

Father Involvement and Marital Relationship during Transition to Parenthood: Differences between Dual and Single-Earner Families

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Research into the process of becoming mother or father shows very conclusively that this important life transition is accompanied by both a decrease in marital quality and a more traditional division of labour. In this paper these changes are analyzed with special emphasis on the relationships between them and exploring the role played in this process by the mother's work status. Results showed a significant link between the development of marital quality and violated expectations regarding father involvement on childrearing. Dual-earner families were characterized by a specific pattern of changes, with greater stability than single-earner families in marital and parental roles during transition to parenthood and a significant role played by spouse support as a partner, but not as a parent.

Keywords: father involvement, marital quality, transition to parenthood, mother's work status.

La investigación sobre el proceso de convertirse en madre o en padre muestra, de manera muy concluyente, que esta importante transición evolutiva suele estar caracterizada por un decremento en la calidad de la relación de pareja y por una tradicionalización en la división de las tareas dentro del hogar. En este artículo se analizan ambos tipos de cambios prestando especial atención a la relación entre los mismos, y se explora el papel que juega en ellos el hecho de que la mujer trabaje o no fuera del hogar. Los resultados indican que existe una importante relación entre el desarrollo de la relación de pareja y la violación de expectativas respecto a la implicación del padre en la crianza y el cuidado del bebé. Las parejas en las que ambos miembros trabajan fuera del hogar tienden a estar caracterizadas por una mayor estabilidad en los roles como pareja y como progenitores durante la transición, y por el significativo papel que en este proceso juega el apoyo del cónyuge como pareja y no como progenitor.

Palabras clave: implicación paterna, calidad de la relación de pareja, transición a la paternidad y la maternidad, estatus laboral de la madre.

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In Spain, as well as in other European countries, the growing presence of women in the labor force has constituted a salient characteristic of recent changes in our social organization. The percentage of worker women has dramatically increased from 29.79% in 1989 to 51.57% in 2009 (National Statistics Institute, 2010). According to sociological analyses (i.e., Alberdi, 1995; Iglesias de Ussel, 1998) this relevant change has provoked a complex process of re-definition and re-negotiation of male and female roles, as well as a growing equality in roles performed by both men and women in different domains, particularly in family context. As a consequence, social sciences have shown a growing interest in examining possible changes in the male role as fathers, particularly paternal participation in childrearing.

The extent and type of father involvement in the care for his children is broadly conceptualized as a complex and multidimensional construct, with both cognitive/attitudinal and behavioral components (Engle & Leonard, 1995; Parke, 2002; Pleck, 1997). Therefore, scholarships have examined attitudinal facets of paternal role as central constructs for understanding father involvement, like general ideology about paternal and maternal roles in the family, with special reference to the level of traditionalism of gender ideology and role attitudes, as well as the father's investment in his paternal identity (Bulanda, 2004; Gaunt, 2005, 2006; McBride et al., 2005; Paterna & Martínez, 2006, 2009; Rane & McBride, 2000).

In addition to the approach described above, researchers have been interested in the extent and type of father involvement in specific childrearing tasks. From this perspective, and according to Lamb (Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987), father involvement has been conceptualized as the level of men participation in child daily life in three different ways: The amount of time and the type of tasks which fathers are usually involved in (a) *interacting* directly with the child, (b) being physically or emotionally available or *accessible* to the child, and (c) assuming *responsibility* for the child's care and welfare. Lamb's three-part model has been broadly empirically examined and continues to be an important guide for research on father involvement in childrearing. Nevertheless, the majority of the studies have been centered on the amount and type of childrearing tasks that fathers perform in the daily life of their children, that is, the interaction level described in Lamb's three-part model.

The present study is an attempt to examine father involvement (particularly father's direct participation in childrearing tasks) during the transition to parenthood, one of the major life transitions of the adult age. Despite the important changes Spanish families have undergone during the past decades in relation to birth rates (i.e., a decrease of birth age -average number of children per women has fallen from 2.8 in 1975 to 1.4 in 2009- or a delay in the timing of motherhood -average age at maternity was 28.8 in 1975 and 30.87 in 2009-; National Statistics Institute,

2010), becoming a parent remains a common experience to most women and men in Spain, and continues to be a normative life transition during adulthood.

