

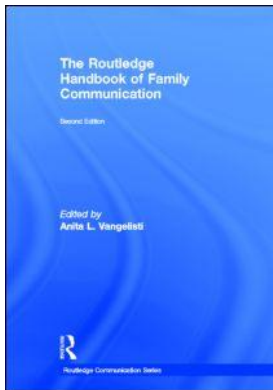
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Anita L. Vangelisti

### **On Becoming Parents**

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## On Becoming Parents

*Erin K. Holmes, Ted L. Huston,  
Anita L. Vangelisti, and Trey D. Guinn*

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There can be no doubt that parenthood produces changes in the lives of mothers and fathers. New parents become true experts on things like strollers, car seats, bottles, diapers, and late night feedings. Not only does everyday life change for mothers and fathers as they add more tasks to their seemingly full list of family chores, the activities that make up their marital relationship change. The transformations in a couple's lifestyle, particularly the changing climate of their marital relationship, have sparked much scholarly debate. Historically, academic writing concerned with the introduction of a baby into a family emphasized its strong negative impact (although occasionally a researcher such as Russell, 1974, would come forward to propose that parenthood brings forth compensating gratifications). LeMasters' (1957) classic article declared that new fathers and mothers were unprepared for and overwhelmed by the "crisis" accompanying the arrival of a child. His thesis aroused strong public interest in this issue. Almost a dozen years later, as LeMasters (1970) noted, his conclusion continued to be put forth in national magazines and major newspapers. Longitudinal studies initiated in the early 1980s, however, began to create cracks in this monolithic negative view of the impact of parenthood on marriage. As scholars examined correlates of the direction and extent of change in satisfaction following the birth of a child, they increasingly recognized that parenthood may enhance, undermine, or have little effect on other marriages (Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008; Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000; Twenge, Campbell, and Foster, 2003).

In this chapter we present a framework that researchers can use to address the adaptations spouses make when they become parents. We consider both research design and other methodological issues that have undermined research in this area. Our central concern will be on the impact of primiparous parenting on marital well-being, but we will also discuss the process of becoming a parent, focusing on the adjustments partners make as they incorporate a child into their life together. We organize our discussion around our own longitudinal study of couples, some of whom became parents, and examine how marriages and lifestyles change when couples have their first baby. As we move from how having a baby affects various facets of married life, we place our findings in the context of the larger body of research, showing both the contribution of our own research as well as its limitations.

## Research Design and Methodological Considerations

### *On Establishing Parenthood as a Causal Agent*

Research on the transition to parenthood has implemented successively more sophisticated strategies for establishing the role parenthood plays in marital life. Cook and Campbell (1979) identify three hallmarks of causal explanation that can be used to characterize the evolution of work on the transition to parenthood. The first criterion for establishing causality is showing that the presumed cause (parenthood) covaries with its putative effect (marital quality). Cross-sectional studies comparing parents and nonparents meet this criterion (e.g., Figley, 1973; Miller, 1976). Cross-sectional studies that find parents less happily married than nonparents are, however, marked by three problems. First, couples who become parents may differ in satisfaction independent of their parental status. The lesser satisfaction of couples who become parents may have been present prior to parenthood. Lawrence et al. (2008) discovered that couples who became parents reported lower marital quality than those who were voluntarily childless, but that couples who planned their pregnancies had higher pre-pregnancy satisfaction and that planning slowed husbands' postpartum declines in satisfaction. The purported differences associated with parenthood may actually reflect partners' values and expectations for parenthood which, as Helms-Erickson (2001) suggests, are critical aspects of timing and life course transitions.

Second, having children encourages unhappy couples to stay married out of the belief that divorce would put their children at risk (Glenn, 1998; Previti & Amato, 2004). The stability of their union is not, however, a function of their marital happiness, thus any group of parents is likely to include unhappy couples (Waite & Lillard, 1991; Waite, Browning, Doherty, Gallagher, Luo, & Stanley, 2002).

