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## **The Involved Ostrich: Mothers' Perceptions of Fathers' Participation in the Transition to Parenthood**

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### **[to cite]:**

The VOICE Group, Andrea Davies, Susan Dobscha, and Susi Geiger, Stephanie O'Donohoe, Lisa O'Malley, Andrea Prothero, Elin Brandi Sorensen, Thyra Uth Thomsen (2009), "The Involved Ostrich: Mothers' Perceptions of Fathers' Participation in the Transition to Parenthood", in NA - Advances in Consumer Research Volume 36, eds. Ann L. McGill and Sharon Shavitt, Duluth, MN : Association for Consumer Research, Pages: 254-260.

### **[url]:**

<http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14635/volumes/v36/NA-36>

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# The Involved Ostrich: Mothers' Perceptions of Fathers' Participation in the Transition to Parenthood

The VOICE Group<sup>1</sup>

VOicing International Consumption Experiences

## ABSTRACT

This study focuses on mothers' perceptions of fathers' attitudes toward consumption decisions related to the introduction of the first child in the family. Two interviews were conducted with each respondent, pre- and post-natal, using the long interview method; in this paper we focus on pre-natal data. Data revealed that men, according to their partner's perceptions, used consumption as a virtual umbilical cord, although levels of consumption involvement varied from co-involvement for most purchases, to limited involvement, and/or involvement for 'large' items, particularly travel systems and technical items. This research also revealed that men partook in highly masculinized forms of "nesting," and in general shunned pregnancy book reading; although some did engage in "research" activities such as searching the internet for product safety information. We conclude from this study that the transition into parenthood can be difficult for men due to their lack of a physical connection to the pregnancy, a perception that the baby industry is not designed for them, the continuance of male stereotypes in the media, and also the time available to men to become involved in consumption activities immediately prior to a baby's birth.

## INTRODUCTION

Parenting is one of the most studied and discussed facets of the human experience. There are thousands of popular press books on the subject as well as journals, dissertations, and monographs with topics ranging from sleep strategies, disciplining models, educational excellence, and sibling rivalry.

Within consumer behavior, the topic of the family took center stage as traditional marketers found the household a useful unit of analysis for promoting goods and services (Commuri and Gentry 2000). The family quickly emerged in the marketing literature as a "unit of analysis" that made decisions as a group. Beyond this cursory analysis, the complexities of family life have remained largely unstudied. While recently new mothers have begun to garner attention from consumer researchers (e.g. Prothero 2002; Hogg, Curasi, and Maclaran 2004), there continues to be a dearth of research on fathers, fatherhood, and fathering styles within the field of consumer behavior (see Harrison and Gentry 2007 (a) and (b) for notable exceptions). Although fathers were classified as a 'consumer group' as early as 1990 (Barbour 1990), we know very little about the extent to which fathers participate in consumption decisions, especially when related to children.

This study serves to shed some initial light on the processes that men use in the transition into parenthood. And while the light is being shed through the perspectives of their female partners, it is an important place to begin as it allows researchers to formulate some initial ideas that can be then supported or refuted once studies with men commence. Using pre-natal interviews of twenty women from four countries, this study looks at the perceptions of their partners' participation in the consumption decisions related to

getting ready for a new baby. While previous research has focused on the role of others on mothers' preparations for the baby and the impact of the marketplace on new mothers' confidence in their new role (Davies et al 2007), no work in the consumer behavior field has been conducted to consider how mothers perceive fathers' level of interest, amount of effort, or perceived role in this transitional stage to parenthood.

## MOTHERHOOD, FATHERHOOD, AND CO-PARENTING

Who is the modern day father? This is perhaps a more complicated question than appears on the surface. Each decade seems to capture through television or movies the stereotypical father of the times, for example *Father Knows Best* in the 1950s and the *Cosby Show* of the 1980s. Media today paints a fragmented picture of fathers; oftentimes, either showing (disproportionately) the single dad struggling to raise children on his own (*Two and a Half Men*) or the well-balanced co-parent who willingly contributes equally to all activities domestic (*Medium*). In advertising, fathers are often shown as inept buffoons or disinterested and useless appendages (Harrison and Gentry 2007a).

