

A Phenomenological Inquiry on First-Time Fathers' Experiences as Postpartum and Newborn Primary Caregivers

Theresa Marie D. Munsayac*, Gwyneth Kate A. Lising, Noroul-ain B. Mohidin, Jose C. Dagoc, Jr.
Notre Dame of Dadiangas University, General Santos City, Philippines

*Corresponding Author Email: munsayactheresamarie1@gmail.com

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Abstract. This study explores the under-researched experiences of first-time fathers who take on the role of primary caregiver during the postpartum period—an area often overshadowed by maternal perspectives. The aim was to understand the challenges these fathers face, how they adapt emotionally, and the support systems they rely on. Using snowball sampling, the study gathered insights from 6 first-time fathers. Thematic analysis revealed three key findings: (1) Navigating Challenges and Adjustments in Fatherhood, (2) Emotional Growth and Strengthening Family Bonds, and (3) Importance of Support Systems and Coping Strategies. Participants reported difficulties balancing work and caregiving, experiencing emotional stress, and undergoing identity shifts. However, these challenges also increased resilience, confidence, and deeper connections with their children and partners. Support from family, healthcare professionals, and online communities played a critical role in their adjustment. This study highlights the need for more inclusive parenting programs and targeted mental health resources for fathers, contributing to a more holistic approach to postpartum care.

Keywords: First-time fathers; Newborn primary caregiver; Postpartum; Newborn care.

1.0 Introduction

Transitioning into fatherhood is a primary social process with significant psychological and emotional consequences. While the postpartum period has traditionally focused on mothers, the role of fathers, especially first-time fathers acting as primary caregivers, remains underexplored in research and practice (Burgess, 2018). This lack of attention overlooks the increasingly shared nature of newborn care and the evolving dynamics of modern families (Dyer et al., 2020). As more fathers assume caregiving responsibilities, understanding their experiences becomes essential to promoting inclusive, effective support systems.

A first-time father, a man navigating parenthood for the first time, often faces challenges such as adapting to a new identity, meeting caregiving demands, and coping with emotional changes (Gonzalez et al., 2021). The transition can be especially intense when these fathers become primary caregivers—those who assume the main responsibility for a child's daily care and emotional nurturing (Palkovitz et al., 2020). However, most existing

literature remains centered on maternal experiences, with limited exploration of how fathers manage the emotional, practical, and identity-related shifts in early parenting (Hodgkinson & Cummings, 2021).

This gap in understanding restricts the development of programs and resources tailored to fathers' needs during the postpartum period. Without recognizing their unique struggles, first-time fathers may feel isolated, underprepared, or undervalued in their caregiving roles. Therefore, this study addresses the research question: How do first-time fathers experience being primary caregivers during the postpartum period?

Understanding these experiences is important for several reasons. First, it broadens the current knowledge of the postpartum period by including paternal perspectives. Second, it supports the development of targeted interventions and mental health services that consider fathers' specific concerns. Finally, it promotes a more balanced and inclusive view of parenting that acknowledges and values the active role of fathers in the early stages of child development.

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of first-time fathers as primary caregivers. Through in-depth interviews with 6 participants, the study uncovered key emotional, practical, and relational challenges faced by these men. The findings highlight the shifting dynamics of caregiving, the emotional growth fostered by active fatherhood, and the importance of support systems in easing the transition. These insights can guide healthcare professionals and policymakers in developing programs that better support paternal well-being and family cohesion during the critical postpartum period.

Increased paternal involvement is also linked to improved mental health outcomes for fathers themselves. Studies show that engaged fathers report lower stress levels, higher life satisfaction, and stronger family relationships (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020; Sevilla & Sanchis-Guarner, 2020). When fathers feel supported and empowered in their caregiving role, they are more likely to form secure bonds with their children and contribute positively to their children's development (Pruett & Pruett, 2020).

