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RESEARCH ARTICLE / ARAŞTIRMA MAKALESİ

Becoming Acquainted Through Touch: A Metaphorical Study of Fathers Meeting Their Newborns in the First 48 Hours

Dokunarak Tanışma: Babaların Yenidoğan Bebekleriyle İlk 48 Saatte Tanışmalarının Metaforik Bir Çalışması

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Abstract:

The aim of this study is to investigate, through metaphors, the perceptions of fathers who meet their babies by holding their hands within the first 48 hours after birth. The sample for this qualitative study, designed using a phenomenological approach, consists of 39 fathers who saw their babies within the first 48 hours after birth and held them in their arms. In the study, the "Personal Information Form" and "Metaphorical Perception Form," developed by the researchers following a literature review, were used as data-collection tools, and data were collected through face-to-face interviews. Participants were asked to complete the statement "Holding my baby's hand is like meeting them because..." to determine their metaphorical perceptions. Content analysis of the metaphorical data was conducted using MAXQDA 2022, while frequency and percentage analyses of the demographic data were conducted using SPSS 22.0. The average age of fathers participating in the study was 31.71±3.7. It was found that 43.6% were happy to have a baby, and 28.2% felt excited when they first held their baby's hands. The study determined that 39 fathers produced 35 different metaphors, grouped into five categories: "Power, Source of Life, Happiness/Peace, Anxiety, and Eternity." The findings show that most fathers have positive perceptions after holding their babies' hands and meeting them for the first time, but some also experience negative feelings. The study suggests that early interaction between fathers and newborn babies can strengthen the father-baby bond.

Keywords: Father, Attachment, Metaphor, Newborn.

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Öz:

Bu çalışmanın amacı, doğumdan sonraki ilk 48 saat içerisinde bebeklerinin ellerini tutarak onlarla tanışma yaşayan babaların algılarını metaforlar aracılığıyla incelemektir. Fenomolojik yaklaşımla tasarlanan bu nitel çalışmanın örneklemini doğumdan sonraki ilk 48 saat içerisinde bebeğini gören ve ellerini tutarak tanışan 39 baba oluşturmaktadır. Çalışmada, araştırmacılar tarafından literatür taraması sonrasında oluşturulan “Kişisel Bilgi Formu” ve “Metaforik Algı Formu” veri toplama araçları kullanılmış; veriler ise araştırmacılar tarafından yüz yüze görüşme yöntemiyle toplanmıştır. Çalışmada babaların bebeklerinin ellerini tutarak tanışmaları üzerine metaforik algılarını belirlemek için katılımcılardan "Bebeğimin elini tutmak onunla tanışmak gibidir çünkü..." ifadesini tamamlamaları istenmiştir. Elde edilen metaforik verilere MAXQDA 2022 ile içerik analizi, demografik verilere ise SPSS 22.0 ile frekans ve yüzde analizi yapılmıştır. Çalışmaya katılan babaların yaşlarının ortalamasının $31,71 \pm 3,7$ olduğu, %43,6'sının bebek sahibi olmaktan mutluluk duyduğu, %28,2'sinin bebeklerinin ellerini ilk tuttuklarında heyecanlandığı saptanmıştır. Çalışmada 39 babanın 35 farklı metafor ürettiği ve bu metaforların “Güç, Yaşam Kaynağı, Mutluluk/Huzur, Kaygı ve Sonsuzluk” olmak üzere 5 kategori altında toplandığı belirlenmiştir. Bulgular, babaların çoğunluğunun bebeklerini ellerinden tuttuktan ve onlarla ilk kez tanıştıktan sonra olumlu algılarının olduğunu gösterirken, aynı zamanda olumsuz algılarının da olabileceğini ortaya koymaktadır. Çalışma, babalar ve yeni doğan bebekler arasındaki erken etkileşimin baba-bebek bağını güçlendirebileceğini göstermektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Baba, Bağlanma, Metafor, Yenidoğan.

Introduction

"Attachment theory," developed by Bowlby (1982), is among the key theories that explain the relationship between parents and their newborns or children (Bowlby, 1982; Cabrera, 2020). The core of this theory lies in the biological foundation of closeness between a newborn and their primary caregiver (Bretherton, 2013; Sorakin ve Cerkez, 2022). This biological mechanism ensures the newborn's survival by promoting proximity and responsiveness between the infant and the caregiver. It is expressed through the newborn's behavioral signals that aim to attract parental attention (Palm, 2014).