In certain circles, fathers are attempting to take a more active role than in previous generations. There appears to be a shift in how fathers are participating in family activities, including childrearing, housework, household maintenance, and kinship work. This shift is less voluntary and more of a requirement when the family is headed by a single father (Harrison and Gentry 2007a). The father must learn to manage a household, including grocery shopping, school clothes shopping, and homework preparation, in the absence of the mother who previously took care of those things. The current generation of fathers is the first to truly embody the fourth and ultimate level of parenting as outlined by Pleck and Pleck (1997). The movement away from the "genial dad and breadwinner" to "equal co-parent" has emerged without explicit expectations and guidelines, without scripts or role models. This more egalitarian approach has left many heterosexual couples grappling with issues of femininity and masculinity and a need to improve upon the parenting styles of their own parents. Both mothers and fathers in a co-parenting household seem to be following a "making it up as we go" mentality that transcends social class, racial, and ethnic boundaries (Summers et al 1999).

Recently, Harrison and Gentry (2007) studied the effects of single fatherhood on family consumption decisions. This groundbreaking work further strengthened the pre-existing belief that women are the primary arbiters of the marketplace when it comes to family purchases such as school clothes and groceries and that, in their absence through either divorce or death, when men enter the marketplace they are often strangers in a strange land (de Certeau 1984), lacking the skills or knowledge of what or how to buy. Imagine a single father having to help his daughter choose tampons, for example.

Researchers also point out that advertising often depicts fathers as helpless, inept, or ignorant when it comes to household processes and purchases. Research in the 1970s and 1980s portrayed both men and women in highly stereotypical roles (Harrison and Gentry 2007). Images began to shift in the 1990s with women being shown more favorably (Coltrane and Allan 1994). Yet, men continue to be portrayed in stereotypical ways. The image of the

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<sup>1</sup>This paper is the result of collective, collaborative research undertaken by members of The VOICE Group. The members of this group, in alphabetical order, are Andrea Davies, Susan Dobscha, Susi Geiger, Stephanie O'Donohoe, Lisa O'Malley, Andrea Prothero, Elin Brandi Sørensen, and Thyra Uth Thomsen.

family man is still extremely rare in ad campaigns. Kaufman (1999) stated that ads are socializing agents for all parents but particularly fathers because they have chosen not to use their own fathers for this purpose.

Recent ad images are showing fathers in a different light. In some cases the father exerts superhuman powers to complete a task (for instance washing the dishes) that the mother was unable to accomplish using her merely human powers. Also, images of fathers holding or otherwise engaging young children have begun to emerge in parenting magazines and on certain TV ads but they are still the exception rather than the norm (Harrison and Gentry 2008).

While consumer research has ignored this facet of family consumption decision making, the parenting research is abounding with models of positive father involvement and the measurement of mothers' perceptions of fathers' participation in parenting.

### RESEARCH FROM THE FAMILY AND PARENTING LITERATURE

The role of the father has been well studied in the family and parenting research. The seminal article by Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, and Levine (1987) created three constructs that measure fathers' involvement: "accessibility, engagement, and responsibility" (p. 259). Summers et al (1999) use this same model to measure mothers' perceptions of fathers' engagement by measuring "interaction or direct engagement between father and child; accessibility or availability to the child, and taking responsibility for the child (p. 293)." Summers et al (1999) go on to say that "this framework appears to be emerging as a generally accepted view of the critical dimensions of positive fathering (p. 293)."

Also, much of the family literature on fathering has used as a central measurement mothers' perceptions (Fagan and Barnett 2003; Futris and Schoppe-Sullivan 2007; Krishnakumar and Black 2003). This use of mothers' perceptions stems from the fact that while co-parenting appears to be the aspirational parenting model of the moment, mothers "continue to assume the primary role in child rearing (Simmernan, Blacher, and Baker 2001; p. 325)." At the same time, while men are playing a greater role in the family and especially inside the home, one study showed that they were largely unable to report on specific details of their children's lives, such as teachers' names and outside activities (Lareau 2000). The mothers' level of knowledge of the children's day to day activities was much higher and much more specific than the fathers'. Douglas and Michaels (2004) point this out as well: "after all, a dad who knows the name of his kid's pediatrician and reads them stories at night is still regarded as a saint; a mother who doesn't is a sinner (p. 8)." Therefore, while it is extremely important that fathers' voices be recorded and studied, this study focuses on mothers' perceptions of fathers' participation in the period prior to the arrival of their first child in order to learn more about fathers' role in this period of transition. It also gives the opportunity to test McMahon's findings that "men and women may both be parents, I was told, but they act, think, and feel differently as parents (1995, p. 234)."