Furthermore, research shows that father involvement benefits children's emotional, social, and cognitive development. Children with actively engaged fathers demonstrate better emotional regulation, social competence, and academic performance (Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2019; Murray et al., 2019). By sharing diverse experiences and perspectives, fathers enrich their children's upbringing and help foster trust, stability, and long-term psychological well-being.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive phenomenological design to explore the lived experiences of first-time fathers serving as primary caregivers during the postpartum period. Rooted in the work of Giorgi (2009), phenomenological research aims to uncover how individuals perceive and make sense of their experiences in a specific context. This approach was chosen to capture the subjective realities of new fathers, an often overlooked perspective in postpartum care. The researchers applied bracketing to set aside their own assumptions and biases during data collection and analysis, as Finlay (2011) described. This involved maintaining reflexive journals and regular debriefings to remain focused on participants' authentic narratives.

2.2 Research Participants

Participants were selected using snowball sampling, a method appropriate for reaching individuals with specific, shared experiences. An initial group of first-time fathers was identified through barangay health centers, and subsequent participants were referred by earlier interviewees. The study included eight participants, all of whom met the following criteria: resident of General Santos City; first-time father; father of infant aged 0–12 months and; serving as the primary caregiver for their child and postpartum partner. Data collection continued until thematic saturation was reached—when no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews.

2.3 Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide, consisting of eight core questions with relevant follow-up prompts. The guide was designed to explore emotional, social, and practical aspects of

caregiving. It was informed by existing studies on paternal involvement and reviewed by experts in qualitative methodology prior to use.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure and Analysis

Participants were contacted through referrals and barangay health unit recommendations. Before interviews, participants received an explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Written informed consent was obtained, and participation was entirely voluntary, with the option to withdraw at any time. Data collection was carried out through in-depth interviews, guided by the validated instrument. Each session aimed to uncover personal stories about fatherhood, caregiving responsibilities, emotional adaptation, and support systems. After recording and transcription, participants were contacted for member checking to ensure the accuracy of their accounts and interpretations. The researchers applied Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which involved familiarizing with data, generating initial codes, identifying themes, reviewing and defining themes, and producing a report. Coding was conducted manually by the main researcher, with periodic cross-checks by a peer reviewer to enhance consistency and reliability.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

This study was reviewed and approved by the research adviser of the authors. All ethical procedures followed the guidelines of Bryman and Bell (2007). Participants were treated with dignity and respect throughout the research process. Written informed consent was obtained before participation, with full transparency about the study's purpose, procedures, and the participants' right to withdraw at any time. Anonymity was preserved using coded identifiers and pseudonyms, and data were securely stored in password-protected files. To ensure confidentiality, no identifying details appeared in the transcripts or final report. Bracketing procedures also supported ethical integrity by minimizing researcher bias and safeguarding the authenticity of participants' experiences.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The identified themes are presented based on first-time fathers' experiences as postpartum and newborn primary caregivers. The data have been organized to highlight their journey in terms of navigating challenges and adjustments in fatherhood, emotional growth and strengthening family bonds, and the importance of support systems and coping strategies.

3.1 Navigating Challenges and Adjustments in Fatherhood

The transition into fatherhood presents many challenges and adjustments, particularly for first-time fathers navigating their new roles as primary caregivers. Participants in this study shared their struggles with time management, exhaustion, and the emotional toll of balancing their responsibilities. They described the difficulty of adapting to disrupted routines, the anxiety of handling a newborn, and the pressure of supporting their partners through postpartum recovery. These experiences highlight the complexities of fatherhood, emphasizing the resilience and patience required to fulfill both their child's and their partner's needs. Participant 3 shared his struggle with time management and the exhaustion of adjusting to a new routine:

"Then, uhm, she takes care of the baby first, and I take over afterward. That is our daily routine. I don't sleep next to my baby. It's a bit difficult at this stage because sometimes we are really busy."

Another father expressed his fear of making mistakes while handling his newborn:

"During the baby's first month, I was afraid to hold them. But over time, it got better, and I got used to it."

