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Factors that Affect Marital Satisfaction Across the Transition to Fatherhood

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ABSTRACT *The purpose of the current study was to briefly explore what creates a better adjustment for men's transition to fatherhood in terms of expectations of the division of tasks, feelings of appreciation, feelings of support, and communication with spouse. The perceptions of marital satisfaction across the transition to fatherhood of 54 Brigham Young University (BYU) students were surveyed using an online questionnaire. Significant differences were found between fathers' expected division of child care tasks and how tasks were actually divided. Feelings of appreciation were related to fathers' involvement in childcare tasks. Communication and quality time with spouse were found to be the greatest determinates of marital satisfaction. It is concluded that communication is the greatest predictor of marital satisfaction.*

The research on men's marital quality across the transition to parenthood is limited. The current research trend has been to examine the couple as a whole across the transition. However, from our review of the literature, there is a noticeable difference between what is understood about women's and men's marital satisfaction during this adjustment. In this study, we explore the research that has been done on couples but focus primarily on the research that has been done specifically on men.

Marital Satisfaction

The birth of a couple's first child brings about more profound changes and challenges to the family unit than any other stage of life (Vessey & Knauth, 2001). This transition has been associated with a deterioration of couple communication, sexual intimacy, and overall marital satisfaction, while conflict also increases (Anderson, Russell, & Schumm, 1983; Glenn & Weaver, 1978; Cowan & Cowan, 1995; Belsky & Pensky, 1988). A major contributor to the dramatic changes accompanying

parenthood is the increase in household labor and child care responsibilities (Levy-Shiff, 1994; Bond, Galinsky, & Swanberg, 1998; Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

However, there are groups of couples within the general picture of declining marital satisfaction that present more stable slopes of marital quality (Belsky & Hsieh, 1998; Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008; Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2008). The relationship between housework, child care responsibilities, and marital satisfaction suggests that some couples may negotiate changes across the transition to parenthood in a more satisfying way than other couples.

Gender Role Ideology

Gender role ideology can have a negative or positive effect on men's marital satisfaction across the transition to fatherhood. According to Lavee & Katz (2002), gender role ideology has been defined as an individual's beliefs and cultural norms. Generally, much of the conflict comes from traditionally defined gender roles, including beliefs about who should be the principal provider, who should care for the children, and who should do the housework (Vessey & Knauth, 2001; Lavee & Katz, 2002; Greenstein, 1996; Blair & Johnson, 1992). In fact, the perceived increase in responsibility to provide for their families was found to be a significant detriment to fathers' marital satisfaction (Grossman, 1987).

Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, and Bradbury (2008) found that husbands' sense of competence at family work, along with the wives' sharing of this view, was the most consistent predictor of husbands' perception of fairness in the relationship. Moreover, the more husbands thought their wives viewed them as competent, the more husbands contributed to housework and child care. While competence influences men's participation in housework, child care, and their sense of fairness, these factors do

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~~that~~ ~~met~~ ~~men's~~ perception of marital satisfaction; ~~perceived~~ ~~fairness~~ is only a mediating factor for women's ~~marital~~ ~~satisfaction~~ (Lavee & Katz, 2002; Robinson & Spitzer, 1992). Thus, the values and beliefs that men hold ~~about~~ ~~gendered~~ behavior affect how they experience the ~~transition~~ to fatherhood.

Expectations

Expectations are closely aligned with one's gender role ideology, and it appears that couples who share the same values are more satisfied overall with their marriage (Wilcox, 2003). Harwood, McLean, and Durkin (2007) found that overall positive expectations about parenthood tended to create a more positive experience during the transition, confirming Palkovitz's (1984) finding that men who had a more positive attitude about their new role as a father were better able to adjust. One experience that shapes husbands' expectations about fatherhood is pregnancy planning (Lawrence et al., 2008). Lawrence et al. (2008) report that to the extent that couples do not plan their pregnancies, the husbands' marital satisfaction experiences a steeper decline over the transition (see also Feldman, 1987; Berman & Pedersen, 1987).

Emotion Work, Perceptions of Being Appreciated, and Support

Some evidence suggests that feeling emotionally cared for may play a large role in marital quality for husbands (Lawrence et al., 2008; Wilcox & Nock, 2006; Thompson, 1991; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Hochschild, 1989b). Hochschild (1979) defines emotion work as "work done in a conscious effort to maintain the well being of a relationship" (p. 561). Wilcox (2003) found that men's emotion work in marriage and women's assessments of men's emotional attentiveness were two of the most important factors in predicting contemporary marital satisfaction and stability. Grossman (1987) would agree with this, citing that fathers who were more affiliative—in other words, those who showed more gestures of friendship and caring—were better able to adjust to fatherhood.