### METHOD

The data for this paper was collected as part of a larger project on the role consumption plays in the management of a woman's transition into first time motherhood. The project includes two interviews each with twenty mothers across four countries (Denmark, Ireland, the UK, and the USA). The interviews were conducted prior to and after the birth of the first child by one of eight researchers who comprise the research group. Other forms of data were also collected, including consumption diaries and photographs of certain goods that were either purchased or received in

other means, such as gifts or on loan. The interviews were driven by the long interview method (McCracken 1988), the photographs were reviewed using autoelicitation techniques (Heisley and Levy 1991) and a snowballing technique was used to garner the participants (Miles and Huberman 1994).

For this paper we are focusing on the pre-birth interviews with mothers, conducted between 32-39 weeks gestation, and are looking specifically at the women's perceptions of the involvement of their male partners in the buying of items needed for the imminent arrival of their baby. It should be stressed at this point that all of our participants were heterosexual, and from middle-class backgrounds.

### FINDINGS

The path to parenthood is lined with fear, excitement, intrepidation, and preparation. And while women have many guideposts along this path, men have relatively few. During pregnancy, women are privy to hundreds of book options, constant updating from doctors, and a willingness to dip into their social network's shared wealth of knowledge. Men, on the other hand, are less targeted by the pregnancy book market, are sometimes absent from doctor's visits, and are not used to discussing such intimate issues with their social networks. So, how does a father manage this transition? Murphy (2004) states that "it takes a very long time to negotiate the shift from partners to parents" and that the mother and father's paths will never be "parallel," especially during the initial postpartum phase.

Between 1970 and 2000 Douglas and Michaels (2004) pointed out that over eight hundred books were published on the topic of motherhood, while in recent years only a small number of 'how to' manuals have been published for fathers (Parsons 1997; Smith 2004; Berkman 2005; Brott 2005). While the literature suggests that many women feel the need to read books and research products men do not necessarily feel the same need. So how then are men transitioning from fathers-to-be to fathers? Does consumption play a role during this period of liminality? There were a number of different areas in which the consumption related activities of fathers were highlighted and below we discuss three prominent areas—namely the use of consumption as a virtual umbilical cord; the 'nesting' activities of fathers; and the ways in which father's both desire and seek out information in relation to pregnancy and fatherhood.

#### Consumption as a virtual umbilical cord

Because men are unable to physiologically perform the act of pregnancy, a number of our participants talked of how their partners felt disconnected from the pregnancy or that the pregnancy did not 'seem real' to them:

Sarah: He's only really realizing it's happening now. He can see the bump getting bigger now, but he kind of feels outside it...So in certain kinds of respects he's really prepared and geared towards it, but in others then he's still a bit of an ostrich on it as well, I think.

Int: And why do you think that is?

Sarah: I think it's just because it's not quite real yet. ....We've talked about this kind of bonding thing before; like I can feel it moving around, trashing around, but he'll talk to it like, he's really into it that way, but at the same time he can walk away from that where for me there's no walking away now (laughs). (Ireland)

"But also—of course it's different for a man, because he cannot feel the baby and all of these things the same way that I can. He doesn't feel it with his own body. (Heidi,Denmark.)