Attachment with newborns has traditionally been examined primarily in relation to mothers. Within the framework of attachment theory, the first and most fundamental relationship develops between the mother and the newborn. Over time, the infant's attachment patterns and the individuals to whom they become attached may evolve (Meredith et al., 2007; Taşkın, 2011; Kara & Çetinkaya, 2022). This is thought to result from the formation of maternal identity beginning at conception, whereas paternal identity typically develops progressively throughout the pregnancy (Özkan et al., 2016; Belli et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, studies have shown that fathers and mothers demonstrate similar behaviors regarding postnatal attachment to their infants. Fathers, like mothers, express affection toward their babies and adapt to their infants' developmental needs (Cabrera et al., 2014). During pregnancy, the father's connection with the baby remains abstract, creating a need for partner support to facilitate interaction with the unborn child (de Waal et al., 2023). Since fathers do not experience the physical aspects of pregnancy, their bond with the baby typically begins to take shape after birth, when direct interaction becomes possible (de Waal et al., 2023).

Father–infant attachment is influenced by various factors, including the father's adaptation to a new identity, psychological and physical competence, positive family dynamics, early postnatal contact, and the initiation of skin-to-skin interaction (Demirbağ et al., 2020). Paternal identity continues to develop throughout the first three years following childbirth (Kowlessar et al., 2015; Belli et

al., 2021). Immediate contact between the father and the newborn, along with active participation in infant care, contributes to the development of paternal identity and positively affects the baby's overall growth and well-being (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018).

Although father–infant attachment is known to have positive outcomes for both the father and the infant, the literature remains limited. Existing studies are predominantly randomized controlled trials focusing on skin-to-skin contact (Erlandsson et al., 2007; Huang et al., 2019; Ayala et al., 2021). Furthermore, a recent systematic review emphasized that initiating father–infant attachment through early introduction methods plays a critical role in shaping subsequent relational processes (Suzuki et al., 2022).

Despite the availability of randomized controlled trials and systematic reviews, a significant gap persists in the literature, particularly regarding metaphor-based investigations. Metaphors enable individuals to concretize abstract experiences and to mentally represent concepts or situations (Güner, 2013; Durmuş, 2023). These insights not only informed the design and implementation of the present study but also addressed an additional gap: exploring fathers' early interactions with their newborns specifically, those who establish contact by holding their infants' hands within the first 0–48 hours after birth through the lens of attachment theory. Therefore, the research questions guiding this study are as follows:

What metaphorical expressions do fathers use to represent their experience of meeting their babies for the first time?

How can these metaphors be thematically categorized within a conceptual framework?

What relationships exist among the codes identified under each conceptual category?

Method**Objective and Type of the Study**

Metaphorical studies, a qualitative research design, examine how individuals interpret and make sense of the emotions they experience or anticipate (Gökçek & Boyacıoğlu, 2025). This qualitative, phenomenological

study aims to metaphorically evaluate the emotions of fathers who hold their babies' hands for the first time within the first 48 hours after birth.

Population and Sample

The study population consisted of fathers at a university hospital in the Central Black Sea in February–March 2024. The sample consisted of 39 fathers who accompanied their wives, whose wives had given birth within the last 0–48 hours, whose newborns had no postnatal anomalies, and who volunteered. The study was completed with this number of participants, as data saturation was achieved.

Data Collection Tools

Two forms were used to collect the data for the study. These forms are a Personal Information Form and a Metaphorical Perception Form.

The researchers prepared the Personal Information Form after a literature review (Köse et al., 2013; Sağlam & Dalgıç, 2023). The form includes 12 questions: 1 open-ended and 11 closed-ended. The metaphorical perception form is a semi-structured interview questionnaire that includes fathers' perceptions of how they metaphorically introduced their babies. The form asked the fathers to complete the sentence, "Holding my baby's hand and becoming acquainted with him feels like... because..." Before the fathers answered the form, the individuals were informed about the metaphor, and a sample metaphorical sentence was provided.