The participants also acknowledged the significant mental and emotional toll of caregiving, particularly in balancing their partners' postpartum recovery with the demanding responsibilities of ensuring their newborns' well-being. They expressed feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and the pressure of meeting both their child's and their partner's needs simultaneously. As Participant 4 described:

"That would probably cause confusion — there are several mood swings, but the man has to increase his patience and tolerance for everything because the situation is very different from normal. That's all."

Participant 6 acknowledged that while he had made efforts to prepare for fatherhood, actual readiness is ultimately unattainable, as no amount of preparation can fully anticipate the unique and ever-evolving challenges that come with parenting. He emphasized that each experience is distinct, shaped by the individuality of the child, the dynamics of the family, and the unpredictable nature of the journey:

"Maybe I wouldn't say that I wasn't prepared, but there's really no such thing as being fully prepared for creating a family, becoming a father, or being a husband because it's something totally new for everyone. And not everyone has the same experience. So I can't compare my experience as a father to my own father's experience. My journey is completely unique. Preparation is really just part of the growth process with the family. The family grows as the baby grows, and we mature together."

Participant 6 recognized the ongoing need to continuously adapt as the baby grew, acknowledging that each developmental stage brought new challenges, responsibilities, and learning experiences. He emphasized that fatherhood required patience, flexibility, and a willingness to evolve alongside his child, as what worked in one phase might not be effective in the next:

"With the baby, uhh... we observed that every month, there are changes in their progress, especially regarding their attitude and curiosity towards us and their surroundings. So, we also had to adjust, especially with their sleeping habits. Their milk intake varied, and their movements, like arm movements, also increased."

Participant 5 shared that he was separated from his partner during her pregnancy, which significantly affected his preparation for fatherhood. The physical and emotional distance limited his involvement in prenatal experiences, making it more challenging to connect with the reality of impending fatherhood. He expressed feelings of uncertainty and concern about how the separation would impact his ability to support both his partner and their child:

"Of course, we broke up when she was pregnant, right? My parents only found out after the baby was born. We reconnected when the baby was around five months old, and they started visiting our home. Sometimes, I would also assist her when we were there."

Participant 5 acknowledged that learning new skills, particularly those essential for soothing and comforting his baby, was especially challenging. He expressed that while he was eager to be a hands-on father, the trial-and-error process of understanding his newborn's needs often left him feeling frustrated and uncertain. From deciphering different cries to mastering techniques like swaddling and rocking, he found that each day presented new learning curves that required patience, persistence, and emotional resilience:

"Maybe when it comes to calming the baby, that is one of the hardest parts because it is tough to soothe them if you do not know how. There are times when the baby is just uncomfortable for no specific reason."

The participants underscored the emotional strain they experienced, particularly during conflict and self-doubt when their responsibilities felt overwhelming. Juggling the demands of caregiving, work, and personal well-being often led to heightened stress, frustration, and occasional disagreements with their partners. The emotional toll of constantly striving to meet their child's needs while navigating their anxieties made the journey rewarding and exhausting. As Participant 5 described:

"When I come home from being out, I am already exhausted, and then everything happens at once—one gets mad at me, and the other starts crying."

The transition to fatherhood entails significant adjustments, particularly in balancing caregiving responsibilities with personal and professional obligations. Similar to the findings of Cabrera et al. (2018), who emphasized that fatherhood requires adaptability, the participants in this study faced challenges such as sleepless nights, time constraints, and learning new caregiving tasks. Many expressed initial struggles in managing household chores, changing diapers, and feeding their newborns, especially without prior caregiving experience. These findings

align with Cabrera and Tamis-LeMonda (2013), who highlighted that involved fathers often experience stress in their early caregiving roles but develop confidence over time.

Moreover, the study revealed that unanticipated situations, such as emergency cesarean sections or their partner's emotional struggles, heightened the fathers' anxieties. This aligns with previous research stating that first-time fathers often experience heightened stress levels during childbirth and postpartum due to uncertainty in their roles (Darwin et al., 2017). However, as they navigated these challenges, they gradually developed a sense of competence and resilience, indicating a shift from apprehension to active engagement in caregiving responsibilities.