Developmental research into the processes of continuity and change that take place during the transition to parenthood offers conclusive evidence that becoming a mother or a father is a critical time for the marital relationship, and one of the most difficult transitions for couples. So, childbirth tends to be accompanied by an increase in conflict between parents, combined with a strong reduction in joint time and activities as partners and an overall low satisfaction with the marital relationship (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Feldman, 2000; Lawrence, Nylen, & Cobb, 2007; Levy-Shiff, 1994). However, these results must be examined more precisely. First, the negative changes experienced are, on average, statistically significant but with a moderate clinical relevance. Second, when analyses extend beyond the central tendencies in the data, a marked variability between families emerges (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Lawrence et al., 2007). Finally, studies also show a high level of continuity within each couple. Thus, partners with a satisfactory relation before their baby's birth are likely to continue enjoying a positive marital relationship after becoming parents, despite any slight and temporary deterioration. Similarly, for couples with problems or under a certain amount of pressure, becoming parents tends to aggravate any already existing problems (Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

Studies have also very conclusively shown a strong tendency for sex-typing in the division of labour, with a significant increase in women's commitment to domestic tasks after the transition (Belsky, Lang, & Huston, 1986; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). Regarding childrearing, the studies that have explored prenatal expectations and father's actual involvement after baby's birth have found that the expectations are very optimistic and inconsistent with father's participation in subsequent months (Belsky et al., 1986; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). This discrepancy was described by Belsky (1985) as *violated expectations*, referring to the experience of parents who face a reality quite different from the one they had anticipated. However, again studies have shown that levels of father involvement before and after the baby's birth are closely related. Thus, significant changes occur towards more traditional sex roles but within important and significant intrafamily continuity.

Summing up, the transition to parenthood is a critical time for marital and parental roles, with a series of changes that are negative in sign and moderate in magnitude, but at the same time these changes are characterized by significant continuity. Little is known about the relationship between these roles and, specifically, between the changes in marital and parental roles during the process of becoming parents. However, this life transition can only be fully understood if a systemic framework is adopted. The

processes of change that men and women go through when becoming parents —on both individual and interpersonal levels— are interrelated and mutually influential (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 2000).

Specifically, several studies have found marital satisfaction and father involvement to be interrelated issues during the transition to parenthood: greater prenatal marital satisfaction tend to be related to more father involvement in childrearing (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Feldman, 2000; Lee & Doherty, 2007). The mutual influence of the roles as partners and parents is not only a matter of the *strength* of these issues but is also related to the patterns of *change* in these roles. There is empirical evidence that father involvement is a factor clearly linked to the decrease in marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. In the analysis carried out by Levy-Shiff (1994); Levy-Shiff and Israelashvili (1988), the degree and extent of the decrease in marital satisfaction was mainly explained by the level of father's participation in childrearing. Cowan and Cowan (2000) reported similar results, but here the negative effect of parenthood on the partners' relationship was mainly mitigated by the degree of discrepancy between prenatal expectations and actual father involvement, that is, the violated expectations described by Belsky (1985). It seems that violated expectations of father involvement in childrearing are especially critical for the development of marital quality, so caring for the baby produces most of the new and pressing demands that partners face when becoming parents (Feldman, 2000; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Levy-Shiff, 1994).