Data Collection

Researchers collected data through face-to-face interviews. Fathers were asked to hold their babies' hands for 5 minutes to complete the bonding phase of getting acquainted. At the end of the time, they were given 15 minutes to complete a sentence containing a metaphor that matched their emotion. The data collection process, including the time for the father and baby to get acquainted, lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Data Analysis

To examine the metaphors fathers generated about their initial encounters with their babies after holding their babies' hands for the first time, a content analysis was conducted. Content analysis is a qualitative research technique that involves systematically grouping relevant data under pre-established themes and concepts, followed by their interpretation in a meaningful and coherent manner (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2013).

The content analysis in the study was conducted in five stages: naming, classification, categorization, validity and

reliability assessment, and data digitization. In the naming stage, all metaphors describing participants' first encounters with their babies were listed, and non-metaphoric forms were excluded. In the classification stage, the metaphors were independently examined by three researchers for similarities and analyzed with respect to their subject matter and source. As a result of these analyses, a comprehensive list of metaphors was created, and five conceptual categories were developed.

The validity and reliability of the analysis were ensured through expert evaluation. Two academicians with expertise in the field reviewed the conceptual categories and provided feedback on whether the metaphors appropriately represented the intended constructs. To assess inter-coder reliability, the formula proposed by Miles and Huberman—[Agreement / (Agreement + Disagreement) × 100]—was used. According to Baltacı (2017), a minimum agreement level of 80% is considered acceptable. In this study, the inter-coder agreement was 84.6%, indicating a high level of reliability.

Finally, in the digitalization stage, the data were converted to a digital format for further analysis. Descriptive statistics for participants' demographic characteristics were analyzed using SPSS version 22.0, and frequency and percentage distributions were calculated and presented in tables. Additionally, MAXQDA 22 software was used to visualize the identified metaphors, enhancing the interpretative aspect of the analysis.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. The necessary permissions were obtained from the Ethics Committee for Social and Human Sciences (January 30, 2024, Decision No. 02.21, Letter No. 382942) and the affiliated hospital (February 21, 2024, Decision No. E-21979232-044-402581). All participants provided written and verbal consent, and their identities were kept confidential.

Findings

The average age of fathers in the study was 31.71±3.7 (22–34). 46.2% of participants had been married for 1–3 years, 66.7% were college graduates, and 59.0% had one child. 89.7% of fathers had not received parenting education, 56.4% had planned to have a baby, and 79.5% felt prepared for fatherhood. In addition, 43.6% reported being happy to have a baby, and 28.2% reported being excited when they first held their baby's hand (Table 1).

Table 1. Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Fathers (n = 39)

Variable	$\bar{X} \pm SD$	Min–Max
Age (years)	31.71 ± 3.7	22–34
Variable	n	%
Duration of marriage		
1–3 years	18	46.2
4–5 years	12	30.7
≥5 years	9	23.1
Educational level		
High school graduate	5	12.8
Bachelor's degree	26	66.7
Master's degree	8	20.5
Income level		
Income is less than expenses	7	18.0
Income equal to expenses	24	61.5

Income is more than expenses	8	20.5
Number of children		
1	23	59.0
2	12	30.8
3	4	10.2
Training on fatherhood		
Received	4	10.3
Not received	35	89.7
Planned baby		
Planned	22	56.4
Not planned	17	43.6
Feeling ready for fatherhood		
Ready	31	79.5
Not ready	8	20.5
Feelings about having a baby		
Happiness	17	43.6
Peace	5	12.8
Conscientiousness	4	10.3
Self-confidence	11	28.2
Sadness	2	5.1
Feelings when holding a baby's hand for the first time		
Happiness	8	20.5
Peace	3	7.7
Excitement	11	28.2
Becoming a family	4	10.3
Conscientiousness	2	5.1
Self-confidence	4	10.3
Sadness	7	17.9

Descriptive statistics are given as mean ($\bar{X}$) and standard deviation (SD) values.

The metaphors produced by 39 fathers while holding their babies' hands for the first time are shown in Figure 2. The fathers produced a total of 35 metaphors. These metaphors

were grouped into five categories: "Happiness/Peace, Source of Life, Strength, Anxiety, and Eternity" (Figure 1).