One of our Danish participants also talked of how she felt marketing activities were also geared towards women, because men were somehow 'on the sideline':

It's like it's always directed at women. And I know what they say about hormones and all that; and that we are easier to manipulate into buying all kinds of things. But my husband cares about this at least just as much as I do. But he is not the kind who is falling for the pink clothes. But I believe it has a lot to do with women and their pregnancy and the husband is out here on the sideline. And that's not how I experience it. (Nina, Denmark)

Thus, in the same way that the mothers saw consumption as a way of helping them to 'prepare' for the arrival of their baby, our participants also suggested that fathers used consumption to remain connected and engaged, but the amount of involvement varied both within and across cultures. A number of our mothers-to-be talked of how their partners were very involved for most of the purchases made and indeed became emotional at times:

Lise: He is probably just as excited as I am, and he has participated in everything. Right from the beginning he has been with me at the doctor and the scannings and the midwife and he is very involved. It is not just my project. It is the two of us all the way through. He would be very unhappy if bought anything and he was not part of the decision. He likes to be part of the decisions-down to almost the smallest details. It is a big thing for him too. (Denmark)

Int: What was it like to go shopping for a pram—how did you go about doing that?

Karen: I was touched, but in fact it was only because Kasper is so sensitive. When he tried to push the pram he started crying. His sister accompanied us. It was in [a town in Jutland]. And when he was to push it, he started crying, and then I just got so touched, and it really was an extremely nice experience, (Denmark)

Similarly some participants talked about the fun they had shopping for baby items. Here Megan talks about her husband's involvement, even though he normally dislikes shopping:

Even Terry, poor guy, doesn't have a choice of what he wears, he hates shopping; so I just literally go in and go boom, boom, boom and come home and go there you are love, and he's delighted, usually [laughs], most of the time anyway. But, I must say I've liked some of the things we've gone shopping for together. In the States now when we were shopping Terry is a real Irish guy and there were two real beautiful looking girls inside the baby shop we were in buying and Terry was telling them about the U2 concert that we went to the night before and that we were from Ireland, and it was our first baby. I was over looking at the shelves of clothes while he was up at the counter chatting the two women up [laughs], and I could hardly get a word in edge ways as to what colours etc, but he's that type of person. He's very outgoing, he's very chatty, and he loved the shopping with an element of doing his own thing in the middle of it [laughs]. But we've had a good laugh actually through the whole lot of it. (Megan, Ireland)

In contrast to those fathers who were very much co-partners in consumption preparations, some of our participants talked about their partners finding "large purchases" to be important in terms of

shopping time and effort, yet, had very little interest in, and left the smaller purchases to the women:

Int: So Duncan's come along on a couple of trips but...

Caroline: Yeah, but not, I think the final decision is still mine, as in because it's knowing a bit more and reading a little bit more about things, and then he was quite happy to go along with it. The bigger things, probably like the cot and the pushchair, and that, the more practical things, yeah, he did have more on an input, but like cotton wool and lotion and all that sort of thing, it goes over his head, oh, do we need that, yeah, oh, we do, yes, we do. (UK)

Indeed, sometimes the mother's did not want the father's to be involved in buying some of the smaller items:

Nina: Well, mostly they were joint decisions—buying a car seat or buying a sleeping bag. Also the bigger things, really. We talked about those and agreed on what it should be. I think I was the one pushing it but then my husband also said that we should go ahead and then we did. And now we go get it done in order to be able to leave it alone.

I: And so you did that together?

Nina: But then, these last clothes, I was definitely the one. I didn't let him in on that. (Denmark)

When asked about the level of joint decision making, Claire underscored her leadership role: "he's been very good" taking her places, he defers to her, yet she sees things as "joint decisions, with me leading!" (UK)

Some participants, again in contrast, talked of their partners feeling very happy to leave most, if not all, consumption decisions up to them:

Int: And does Tony feel it will be nice for the baby to sleep in it?

Sarah: I think he does yeah; in some respects he's like 'oh you decide, it's your kind of area' if you like. (Ireland)

There were also cases where some of our participants talked about how their partners would like to be more involved in all sorts of activities, related to the baby, including buying things, but circumstances did not allow this. Ella, for instance talks of how her husband Fintan was not as involved because he was working incredibly hard within his own small business:

I really feel having talked to you that Fintan has really been kind of left out. But to be fair it's probably more circumstances than anything that he hasn't been as involved in stuff. Even from the point of view of reading and everything; if he actually had two minutes he'd probably read some of the books with me. And he did particularly in the beginning when we had that book with all the pictures, every week. He was thrilled with that, it was so amazing to read that, you know after so many weeks this organ was developed. I suppose I feel a bit sorry for him because he hasn't been able to be as involved, but he's a very hands-on kind of person, and he will be. And he's come to the hospital with me a lot. I really feel like I'm defending him, its not that, I just feel it's a bit unfair that he hasn't been able to be as involved. (Ireland)