Studies have found that appreciation is a significant contributor to one's perceptions of marital happiness (Thompson, 1991; Hochschild, 1989b). Aligning with Thompson's (1991) research, Hawkins, Marshall, and Allen (1998) found that appreciation and listening were significant contributors. Palkovitz (1984), in his work on parental attitudes and father interaction, found that men who have strong social support networks feel that the transition to parenthood is easier. Also, men are better able to adjust to the father role when they feel that they have their wife's support.

Negotiations of Household and Child Care Tasks

There is also evidence that negotiations between partners over household and child care tasks may be an important predictor of marital quality. Mannino & Deutsch (2007) examined household labor and child care negotiations between parents with three- and four-year-old children, and found that these negotiations can be a significant contributor to marital conflict. Hawkins et al. (1998) also found that shared decision making in a relationship can contribute to overall marital satisfaction. Yet there has been little research examining these negotiations across the crucial transition to parenthood. Additionally, this research has focused more on the effect of these negotiations on women. Research is needed that examines men's experiences during this process.

The Present Study

The purpose of the current study was to briefly explore what creates a better adjustment for men during the transition to fatherhood, adding needed understanding of what specific factors such as met expectations, appreciation, communication, support and understanding have more prominent effects on fathers' marital satisfaction. This study looked at factors such as length of marriage and household income as predictors of men's ability to adjust well. In addition, this study aimed to determine what factors such as appreciation, understanding, support and marital satisfaction play a role in father's expectations of the division of household and childcare tasks as well as

father's involvement in these tasks. Differences between expectations of and involvement in household and childcare tasks were also examined. Finally, this study included one qualitative item to deepen our understanding of what father's feel most affects their marital relationship.

Based on the above research questions, we hypothesized that (1) fathers who felt that they were making a contribution to their family and felt that their wives appreciated and supported that contribution would have higher marital satisfaction, (2) fathers who were better able to communicate with their wives would be more satisfied with their marriage and (3) father's expectations about the division of household and childcare tasks would not match the way tasks were actually divided after birth.

Method

Participants

Fifty-four first-time fathers who had transitioned to parenthood within the last year responded to our survey. Participants were, on average, 24.91 years old ($SD = 1.77$) and had been married an average of 3.43 years ($SD = .63$). Most of the respondents were Caucasian (87%) with only their spouse living in the household (98%), worked full or part-time (82%), and had a household income of less than \$50,000 (94%). All respondents were in their first marriage and had graduated from or were currently attending college.

Measures

This study examined a range of self-reported factors and their possible relation to fathers' marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood. The 37 questions were divided into 13 sections, representing each factor or sub-factor mentioned in our above literature review.

Religious Attitudes. In order to assess the influence of religiosity, participants responded to three items ($\alpha = .97$) including, "I look to my faith as providing meaning and purpose in my life," "My faith is an important part of who I am as a person," and "My faith impacts many of my decisions." Items were answered on a 4-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).

Marital Satisfaction. Marital satisfaction was assessed using items from the Quality of Marriage Index (QMI, Norton, 1983). The QMI is a six-item inventory ($\alpha = .98$) that assesses marital satisfaction using broad items, such as "Overall I feel very satisfied in my marriage." Fathers

reported their marital satisfaction on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Communication. Couple communication patterns were measured using one item from the RELATE assessment battery (Busby, Holman, & Taniguchi, 2001). Participants reported on the item "Overall, I feel that my spouse and I communicate well in our relationship." This response was based on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Expected and Actual Division of Household Labor. The expected and actual division of housework was examined using the scale developed by Cowan and Cowan (1992). Fathers rated what their expectations of the division of housework had been prior to the birth of their child and how the division actually is now using a six point scale ($\alpha = .67$) ranging from 0 (we don't do this) to 5 (I always do this) with 1 being (my partner always does this). Some of these household tasks included "cooking and menu planning," "cleaning up after meals," "grocery shopping," "laundry: washing, ironing, and folding," and "vacuuming."

Expected and Actual Division of Child Care Tasks. Participants also responded to six items ($\alpha = .76$) regarding their retrospective expectations before birth about the division of child care tasks after birth and then how the division actually is now using a six point scale ranging from 0 (We don't do this) to 5 (I always do this) with 1 being (my partner always does this). Items were derived from a similar scale used by Hawkins, Lovejoy, Holmes, Blanchard, & Fawcett (2008), and included tasks such as "changing diapers," "getting up at night with the baby," and "playing with the baby."