Third, couples who become parents may differ from nonparents in other ways including, but not limited to, their own attitudes and desires toward parenting, their expectations for either joy or misery as a parent, and their feelings of adequacy or inadequacy as a caregiver (Curran, Hazen, & Mann, 2009; Rhoades, Simpson, Blakely, Lanigan, & Allen, 1997). A cross-sectional comparison of married couples who are parents with those who are nonparents would include sets of couples who were married at different ages and who have been married different lengths of time. Even with changing demographic trends suggesting that women are bearing their first children at older ages than they have in the past 40 to 50 years (Waldrop, 1994), the parent group is likely to be younger and married for a shorter length of time than the nonparent group, and these factors, rather than parenthood status alone, may account for group differences in marital satisfaction or marital stability (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; Moore & Waite, 1981).

Cook and Campbell's (1979) second criterion for proving causal significance is establishing the temporal precedence of the putative cause. With data gathered from couples before and after becoming parents, longitudinal designs establish the temporal precedence of parenthood as the putative cause. In the most common longitudinal design, a single group of couples, in which the wives are pregnant, is followed from before to after the births of the children. These studies often (Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985; Cowan et al., 1985; Feldman & Nash, 1984; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988; Tomlinson, 1987), although not invariably (Cox, Paley, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999; Meyerowitz & Feldman, 1966; Waldron & Routh, 1981; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990), report linear declines in marital well-being from before to one year after childbirth. Although the designs used in most longitudinal investigations provide information that was unavailable in

earlier cross-sectional studies, they have at least three limitations (Cook & Campbell, 1979). First, couples about to become parents may, as a consequence of their pregnancies, be temporarily happier with their marriages; thus changes in marital satisfaction may reflect regression toward the mean (regression effects).

Second, as couples settle into marriage, their satisfaction may decline over time regardless of whether they become parents (maturation effects). This is important because a sizable proportion of couples become parents during the first few years of marriage, a period over which declines in satisfaction are normative (see Glenn, 1998). Third, the before/after design used in the studies that investigate the impact of parenthood on marriage, coupled with the participants' awareness of the general purposes of the investigation, may affect the data (testing effects).

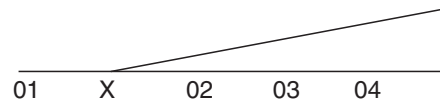
The third criterion for establishing causality is the exclusion of alternative explanations for the putative cause–effect relationship (Cook & Campbell, 1979). The use of a comparison group of couples who do not make the transition to parenthood provides one way of eliminating alternative explanations such as maturation effects. The few studies that have included comparison groups of couples who have not made the transition over the same period provide little support for the idea that parenthood produces a linear decline in marital satisfaction. For example, couples become less satisfied with their marriages over time, regardless of whether they become parents (e.g., Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Lawrence et al., 2008; MacDermid, Huston, & McHale, 1990; McHale & Huston, 1985; Ryder, 1973). Further, one may find steeper declines for women who transition to parenthood within the first six years of marriage (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000), a buffering effect for parents who planned their pregnancies and had higher pre-pregnancy marital satisfaction (Lawrence, et al., 2008), steeper declines in marital happiness as the result of destructive conflict and active avoidance, and discrete groups of couples with varying degrees of stability and change including increases in marital satisfaction and marital happiness over time (Anderson, Van Ryzin, & Doherty, 2010; Belsky & Hsieh, 1998; Kamp Dush, Taylor, & Kroeger, 2008). Only through continued inclusion of both parent and nonparent groups can one come to solid conclusions about the complex effects of parenthood on marriage.

### *Temporal Aspects of the Impact of Parenthood on Marriage*

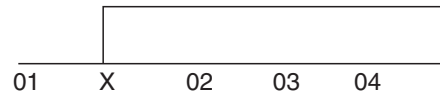
Practical considerations have led most researchers to gather data on one or two occasions within a year after childbirth from couples who have become parents. Because the processes through which parenthood affects marital well-being are poorly understood, social scientists have given little attention to the timing of marital assessments. Kelly and McGrath (1988) argue that researchers need to incorporate temporal parameters into their conceptualization of causal agents and to articulate the hypothesized temporal path created by the putative cause. They describe a variety of ways an event,  $X$  (e.g., child-birth), might affect an outcome,  $Y$  (e.g., marital satisfaction).