The mental well-being of new fathers is a significant but neglected aspect of parent transition. Postpartum depression is estimated to occur in about 14.1% of U.S. men, with the highest incidence three to six months after the baby is born (Paternal Depression, 2025). Contributing factors are hormonal fluctuations, sleep deprivation, and challenges in juggling work and family demands. Prevalent as it is, paternal depression is underdiagnosed and undertreated, and this makes raising awareness and the need for support for new fathers all the more critical.

Social conventions and traditional gender roles make it difficult to transition to fatherhood. Although modern narratives reveal greater paternal involvement in childcare and household work, there are still huge gaps. Scheduling children's activities and cleaning the house are often left to mothers, contributing to their mental load (Cartigny, 2024). To address this, there needs to be more emphasis on a more balanced division of homework and on expanding shared parenting roles to better benefit both parents.

The age of men at fatherhood also influences their experience and difficulties. Older fathers, especially in the 60s and 70s, also report their parenting experiences to be richer and more profound because of their age (Godwin, 2025). However, they can also face special difficulties, such as social perceptions of age and health problems with the children. Most older fathers, with greater financial security and life experience, are more engaged and available than they would have been at an earlier age.

Some strategies have been proposed to make the transition to fatherhood smoother. These include mentally preparing oneself for future changes, resting adequately, and strategically planning paternity leave (Herald Sun, 2025). Preparation early on for work and discussion on parenting responsibility are also important, as such an arrangement affects long-term family life. In addition, creating an open forum where the mental health of fathers is recognized and supported is important.

The first emergent theme highlights the challenges and adjustments that first-time fathers faced as primary caregivers. Participants described significant disruptions in their daily routines, including sleepless nights, struggles with time management, and difficulty balancing work with caregiving responsibilities. The transition from independent individuals to hands-on caregivers was physically, emotionally, and mentally demanding. Many fathers also encountered unexpected challenges such as emergency cesarean section, their partners' postpartum emotional struggles, and financial pressures. The lack of prior caregiving experience heightened their anxieties, making them second-guess their ability to handle their newborns properly.

3.2 Emotional Growth and Strengthening Family Bonds

Fatherhood brings challenges, fosters emotional growth, and strengthens family bonds. As first-time fathers navigate their new roles, they experience a profound transformation in their relationships, shifting their focus from individual pursuits to shared responsibilities and collective well-being. Participants in this study described how the presence of their child deepened their connection with their partners, creating a stronger sense of unity and purpose. Through late-night feedings, teamwork, and the joy of witnessing their child's milestones, they developed greater patience, understanding, and commitment, reinforcing the foundation of their family.

Participant 3 described how having a child was a unifying force that solidified their family bond. He shared that the arrival of their baby brought a newfound sense of purpose and connection, strengthening the emotional ties between him and his partner. Through shared responsibilities, late-night feedings, and the joys of witnessing their

child's milestones, he felt an overwhelming sense of togetherness and commitment, reinforcing the foundation of their family:

"Maybe, uh, because of our baby, our family became stronger. It feels like the baby is the one bringing us happiness."

Participant 3 highlighted the profound shift in their mindset as a couple after becoming parents. He shared that while their relationship once revolved around their personal goals and shared experiences as partners, the arrival of their child redefined their priorities. Their focus shifted toward teamwork, mutual support, and the well-being of their growing family. He emphasized how this transformation required greater patience, understanding, and a deepened sense of responsibility, ultimately strengthening their bond as they navigated the challenges and joys of parenthood together:

"Uhm, I feel like my bond with my wife has become stronger because before, we used to focus on luxuries and material things. However, now, it is different—our focus is entirely on the baby."

Participant 5 expressed that he initially had little experience with babies and was unprepared for the required care and attention. He admitted that while he anticipated sleepless nights and frequent diaper changes, the constant demands of feeding, soothing, and ensuring the baby's comfort were more overwhelming than he had imagined. The realization of just how much effort and patience newborn care entailed made the transition into fatherhood both challenging and eye-opening:

"I never really cared for a baby before, so now I am just shocked by everything—from holding the baby to changing diapers and everything else."