Appreciation. Felt appreciation was measured using a series of items ($\alpha = .84$) including, "In general, how often do you feel appreciated in your relationship?" and "How often do you feel appreciated for the contributions you make to the family?" Items were asked on a 4-point scale ($\alpha = .90$) ranging from 1 (Not at all) to 4 (All the time). In addition, items such as, "I feel supported by my extended family in my new role as a parent" and "The amount of appreciation I receive in my marriage is what I had expected to receive" were asked on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

Procedure

Participants were recruited through email, announcements in college classes, and word of mouth. Each participant was given the link to the online survey

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processed through Qualtrics and was asked to complete the questionnaire before a certain date. Initially, participants reviewed the informed consent form and agreed to participate in the study by selecting "yes" acting as their signature. Participants then answered the participation eligibility questions and a series of demographic questions. Next, the participants rated themselves and their relationship across 37 questions and responded to one qualitative item, "What do you feel affects the quality of your relationship with your spouse the most at this period in your life together?"

Analysis Plan

Descriptive statistics were analyzed in order to gain a greater understanding of what creates a better marital adjustment for men during the transition to fatherhood. Bivariate correlations were calculated to better understand intercorrelations among the study variables such as feeling positive about the birth. Regression analyses were performed to test the associations between support, appreciation and understanding on marital satisfaction. Further regression analyses were performed to test associations between appreciation, support, understanding, and marital satisfaction on fathers' participation in childcare tasks. Repeated measures MANOVAs were performed to determine if there was a difference between fathers' expectations of the division of household and childcare tasks and how household and childcare tasks were actually divided once the baby was born.

Finally, analysis of the qualitative question, "What do you feel affects the quality of your relationship with your spouse the most at this period in your life together?" was used to supplement and deepen findings identified from analyses of the quantitative questions. The qualitative item was analyzed using a grounded theory approach (Berg, 2001). This approach required an initial reading of all of the responses to the open-ended questions without prior ideas about themes. The initial read was followed by identification of salient themes. Themes that continued to recur were identified, coded, and then confirmed or disconfirmed through multiple readings of the qualitative responses.

Results**What factors facilitate a more positive adjustment to parenthood for new fathers?**

When we examined differences between fathers' length of marriage and other factors, we found that those who were married less than three months and became pregnant ($M = 7.33$, $SD = 2.31$), as compared to those who had been married for at least 3 to 6 months before becoming pregnant ($M = 9.22$, $SD = .95$), felt significantly less positive about the birth of their child ($F(1, 52) = 4.35$, $p < .05$).

In regards to household income, those who made more money—in the range of \$50,000 to \$80,000 ($M = 9.39$, $SD = .84$) as compared to those who made less than \$50,000 ($M = 8.73$, $SD = 1.45$)—felt more positively about the birth of their child ($t(51) = -2.085$, $p < .05$). Also, those fathers who reported the higher income ($M = 9.39$, $SD = 1.55$) felt more support from their spouse and extended family than did those who reported making less than \$50,000 ($M = 8.14$, $SD = 2.56$; $t(47) = -2.124$, $p < .05$).

What factors predict better marital satisfaction for new fathers?

To explore predictors of men's marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood, we ran a multiple regression analysis examining associations between marital satisfaction and appreciation, support, understanding, and communication. The model did not account for a significant amount of the variability in marital satisfaction ($F(3, 45) = .79$, $p = .51$). Of the individual factors in the full model, neither appreciation, neither support, nor understanding, was significantly related to marital satisfaction, which is likely why the overall model did not account well for variability in marital satisfaction. Communication, however, was found to be a significant predictor of marital satisfaction. Fathers who felt they communicated well with their spouse had higher overall marital satisfaction ($\beta = .82$, $p < .001$; see Table 1).

What factors affect new fathers' involvement in childcare tasks?

To explore what factors affects fathers' involvement in childcare tasks we ran a multiple regression analysis examining the relationship between the division of childcare tasks and marital satisfaction, support, appreciation, and understanding. The model did

Table 3*Post-Hoc Tests of Difference between Expected and Actual Division of Childcare Tasks*

| Task | Expected Mean | Actual Mean | T-value |
|--|----------------------|--------------------|----------------|
| Feeding the baby | 3.00 | 2.90 | 1.28 |
| Changing diapers | 3.78 | 3.49 | 2.60* |
| Getting up at night with the baby | 3.43 | 3.14 | 1.60 |
| Playing with the baby | 3.76 | 3.96 | 2.85** |
| Giving baths | 3.69 | 3.47 | 1.38 |
| Taking the baby to the doctor | 3.43 | 3.06 | 3.23** |
| Soothing baby when fussy | 3.75 | 3.51 | 2.71** |
| Staying home with sick baby | 2.86 | 2.73 | 1.47 |
| Arranging childcare | 2.39 | 2.33 | .45 |

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$

coded as quality time. These are two of the most salient themes encountered in participants' responses (See Table 4). It would appear that more than half of fathers were concerned with spending quality time with their wives. Many fathers spoke of how the amount of time that they could spend with their spouse had greatly decreased since the birth of their child. Also, at least one in four fathers mentioned that communication issues had a significant impact on their relationship.

