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A qualitative exploration of how extended paternity leave can promote fathers' psychological wellbeing

Jessica Hobbs

Abstract: The perinatal period is known to be a vulnerable time for parents' mental health and wellbeing. Research about fathers' health during this time is in its infancy and has focused predominantly on mental health problems. Much less is known about how fathers experience their own wellbeing or what can help their lives (and consequently the lives of their family) to go well during the significant event of having a baby. Early research suggests that allowing fathers to take a longer period of paternity leave could help to promote their wellbeing. The aim of this study was therefore to explore the experiences of some of the first fathers to take extended paternity leave following the UK's introduction of its new Shared Parental Leave policy in 2015. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with sixteen fathers from around the UK who were employed in a variety of industries. The sample included both first-time fathers and those extending their family. Template Analysis was initially used to systematically analyse the data. The overarching conclusion was that the wellbeing of these fathers appeared to flourish during a major life event that has a known association with mental health problems for many fathers. To seek an explanation for this, the findings were interpreted using a novel approach based on the theoretical framework of Ryff's (1989) six aspects of psychological wellbeing. A conceptual model is therefore proposed that suggests extended paternity leave can promote fathers' psychological wellbeing by allowing them a rare and valuable opportunity for self-reflection, personal growth, development of parental mastery, and to support the wellbeing of their family. This qualitative exploration contributes a deep understanding of the nature of these fathers' individual experiences of their own psychological wellbeing. The potential of extended paternity leave for promoting the wellbeing of fathers and their families during the critical postnatal period signals that there may be value in researching the relationship between paternal leave and wellbeing further.

Keywords: Psychological wellbeing; fathers' mental health; perinatal mental health; paternity leave; parental leave

1. Introduction

Having a baby is a significant life event experienced by most adults. Although this event is usually aspirational, the associated physiological, psychological and behavioural changes can present particular challenges to new parents' mental health and wellbeing (Saxbe et al., 2018). Perinatal mental health research has historically focused on mothers. More recently, research has begun to find that a father's mental health is also more vulnerable during his wife or partner's pregnancy and through his child's first year while he adjusts to fatherhood and strives to balance employment with caring for his family. Meta-analyses have indicated that 8 – 10% of fathers report a form of depression in the postnatal period (Cameron et al., 2016; Paulson & Bazemore,

2010; Rao et al., 2020). The meta-analytic prevalence rate for perinatal paternal anxiety is similarly around 10% and is higher in the year postpartum than during pregnancy (Leach et al., 2016; Leiferman et al., 2021). These results may be understated as men often do not report mental health concerns or seek help (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Men's Health Forum, 2016). Industrial research in the UK suggests that over a third of first-time fathers were worried about their own mental health (NCT, 2015). This growing body of evidence suggests that poor mental health is now understood to be quite common in fathers during the perinatal period.

This topic is important because poor mental health in fathers can have detrimental effects to the wellbeing of their family as well as themselves (Bruno et al., 2020; Fisher, 2016; Fisher et al., 2021; Khajehei et al., 2022; Yogman & Eppel, 2022). The majority of research in this field has therefore focused on the prevalence of paternal postnatal depression, identifying potential causes and effective support (Edward et al., 2015; Hambidge et al., 2021; Philpott & Corcoran, 2018). One known major influencing factor is reduced social support, which often occurs when their partner experiences depression (Edward et al., 2015; Glasser & Lerner-Geva, 2019; Paulson & Bazemore, 2010; Philpott & Corcoran, 2018; Singley & Edwards, 2015). These and other such studies demonstrate an association between maternal and paternal mental ill-health. From a more positive perspective, other studies indicate the potential of good mental health in fathers for promoting the wellbeing of their children (Gere et al., 2013), and extensive paternal involvement in childcare for promoting overall family wellbeing (Sztáray Kézdy & Drjenovszky, 2021). Therefore, if we can understand more about how to support fathers experiencing or at risk of mental health problems, this can also benefit the whole family.

A small body of qualitative research has begun to seek an understanding of fathers' mental health experiences during the perinatal period. Recent work by Ndzi suggests that paternal mental health is challenged when the paternity leave entitlement is too short to allow them to adjust to the changes associated with fatherhood or bond with their child (Ndzi, 2023). Other work on this important topic by Darwin and colleagues concluded with the call that, "*Further research is needed to inform how best to identify and manage both parents' mental health needs and promote their psychological wellbeing*" (Darwin et al., 2017, p. 2). Taking a salutogenic approach, Baldwin and colleagues explored the *wellbeing* experiences and needs of first-time fathers in the UK (Baldwin et al., 2019). Studies of this nature are rare, and we know much less about promoting fathers' wellbeing during the perinatal period than about the challenges to their mental health.