Figures 5.1a and 5.1b portray parenthood as creating an immediate effect that persists over time in the first case and fades in the second. Research that uses data gathered from parents soon after childbirth assumes parenthood has an almost immediate impact. Much of the research on the transition to parenthood, even that of a longitudinal nature, reports data gathered from new parents on only one or two occasions relatively

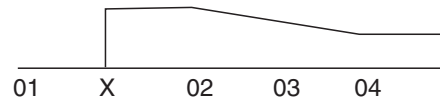
a.) an increasing, linear process



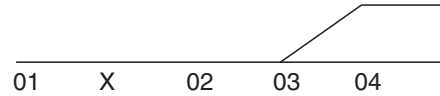
b.) an all-at-once change maintained over time



c.) an all-at-once change not maintained over time



d.) a delayed effect



e.) a cyclical effect

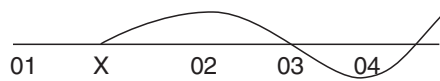


Figure 5.1

soon after the birth of the first child. As a consequence, the studies may pick up short-term fluctuations in satisfaction, but may fail to detect more slowly emerging effects of parenthood. Thus, although the literature on the transition to parenthood tends to characterize parenthood as a “crisis,” it is unclear whether the crisis and its effects dissipate over time as couples reconcile differences and grow together as a result of the crisis (Figure 5.1b) or whether the marital patterns instigated by the crisis become ongoing and create long-lasting change in marital well-being (Figure 5.1a).

Figure 5.1c suggests another possible pattern. Here, the effect of parenthood on marital satisfaction increases gradually over time. For example, if parenthood increases stress and conflict in marriage (Hill, 1949; LeMasters, 1957), the impact of the conflictual and negative patterns may cumulate with time and erode satisfaction. On the other hand, parenthood may bring with it a sense of elation that might be reflected in a short-lived upswing in satisfaction, followed by a decline (see Miller & Sollie, 1980; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990). Figure 5.1d, in contrast, shows parenthood as having a delayed or “sleeper” impact on marriage. The influence of parenthood on marital satisfaction may surface years later, for example, as a consequence of spouses’ having very different religious values or ideas about child rearing.

Finally, Figure 5.1e shows a cyclical pattern reflecting modulations in spouses’ marital satisfaction over time. Marital satisfaction contains both a relatively stable trait-like component and a state-like element that resonates to the vicissitudes of day-to-day life (Robins, 1990). If the cyclical pattern of spouses’ satisfaction is similar across couples, different conclusions might be reached about the impact of parenthood, depending on the timing of measurement. Parenthood could create highs and lows in the lives of

couples, but the timing of these highs and lows may be largely idiosyncratic. If the pattern is not timed similarly across couples the effects of parenthood are likely to be masked.

We have referred to findings above that reflect multiple possibilities about the temporal aspects of the transition to parenthood, and highlight one recent study that helps us better understand the changes in marital quality for parents over time. Doss et al. (2009) studied couples over the first eight years of marriage and questioned whether and how parenthood undermines marital quality. These researchers found that parents and nonparents demonstrated similar amounts of decline in relationship functioning, but that the change occurred suddenly following the birth of the baby for parents, and more gradually for nonparents. Also, a number of variables influenced parents' post-birth relational functioning including a history of parental divorce (for mothers), having a baby more quickly following marriage (for fathers), the sex of the baby, and couples' conflict management skills.