Participant 5 also highlighted his stronger emotional connection with the baby:

"We became closer because we are always together now. We are more open with each other since we live in the same house and go out together, and now, the baby is always laughing."

Participant 6 expressed how fatherhood profoundly shifted his self-perception, reshaping his identity and sense of purpose. While he had always envisioned himself as independent and in control, becoming a father introduced a new level of responsibility that challenged and transformed him. The experience pushed him to be more patient, selfless, and emotionally attuned, as he now saw himself as an individual and a protector, provider, and role model for his child. He verbalized:

"It is like—I forgot the term—but it is not that I completely forgot about myself, but I set myself aside because I prioritize the two. That is really how it is. Especially last year, the baby was hospitalized twice, and my wife also had to go back for check-ups multiple times. So yeah."

Participant 6 also expressed an evolving understanding of fatherhood:

"So, the understanding between us grew. If I could rate it, maybe around 8 to 9, because supporting them is not just about finances. Especially at night, you cannot just say, 'I have work,' and expect my wife to handle everything, because she also works. So, we consider each other's situations and share responsibilities in caring for the baby."

Participant 6 highlighted how he grew closer to his partner and child:

"I can say that our emotional connection is more intense now because the baby has brought us even closer together."

Despite the difficulties, fatherhood fosters deep emotional growth and strengthens family relationships. Participants in the study reported increased patience, emotional intelligence, and a stronger connection with both their partners and newborns. These findings are consistent with the work of Lamb (2010), who stated that hands-on fathers develop stronger emotional ties with their children, leading to long-term positive developmental outcomes.

A recurring theme among participants was the newfound appreciation for their partners and the teamwork required in raising a child. Many recognized that effective communication and shared responsibilities reduced conflicts and strengthened their bond as a couple. This is supported by Kuo et al. (2018), who found that co-parenting significantly enhances both parents' relationship satisfaction and emotional well-being. Furthermore, the participants expressed that fatherhood gave them a renewed sense of purpose, shifting their priorities from personal indulgences to family-centered decision-making. The father's role has also been transformed, and greater involvement has led to enhanced relationships, cognitive, socio-emotional, psychological, and academic performance in children. Active father involvement has been associated with children's enhanced IQ, language, and emotional health. This engagement also leads to enhanced couple relationships and less stress in mothers, reflecting interdependent benefits for the family (Singapore Dads for Life).

In other instances, unconventional co-parenting arrangements have been adopted to maintain children's best interests. One example is a mother of three who opted to reside in a granny flat on her ex-husband's property, in a close family bond despite the divorce. The arrangement allows the two parents to remain actively involved in their kids' lives, demonstrating flexibility and dedication to co-parenting (Chapman, 2025). Celebrity life also reflects the co-parenting relationships of success. For example, Gigi Hadid and Zayn Malik have focused on respect and flexibility in parenting. By pre-scheduling custody but being flexible, they offer emotional stability to their child, reflecting the importance of cooperation and empathy in shared parenting (Halkidis, 2025).

While fatherhood is challenging, it also has the potential to enhance emotional development and family relationships. Being active and cooperative parents is very beneficial to the children's development, their quality of relationships, and their parents' personal development. Fostering effective communication, embracing flexibility, and sharing responsibility are some strategies for contemporary parenthood. Despite their challenges, many fathers expressed that their caregiving experience deepened their emotional bond with their children and strengthened their relationship with their partners. Through sleepless nights, moments of doubt, and the demands of nurturing a newborn, they discovered a profound sense of fulfillment in their caregiver role. They realized patience, teamwork, and kindness were essential in navigating postpartum responsibilities, fostering a deeper appreciation for their partners and greater unity within their growing families. Fathers reported that their children became their source of motivation, pushing them to work harder and become more responsible. The experience of caring for a newborn transformed their priorities, shifting their focus from personal interests to family well-being.