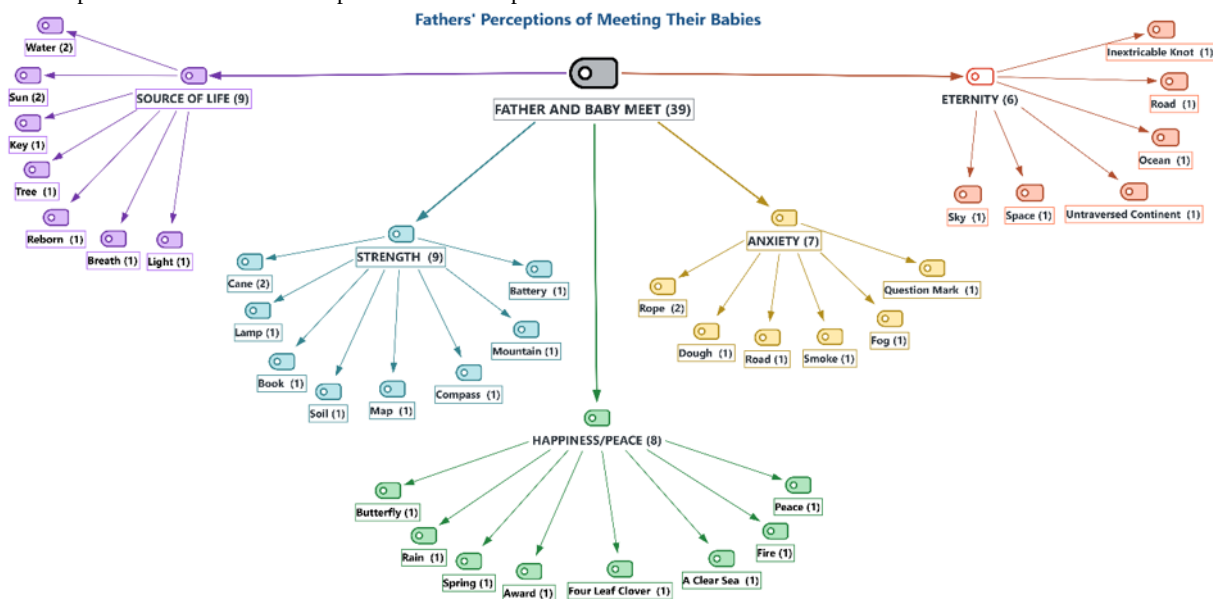


Figure 1. Hierarchical Theme-Category-Metaphor System and Metaphor Frequencies

Happiness/Peace

Fathers used the following metaphors in the "Happiness/Peace" category: "peace (1), a clear sea (1), fire (1), reward (1), four-leaf clover (1), spring (1), rain (1), butterfly (1)." One father who generated the "clear sea" metaphor explained it as follows: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a clear sea. Even though I was holding his tiny hands for the first time, I felt as happy as if I were listening to the waves on the shore" (Father 11). Another father who produced the "four-leaf clover"

metaphor expressed: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a four-leaf clover. Because I am already sure that it has brought prosperity, luck, and peace to our lives with my wife" (Father 23). The father who used the "rain" metaphor explained it in this way: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like rain. Because rain nourishes the soil and brings abundance. I believe that my baby is a blessing to me and brings peace" (Father 25).

Source of Life

In the "Source of Life" category, fathers used the metaphors of light (1), sun (2), breath (1), rebirth (1), tree (1), key (1), and water (2). Fathers who used the 'sun' metaphor explained it as follows: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like the sun. Just as the sun warms everything around it with its light, my baby warmed my life and made me believe that I couldn't live without him" (Father 2). "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like the sun. Just as the sun illuminates the world, my baby illuminated the darkness in my life and made me feel truly alive" (Father 14). A father who used the metaphor of 'water' after meeting his baby for the first time expressed it as follows: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like water. Because water is essential for life, and after my baby came into being, I realized I needed him to live" (Father 33). A father who used the metaphor of 'rebirth' explained: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like being reborn. Because a part of you comes into the world, and you give life again for a new life to begin" (Father 5).