Little is known about the role played by undergoing the transition to parenthood in a single or a dual-earner family. In research about father involvement, whether or not the mother is employed is considered a major and central issue since it tends to alter the traditional specialization role within the family, promoting greater father involvement in domestic labour and childrearing in dual-earner families. This might occur for practical reasons and also due to ideological and attitudinal considerations (Barnett & Baruch, 1988; Gottfried & Gottfried, 2006; Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1987; Paterna & Martínez, 2006) but, whatever the reason or reasons, all the studies find more involved fathers in families where both parents are earners (Barnett & Baruch, 1988; Crouter & Manke, 1997; Gottfried & Gottfried, 2006; Lamb et al., 1987; McBride & Mills, 1993). In addition, studies specifically conducted with dual-earner families show that there are several characteristics of mothers' labour conditions (e.g., work-schedule, number of hours at work, and incomes) significantly related to father's level of participation in childrearing tasks (Barnett & Baruch, 1987; Deutsch, Lussier, & Servis, 1993; Gaunt, 2005; Paterna & Martínez, 2009). However, the importance of the mother's work status with respect to father involvement also stems from the significant role this index plays from an ecological perspective of the family system

(Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Minuchin, 2002). Whether the mother works or not contributes to generating two ecologically different family microsystems, in which the father becomes involved in response to different situational requirements and within different relation patterns (Barnett & Baruch, 1988; Crouter & Manke, 1997; Gottfried & Gottfried, 2006; Lee & Doherty, 2007; Riley, 1990). Thus, in single-earner families the mother is available to be the main carer for the children, and as a result, in these homes the involvement of the father is essentially voluntary, depending on several factors that act as facilitators of that involvement (characteristics of marital relation, beliefs, and attitudes about sex roles ...). Conversely, in dual-earner families the father's participation is more necessary than voluntary, and is therefore more independent of facilitating factors. In fact, as Riley (1990) suggests, these differential patterns are so solid from an empirical point of view that it is advisable to work separately with the two types of families when analyzing data. When this strategy is adopted, results reflect how father involvement has different profiles in single- and dual-earner families. Taking into account the role played by father involvement during the transition to parenthood, the mother's work status should influence the processes of adaptation and readjustment occurring during transition to parenthood (Feldman, 2000; Lee & Doherty, 2007).

The results presented here come from a longitudinal study on the transition to parenthood in Spanish families. There is little empirical evidence about how adults, couples, and families face this dramatic life transition in Spain. The study is also relevant because of the topics discussed above. Spain is a changing but still traditional society, with increasing but low levels of male participation in domestic labour (Instituto de la Mujer, 2007) and increasing but still moderate participation rates for mothers in the labour force (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2010). Our first goal was to explore the patterns of change and continuity that occur during the transition to parenthood in marital quality and division of childrearing between parents. In particular, we wished to examine the extent to which prenatal expectations about father involvement are related to and satisfied by actual participation of fathers after their babies' births. We hypothesized concerning this goal that marital quality and paternal involvement would not undergo independent patterns of change during the transition. Our second main goal was to examine the role played by the mother's work status, exploring the relation between the patterns of change in marital and parental roles in the full sample and separately for dual and single-earner families. Concerning the second objective, we hypothesized that two different patterns of relations for father involvement will be found in single- and dual-earner families. Specifically, we posit that dual-earner families will experience more continuity during transition to parenthood in comparison to single-earner families.

Method

Participants

Data presented in this paper were obtained in a longitudinal study about the process of becoming a parent in Spanish families. In this article we present data from the first and second waves of the study, which took place during the first trimester of mothers' pregnancies (T1) and when babies were one year old (T2), respectively.

The longitudinal study began with a larger sample but for T2 it consisted of 187 parents. Nevertheless, data analyses showed no differences between the participants and the drop-out parents in socio-demographic variables, so there was a no selective attrition with respect to these kinds of indexes.

We present data for 108 mothers and 79 fathers, 56.1% ($n = 105$) of whom were experiencing the transition to parenthood for the first time. The whole sample was composed of 79 couples and 29 mothers with a partner not included in the analyses presented here due two reasons: The father did not participated in the study either in T1 and T2, or was dropped-out from T1 to T2. Fathers' average age at T1 was 28.73 years ($SD = 4.06$) and mothers' was 27.12 ($SD = 4.17$). Regarding educational level, 41.77% ($n = 33$) of fathers and 53.70% ($n = 58$) of mothers had completed primary school, 46.84% ($n = 37$) and 37.04% ($n = 40$) of mothers had finished secondary school, and 11.39% ($n = 9$) of fathers and 9.26% ($n = 10$) of mothers obtained university education. Finally, at T1 39% ($n = 73$) of mothers were earners, most of them with full-time jobs (86%), whereas at T2 the percentage of dual-earner families dropped to 29.4% ($n = 55$) (83% of working mothers had full-time jobs).