### *Links Among Parenthood, Marital Patterns, and Satisfaction*

Parenthood marks a transition for couples, but that transition begins before the physical birth of the child (Cowan, 1991). Pregnancy itself can strengthen couples' feelings of togetherness (Feeney et al., 2001), increase a wife's sense of her husband's care for her (Holmes, Duncan, Bair, & White, 2007), increase a man's potential to develop generativity (Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997), or provide the couple with new leisure opportunities (e.g., buying materials for baby, planning for baby's future, choosing baby's names, and attending birthing classes together; Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008). Pregnancy can also introduce a new life course transition for women as they consider the place their new childcare responsibilities fit in their current career goals (Holmes, Erickson, & Hill, in press). These considerations suggest that parenthood "as a cause" can be viewed in a number of different ways. Following Cook and Campbell (1979), parenthood can be taken as a "macro" event that sets in motion a number of other adjustments of a macro nature (e.g., changes in spouses' labor force participation or economic well-being) that may affect marital satisfaction. According to Cook and Campbell, macro events may also set in motion other, more specific, events—referred to as "micromedial" events—that affect the satisfactoriness of the marriage. Thus, for example, parenthood may be the root cause of alterations in the division of household labor, sleep deficits (Medina, Lederhos, & Lillis, 2009), increases in the amount of stress spouses experience, or decreases in the opportunity for spouses to pursue enjoyable leisure activities—any of which may undermine partners' sense of satisfaction with their marriage. It is critical to identify how parenthood affects the day-to-day lives of marital couples and to pinpoint which of these changes make differences in how spouses come to feel about each other and their marriage. Parenthood may be a "big change" for many couples, but whether it is an unwelcome change for marriage is another matter.

### **The PAIR Project as a Context for Studying the Impact of Parenthood on Marriage<sup>1</sup>**

We organize our discussion of the transition to parenthood around our longitudinal study of newlyweds because the study has several design strengths that are unusual in

research in this area. First, by gathering systematic diary data from couples we were able to explore in considerable depth the impact of having a baby on a great many aspects of married life, including the roles played by the husband and the wife, their companionship, their sexual behavior in the marriage, expressions of affection, the degree to which they were irritable with each other, their leisure patterns, their love, and their satisfaction with their marriage. Second, we were able to compare the earlier courtship and marital patterns of couples who became parents with those of childless couples, making it possible for us to discover whether parents differ from nonparents before they have a child with regard to various features of their marriages. Third, the comparison over time of couples who became parents with those who do not made it possible for us to determine whether it is parenthood, rather than the passage of time, that accounts for changes in the quality of marriage. Fourth, we could examine the influence of the timing of parenthood on aspects of the marriage. Fifth, participants were not sensitized to the nature of the study. The issue of parenthood was never identified as a focal point of the research, nor was the timing of births used to determine data collection periods. This study is limited, like most longitudinal studies of parenthood, to the period of time during which the transition takes place, but does not consider longer-term ramifications of parenthood for marriage relationships. Unlike most research, which generally focuses on a group of couples as they become parents, we were able to compare couples who had children at different points in the marriage with those who were childless at these times. We were thereby in a position to determine whether parenthood hastens the loss of romance, as others have suggested, or whether previous researchers were mistaken and that such a loss, if it occurs, is part of the ordinary waning of romance as marriage progresses.

We initially gathered data two months after couples were wed. The second and third phases of data collection took place 14 months and 26 months into marriage. The initial sample, drawn from marriage license records in four counties in central Pennsylvania, consisted of 168 first-time married couples, 129 of whom stayed married and were followed across all three phases of the study. We collected detailed diary data on three occasions that were spaced a year apart, beginning when couples were newlyweds, so we could see how marriages unfolded and how becoming parents affected the couples' marriages and their lifestyle. It is important to note here that because "newlywed" data were gathered about two months into marriage, with the next two data collections occurring at 14 months and 26 months, the couples who made the transition to parenthood did so between two and 26 months of their wedding.