Strength

In the "Strength" category, fathers used the following metaphors: "battery (1), mountain (1), compass (1), map (1), soil (1), book (1), lamp (1), cane (2)." One father who used the "cane" metaphor explained it as follows: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a cane. Because a cane provides support for a person to walk, my baby also supported me, and now I will walk with him as my support" (Father 28). The father who used the "battery" metaphor expressed: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a battery. Because I will overcome all difficulties by drawing energy from him" (Father 6). Finally, the father who generated the "compass" metaphor explained: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a compass. Because it will give me strength and direction to take beautiful steps in my life" (Father 12).

Anxiety

In the "Anxiety" category, fathers used the following metaphors: "fog (1), rope (2), smoke (1), question mark (1), dough (1), road (1)." One father who used the "rope" metaphor explained: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a worn-out rope. Because I don't know whether the bond between us will be negatively affected as I try to hold him" (Father 17). The father who used the "question mark" metaphor expressed: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a question mark. Because the responsibilities I have are confusing me" (Father 30). The father who used the "road" metaphor explained: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a rough road. Because during this new journey in our lives, I don't know what challenges I will face" (Father 37).

Eternity

In the "Eternity" category, fathers used the following metaphors: "knot (1), road (1), ocean (1), uncharted territory (1), space (1), sky (1)." The father who used the "knot" metaphor explained: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like a knot. Because I am certain that the bond we have established will never be untied" (Father 9). The father who used the "ocean" metaphor expressed: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like the ocean, because I know that the love I feel for him has no end" (Father 18). The father who used the "space" metaphor explained: "Holding my baby's hand and meeting him is like space. Because with his arrival, I realize that the bond between us has no limits" (Father 36). Figure 3 shows the relationships between themes derived from fathers' metaphors about their first encounters with their babies. The connections between codes reveal that the experience of fatherhood is multidimensional. Findings indicate that themes of emotional bonding, responsibility, rebirth, and protection are interrelated, and that fatherhood represents a psychosocial transformation that goes beyond a biological event.

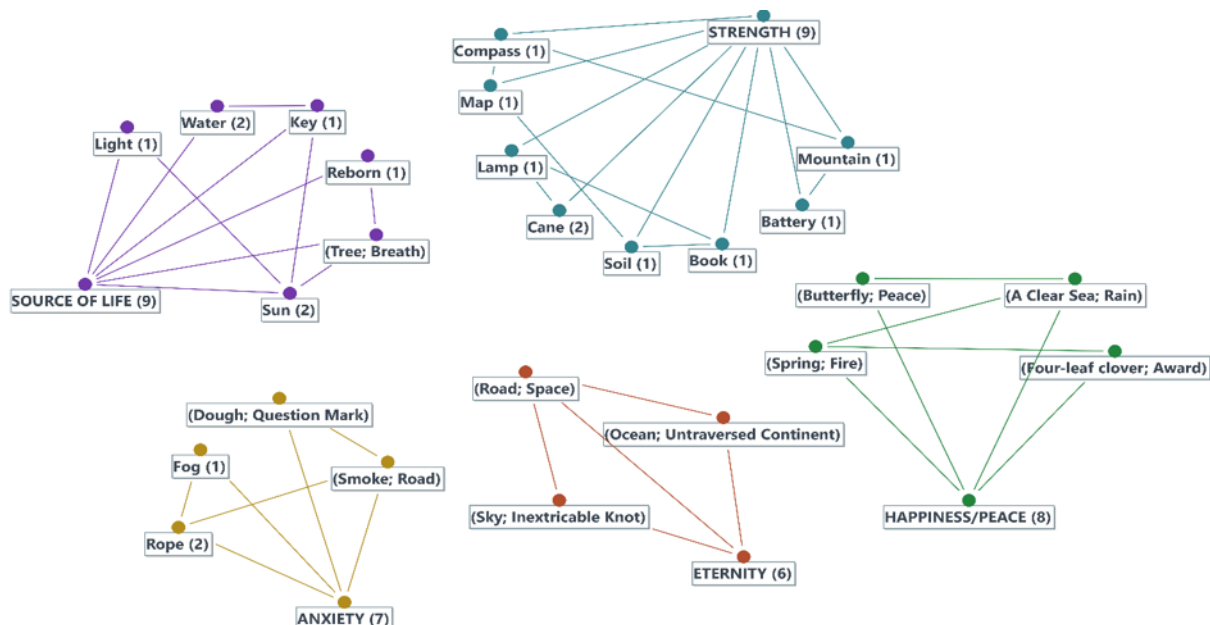


Figure 2. Relationship of Codes in Themes Determined from Metaphors

Figure 3 illustrates the most frequent concepts in participants' metaphorical expressions. Words like "love," "responsibility," "happiness," "connection," "anxiety," and

"protection" that stand out in the code cloud reflect the emotional intensity and psychological awareness fathers experience during their first encounter with their babies.