There has been much talk in the literature of the involvement of men in the bringing up of their children, and also recently discussions as to how difficult this can sometimes be, due to limited

paternity leave, for instance. Warner (2005) points out that at the turn of the century American men were working on average more than fifty hours per week. Such long hours coupled with both limited paternity and maternity leave created an environment where some fathers were not as involved as they would like to have been. This is also true in our study where the men were all working full-time in the weeks prior to their babies' arrival, and as such would have had limited time to become involved with purchasing, particularly when their partners had begun their own maternity leave from work.

Even those partners who had very little involvement in purchasing most items did play a role in the purchasing of bigger and/or technical items for the baby. Indeed, one area where most of our participants talked of their partner's involvement, either in purchasing, or in afterwards assembling, was the buying of the baby 'travel system'. As Megan laughingly told us:

Basically it was very light-weight, very easy to manoeuvre, and my husband thought it was the best thing since his brand new car that he bought a couple of years ago [laughs]. So that's why we bought that. (Ireland)

Ella, also from Ireland, who had highlighted how her husband Fintan had little involvement in most purchases talked of how he was 'adamant' that they purchase a particular type of travel system. Abigail, from the USA, also talks of her husband's enthusiasm over technical items:

Int: Oh, okay. So, has he, how involved has he been?  
Abigail: He's been surprisingly involved. More, much more than I expected him. He's an engineer and like he loves all the, like when we went to register, he's looking at all the stuff, you know, yeah looking at gadgets to see how things go together and you know, we had a shower and I came home and he had every box opened already and I'm like, wait, we might need to return it. I want to see, this is cool. Did you see the car seat? I'm like this time it won't work. Show me what to do. (USA)

Thus in the same way that the mothers in our study used consumption to help them prepare for their babies arrival, fathers, who often felt that the pregnancy was 'not real' to them also used consumption to help them prepare. The level and types of involvement however, varied both within and between countries and ranged from co-decision making for most purchases, to limited and little involvement in other instances. The only area in which there appeared to be consistency was in the purchase of a travel system for a baby, where all fathers had some involvement in the decision making and/or assembly of the product purchased.

### Father's Nesting

Many of our participants talked of their partners engaging in a highly masculine form of "nesting," an activity typically attributed to pregnant women. Nesting has been described as a hormonally triggered desire to make the home as clean, orderly, and ready as possible prior to the baby's arrival and tends to 'kick-in' around the fifth/sixth month of pregnancy (Johnston 2004). While there has been limited research about the physiological and behavioral changes of expectant fathers (Storey et al 2000) the authors note hormonal changes in men just before and after their babies' birth have been identified. At the same time, other studies have shown, that men also suffer from post-partum depression (Ballard and Davies 1996; Leathers, Kelley, and Richman 1997), although other research suggests these levels are much higher for women (Douglas and Michaels 2004). Consequently if men's hormones and physiology

also change during this time period do such changes also lead to a male form of 'nesting'? From our interviews, we found many examples of men undertaking 'projects' that could be considered nesting. Activities took the form of large home improvement projects and also putting together complicated baby equipment. Even the men who had been less involved in purchasing items were very involved in various 'projects', with examples including, converting an attic; converting a spare bedroom into a nursery for the baby; and putting together 'complicated' items such as cribs, travel cots, etc. Here, Sarah talks of how her husband has been involved very little in the purchase of things and is also unsure about what will happen when the baby actually arrives, yet is still involved in 'big' projects and is also planning to work less hours following their babies birth:

Int: Does he want to switch off and wait until the baby arrives for everything?