Procedure

Parents were recruited from local health centres run by Public Sanitary Services during their first visit for the medical supervision of pregnancy. Mothers and fathers were interviewed separately at health centers during the first trimester of pregnancy (T1) and during a home visit when babies were 10–12 months old (T2). At T1 and T2, data were obtained separately in face-to-face interviews with mothers and fathers.

Measures

At T1 and T2, fathers and mothers were interviewed using a long standardized interview designed to explore several topics related to the process of becoming a parent. This interview was composed of some scales used by Belsky in "The Pennsylvania Infant and Family Development Project", and some scales were designed by our research team. The interview gathers data presented in this paper concerning:

- *Marital quality* (Hidalgo, 1994): This scale was designed by us in order to assess perceived quality of marital relationship. It is composed of five items related to five components of marital quality (communication, unity, ease of daily-life, satisfaction, and life-prospects). The higher the final score (ranging from 5 to 15) the better the perceived marital quality ($\alpha = .80$ at T1 and $\alpha = .81$ at T2).
- *Partner support for parenthood and for general matters* (Belsky & Rovine, 1990): On this scale frequency and usefulness of talks with the partner are assessed by questions about both parenthood and other issues (e.g., "How often do you talk with your partner about issues related to your job? How helpful are these chats for you?"). Two indexes are obtained, *partner support for parenthood* and *partner support for general matters*, both ranging from 1 to 25. The higher the two final scores, the greater the perceived support of the partner (for the whole scale, $\alpha = .90$ at T1 and $\alpha = .92$ at T2).
- *Father involvement in childrearing* (Belsky et al., 1986): Participants reported the division of seven childrearing tasks using a scale ranging from 1 (always the mother) to 7 (always the father) (e.g., "Who usually feeds the baby?"). A final single score is obtained (ranging from 7 to 49); the higher the score, the greater the father's involvement. Using the same scale, at T1 questions were asked concerning the *expectations about father involvement* in these tasks (e.g., "Who do you think will feed the baby?") ($\alpha = .83$ at T1 and $\alpha = .86$ at T2).

Analytic approach

Using the scales described above, we obtained data for the magnitude of each topic at T1 and T2 separately. To evaluate the changes experienced by each subject from T1 to T2, four change scores were computed by calculating the difference between the scores at T2 and T1 (i.e., marital quality: $\Delta MQ = \text{data from T2} - \text{data from T1}$). These new data informed us about:

- *The strength of the change*: The higher the score, the greater the difference between T2 and T1, showing a stronger change in the dimension.
- *The direction of the change*: A positive score, resulting from a greater value at T2 than at T1, reflects an increase; a negative score indicates that the score at T2 was lower than that at T1, indicating a decrease.

With respect to mother's work status, taking into account the low frequency of part-time working mothers, this variable was dichotomized for its use throughout the results section (0=single-earner families, 1=dual-earner families).

In order to meet the main objectives of the study, several analyses were performed. Means and standard deviations were used to describe the central topics of the transition

(marital quality, father involvement, and partner support for both parenthood and general matters). Correlations, multivariate repeated measured analysis, and subsequent ANOVA's were performed in order to explore the patterns of continuity and change from T1 to T2. Specific Multivariate repeated measured analysis, MANOVA's and subsequent ANOVA's were conducted in order to explore the role played by mother's work status. Finally, two linear regression analyses were computed separately for dual- and single-earner families examining predictors for father involvement in both groups.