A recent study of UK fathers' perinatal mental health found that,

"Several participants suggested longer paternity leave could provide men additional time to adjust to the arrival of their baby, and potentially mitigate some factors contributing to possible mental health problems." (Hambidge et al., 2021, p. 6).

The suggestion that extended paternity leave could help to promote fathers' wellbeing during the critical postnatal period is not new. It was initially proposed in theory (Bolzan et al., 2005; Saxbe et al., 2018) and followed by experiment (Moss-Racusin et al., 2021). Empirical studies have found that a short period of paternity leave can improve fathers' wellbeing (Cardenas et al., 2021; Philpott & Corcoran, 2018). In countries where a longer dedicated paternal leave policy is well-established, the benefit to fathers' wellbeing has been shown (Lidbeck et al., 2018) and found to persist long-term (Korsgren & van Lent, 2022). However, a recent systematic review of the literature about parental leave and parents' mental health concluded that what we know overall about the association between paternal leave and mental health is inconclusive, primarily due to an insufficient volume of empirical research on the topic (Heshmati et al., 2023).

In the UK, cultural parental expectations continue to follow a traditional model where the mother usually assumes responsibility for primary childcare and takes up to a year of maternity

leave while the father takes only a short few weeks of leave around the time of birth (Baird & O'Brien, 2015). In 2015 the new Shared Parental Leave (SPL) policy was introduced that allows dual-earner couples to share 50 weeks of leave (Atkinson J. et al., 2022). This means that the father can take longer paternity leave than the maximum statutory two weeks if the mother shortens her maternity leave. The introduction of this new policy therefore presents an opportunity to study mental health and wellbeing in the emerging context of fathers who take a longer paternity leave.

Huppert defines psychological wellbeing as "*lives going well*" (Huppert, 2009, p. 137), and observes that "*since well-being is more than the absence of ill-being, it needs to be studied in its own right*" (Huppert, 2009, p. 138). Seeking a deeper understanding of fathers' wellbeing during extended paternity leave leads us to consider how the construct of wellbeing has been conceptualised. Perhaps the most popular quantitative measures are Ryff's scales of psychological wellbeing, which propose that psychological wellbeing is comprised of six aspects: 'self-acceptance', 'purpose in life', 'personal growth', 'environmental mastery', 'autonomy' and 'positive relations with others' (Ryff, 1989; Ryff & Keyes, 1995). The main critique of Ryff's scales concerns the validity of the six aspects. Several studies have found four of the aspects to be highly correlated and proposed a simpler three-factor model in preference (Abbott et al., 2006; Burns & Machin, 2009). The proposed three factors were 'autonomy', 'positive relations with others', and a third factor combining Ryff's remaining four aspects. Interestingly, if we were to use the overarching term 'competence' for these four remaining aspects, the proposed model looks identical to Ryan & Deci's self-determination theory, which states that 'autonomy', 'relatedness' and 'competence' facilitate intrinsic motivation and individual wellbeing (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Taking the opposite perspective on this critique of Ryff's scales, Diener and colleagues proposed an eight-factor model of psychological wellbeing, derived through adaptations such as splitting 'positive relations with others' into two distinct dimensions: 'supportive and rewarding relationships' and 'contribute to the wellbeing of others' (Diener et al., 2009, p. 252). This debate indicates that wellbeing is a complex construct with multiple dimensions.

Quantitative studies aim to measure the extent of wellbeing and what factors influence it. However, since the multi-faceted construct of wellbeing is deeply rooted in the individual experience and context, some scholars have begun to explore new conceptualisations of wellbeing that consider "*what is it that is experienced by humans that can be called wellbeing?*" (Galvin, 2018, p. 1). Qualitative research is therefore necessary to understand the contextual nature of wellbeing and the lived individual experience.

This study takes a novel approach by using Ryff's six aspects of psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989) as a theoretical framework around which to base qualitative analysis of the individual wellbeing experiences of fathers in an emerging context. Ryff's conceptualisation was selected because it was deemed sufficiently broad to illuminate the nature of individual experiences but avoids undue complexity. The findings contribute a deep understanding of the experience of wellbeing in fathers who were among the first to take a longer period of parental leave following the introduction of the UK's new SPL policy. The overall aim was to explore not just if, but *how* extended paternity leave can help to promote fathers' wellbeing during the critical postnatal period.

2. Method

The research design was an exploratory qualitative study. Ethical approval was granted in accordance with the procedures of the supervising institution.

2.1 Participants

Given the low take-up of SPL in the UK, this proved to be a hard-to-reach population and the laborious recruitment process took nine months. The study was advertised by word-of-mouth and one social media post. Prospective participants were provided with an information sheet about the study and a signed informed consent form was obtained from all fathers who chose to participate. A sample was ultimately recruited of sixteen fathers who lived and worked in the UK and had taken four weeks or more of parental leave during their child's first year since the introduction of SPL in 2015. Those who took part were friends, colleagues and relations of contacts in the researcher's personal and professional networks. No prior relationship existed between the researcher and any of the participants. Three fathers who received the information sheet did not respond, and their reasons for declining to take part are unknown.