### How Parenthood Affects Married Life

Parenthood is generally thought to nudge marriages away from "loving companionships" toward more "working partnerships." We examined division of labor, spousal leisure and companionship, and socioemotional behavior to assess the ways in which parenthood affects the day-to-day life of couples, including whether the division of labor becomes more traditionalized, whether spouses' companionship is reduced, and whether marriages become less affectionate or more conflict ridden over time.

#### *The Expansion of Work at Home*

Figure 5.2 uses PAIR project data to illustrate alterations in couples' lifestyle that accompany parenthood (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; MacDermid et al., 1990). Before

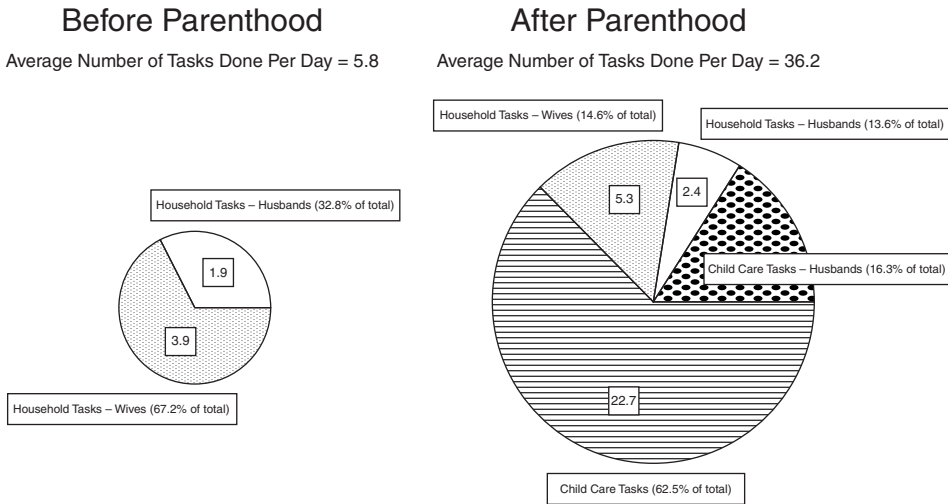


Figure 5.2

parenthood, we see that wives do 67.2 percent of the chores (an average of 3.9 chores a day), leaving husbands with the remaining 32.8 percent of the chores (an average of 1.9 chores a day). The arrival of a child produces a six-fold increase in the number of family-related activities performed on an average day, from 5.8 tasks completed per day before parenthood to 36.2 tasks per day after parenthood. New mothers increase their household tasks to 5.3 tasks on average per day and accumulate another 22.7 childcare tasks. New fathers also increase their participation in household tasks to 2.4 per day and accrue an average of 5.9 childcare tasks. One can see the great expansion of the couples' workload in the home after they become parents, particularly as new mothers, dramatically increase their involvement in childcare tasks (see also Cowan et al., 1985; Ruble et al., 1988). Fathers' responsibilities grow as they become involved in childcare tasks, but the escalation of their duties is clearly more modest than those of mothers.'

Though inequity in the amount of work women and men do at home still exists, and though women's perceptions of inequity in housework contribute to their dissatisfaction (Dew & Wilcox, 2011), empirical evidence shows that women often do not perceive the uneven division of labor as unfair. Indeed, one study showed that women will complete up to two-thirds of household work before they feel a sense of unfairness in the division of labor and that men will complete roughly 36 percent of family work when they begin to sense the load landing unjustly on them (Lennon & Rosenfeld, 1994). Grote, Naylor, and Clark (2002) explored women's and men's sense of fairness in family work across the transition to parenthood. Women's perceptions of equity are linked to the pleasure they get out of performing household and childcare tasks, while men's enjoyment for these tasks does not consistently predict their reports of satisfaction with the division of labor. Further the most consistent predictor of a husband's sense of fairness was his sense of competency at family work combined with his wife's sense of his competence in performing household and childcare activities. The more husbands thought their wives viewed them as competent, the more husbands contributed to both housework and childcare. The sense of competence of wives, either as they perceived it or as their



spouses perceived it was unrelated to how wives felt about the division of family tasks. Finally, mothers' perceptions that fathers' were good at family work were linked with reports that their husband actually did more housework and childcare.