3.3 Importance of Support Systems and Coping Strategies

Navigating the complexities of fatherhood requires strong support systems and effective coping strategies. First-time fathers rely on open communication with their partners to manage parenting challenges, emphasizing teamwork in making decisions for their child's well-being. In addition to their partners, they seek guidance and reassurance from their extended families, whose advice and shared experiences help them adapt to their new roles. By fostering strong support networks and maintaining open discussions, these fathers develop strategies to cope with the demands of parenting, ultimately strengthening their confidence and ability to provide for their child. Participant 3 emphasized the crucial role of effective communication in co-parenting, highlighting how open and honest discussions with his partner helped them navigate the challenges of raising a child together. He shared:

"Yes, of course. We talk whenever something needs to be fixed or discussed, especially regarding our baby. Teamwork is essential."

Participant 3 also shared how family members played a crucial role in providing invaluable advice and support throughout his journey into fatherhood. He expressed:

"Yes, my family and my partner's family give us advice and ideas on raising the baby."

Healthcare professionals also played a vital role in ensuring the fathers' confidence in their caregiving skills:

"Yes, we have a pediatrician we always consult whenever we have concerns about the baby. They have been a big help, especially during the first few months."

Some fathers also developed coping strategies to manage stress and maintain their well-being, such as engaging in physical activities:

"Uhh... Last year, none. However, this year, I am trying to get back into running. Before my wife and I got together, I was really into running—I used to join marathons and events like that. Back then, because of COVID, everything was virtual. However, now, I am trying to find balance again."

Participant 5 expressed ways on how to balance personal time and caregiving responsibilities:

"Before I leave, I bathe the baby and put them to sleep."

Participant 6 cited his Catholic upbringing as a significant factor in his confidence and perseverance in fatherhood:

"I believe so. With the guidance of my in-laws and, of course, my own family, it helps. Our faith also plays a big role—our Catholic faith—since we were raised religiously. So, we are following that path, and I think that gives us confidence."

The participants emphasized the challenge of balancing traditional parenting practices with modern approaches, striving to honor cultural wisdom while adapting to new insights and resources. Many fathers found themselves navigating generational differences, carefully integrating advice from their elders with contemporary parenting techniques:

"Uhhh... Our cultural beliefs are slightly different because my wife's family is more traditional, while my family is more modern. We prioritize medical check-ups and going to the doctor first. However, as much as possible, we consider both sides. So, we make sure to have a check-up first, and if my in-laws prefer traditional hilot, we also consider that."

The presence of strong support systems played a crucial role in helping first-time fathers navigate their new responsibilities. Many participants relied on their parents, in-laws, and healthcare professionals for guidance, echoing previous research highlighting the significance of intergenerational support in easing the transition into fatherhood (Habib & Lancaster, 2010). Fathers who had access to emotional and practical support were better able to manage stress and develop effective caregiving strategies. Additionally, digital resources, particularly parenting content on social media platforms such as TikTok and Facebook, were frequently mentioned as sources of information. This finding aligns with recent studies on digital parenting, which highlight the increasing reliance of new parents on online platforms for quick and accessible childcare information (Chung et al., 2022).

Regarding coping strategies, time management emerged as a key factor in balancing work, caregiving, and personal well-being. Participants emphasized the importance of structuring their daily routines to accommodate their child's needs while ensuring self-care. This aligns with previous findings by Nomaguchi and Milkie (2020), who argued that effective time management reduces parental stress and improves overall well-being. With these challenges, many fathers opt for safer and less public platforms. Tinybeans, a family photobook application, is one such platform that enables parents to capture, organize, and share kids' life stories on a secure, controlled platform (Tinybeans, n.d.). Such platforms respect users' privacy, and families can find an occasion to post without risking public exposure. This approach helps fathers preserve the memories of their children safely while being discreet, demonstrating how technology can be harnessed to support parenthood with responsibility.