The participants were employed in a variety of industries in the private, public and charity sectors. They were located around the UK, although the majority worked in London. Eight of the sixteen fathers had worked in their organisation for more than ten years, and only one had been with his current employer for less than four years. None of them were 'young fathers' (i.e., aged under 25 years old) when they took their leave. Four participants were Asian British, one was Black British, one was European living in the UK, and the remaining ten fathers were White British. All participants lived with their child's mother in a heterosexual relationship, and most were married. Demographic information about the study participants' parental leave is shown in Table 1. Pseudonyms were applied to preserve their anonymity.

Table 1. Participant demographics

Pseudonym	Industry	First-time father?	Parental leave duration
Andy	Telecoms	Yes	4 x 2 weeks
Dave	Law	No	2 months
Rhys	Medicine	Yes	2 months
Tony	Financial Services	No	2 months
Jon	Charity	Yes	3 months part-time
Victor	Financial Services	Yes	3 months
Matt	Retail	Yes	3 x 2 weeks and 8 x 1 week
Ajay	Technology	Yes	2 x 2 months
James	Consulting	Yes	4 months
Animesh	Technology	Yes	3 months and 2 x 1 month
Rich	Technology	No	6 months
Steve	Financial Services	No	6 months
Rafal	Construction	No	6 months
Danny	Consulting	Yes	6 months
Karsten	Sport	Yes	8 months
Ewan	Armed Forces	No	3 weeks and 18 months

2.2 Data collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted during 2019 by the researcher in-person at the participant's place of work or nearby. All interviews were retrospective. Most participants had completed their leave and returned to work within the year before the interview. For five participants, it had been several years since their parental leave. An interview guide was piloted

beforehand with two fathers outside of the sample, and the subsequent interview guide was applied consistently across all sixteen interviews. The opening questions were intentionally broad, for example, "Tell me about the parental leave that you took." The interviews lasted on average 66 minutes and each interview was audio recorded.

2.3 Data analysis

The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim by hand. The combination of conducting the interviews and transcription comprised the first stage of familiarisation with the data. The second stage involved reading through all sixteen transcripts in close succession to develop an overall impression of the participants' experiences. The researcher then coded the data inductively in NVivo, and used template analysis (King, 2004) to identify a hierarchical template of themes about fathers' experiences of taking extended parental leave and returning to work afterwards. Saturation was reached (no new codes were added) after the tenth interview, and the final version of the template was produced after the fourteenth interview. Analysis of the fifteenth and sixteenth interviews was used to validate the template. A key finding was that these fathers all appeared to experience a very positive sense of their own wellbeing despite having encountered a variety of challenges. To explain this, the researcher used the six aspects of Ryff's model of psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989) as a framework around which to interpret the data that pertained specifically to the participants' psychological wellbeing.

2.4 Researcher reflexivity

The researcher was female and not a parent. As such, she had no personal experience of what it is like to be a father. However, it is important to note that this does not make the researcher fully objective. Qualitative research is always interpreted through the lens of the researcher's own subjective experience, and reflexivity is therefore critical (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). For this purpose, the researcher documented each version of the template separately as it was developed along with memos reflecting the evolution of her analytic thoughts throughout the process in line with qualitative analysis best practice (Saldaña, 2021).

3. Findings

This section firstly presents these fathers' experiences of their extended paternity leave and overall wellbeing. An exploration of their psychological wellbeing is then structured around a proposed conceptual model based on the theoretical framework of Ryff's (1989) six aspects.

3.1 Experiences of extended paternity leave

Many parents find the postnatal period challenging and the fathers in this study did not find caring for a newborn child easy while on extended paternity leave. They described many well-known practical challenges, such as broken sleep, establishing a routine, and the effort required to leave the house. These challenges were compounded for those fathers who were also caring for older children. In addition to the practical difficulties, psychological challenges were also reported. Some fathers talked about the monotony of their repetitive daily routine and felt constrained to their home or local area. Rafal observed, "*your world becomes very small*". James reported "*feeling a bit isolated or a bit lonely*" during his paternity leave, and Rich observed, "*It's a very solitary thing if you do it as a man.*". Some fathers attended parent and child groups in an attempt to seek out social interaction. However, they found these groups predominantly attended by mothers, many of whom already had established relationships. This made these

fathers feel “clearly the sore thumb” (Danny) and prompted them to behave timidly: “I didn’t speak to any women. ... I didn’t want to do anything that might cause offense to anyone at all. So, if no one spoke to me, no one spoke to me, I just got on with my thing.” (Rich).