Results

The descriptive preliminary analyses are presented in Table 1. Mean data reflect, on average, that all the issues assessed evolved in a negative direction across the transition to parenthood. For the relationship between partners, there was a decrease from T1 to T2 in marital quality and partner support for both parenthood and general matters. With respect to childrearing, scores at T1 tended to be higher than those at T2, showing averaged violated expectations for father involvement. Means for the four change scores were negative, indicating the averaged developmental tendency for each topic described above, but standard deviations of each index were high, indicating a great variability in the processes taking place between T1 and T2. A multivariate repeated measured analysis showed that differences between T1 and T2 were statistically significant for the set of the topics assessed, $F(4,139) = 8.77, p < .001$. Subsequent univariate ANOVAs established that marital quality, $F(1,186) = 29.63, p < .001$, father involvement,

$F(1,142) = 14.20, p < .001$, and partner support for general matters, $F(1,186) = 5.79, p < .05$, contributed specifically to the multivariate model. Nevertheless, correlation analyses revealed significant relations in all the topics between T1 and T2.

To explore the role that mother's work status plays in these relations, we performed additional analyses. First, two multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) were performed at T1 and T2 separately including mother's work status as independent variable and marital quality, father involvement, partner support for parenthood, and partner support for general matters as dependent variables. These analyses showed significant differences between parents from single- and dual-earner families at T1, $F(4,138) = 3.45, p < .01$, and T2, $F(4,138) = 2.83, p < .05$. Subsequent univariate ANOVAs indicated that these differences were explained particularly by father involvement, $F(1,141) = 5.04, p < .05$ at T1 and $F(1,141) = 10.37, p < .01$ at T2, and partner support for parenthood, $F(1,141) = 3.73, p < .05$ at T1. Second, the main effect of mother's work status was included in the multivariate repeated measured analysis presented at the beginning of this section, showing that the model was nearly significant for the set of the topics assessed, $F(4,138) = 2.18, p = .07$. Third, following Riley's (1990) suggestion, we performed two separate multivariate repeated measured analyses for single- and dual-earner families in order to explore differences between T1 and T2 in the direct scores. The results obtained (see Table 2) showed significant differences for parents from single-earner families, $F(4,96) = 7.83, p < .001$, particularly for marital quality, $F(1,99) = 21.65, p < .001$, father involvement, $F(1,99) = 15.81, p < .001$, and partner support for general matters, $F(1,99) = 5.03, p < .05$.

Table 1
Descriptive and Longitudinal Preliminary Analysis

		Mean (SD)	R	F
Marital Quality	T1	13.36 (1.89)	.634****	29.63****
	T2	12.57 (2.53)		
	T2-T1	-0.79 (1.97)		
Father Involvement	T1	18.15 (6.59)	.386****	14.20****
	T2	15.83 (6.7)		
	T2-T1	-2.32 (7.37)		
Partner Support for Parenthood	T1	15.71 (7.69)	.444****	ns
	T2	15.55 (7.76)		
	T2-T1	-0.16 (8.14)		
Partner Support for General Matters	T1	17.5 (6.65)	.453****	5.79*
	T2	16.18 (7.62)		
	T2-T1	-1.32 (7.51)		

** $p < .01$. **** $p < .001$.

Table 2
Parents from Dual- and Single-earner Families: Descriptive and Longitudinal Analysis

		Dual-earner families (<i>n</i> = 73)			Single-earner families (<i>n</i> = 114)		
		Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>r</i>	<i>F</i>	Mean (<i>SD</i>)	<i>r</i>	<i>F</i>
Marital Quality	T1	13.22 (1.96)	.542***	ns	13.42 (1.86)	.704****	21.65****
	T2	12.85 (2.59)			12.45 (2.49)		
Father Involvement	T1	19 (6.48)	.304*	ns	17.78 (6.63)	.429****	15.81****
	T2	18.49 (6.74)			14.68 (6.37)		
Partner Support for Parenthood	T1	16.13 (7.84)	.400****	ns	15.53 (7.64)	.474****	ns
	T2	16.67 (8.07)			15.08 (7.6)		
Partner Support for General Matters	T1	17.62 (6.42)	.315**	ns	17.45 (6.76)	.545****	5.03*
	T2	17.45 (7.12)			15.65 (7.78)		

p* < .05. *p* < .01. *****p* < .001.

