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“Waiting for Baby”:  
First-Time Parents Talk about Worries during Pregnancy

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## ABSTRACT

Previous research indicates that positive and negative changes of mood are not unusual during pregnancy, and both men and women may be faced with an overwhelming amount of worries. Although attention has begun to focus on the impact of anxiety disorders during pregnancy, less is known about the nature of the unique time-bounded concerns parents experience during this time. The purpose of this exploratory study was to increase understanding of expectant parents' worries during first pregnancies. The research was guided by a social constructionist approach. By conducting semi-structured interviews, the study aimed to explore the ways a group of 20 first-time parents talked about worries during pregnancy, to bring us closer to the psychology of this transition. Participants were recruited through local antenatal education providers and by word of mouth. Interviews were audio-recorded digitally, transcribed by the researcher, and analysed discursively. Analysis focused on the discursive detail of worries, including how participants constructed worry, what they worried about, and how they managed and made sense of their concerns. The participants drew upon salient discourses to construct aspects of pregnancy and parenthood in a variety of ways. Similarities as well as differences emerged from the men's and women's data. An example of a marked difference was apparent in the way participants constructed worry. That is, while women drew upon a discourse of *all-consuming worry* to construct concerns as negative, pervasive and consuming, the men drew upon a discourse of *sudden reality* to construct their concerns as intense but comparatively short-lived, in response to a tangible event during pregnancy. Both women and men drew upon discourses of the *healthy baby* and *responsibility* to describe and explain the content of their worries. More positive aspects of their talk were captured by discourses of *trust* and *positive change*, which participants utilised to manage and make meaning of their concerns. Increased understanding of pregnancy-related worries is important for informing the development of psycho-education for new parents as well as therapeutic practices. Ultimately, helping new parents manage their worries is essential in preventing the development of more serious distress or illness, as well as working to strengthen the family unit.

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## PREFACE

This thesis explores the way meanings are made within first-time parents' experiences of worry during pregnancy. My interest in this area was sparked during my first year of clinical psychology training whilst working on a paper involving research regarding symptoms of depression and anxiety that can occur during pregnancy. My reading at this time covered literature from the disciplines of Psychology and Psychiatry as well as Midwifery, Nursing, and Medicine, and the overriding consensus across these literary persuasions was that most research to date has focused on depression associated with pregnancy and childbirth, while much less attention has examined the experience of anxiety during this time (Brummelte & Galea, 2010; Buist, 2006; Glasheen, Richardson & Fabio, 2010; Petrillo, Nonacs, Viguera & Cohen 2005; Ross & McLean, 2006).

This struck me as a significant gap in our knowledge and understanding, especially given the high prevalence of anxiety that has been identified in childbearing women (Wenzel, 2011), and that anxiety has been regarded as a particularly salient feature of mood disorders experienced by women during this time (Buist, Ross & Steiner, 2006). What struck me as even more surprising was the seemingly sparse body of literature exploring the common everyday experiences of expectant women *and* men, and in particular the experience of *worries* during this time. Time crept forward, and as the due date for my thesis proposal drew near, my interest in this topic continued to grow, gradually developing into the study that fills the chapters of the following dissertation.

### **Structure of Thesis**

The story of my research will be told throughout the nine chapters which make up the body of this thesis. Chapter One provides the context for pregnancy research within which the inquiry is embedded. Chapter Two provides a literature review, reviewing previous quantitative and qualitative studies conducted on the prevalence and experience of anxiety and worry during

pregnancy. Chapter Three locates this inquiry within the wider epistemological foundations of social constructionism and argues for the application of a discourse analytic approach, while Chapter Four provides a detailed account of the design and process of this research. Chapters Five through Eight present the research findings. Chapter Five presents the analysis of twelve women's accounts of worry during pregnancy, and explores the first three discourses utilised in their talk. These discourses illustrate how the women constructed their worry, and encompass the content of women's worries as well as the reasoning behind their concerns and fears. Chapter Six presents part two of the analysis of women's talk, focusing on the more positive discourses that were drawn upon to demonstrate how women managed and made sense of their worries during pregnancy. Chapter Seven and Eight present the analysis of eight men's accounts of worry during this time, again looking at the five main discourses that were drawn upon in two parts. Chapter Nine provides a discussion of the research findings, beginning with a summary of the analysis and considerations for potential implications of the findings. The limitations of this research are acknowledged and I propose further research in this area. The chapter ends with a brief summary of the main conclusions of the thesis.