First-time fathers in particular were sensible of the new responsibility and their changing priorities. Andy found becoming a new father an unsettling emotional experience:

“It’s kind of chaos because you are going through that phase where you actually become vulnerable, you know, because of these huge emotions going around. And then ... things other than your baby start losing importance... things started changing and you don’t really know where other things stand...”

Several of the participants talked about making “sacrifices”, which usually meant giving up their own time, for example not going to the gym or spending time with friends like they used to. “The cold cup of coffee” was symbolic of Ajay prioritising his child’s needs above his own.

Despite the challenging experiences reported by the fathers in this study, they were all overwhelmingly positive about having taken an extended period of parental leave.

“Because as much as there were days where it was dull, it was boring, or I missed, you know, adult conversation, or she was having a bad day etc. It was, it was lovely! I mean it was a great thing to do.” (James)

Extended leave was generally presented as a “rare” and “valuable” opportunity, which they felt “lucky” to have and were “grateful” for. Danny referred to it twice as “a gift” from his employer, and went on to describe it proudly as one of the best experiences of his life: “I’m proud of it. ... this has definitely been one of the best things I’ve done as an adult, without a doubt.”

Matt’s comment summarised the views expressed by all fathers in this study:

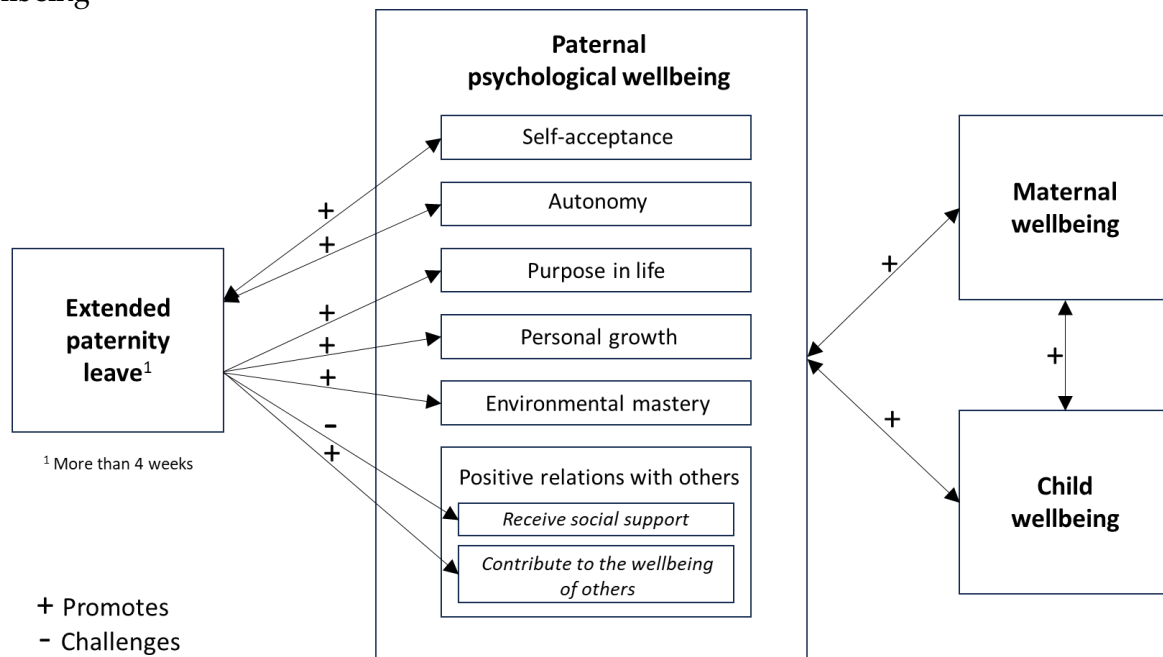
“I can’t imagine not having the time. So, obviously I’m very grateful for it. And I would definitely recommend any father or partner to consider it. And even if it’s not available full-pay, consider taking more time throughout that period because it is hugely beneficial to the bonding with your child, but also the support you can provide to your wife or partner. You know, ... we’ve had some tough times, as any new parents would, but it’s never, I’ve never felt like it’s been too much. And I think having the extra paternity leave has really helped with that.”

His comment encapsulated many of the points raised throughout the interviews. It expressed his awareness that having a new baby could be challenging for a new father, but a belief that taking an extended period of parental leave enabled him to cope individually and also provide support to his wife and baby. He was appreciative of the opportunity, could not imagine being without it, and would recommend it to others. This comment presents an overwhelmingly positive experience of a father’s extended paternity leave and how he perceived it helped promote his own wellbeing.