Bivariate correlation analyses of change scores were run to explore covariation between the development of marital quality and changes in other issues. The results showed significant and positive correlations between the change in marital quality and the change in the other three scores: partner support for parenthood, $r(187) = .237$, $p < .001$, partner support for general matters, $r(187) = .51$, $p < .001$, and violated expectations of father involvement, $r(143) = .152$, $p < .05$. Two separate linear regression analyses for dual- and single-earner families were computed in order to assess the relative strength of these variables in predicting change in marital quality across the transition to parenthood in each type of family (see Table 3). Results obtained for single-earner families showed partner support for general matters as the only variable that was significantly related ($\beta = .647$, $p < .001$) with the change in marital quality. In dual-earner families, both partner support for general matters ($\beta = .536$, $p < .001$ and violated

expectations about father involvement ($\beta = .183$, $p < .05$) predicted change in marital quality.

Discussion

The main goal of the present study was to examine father involvement during the transition to parenthood. As previous studies had pointed out, the obtained results shed light about father involvement in childrearing as a complex and multidimensional construct (Parke, 2002; Pleck, 1997).

Descriptive analyses performed allow us to draw conclusions quite similar to those expressed in the literature (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Lawrence et al., 2007; Levy-Shiff, 1994). The average tendencies indicate that becoming a parent is a process that promotes some negative changes in marital quality, and that organization of childrearing is quite different from prenatal

Table 3
Change in Marital Quality: Regression Analysis for Parents from Single- and Dual-earner Families

Variable	Single- earner Families (<i>n</i> = 114)			Dual- earner Families (<i>n</i> = 73)		
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	β
Δ PSP	-.054	.039	-.205	-.003	-.001	.024
Δ PSG	.148	.034	.647****	.156	.029	.536****
Δ FI	-.030	.251	-.094	.048	.022	.183*
<i>R</i> ²		.336			.321	
<i>F</i>		6.58****			15.1****	

Note. Δ PSP = change in partner support for parenthood. Δ PSG = change in partner support for general matters. Δ FI = violated expectations about father involvement.

p* < .05. ***p* < .001.

expectations. However, correlation analyses showed that these mainly negative changes occur, on average, within significant intrafamily continuity.

Nevertheless, the results presented here also identified one exception to this more general interpretation: in this pattern of negative changes, there were no relevant changes related to partner support for parenthood. Combining this result with the significant decrease in support by the spouse as partner seems to indicate that, during the transition, many parents may experience changes in opposite directions. Therefore, the adaptation to parenthood implies, to a great extent, more commitment to the relationship as parents and less to the relationship as partners. One of the possible implications of these opposing patterns is the observed significant decrease in the perceived marital quality.

The results of the developmental analytical strategy seem to us to be especially interesting. With these analyses, we tried to avoid limiting the strength of the different issues assessed before and after baby's birth, and to focus on the *strength of the changes* that occur during the transition, that is, on the level of *continuity/discontinuity* experienced during the process of becoming parents. Therefore, these change scores allow us to produce indexes that provide information of a highly developmental nature.

The results of this type of analysis confirm, as do other studies (Cowan & Cowan, 2000; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Levy-Shiff & Israelashvili, 1988), the interaction between the development of marital quality and father involvement during the transition to parenthood. Parents whose prenatal expectations of father involvement were closer to the father's actual participation experienced less deterioration and greater continuity in marital satisfaction during the transition. As Belsky (1985) suggested, within the process of changes and adjustments that occurs during the transition to parenthood, the *violation of expectations* previously held about these changes probably does not promote satisfactory evolution of the process. Violated expectations seem to have particularly negative consequences when they involve childrearing, where the discrepancy between expectation and reality means that the mother is involved in these tasks more than expected, resulting in a more critical view of her partner and a decrease in marital quality (Feldman, 2000; Levy-Shiff, 1994). However, this argument does not explain the decrease in marital satisfaction experienced by father¹. As Levy-Shiff (1994) remarks, a decrease in the father's satisfaction may have two complementary explanations. On the one hand, a greater amount of time spent caring for her baby may be linked to a reduction in a mother's involvement in her marital relationship, and these changes may affect the father negatively. On the other hand, in those cases where men hoped and wished to undertake a more

