Increasing (un)certainty : becoming parents in the digital age

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Abstract

Becoming parents for the first time is a period with many intense emotions. Happiness and gratitude can be quickly alternated with doubt and stress. In this auto-ethnographic paper we reflect on how different online sources have influenced these emotions.

Author Keywords

Parenthood; Online information; Social Media; Life Transition; Auto-Ethnography

ACM Classification Keywords

H.5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous;

Introduction

We became parents on may 11th 2016, at 8 o'clock in the morning when our daughter was born. Or, we became parents nine months earlier, at the start of the pregnancy, the start of the responsibility for a new being. Or even earlier, during the conversation that lead to the decision to want children. On the other side of the spectrum we are still adjusting to a new situation and developing parenting skills. With every new stage, came new questions, reflected in our Google search history.

Dutch Natal Care

To help understand the described events we shortly explain the unique Dutch natal care system.

Midwifes: Most pregnant women are cared for by midwives who have practices separate from the hospital. These midwives guide the pregnancy, (home) birth and first week.

"Kraamzorg" Maternity Care: Even after a hospital birth, a family will be home within a few hours (in most, healthy cases). The family receives daily home care for the first (appr.) 8 days, for 4-8 hours a day, by a certified home nurse. (S)he helps with the baby and takes care of the recovering mother.

Child Health Center: After the first week the care is transferred to the Child Health Center. Here, a child receives regular check-ups for growth, weight, development and general health. It is often the first line of contact for worries about the child.

Uncertain Transitional Period

Many transitions in life are not instant, which is even true for transitions of life and death. Becoming parents is such a transition, although it is considered a "critical role transition *point*" it is experienced as a phase [3], taking weeks, months or even years. Transitioning into a new role, adjusting the self-image ("I am a parent") and developing new skills contribute to feelings of insecurity and doubt but also pride. The transition to parenthood even shows increased degrees of both personal and marital stress [3]. Sources ranging from a 1957 study discussing this period as 'crisis' [2] to this year's movie 'Bad Moms', show this is a timeless theme. Over the last years, these experiences have increasingly been connected to *online* experiences.

The Duality of Online experiences

Several researchers have shown that the vast majority of pregnant women use internet as a source of information for topics such as health, nutrition and exercise [5]. In addition to information, social media can provide social support. However, a study by Bartholomew et al. [1] also found a correlation between new mothers Facebook use and higher levels of parenting stress. We found little research how the variety of online sources are *experienced* and how they effects the emotions during the transition to parenthood. In our view, online interactions have a very two-sided effect. Useful online information can give support, but at the same time the multitude of information increases uncertainty and confusion. Here, we take an auto-ethnographic perspective, describing a selection of online interactions and experiences during the recent transition to parenthood of both authors. These experiences are written from the point of view of the first author.

Memories of a process of becoming:

June 2015: Facebook Confirmation
I should be writing a paper, in stead I find myself scrolling through the Facebook album of a friend. Specifically, an album with her daughters. Looking at how happy they are. Looking for confirmation of a choice already made. Am I ready for this? Am I sure this is what I want?

August 2015: An unquenchable thirst
Soon after the unforgettable moment of the positive test a maelstrom of questions is whirling in my mind. However, the pregnancy is still a secret, so there is no-one to discuss these topics with. What remains is a desire for information, an unquenchable thirst to Google everything. I read about development in the womb, labor, life with babies. But also about the negative aspects, the risks and statistics of those first weeks. There is so much to read, I find it hard to focus.

October 2015: Spreading the news
After sharing the news with family and friends in person we announce the pregnancy online. We both fanatically check our Facebook notifications, seeing the counter of likes and congratulations steadily rise. Some comments touch me more than I dare to admit 'You're going to be great parents' – 'The little one is lucky to have you as parents'. It feels reassuring.

January 2016: Comparing personal stories
I've read so much of the practical stuff, the lists and factual articles. I'm becoming more interested in personal stories. I follow several 'vloggers' with their stories of pregnancy, birth and babies. I compare my pregnancy to theirs and feel connected. But I avoid the birth stories that start with 'my labor was very, very heavy', maybe *not* knowing is better.

11th of May 2016
The unbelievable and unrealistic day our daughter is born. We deliberately refrain from sharing the news on Facebook but call our family and send messages to smaller groups of friends through Whatsapp.