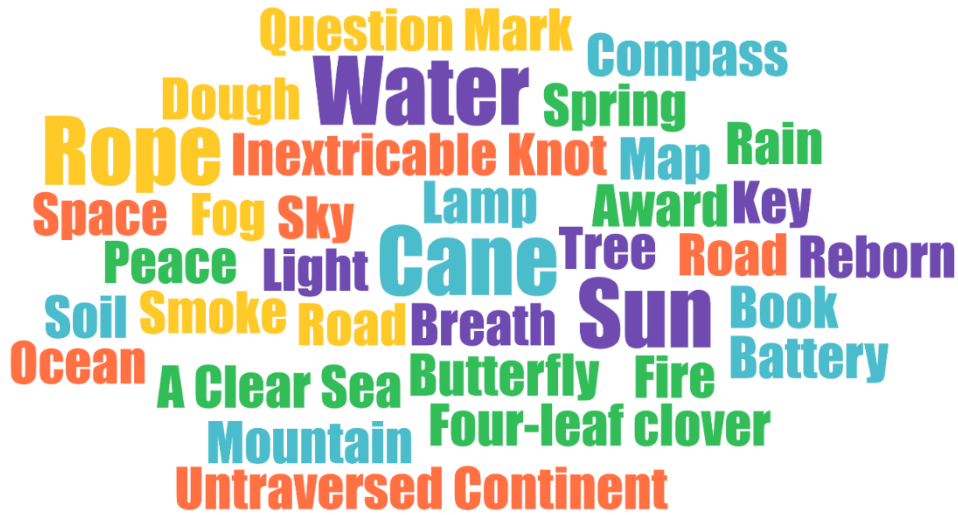


Figure 3. Code Cloud

Discussion

In this study, in line with Bowlby's attachment theory, it was hypothesized that early physical contact between fathers and newborn babies (holding the baby's hand within the first 0-48 hours after birth) would contribute to the formation of an emotional bond and that this would be reflected in the fathers' metaphorical expressions. Accordingly, the metaphors of fathers who held their babies' hands and got to know them within the first 0-48 hours after birth were analyzed in the context of Bowlby's attachment theory and the current literature. The findings indicate that the emotional bond formed between fathers and their babies during this early period is multidimensional. Accordingly, the categories derived from metaphors have been discussed as follows:

Metaphors collected under the theme of *Happiness/Peace* (e.g., sea, rain, four-leaf clover, butterfly) suggest that fathers interpret their first contact with their newborns as experiences of trust, love, and inner peace, reflecting positive emotions and personal satisfaction. According to Bowlby (1982), attachment is not only a behavior directed toward caregiving but also a source of emotional fulfillment for fathers. Supporting this perspective, Bamishigbin et al. (2020) reported that fathers' early interactions with their infants contribute to feelings of happiness and may reduce the risk of future depressive symptoms. Furthermore, a review of the literature reveals that research conducted by Özer Yurdal and Özsoy (2025) determined that skin-to-skin contact between fathers and their babies during the early postnatal period positively affects bonding and increases emotional satisfaction in fathers, thereby strengthening their attachment to their babies. These findings collectively indicate that early father–infant contact can elicit significant emotional benefits, fostering well-being and positive affect in fathers.

Metaphors categorized under *Source of Life* (e.g., sun, water, breath, rebirth) suggest that fathers experience existential renewal after interacting with their infants. Within the framework of attachment theory, this aligns with Bowlby's (1982) characterization of attachment as a "biological mechanism for survival." Supporting this view, Abraham et al. (2014) found that fathers may perceive their infants as sources of life, a perception linked to elevated oxytocin levels following attachment-

promoting behaviors. Reviews of the literature have found that fathers' physical contact with their babies increases oxytocin levels. It is thought that this situation may influence the biological mechanisms underlying existential renewal and emotional bonding, as described by the metaphorical expressions "source of life" (Morris et al., 2021; Shorey et al., 2023). In a study by Morris et al. (2021), physical contact between fathers and their babies increased fathers' oxytocin secretion and positively affected bonding. Furthermore, it was found that interacting through touch strengthens emotional bonding. Overall, the findings of the present study are consistent with the literature, suggesting that early father–infant interactions not only foster attachment but also evoke profound biological and existential experiences in fathers.