active role as fathers, the greater involvement of the mother may be linked to the father feeling like an outsider. Both possible situations could contribute to the common paternal experience of a decrease in the perceived marital quality, although for different reasons from those experienced by mothers. In short, it seems to indicate that there are two patterns of change, which are the consequences of different processes. As Cowan and Cowan (2000) pointed out, the transition to parenthood is accompanied by adjustments and changes that, to a certain extent, tend to define the transition to motherhood *and* the transition to fatherhood. Nevertheless, we think that in future research we should conduct specific analyses in order to explore the process of becoming a parent separately for women and men.

Despite these gender differences, our data analyses suggests that patterns of continuity tend to happen together: more stable partner relations occurred among parents whose expectations were closer to reality. These results highlight the importance of stability in times of transition. Developmental transitions are potentially stressful mainly because many changes occur in a variety of areas during these periods of people's lives. If these changes take place with a backdrop of overall stability, the adult and/or the couple are more likely to manage the transition satisfactorily.

The present study confirms that mother's work status plays an important role in father involvement in childrearing. Feldman (2000) discussed the need for more studies to clarify the weight that this index has in explaining the variability observed in the process of becoming parents. Therefore, and following Riley's recommendations (1990), we performed separate analyses for dual- and single-earner families, finding that the transitions experienced by both types of families are fairly similar. However, the results concerning the changes in marital quality, father involvement, partner support for parenthood and partner support for general matters did not show significant differences for dual-earner families. These results indicate, as we hypothesized, that the transition experienced by dual-earner families is a more continuous and slightly more positive process.

Our regression analyses indicated that, on the one hand, in single- and in dual-earner families, stability in marital quality was especially and strongly associated with stability in support provided by the spouse, but as partner, not as co-parent. This result emphasizes the critical role of stability in the partner's support for general issues in mitigating any decrease in perceived marital quality: couples with positive profiles tend to be those that *do not become parents to the detriment of their role as partners*. Therefore, the transition to parenthood seems to be a process characterized by strong changes in marital and parental roles which are better managed from a background of continuity.

¹ Although we do not report empirical analysis of differences linked to gender in this paper, it should be noted that decrease in the perceived quality of the marital relationship was significant for both mothers and fathers.

On the other hand, regression analysis performed for dual-earner families confirmed the important role played by partner support in this type of microsystem, but they showed that changes in marital quality were also significantly predicted by violated expectations about father involvement. As we mentioned in the introduction, different authors (Barnett & Baruch, 1988; Crouter & Manke, 1997; Gottfried & Gottfried, 2006; Lee & Doherty, 2007; Riley, 1990) have suggested that, compared with mothers from single-earner families, the lower level of time available for mothers from dual-earner families to dedicate to childrearing is related to a lower level of volition in terms of father involvement. So, in families where the woman is in the labor force, the father's participation in traditionally female tasks is more necessary and more stable than in single-earner homes. Therefore in these families, with lower levels of willfulness in father involvement, the stability of the partner and parent relationships and their mutual influences seem to be particularly critical during the transition to parenthood.

In short, the results presented here show that the roles as partner and parent, two of the most important facets of adult identity, are closely related since the time one becomes a parent, and their development during this important transition will depend, above all, on the ecological characteristics that define each family system. Anyhow, we think that the present study has two main limitations. On the one hand, there are other topics that should contribute to improving our understanding of this relevant developmental transition which have not been commented on in this paper, particularly gender, experience as parent and characteristics of mothers' labour conditions; these analyses are central research questions for our next planned publications. On the other hand, we collected data using individual interviews and running individual data analyses, but the results and conclusions should be improved with data coming from the couple as the unit of analysis.

In conclusion, we believe that the present study is consistent and supports the ecological and systemic view of the family that has been gaining ground in research on the transition to parenthood. The results reported here allow us to conclude that the different processes of change that occur during this life transition do not follow separate paths but stem from the combined influence of different factors that play crucial roles in the process.

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