Sarah: No, he's funny, he's quite prepared, in like the attic is underway, you know what I mean, and he's doing all of that like, and from a furniture point of view, what chair will we use, what will we use as a changing table, and he's got involved with the Moses basket. He got a bit of a shock yesterday when I said "we might leave the Moses basket here" [in the bedroom], and he was like, "is it going to sleep here", and I was like "yes". I just assumed he knew (laughs) so there might be a bit of a debate about that one, but I mean even for the first few weeks it will have to be in with us you know. (Ireland)

Karen explains how her partner, Kasper, builds a new chest for the baby: "I am sort of picky. So we ended up making one ourselves. That was fine. It was Kasper who decided, that he would like to do that. And I don't have to interfere. It is his project. That's nice (Denmark, pre-interview)." Karen also remarks that Kasper restored another piece of furniture:

Yes, the cupboard. I think that is because there is such a funny story behind my purchase of it, and then Kasper restored it. He really has done a lot, I reckon. It was a total ramshackle. He really has restored it from scratch. And that has also been a project for him. [...] It means a lot. He also told me, that I do not have to paint it. He wants to do it all himself. That's his project. It has really been great. He has also sewn a curtain for the nursery station. He has made the nursery station and the cupboard. All himself. Sewn and measured and everything. Yes. (Denmark)

There is much said about a woman's nesting instinct kicking in toward the end of the pregnancy but nothing appears to be mentioned about a man's desire to "get his house in order" for the baby. From our data, it appears that for some men, the desire to construct new things or put together complicated baby apparatuses may be a way of making the impending changes seem more real or provide a physical connection in lieu of the physical changes happening to their pregnant partners. Thus, while some father's such as Fintan and Tony had little involvement in buying items for the baby they had engaged in very significant 'projects' in their houses, even though their partners had stressed how busy they were with their jobs and thus unable to engage with other preparations, such as buying products. 'Nesting' for fathers therefore can be an important way of managing role uncertainty and the 'projects' they engaged with can be seen as a way of staging the self (Goffman 1959) and also helping fathers cope with the role disruption they are facing (Solomon 1983).

**Fathers Desiring and Seeking Out of Information**

The amount and type of information sought out in relation to the pregnancy varied between partners. While a few of our mothers-to-be read very little, most were highly engaged and saw reading about their pregnancy and birth as playing a big role in helping them prepare for their babies' arrivals. The women talked of how their partners did very little or no reading, or who read in a different way:

The only other one (books consulted) was one that I think Duncan's friend bought him, but it was to do with a chap, you're pregnant, too, mate. I did flick through it, but it's written for a guy. It's not something that I would say go and read, because it's written like they're down the pub and they're chatting, and you know the way lads will have a few pints. They're ... and they're fantastic, because it explained everything that would happen or that was happening in boy talk, I think. That's the only way to describe it. I think there must be quite a few of those types of books for chaps. It was completely different to what I would have. I was surprised, initially, that he enjoyed it. You know lads laugh at you, I'm thinking, and then I look at the bit he's just read and think, OK. It's not the most polite about us girls, but, yeah. (Caroline, UK)

So, while women's pregnancy books and publications are often quite graphic, technical, and medically thorough, this particular publication geared toward a man was tongue-in-cheek and almost poking fun of the entire pregnancy process. Indeed, the front cover of one of the few books for men on pregnancy *The Bloke's Guide to Pregnancy* (Smith 2004) has a picture of a football on the front cover, in stark contrast to the often idyllic mother and baby photographs sporting the front cover of most mothering manuals.

The next example is particularly compelling because Karen repeatedly describes Kasper as heavily involved with all aspects of her pregnancy:

Karen: It has been much like 'Kasper, I would really like you to read some of all those books'—but he doesn't bother.

Int: No, he prefers the Internet?

Karen: Yes, he does that too. But he is more like looking things up. He is more like, well, he says 'It is not necessary to read this book from one end to another—you don't get any wiser of that.' You know, that is one thing I have been a bit disappointed about him not participating. (Denmark)

Kasper goes so far as to make Karen question the degree to which she is studying up on pregnancy and parenting:

But Kasper thinks I am exaggerating, he tells me to use them as reference books, not read them as such. I do have a tendency to read them and to find out that oh we have to remember. (Karen, Denmark)

Sarah's partner is so disgusted by the pictures in the pregnancy books and he refuses to look at them:

Int: And what about any of the books, has he looked at any of them?