Other findings suggest that fairness in the division of household labor may not play as significant a role in predicting marital quality as previously suggested. In particular, the work that couples do to maintain the quality of their relationships, coined emotion work, has been identified as a stronger predictor of marital satisfaction (Lawrence, et al., 2008; Wilcox & Nock, 2006; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004). Although couples generally divide tasks unequally, with most of the burden given to women, some women report fairness in the division if they feel appreciated and cared for emotionally (Wilcox & Nock, 2006).

### *Work Roles and Childcare*

Most wives in the U.S.A. work outside the home—even when they are mothers of young children (U.S. Bureau of Census, 2011). Indeed for some mothers the loss of their work role outside the home contributes to a decline in relational satisfaction (Keizer, Dykstra, & Poortman, 2010). For others, a mismatch between one's ideal and actual employment (e.g., desiring full-time work but staying home, or desiring to stay home but working full time) increases depression across the first three years of the transition to parenthood (Holmes et al., in press).

Despite a cultural ideal that includes employment for mothers, working wives who become mothers experience what some have called a cultural contradiction between a high mothering identity and a calling for career (Elgar & Chester, 2007; Giele, 2008; Johnston & Swanson, 2007). As a result, in addition to creating a unique mothering identity, contemporary women must also determine a worker identity that “justifies their decision to work or not to work outside the home” (Johnston & Swanson, 2007, p. 448). While men's labor force participation continues to remain more stable than women's through the transition to parenthood, cultural contradictions in men's identities as “breadwinner” and “caregiver” also exist (Henwood & Procter, 2003).

Comparisons between data from the past decade or so with earlier data from the 1970s and 1980s suggest that fathers in intact families have increased accessibility to their children, boosted direct engagement with their children (Yeung, Sandberg, Davis-Kean, & Hofferth, 2001), and enhanced father-son relationship quality (Morman & Floyd, 2002). Thus, while the breadwinner role for men is still a strong cultural ideal, the highly involved “new father” who, like his wife, is immersed in his child's life in the effort to meet his child's emotional, psychological, relational, and spiritual needs is also becoming more prevalent (Brotherson & White, 2007).

Though it may be possible for some mothers and fathers to act out both scripts, for most there is an inherent contradiction (Holmes, Baumgartner, Marks, Palkovitz, & Nesteruk, 2010). For instance, Deutsch (1999) found that the couples were overtly committed to allocating equivalent resources to work inside and outside of the home, but they often contradicted their values in practice. Couples in her sample grappled with the personal ideal that splitting work evenly among partners was the best alternative for fairness in families because they continued to feel an internal pull to act on traditional norms regarding the division of labor.

In our own research, when husbands worked and wives were the primary caregivers, fathers rarely stepped forward to help with their child, unless they felt confident they

knew what they are doing (McHale & Huston, 1984) and unless they experienced stronger than average feelings of love for their wife (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston & McHale, 1987). The tendency of any spouse—whether traditional or egalitarian—to engage in more childcare activity in part depends on their perceived skills (McHale & Huston, 1984). Fathers who feel skilled with regard to parenting are more involved in child-oriented activities than are those who feel unskilled (Bonney, Kelley, & Levant, 1999; Hudson, Elek, & Fleck, 2001). Even fathers' perception of their skill prior to the birth of the baby is linked to their involvement over the transition to parenthood (Barry, Smith, Deutsch, & Perry-Jenkins, 2011). Fathers who feel competent about performing childcare tend to have wives who are more satisfied with their relationship (Biehle & Mickelson, 2011). It is also interesting to note that paternal competence in infant care is mediated by men's marital satisfaction, such that the more satisfied a father is with his marriage before the transition to parenthood, the more competent he will be after the transition (Bonney et al., 1999; Cowan & Cowan, 1987). Further, a close, confiding marriage before the transition to parenthood continues to breed men's sense of paternal skill with their infants during the first six months postpartum (Cox, Owen, Lewis, & Henderson, 1989).