3.2 Psychological wellbeing

Ryff synthesised the literature on psychological wellbeing into six aspects: ‘self-acceptance’, ‘autonomy’, purpose in life’, ‘personal growth’, ‘environmental mastery’, and ‘positive relations with others’ (Ryff, 1989). This section presents the findings from analysis of the participants’ psychological wellbeing using these six aspects as a theoretical framework.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of how extended paternity leave can promote paternal psychological wellbeing



3.2.1 Self-acceptance

Overall, the fathers in the study presented themselves as self-aware and confident. James observed how he found maintaining his daughter's routine "straight forward" because of his known strengths: "My personality anyway leans toward being quite structured and planned." Rich made a connection between one of his strengths and how it helped him to cope with the isolation he experienced while on leave: "I've always been fairly self-sufficient. ... I can just get by on my own if I have to."

Self-awareness extended to their weaknesses as well. Karsten confessed: "I'm not really much of a planner to be honest.", and Rafal joked that, "I am forgetful." Those participants who mentioned their own weaknesses appeared comfortable with them and did not indicate that they caused any concern.

3.2.2 Autonomy

Across the sample, these fathers all demonstrated a very strong sense of control and autonomy, especially on their return to work. Several participants gave examples of defining non-standard working hours for themselves, where they started or left work earlier than their colleagues. The interviews for this study were all conducted before the COVID-19 pandemic and in that context, it is notable that twelve of the sixteen fathers had negotiated the flexibility to work from home on a regular basis. When they returned to work after their leave, some participants demonstrated autonomy over how they approached their work: "I found myself being a lot more fearless in terms of saying, ... "this is how I want to work."" (Danny).

In addition to demonstrating autonomy over paid work, most of the fathers in this study also demonstrated autonomy through their decision to take a longer period of parental leave than the two-week paternity leave that is the UK's cultural norm. Jon said, "I had to go for that. I had to push for it." Rafal's experience of requesting SPL from his employer was met with resistance that he had to be resolute to confront: "I did have to explain that it wasn't a choice that they had, it was a right I had, and that they had to go and figure out how [the formalities] worked..."

It should be noted that autonomy in their leave decision-making was not the case for all of the fathers in the study. Andy mentioned that he took SPL on his wife's suggestion, and Karsten appeared somewhat pressured by his wife: *"She kind of made the suggestion. So, I mean, she's the main bread earner anyway, so it kind of made sense that she went back after 4 months and, yeah, and I did the 8 months."*

Most of the participants demonstrated a great deal of autonomy over their work and their parental leave, however Jon reported a slightly different view: *"I just felt a little bit trapped [in my current job] and a little bit like I couldn't – not as free to make the decisions that I would normally make if I hadn't – if I didn't have that sort of [family] commitment."*

This one example stands out because, although the participant was clearly used to exercising autonomy, he felt that autonomy restricted by his family responsibilities.

3.2.3 Purpose in life

Many parents find fulfilment in spending time with their children and often regard being a parent as meaningful to their life. Accepting that responsibility and the associated change in identity usually requires some psychological and emotional investment, especially for first-time parents. Having a longer period of leave provided many of the fathers in this study the dedicated time they needed to think and process that transition without the daily demands of work. Danny observed: *"If it's your first child, you know, everything is an adjustment period, right. ... And I think the fact that I wasn't at work allowed me to kind of get the head space to manage that adjustment better."*

The need for time to adjust was not only necessary for first-time fathers. Those having subsequent children also observed how the longer time away from work allowed them to adjust to the changes of a growing family: *"It was, like, really important that we had that time together to really kind of get used to the idea of having two kids. I think if we were having three kids, we'd probably want that and maybe a little bit more."* (Tony).

The extended leave also gave these fathers precious time to think about themselves, their aspirations and their work:

"As you take time off work you get time to be more reflective about yourself and the role that work plays for you and that you play at work. And so, possibly, the more time you have off work, the more time you have to evaluate what actually matters in life." (Ajay)

A couple of the participants also mentioned how their leave gave them time to talk things through as a family, which enabled them to make strategic decisions together with their wife, such as going part-time or moving home. The value of extended parental leave for allowing these fathers time to think and re-evaluate their shifting sense of purpose and direction in life during a transitional phase was very clear.

3.2.4 Personal growth

It was also clear to see how these fathers viewed the extended time away from work as a valuable learning process. Jon persuaded his wife to give up three months of her maternity leave because he felt so strongly that: *"I wanted to have the opportunity to experience what it would be like to have a long, condensed period of time with my new-born."*

A few of the participants identified specific skills that they learned during their leave and then transferred back into their work, such as negotiation, empathy, and a more flexible approach to problem solving. Taking a more general view, Rafal noted that *"it makes you grow up"*. Tony similarly observed that the *"maturity"* and sense of perspective he had gained while on leave allowed him to cope better with stress at work than he did before.