Discussion

Length of Marriage and Personal Attitudes

Other important factors that may be involved in father's marital satisfaction were encountered that were not hypothesized. Fathers who had been married for at least three to six months and became pregnant, as compared to fathers who were married for less than three months, felt significantly more positive about the birth of their child. In addition, we found that fathers with higher incomes felt more positively about the birth of their child. It is possible that fathers who have been married longer feel that they have more stability within their marriage and are more prepared for the transition to fatherhood than those who have only been married for a short time.

Table 4

What do you feel affects the quality of your relationship the most at this point in your life?

| Category | N | % |
|----------------------------------|----|----|
| Spend time together | 23 | 58 |
| Communication | 11 | 28 |
| Mentioned the baby specifically | 7 | 18 |
| Busy schedules | 7 | 18 |
| Work pressures | 7 | 18 |
| Personal attitudes | 7 | 18 |
| Assisting spouse with care tasks | 5 | 13 |
| Sleep | 4 | 10 |
| Physical Intimacy | 3 | 8 |
| Faith | 2 | 5 |

**Responses coded into multiple categories (n = 40)

Additionally, fathers with higher incomes most likely feel more financially prepared for childbirth and are therefore more positive about having a child (Belsky & Rovine, 1990).

Support and Appreciation

We found that fathers who reported higher incomes felt more support from their spouse. It would appear that fathers feel more support from their spouse and are more satisfied in their marriage as they contribute to the temporal well-being of their family. It is possible that many of the fathers in our study—because of their faith—feel that it is their role to provide for their family (Wilcox, 2003), and the more effectively they accomplish this the happier they are in their family. In turn, this will result in higher marital satisfaction.

In contrast, we found that fathers who were more involved in childcare tasks felt less appreciated. It is possible that the fathers in this study maintained a very traditional gender ideology so they felt that it was primarily the mother's responsibility to care for the children. Therefore, they feel that they should receive more appreciation from their wife when they engage in childcare tasks, since they are assisting with her role (Hochschild, 1989).

Expectations

We found no difference between fathers' expectations and the way household tasks eventually were divided. However, we did find differences within their child care expectations: (1) fathers believed that mothers would feed

the baby most of the time, but mothers tended to feed the baby almost all of the time; and (2) fathers believed that they would divide changing diapers, playing with the baby, giving baths, taking the baby to the doctor, and soothing the baby equally, but it turned out that mothers ended up doing these tasks more often. Therefore, our hypothesis was partially supported by our results.

There are a few potential explanations for these findings. It is possible that fathers feel that household tasks are the mother's role in the family, as was stated by Vessey and Knauth (2001) and Lavee and Katz (2002) and therefore there are no differences between the expected and the actual division of household tasks. However, with the childcare tasks it is possible that fathers feel less competent at these tasks and therefore, allow the mother to complete childcare tasks the majority of the time (Lawrence, et al., 2008). In addition, father's may have other demands competing for their time, such as school and the pressure to provide for their family, that intrude on their ability to be as involved in the care of their child as they would like to be (Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

Communication

We found that fathers who feel that they communicate well with their spouse are generally more satisfied in their marriages. Indeed, communication was the strongest predictor of fathers' marital satisfaction in this study. This supports our hypothesis, possibly because fathers feel more comfortable with their spouse when they are able to communicate clearly. Additionally, effective communication facilitates the resolution of conflicts and other factors that could possibly disrupt marital satisfaction (Boland & Follingstad, 1987). This view is supported by fathers' responses to our qualitative item, as most stated that spending time together and communicating were what affected their marital relationship the most at this time.

Limitations

Our study was limited because the sample size was small (n = 54), and we recruited through convenience sampling. Both of these factors lead to a lower ability to generalize outside of BYU students. More research should be done on fathers outside of the LDS faith. It is possible that fathers outside of the LDS faith will feel differently about the division of household labor and child care tasks across the transition to fatherhood. In addition, future studies may benefit from examining more extensive measures of marital satisfaction, enabling them to more

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effectively measure the depth and complexity of fathers' marital satisfaction and relationships.

Conclusion and Practical Implications

In summary, we see that fathers' expectations did not match the actual division of child care tasks. In addition, fathers who contributed more financially to their families felt more appreciation from their spouse, and communication was the greatest predictor of a father's marital satisfaction. It is also interesting that when asked what affected their relationship with their spouse most at the current time many fathers mentioned quality time with their spouse. Future studies should focus on confirming this finding and on examining the ways that fathers are able to manage this time, both successfully and unsuccessfully.

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