For fathers in our sample, perceived skill in childcare is a relatively stable trait. It does not significantly change when they become parents (McHale & Huston, 1984)—husbands who feel skilled at childcare before becoming fathers also tend to feel skilled afterward. In an exploration of men's transition to fatherhood, Strauss and Goldberg (1999) emphasize not only the general continuity between men's early caregiving competence and later competence, but also the match between their ideal roles and their actual roles. Those who were more able to achieve their ideal roles felt competent and satisfied as fathers, often being more inclined to be involved in childcare tasks. Although husbands' and wives' role preferences are not related to each other before they become parents, afterward, mothers' expressivity (defined in terms of: warmth in relations with others, gentleness, ability to devote self completely to others, kindness, awareness of others' feelings, etc.) and their perceived skill are inversely related to fathers' preferences for being involved in childcare. The more expressive mothers are, and the more skilled they perceive themselves to be in terms of childcare, the less their husbands prefer to engage in childcare activities (see also Cook, Jones, Dick, & Singh, 2005; Genesoni & Tallandini, 2009; Habib & Lancaster, 2010).

In addition to examining perceived skill, scholars continue to become more attuned to the ways mothers influence father involvement (prior to the transition to parenthood and much after). For example, some mothers may serve as "gatekeepers" to fathers' relationships with their children by regulating fathers' involvement either as gate openers (mothers whose beliefs and attitudes encourage father involvement in family work) or as gate closers (mothers whose beliefs and attitudes hinder father involvement) (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Cannon, Schoppe-Sullivan, Mangelsdorf, Brown, & Sokolowski, 2008; McBride, Brown, Bost, Shin, Vaughn, & Korth, 2005). Whether undermining or supportive, mothers control fathers' active involvement with their children (Gaunt, 2008; Herzog, Umana-Taylor, Madden-Derdich, & Leonard, 2007; Sano, Richards, & Zvonkovic, 2008; Schoppe-Sullivan et al., 2008), fathers' parenting behaviors (Cannon, et al., 2008; McBride, et al., 2005), and fathers' accessibility to their children (McBride, et al., 2005), sometimes limiting men's involvement in childcare tasks (Fagan & Barnett, 2003; McBride et al., 2005).

From our own data, it appears that the changing role preferences of wives influence husbands' involvement with their children. The associations between wives' role-related

characteristics and their husbands' activities are stronger than the associations between husbands' characteristics and their own activities. Although husbands who are more expressive tend to believe that they are more skilled in terms of childcare, husbands' expressivity does not by itself predict their tendency to engage in child-oriented activities. Wives' role preferences (measured after they become mothers), however, predict husbands' involvement with their children. Wives who prefer their husbands to be involved in childcare after they become parents tend to have husbands who engage in more child-oriented activities (McHale & Huston, 1984). As we will see below, however, husbands' greater involvement in childcare does not always bode well for the marriage.

### *Balancing Career and Family Life*

Many new parents have to juggle the demands of two jobs and their new babies. Forty-three percent of those we interviewed found themselves in such a situation. The total work burden was rarely equally balanced between the parents when both partners worked for pay outside the home. All told, in such situations fathers took on a fourth of the childcare and household responsibilities. By the second year of the child's life, working mothers were employed an average of 30 hours a week for pay while performing 26 household and childcare tasks. Their husbands worked 34 hours a week for pay, while performing about five household and childcare tasks (Smith & Huston, 2004). Since there was a strong correlation between the number of tasks performed and the total amount of time devoted to them, we can use the number of tasks and the time spent in tasks interchangeably. The imbalance of the household work would have been even greater had employed mothers not cut back on the number of tasks they took on compared to the mothers who did not work outside the home (Crouter, Perry-Jenkins, Huston, & McHale, 1987). The dual-earner couples generally chose efficiency (e.g., one parent caring for the child—mostly the mother—while the other engaged in another activity) over companionship (e.g., both parents spending time together with the child). Another adaptation parents created to manage career and home life included differing work hours between father and mother. For three-fourths of the dual-earner parents, one partner might work daytime hours, with the other working in the evening, or on the overnight shift.