Metaphors categorized under the theme of *Power* (e.g., cane, compass, battery, mountain) indicate that fathers perceive their infants as sources of support and motivation following initial contact. Within the framework of Bowlby's attachment theory, this finding aligns closely with the concept of the "secure base," which emphasizes the role of attachment figures in providing guidance and fostering resilience (Bowlby, 1982). Fathers' perceptions of their infants as guiding and confidence-enhancing agents are further supported by Solberg et al. (2023), who reported that fathers experienced a shift from insecurity to self-confidence and felt more resilient after interacting with their newborns. In a study conducted by Soultanopoulos et al. (2025), it was observed that interaction between fathers and babies in the early postnatal period enabled fathers to feel psychologically strong. These findings show that fathers' early interactions with their babies not only strengthen emotional bonds but also support the development of the father-baby bond. The findings are consistent with the literature.

Metaphors within the theme of *Anxiety* (e.g., fog, rope, question mark, road) indicate that fathers experience feelings of responsibility, uncertainty, and concern regarding their new parental role. This finding is consistent with Bowlby's (1982) assertion that the attachment system is activated not only by love but also by fear of separation or loss. Supporting this perspective, Lindeberg et al. (2008) reported that fathers' sense of responsibility for their infants can generate anxiety, while a qualitative study

by Koyuncu and Kissal (2025) found that men's perceptions of changes in their responsibilities after becoming fathers contribute to anxiety. Research conducted by Philpott et al. (2022) reveals that fathers experience anxiety in the early postnatal period and feel psychological pressure in the process of adapting to fatherhood. Although these findings align with existing literature, the emergence of this theme highlights that fathers may sometimes experience complex and ambivalent emotions in response to their infants.

Metaphors categorized under the theme of *Eternity* (e.g., knot, ocean, space, sky) indicate that fathers form a deep and enduring bond with their infants that transcends time. According to Bowlby's (2008) attachment theory, attachment establishes an internal representational system that persists throughout life. Recent longitudinal research supports the notion that father–infant attachment established in the early postnatal period forms a lasting emotional bond that extends beyond infancy. For example, Hatakka et al. (2025) reported that paternal bonding assessed in the early months after birth was significantly associated with children's social-emotional outcomes at 5 years of age, highlighting the enduring influence of early postnatal attachment. Consistent with this perspective, the present study's findings suggest that fathers' relationships with their infants are long-lasting and emotionally enduring.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study, conducted within the framework of Bowlby's attachment theory, demonstrates that the early interactions fathers establish with their newborns create positive emotional experiences. In the study, some fathers reported feeling anxious about parenting responsibilities. While these findings generally indicate that fathers' early contact with their infants is perceived positively, they also emphasize that the initial stage of attachment is a critical period with potential implications for future father–infant relationships.

Limitations

As the findings of this study were obtained from fathers within 0–48 hours, they cannot be generalized to all fathers.

Declarations

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

The study was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee prior to data collection (Date: 30.01.2024, Decision no: 02.21, Letter no: 382942). Following ethics committee approval, institutional permission to conduct the study was obtained from the affiliated research and application hospital (Date: 21.02.2024, Decision no: E-21979232-044-402581). After the necessary permissions were obtained, all study participants provided written and verbal consent, and their identities were kept confidential.

Publication Permission

Not applicable.

Availability of Data and Materials

Not applicable.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Financial Disclosure

Not applicable.

Authors' Contributions

The study design was developed by YY, EKD, and ÖA. The data for the study were collected by YY and EKD. The data in the study were analyzed by YY, EKD, and ÖA. YY, EKD, and ÖA contributed to the interpretation of the data and the evaluation of the results, as well as to the writing and revision of the article. ÖA has reviewed the final version of the article and provided feedback.

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