May 2016: Helpless and Uncertain
The first days were quite easy, a content baby. But she seems to be getting more and more dissatisfied. What could be wrong? Why does she cry so much more than before? On day 8, the uncertainty reaches its peak. At the same time, we have to deal with things on our own from now on as the 'kraamzorg' is leaving (see sidebar). Our daughter keeps on crying, she seems to be in pain. We Google what might be wrong, reading about reflux, cramps, throat problems. The negative stories on forums are overwhelming and distress us even more. Reading comments that say "the reflux was over after 4 months" just sound like horror after struggling to overcome just these two days.
Finally, the 4th midwife from our practice we speak to during a late night phone call changes our view. What a relief when she tells us that this is normal for this 'age' (and typically lasts a few day). Secondly, we can try a certain medicine that might help. Finally, we don't feel completely helpless anymore. Rather than a multitude of possibilities, this call provided a single plausible explanation and a plan.

May 2016: A change of plans, again and again
Some days later, her stomach seems fine again, but she won't sleep in her own bed. We keep on trying different things, from different online sources. Maybe feed her more often. Or just let her sleep in our bed. Or sing a song, or cradle her to sleep, or … or… So many suggestions and such strong opinions. Could we just let her 'cry it out' for a moment? Is she too young for that? Or are we making her over depending on us? We ask a befriended couple for help. Speaking to them we feel supported, they clearly have empathy for the situation and have been through the same. We listen to their experience, ask question on how, and when and for how long. After the call, we are able to construct a 'plan of action' to stick to for a while, which we were unable to before.

June 2016: Increasing Confidence
Things are going well. I read online experiences and compare how things are going. If I read people tackling problems or approaching things very differently I feel strengthened in our approach. Thinking "I'm not doing so bad after all."

July 2016: Doubt
The time that our daughter wouldn't sleep seems ages ago. She sleeps for hours at a time, and suddenly also drinks less frequent. Although it seems a luxury, my mind starts worrying again. Remembering stories of silent malnourishment and severe problems. Freek is not worried at all, does a quick Google search and finds a Q&A with a very similar situation. The question is answered by a professional, who explains the theory on variety in sleep patterns, the signs and reassures that there is little need for worry.

Reflection
The memories include a diversity of online experience, positive and negative, some small, some recurring. Here, we reflect on what causes these experiences. In what way are they influenced by the *online* nature of the information rather than the information in itself?

Information overload
The internet is an overwhelming source of endless information. One can never read "everything", which can strengthen the feeling of not being ready. At the same time it is very difficult to select what to read, as formal and informal sources are mixed, and sometimes difficult to distinguish. The more formal sources (such as health institutes) often remain very impersonal with general suggestions for "the average situation". There is no option to ask for clarification or specific personal situations. Social platforms such as forums provide more specific cases, which are often elaborately discussed. But the downside is that often no experts are involved, and these platforms bring additional challenges, discussed below.

The harshness of anonymity
Discussions in online communities often take a very strong tone. Groups of mothers (although all concern parenting issues in general, the platforms seem to be dominated by mothers), get into fierce arguments on what should and shouldn't be done. Such 'self-proclaimed expertise' could even be seen as a mechanism to cope with insecurities [4]. The fierce, even aggressive discussions seems to be caused by the anonymous nature of these *online* communications. On the other side the anonymity is also what gives people the sense of freedom to share problems, doubts or questions they might not want to share with friends.

Misrepresentation: lack of the middle ground
Forums are often loaded with severe, negative stories, people wanting to ventilate their negative experience. On the other side of the spectrum, some popular sources present idealized stories (such as blogs or vlogs). It seems like people who are doing 'just fine, but struggling at times' are not sharing this online, or not honestly. Facebook is known for over- representing positive stories. Such idealized stories can increase insecurity because others' lives seem perfect.

Final thoughts
During the transition to parenthood, online information and social platforms seem to magnify emotions. When sharing the happy news of pregnancy or birth, online responses strengthen the feelings of joy and celebration. However, when insecure, online information and communities enlarge doubts and insecurity. Supporting better searching, selecting and filtering of information could enable online sources to be used to counter negative emotions and empower new parents.

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