Sarah: He won't even look at any of the pictures.

Int: Why?

Sarah: What I do is, the book will be on the bed or something, and he'll find it and it will fall open on what he would call really horrendous pictures and he'll go 'agh'. (Ireland)

Sadie's partner also did not look at the pregnancy books but for different reasons:

Int: Did Ed look at it (book on pregnancy) as well?

Sadie: Never, well he doesn't, he's not into reading anyway, and he certainly wouldn't be reading that. He's kind of an old fashioned, macho guy. 'That's women's stuff.' (Ireland)

There were exceptions; here Abigail talks of her husband's involvement at pre-natal doctor's visit as a result of being 'up to speed' from reading baby manuals:

Abigail: We were lucky because he was in school too and it was flexible. Then he's, you know, all freaked out because the last two appointments or whatever, now he starts work and he's like, I can't come, your mom's going to have to go. He's so bummed out that he can't but he's been (inaudible) and he'll ask more questions than I do. I kind of, whatever the doctor tells me, that's fine. And he's like, what about and like, I heard. You know 'cause we have the *What to Expect When You're Expecting* book and yet in this chapter it's and he's all up to speed. (USA)

A clear picture of how fathers prepare for the role of fatherhood does not emerge from these findings. The mothers' perceptions of their partners' involvement shows both similarities and differences; involvement in buying items for instance varies from co-involvement and joint-decision making, for most, if not all purchases, to limited involvement at the other end of the spectrum. Further research to assess what mediates these relationships is therefore warranted. For example, existing research in the parenting literature suggests these differences are not related to class, ethnicity or race. Our study serves to confirm this viewpoint as well as there were difference and similarities both within and across cultures.

**DISCUSSION**

This study serves to uncover men's consumption activities in the biologically female and culturally feminine experience of pregnancy and childbirth. As the zeitgeist of parenting has shifted to the notion of co-contribution, the implementation of this philosophy has proved problematic during this particular transitional period. During pregnancy especially and to a certain extent after a child is born, nature necessarily forces a different experience on men and women and it is only now that researchers and parents alike are beginning to figure out what equal parenting really means. Murphy (2004) states "whatever you do, keep in mind that it takes a very long time to negotiate the shift from partners to parents... The overwhelming majority of moms I spoke to found that the birth of their baby transformed even the most egalitarian marriage into a kind of Leave it to Beaver time warp... (p. 53)." And while women want their partner to be an equal contributor, as one participant (Claire) said, the reality may be that they want joint decision making with the woman in the lead. In her extremely successful book *The Girlfriend's Guide to Pregnancy*, Vicky Iovine described it this way: "perhaps we new mums are secretly terrified that Daddy is going to be at least as skillful at childcare as we are. Where does that leave us?... So many of us secretly suspect that we are really amateurish at this mothering business and if a man... can do the job proficiently, then our self-esteem and identity lie in shattered little pieces on the bedroom floor (p. 52)."

The complex set of emotions and physiological changes that both men and women experience when transitioning into parenthood is sometimes softened by consumption experiences, such as when Danish consumers buy their first prams, a product laden with

social and cultural capital (Thomsen and Sørensen 2006). Yet, it also appears from related research that the baby marketplace actually exacerbates the fears and concerns of new parents, creating feelings of inadequacy and resistance. How women perceive their partners to be coping with the transition appears to be an important piece in the larger study of how becoming a parent is informed by identity, gender roles and norms, socialization, marketplace ideologies, and sociocultural beliefs. This paper has focused on women's perceptions of their partner's involvement in consumption prior to the birth of their baby; future research is therefore warranted, for perceptions following the birth of the baby on the one-hand, with a need for also investigating the perceptions and opinions of fathers themselves. As stated in the literature review, mother's perceptions of fathers have been utilized as a central measurement in the parenting and family literatures and this study also follows this practice; in the future it is also important to consider father's opinions on their roles and also father's perceptions of mother's involvement, to broaden our understanding and help build on the new ideas, from the differing countries, brought together and highlighted in this paper.

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**260 / *The Involved Ostrich: Mothers' Perceptions of Fathers' Participation in the Transition to Parenthood***

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