3.2.5 Environmental mastery

Having an extended period during which they were responsible for their child's daily routine enabled these fathers to feel more involved and confident as parents. They appeared to feel fully capable of caring for their child's needs: *"So, in terms of the sort of routine of, you know, changing her, feeding her, putting her down for a sleep, how to get her to sleep etc. and so on and so on. All of that was fairly straight forward."* (James).

James directly attributed that confidence to the extended leave he took after his wife returned to work:

"I was a very active, involved, engaged parent to begin with. But I feel as though having that period of paternity leave really gave me a level of confidence and understanding that I'm not sure I would have had had I not taken that."

Given the high levels of autonomy previously identified, it was important to several of these fathers that they had control over how to parent when they were alone with their child. Dave made his own decisions while on leave:

"When I was the one kind of there looking after [our son], I would make, you know, independent choices about, you know, what he would wear and where we would go and what we would see, and all of that, you know, what we would cook for lunch."

He went on to acknowledge that he might do some things *"different to how Mummy does it"* but maintained that his way was equally acceptable, and he was no less capable as a parent.

3.2.6 Positive relations with others

The final one of Ryff's (1989) six aspects of psychological wellbeing concerns social relationships. A couple of the participants noted connections with other new fathers. Those who were part of a local parental group found it helpful because of the empathetic nature of their shared experience: *"You're all having a kid at the same sort of time, and you all live semi-locally. So, the benefit is that you have a little support network where you're all going through the same thing together at the same stage."* (Jon).

However, they observed that most other fathers they knew took only a short period of paternity leave, meaning that those fathers who took a longer leave were often left alone as the others returned to work sooner. The challenge of feeling isolated and excluded by the maternal community has already been described.

The majority of participants in the study spoke about relationships with work colleagues much more than their limited mentions of friends and family. Many had a long tenure with their employer, which contributed to very close work-based relationships, and they described their colleagues as *"very supportive"*. However, most of the fathers in this study constructed a barrier between work and home while they were on leave. This allowed them the space to focus fully on their family without the distraction of work, but it had the unfortunate effect of cutting them off from this important source of social support. A few participants spoke of maintaining social contact with colleagues using informal technology, such as WhatsApp. Others mentioned crossing the barrier to attend one-off work-related social events during their time off. But one of the challenges that participants experienced was that colleagues often demonstrated their support most by respecting the barrier and not attempting to contact the father while he was on leave. James noted, *"People weren't contacting me. But again, sometimes that was part of the frustration."* Steve was actively prevented by his employer from contacting his work colleagues because of procedural complications:

"I wasn't working from home, I was just logging in to just chat a few people and say, "how's it going?" or that, until I was told to stop logging in because it's - it was causing a problem with timesheet entry or something."

Considering the limited contact with colleagues and other fathers and the challenges of integrating into the maternal community, the primary source of social support that most of these fathers received was from their wife or partner. In addition to practical support with childcare and domestic tasks their wives provided valuable social support: "... when your partner comes home and you're just like, probably spend the first half hour talking about every intricate detail of your day because you haven't spoken to anybody for eight or nine hours." (James).

In contrast to the limited social support that these fathers reported receiving for themselves, most of them presented the purpose of their leave as being to provide support to their wife and child. A couple of the participants mentioned birth complications, which meant their wife required extra care from them during her extended physical recovery. Matt was sensible of the potential that his wife might also require psychological support: "She could've suffered from postnatal depression or something, and maybe I would've needed to be there, you know, for a solid three months or whatever, and that was an option."

Some of the participants also noted how sharing the parental leave supported their wife's career. For Rafal's wife, who was a lawyer, "it made sense politically for her to get back sooner... and she became a partner on the back of it." Steve said that his wife enjoyed her job and "was more excited to go back to work rather than stay home". These fathers spoke about their wives' careers with great respect and appeared to derive satisfaction from having helped to support them professionally. These fathers also reported how taking a longer period of leave helped them to "build a relationship" and "bond" with their newborn child. On this particular topic, many participants drew direct comparisons with their perception of taking shorter paternity leave and expressed their view that a longer leave was better for their child. Karsten's comment was echoed in similar words by several participants: "I think I've probably got a relationship with [my son] that I wouldn't have necessarily had if I didn't sort of take that eight months off with him."

A couple of participants gave examples of engaging in activities that would directly support their child's development. Danny relayed their paediatrician's observation: "I can really tell that you're both spending a lot of time with him in the way he's developed." He went on to qualify his interpretation of that statement: "I'm not putting that all down to me taking six months off because there are many other factors, but I definitely think that's contributed." The potential long-term benefit for their child of a strong paternal bond was also noted:

"... when she's 7 or 8 everything's really big important things, like, "which colour should a unicorn's hair be?". Rainbow, obviously! I've learned this question. It's that piece, which is kind of cute when she's 7. When she's 13 or 14 it can, it could be a very significant difference. It could be that one very important conversation." (Ewan)

The fathers in this study demonstrated a strong desire to support their wife and children. Taking an extended period of leave during their child's formative first year was their way of making time in their busy lives to provide that care.

