Theme 3. Caught by pressure of spousal expertise		
Subtheme 1. Called by displayed spousal expertise		
Finding freedom in spouse's expertise	413-415	<i>... I just fully fully trust her. So it makes me feel more at ease in terms of how I can be and be present for them, and and support them.</i>
Watches spouse rising to occasion	385-386	<i>... I think she's been incredible in adjusting to it all. You know the good and the bad, and figuring out her role...</i>
Sensing support through tasks completed	498-499	<i>... the support was more through tasks and doing than it was through sort of emotional connection and reassurance...</i>
Understanding the other and their experience	468-469	<i>... I suppose it means to me, kind of seeing the other person and seeing what their experience is like.</i>
Subtheme 2. Responding by defining his own expertise		
Finding more practical applications in longer wake windows	185-186	<i>... as we've come out of that, the the tasks are more shared because it's not just about nursing and sleep cycles...</i>
United in understanding how family needs can be addressed	451-452	<i>... I think, coming, coming out of that, letting her do her thing, trusting her, let me do more in other ways....</i>
Doing whatever he could to "be" a parent	537-539	<i>... I suppose it made me feel more aware, sort of consistently and constantly when I wasn't helping...</i>
Given ability to contribute elsewhere	447-448	<i>... I'm not really used there. So you're kind of there as like this cheerleader...</i>

APPENDIX K

Complete Table of Group Experiential Themes

EXHIBIT 6.1 Table 4 of Group Experiential Themes for Spousal Support Study

			Line
Group Experiential Theme 1. Evaluating spousal support dependability			
1a. Assuming and leaning in on available support to ease strain			
Gary:	I just think life becomes easier, and and the burden is lighter when people are sharing it.		517-519
Jason:	... keep an eye each other and help each other out...		484
John:	I guess it just yeah, I don't know. Just puts me more at ease.		552-553
1b. Seeking and discovering areas to first develop independent coping			
Sonny:	... so this is the first time in a long time where I've really had to rely on her to for things that I need.		663-664
AWL:	...I think there's this attempt to not put too much of that on her (?), and to find my own strength...		525-526
Group Experiential Theme 2. Opportunities for enhanced fatherhood role engagement and development			
2a. Finding unpressured opportunity for role exploration and growth			
John:	I mean, I guess I have certain gut feelings about, you know, how being a father feels, but, I hadn't really defined it.		27-29
Jason:	... has allowed for an evolution of an evolution of my relationship with my daughter as well as, um, allowing it to kind of evolve in in whatever way it needs to be.		559-561
Sonny:	...I feel like I'm able to have a more authentic reaction, because I'm not trying to compensate for anything else...		575-577
2b. Finding pressure to create or define fathering role			
AWL:	... I think, coming, coming out of that, letting her do her thing, trusting her, let me do more in other ways....		451-452
Gary:	...if she becomes the expert in our child, then it's sometimes difficult to allow me to step in...		566-568
Group Experiential Theme 3. Mediation of relief from the emotional burden of fatherhood			
3a. Becoming a convergent point of burden			
Sonny:	... which might be a virtue of me taking out some sort of frustration I have on my partner...		639-640
AWL:	I think there was even some resentment toward me because of that...		183-184
Jason:	... <i>to have have someone there to kind of, to to be that emotional support, be that sounding board, uh share the emotional burden with.</i>		406-408
3b. Opening an avenue for displacing or alleviating burden			
Gary:	...we have really tried to understand each other's love languages... ... all those times when you feel like kind of drop the ball and your your		382-384
John:	spouse just saying like... *Coughs* Excuse me. "That that's gonna happen sometimes"...		478-481