Apart from seeking external help, the respondents also highlighted the significance of having internal coping strategies, most notably, effective time management. Coping with work, caregiving, and self-care entailed planning and organizing schedules carefully. These findings attest to research studies by Nomaguchi (2020), which claimed that effective time management reduces parental stress and optimizes overall well-being. Fathers who could incorporate caregiving into the daily schedule without compromising opportunities for self-care reported high levels of satisfaction and emotional well-being. Being able to do this was viewed as key in coping with the multi-faceted role of fatherhood (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2020).

Both conventional and web-based support systems facilitate first-time fathers' management of fatherhood. Even though web support is socially conducive and easy to access, the highest level of caution has to be observed when handling privacy issues. Moreover, individual coping skills, such as efficient time management, also enhance fathers' caregiving ability and health. By integrating such coping skills, fathers can better manage their roles and establish healthy family relationships.

To navigate their new roles as caregivers, fathers leaned on various support systems to help them adapt and gain confidence. Many sought guidance from their parents and in-laws, drawing from their wisdom and firsthand experiences in parenting. Others turned to healthcare professionals for expert advice on newborn care, feeding, and postpartum recovery. Additionally, in the digital age, some fathers found valuable support through online resources, engaging with parenting communities on social media platforms like TikTok and Facebook. These platforms provided them with accessible tips, tutorials, and shared experiences from other parents, offering reassurance and practical strategies for managing the challenges of fatherhood. Open communication with their partners also played a crucial role in balancing caregiving responsibilities with work and personal well-being. Fathers emphasized that teamwork and shared responsibilities were essential in managing their daily tasks.

4.0 Conclusion

This study contributes to a deeper understanding of first-time fathers' emotional, psychological, and social transformations during the postpartum period as primary caregivers. It highlights how these men navigate an evolving journey, from initial uncertainty and emotional vulnerability to developing confidence, resilience, and a strong paternal identity. By centering on their lived experiences, the study underscores the complexity of modern fatherhood and challenges traditional perceptions of paternal roles. At the heart of this transformation is a significant shift in identity. The fathers in this study did not merely acquire new caregiving skills; they redefined their sense of self, reshaped their priorities, and embraced more nurturing and emotionally engaged roles within the family. Their progression from self-doubt to competence was not linear but shaped by personal growth, the demands of caregiving, and the evolving dynamics within their households.

A recurring theme was the importance of social and emotional support. Fathers cited partners, family members, online parenting communities, and digital resources as essential in helping them adapt and cope. These support systems offered practical advice, emotional reassurance, and a sense of solidarity that alleviated feelings of isolation. Many fathers also developed their coping strategies, including time management, teamwork with their partners, and self-reflection, which strengthened their confidence and emotional stability. As fathers encountered small yet meaningful victories, such as bonding with their newborns and mastering daily caregiving, they began to see themselves as capable, nurturing, and essential co-parents. These moments fostered a more profound sense of purpose and pride, contributing to the broader redefinition of fatherhood as emotionally present and actively involved. This shift reflects a growing cultural movement toward shared parenting responsibilities and challenges outdated gender norms.

These findings have clear implications for multiple stakeholders. Healthcare providers should include fathers more intentionally in postpartum care, offering them guidance, support, and mental health screenings. Educators and parenting programs could develop workshops or resources focusing on father-inclusive caregiving strategies. Policymakers must advocate for parental leave policies and workplace flexibility that enable fathers to be more present during this crucial time. Future research should explore first-time fathers' experiences across diverse cultural, socio-economic, and familial contexts. Comparative studies between fathers and mothers, or between cohabiting and non-cohabiting fathers, may also yield valuable insights into the evolving dynamics of caregiving roles.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors contributed equally to the completion of this research. Theresa edited the entire document, gathered related literature, interviewed first-time fathers as postpartum and newborn primary caregivers, and led the study's conduct. Gwyneth assisted in reviewing related literature, conducting interviews, and transcribing data. Noroul-ain contributed to transcribing and interpreting the data. Lastly, the research adviser, Jose, supervised the entire research process.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

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