4. Discussion

This study explored the psychological wellbeing of fathers who were among the first to take a longer period of paternity leave following the UK's introduction of its SPL policy. These fathers reported practical and psychological challenges such as reduced sleep, social isolation, and the adjustment associated with prioritising the needs of others above their own. These experiences

reinforce prior research findings that a father's mental health and wellbeing can be at risk during the postnatal period (Philpott & Corcoran, 2018; Saxbe et al., 2018). Despite the challenges, these fathers presented their extended parental leave as an overwhelmingly positive experience. They described the opportunity as a precious "gift" for which they were very thankful. Every father in the study strongly recommended other fathers to take as long a period of leave as they could and said they would do so again themselves if they had another child. The overall experiences that these fathers reported were convincingly of lives going well, which is the embodiment of the very definition of psychological wellbeing (Huppert, 2009). This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that longer paternity leave can promote fathers' wellbeing (Hambidge et al., 2021; Lidbeck et al., 2018), but *how* does it achieve that outcome?

To seek an explanation for how extended paternity leave can promote fathers' wellbeing, the six aspects of Ryff's scales of psychological wellbeing (Ryff, 1989) was used as a framework. Consequently, a conceptual model was proposed based on interpretation of the data around this framework. Extended paternity leave and the first two aspects of psychological wellbeing ('self-acceptance' and 'autonomy') appear to be related, although the relationship may be bi-directional. The fathers in this study demonstrated awareness and acceptance of their own strengths and weaknesses in relation to their parenting. However, it is not clear whether that 'self-acceptance' was promoted by their extended leave or whether prior awareness of their parental capabilities contributed to their decision to take extended leave. Similarly, although their 'autonomy' was widely apparent in their approach to paid work and their use of flexible working arrangements after their leave, that autonomy was also pivotal for most of these fathers in their decision to take a period of leave that was longer than the cultural norm in the first place. So, although taking extended paternity leave may have bolstered the 'self-acceptance' and 'autonomy' aspects of their wellbeing, it is also possible that these aspects facilitated them taking extended leave in the first place.

The next three aspects of wellbeing did appear to be promoted by extended paternity leave. Firstly, the extended leave gave these fathers space to reflect on themselves, their careers and their aspirations or 'purpose in life', often in conjunction with their wife or partner. Importantly, the extra time away from work also helped them handle the adjustment of becoming a father for the first-time or extending their family. Secondly, extended leave provided an opportunity for 'personal growth', and many of these fathers reported learning skills that they subsequently transferred into their paid work. Thirdly, by having the time to devote to it exclusively, the comprehensive parenting expertise they developed promoted a sense of 'mastery' of parental responsibilities. From this, we can conclude that extended paternity leave can promote fathers' psychological wellbeing by providing a valuable opportunity for self-reflection, personal growth and development of parental mastery.

The sixth and final aspect of Ryff's psychological wellbeing is 'positive relations with others' (Ryff, 1989), and the participants' experiences of this aspect were the most nuanced. Surprisingly few of the fathers mentioned receiving support from friends or family during their leave. Some of them did mention supportive connections with other fathers. However, taking parental leave longer than two weeks is not the cultural norm in the UK, so the fathers in the study spent the majority of their extended leave without that support because the other fathers in their network were working during the day. Their attempts to integrate into the maternal community who were available in the daytime were largely unsuccessful. Many of the fathers in the study reported close relationships with work colleagues but the way that these colleagues expressed support was usually to respect the barrier between work and home and refrain from making contact. Whilst this allowed fathers valuable space to focus on their family without the distraction of

work, it had the unfortunate effect of cutting off that valuable source of social support, which could increase their risk of postnatal depression (Philpott & Corcoran, 2018; Singley & Edwards, 2015). This meant that the primary (and sometimes only) social support they received was from their wife or partner. However, given the known association between maternal and paternal mental ill-health (Edward et al., 2015; Glasser & Lerner-Geva, 2019; Paulson & Bazemore, 2010), this could challenge the wellbeing of both parents. The quality of the couple relationship therefore becomes even more important at a time when it is under immense pressure (Faircloth, 2020).

In contrast, taking extended paternity leave was widely presented as a way for these fathers to provide support to their wife for her physical recovery, with the practicalities of parenting, and to facilitate her career. Since they are linked, by helping to promote their partner's wellbeing, these fathers may have in turn been promoting their own wellbeing. Furthermore, it gave them the opportunity to build a close "bond" with their child and contribute meaningfully to their development. In their new model of psychological wellbeing, Diener and colleagues include the specific aspect, 'Contribute to the wellbeing of others', (Diener et al., 2009, p. 252). On this basis, the gain from using their extended leave to support their family may have counterbalanced the challenge of receiving reduced social support for themselves, meaning that overall, this final aspect of their wellbeing was promoted.

The perinatal period is known to be critical for both new mothers' and fathers' mental health and wellbeing (Cameron et al., 2016; Rao et al., 2020; Saxbe et al., 2018). Building on work that indicates longer parental leave can improve maternal health (Saxbe et al., 2018), this study lends support to the suggestions that longer paternity leave can promote fathers' wellbeing during the vulnerable postnatal period (Hambidge et al., 2021; Lidbeck et al., 2018). Furthermore, it responds to Darwin and colleagues' (2017) call for further research by proposing a conceptual model to explain *how* extended leave can promote fathers' psychological wellbeing. We know that a father's mental health and wellbeing influences the wellbeing of his partner and children (Bruno et al., 2020; Fisher, 2016; Gere et al., 2013; Khajehei et al., 2022; Yogman & Eppel, 2022). This implies that paternity leave longer than four weeks is important for promoting the wellbeing of the whole family and should therefore be accessible to all fathers.

5. Conclusion

This article presents a qualitative exploration of the psychological wellbeing of sixteen fathers who were among the first to take an extended period of paternity leave after the introduction of the UK's SPL policy in 2015. The fathers in the study reported various challenges during their parental leave. However, these challenges appeared to be significantly outweighed by their positive experiences of a longer period of parental leave. The overarching finding was that the wellbeing of all fathers in the study appeared to flourish during a major life event that has a known association with mental health problems for many fathers. Using Ryff's (1989) six aspects of psychological wellbeing as a framework, a conceptual model is proposed to explain the relationship. The findings seem to suggest that extended paternity leave can promote fathers' psychological wellbeing by providing them with a rare and valuable opportunity for self-reflection, personal growth, development of parental mastery, and to support the wellbeing of their family.

Although the findings from this small sample may not be generalised to all fathers who take a longer leave than statutory paternity, they contribute a deep initial insight into how fathers experience their own psychological wellbeing during the critical postnatal period and how

extended paternity leave can help to promote their own wellbeing and that of their family. These intriguing insights highlight the potential value of researching this topic further.

6. Strengths and limitations

This study advances research on paternal perinatal mental health and wellbeing by contributing a qualitative exploration of how fathers experience their own wellbeing while on extended paternity leave. The sample represented a variety of ethnic backgrounds (although the majority were white), industries, locations around the UK, and those having subsequent children as well as first-time fathers. All fathers in this study were over 25 years of age. Most were employed by large organisations, with only two participants working for small or medium-sized enterprises. Although these may be viewed as limitations of the study, the sample is reasonably representative of the small population of UK fathers who have taken SPL since its introduction (Department for Business & Trade, 2023, p. 8). Paternal leave longer than four weeks is not the norm in the UK; however, it is commonplace in most Nordic and some other countries (Koslowski et al., 2022). From this study, we cannot therefore know whether this conceptual model holds in parental leave policy contexts outside the UK where longer paternal leave is more normalised.

This study presents the experiences of UK fathers who took extended parental leave in the four years immediately following the introduction of SPL. These experiences were prior to the COVID-19 pandemic that severely impacted mental health and wellbeing across the population and fundamentally shifted priorities and ways of working. As with so many things, it is conceivable that the post-pandemic experiences of extended parental leave may look quite different. As with any qualitative study, the limitations of self-report responses should be acknowledged, especially given there were several years between their leave and the study interview for a few of the participants. The participants chose what to disclose and what remained unsaid. Furthermore, the fathers in this study all presented a positive sense of their own wellbeing during their extended paternity leave. Whilst this was not a criterion for participation, it should be noted that the fathers in the study volunteered to take part. This is an important observation because it may be that fathers with a negative experience of taking a longer parental leave declined to participate because they felt less comfortable discussing their experience. It might therefore be interesting for future research to take a longitudinal approach and follow the wellbeing of fathers as they take either long or short periods of paternity leave, offering the potential to explore more diverse experiences as they unfold.

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The author reports no conflicts of interest.

Data availability statement

Full interview transcript data will not be made available due to ethical restrictions preserving participant anonymity and confidentiality.

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Ethical Approval Statement

Ethical approval for this study was granted on 29th November 2018 in accordance with the procedures of the School of Business, Economics and Informatics Ethics Committee, Birkbeck College, University of London. Written informed consent, including agreement for the findings to be published, was obtained from all participants prior to data collection.

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