In our research we did not ask dual-earner couples *why* they chose one form of childcare arrangement rather than another. Johnson (2000) found that couples generally leave childcare decisions up to the mother, rather than jointly considering the merits of alternative solutions. According to Johnson, mothers' ideas about the importance of family-care, the availability of kin to provide such care, cost considerations, and quality of care play important roles in childcare decisions.

Working mothers usually wanted their husbands to be more involved in childcare than the husbands tended to be. Indeed, employed mothers in our sample discovered that securing help from their employed husbands could carry significant costs. When the fathers assisted them, they often did so with obvious reluctance, offering clear signs that they believed they were being exploited, saddled with chores that were not included in their job description. The more fathers in dual-earner marriages were involved with childcare, the more they complained, criticized, and otherwise showed dissatisfaction toward their wives. Furthermore, fathers in dual-earner marriages who behaved more negatively tended to be less satisfied with the division of childcare tasks and also less in love with

their wives. Conversely, fathers in dual-earner marriages who were less involved with their children (with regard to both childcare and leisure activities) were more in love with their wives. Research suggests that more recent generations of parents experience greater declines in satisfaction than prior generations (Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003) and that the division of labor is a primary source of conflict among new parents (Kluwer, 2010).

### **Does Parenthood Undermine Romance and Lead to Conflict?**

Spouses' increased childcare responsibilities restrict the amount of time they have to be with each other as a couple. Not surprisingly, the amount of time husbands and wives pursue leisure activities together as a couple decreases once they become parents (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008). The disenchantment new parents express with the limited amount of time they now spend together reflects in part the fact that they pursue fewer activities that they both enjoy. Even when parents do engage in leisure together, they often have to keep a sharp eye on the child.

The extent to which mothers, in particular, spend time with their child doing leisure activity comes to rival time they spend in leisure with their husbands alone as a pair (Crawford & Huston, 1993). Fathers and children pursue relatively few leisure activities together without the mother also involved. Having a baby allows mothers to spend more time doing leisure activities that they like, and less leisure time in activities they dislike, while the reverse is true for new fathers. New fathers' leisure time shifts from activities with friends or time in solitary activities toward less enjoyable family and home-centered pursuits. This constricted freedom may produce a feeling of being hemmed in by fatherhood. Indeed, Claxton and Perry-Jenkins (2008) found that men who participated in more independent leisure activities before the birth of their baby reported less love and more conflict in their marriage one year later.

Our data indicate that the disquiet that fathers feel about changes in their social life does not undermine their overall feelings of marital satisfaction or weaken their expressed love for their wives—or their wives for them. Nor does the reduced amount of time couples have alone together affect such feelings. This may be explained, in part, by their recognition that such changes are an inevitable part of parenthood. They may also be sustained by a feeling of pride. Their production of a child anchors them in the mainstream of the culture, and is an achievement regarded as praiseworthy.

Aside from leisure pursuits, parents in our sample spend less time talking together than do nonparents (McHale & Huston, 1985). Given the centrality of communication to spouses' marital satisfaction, this reported decrease in partners' time together would not seem to bode well for the quality of their marriage. When we examined the parents' affectionate expressions toward one another we found that parenthood has little impact on the relationship. Though new parents may spend less time conversing, they are no less affectionate with each other than couples who do not yet have children (MacDermid et al., 1990). New parents seem to make the most of their limited time together. Furthermore, the data show that for some couples, the amount of affection that husbands express toward their wives actually increases during the transition to parenthood (McHale & Huston, 1985). New parents said "I love you" to each other as often as nonparents; they also tried to make one another laugh, hugged and kissed each other, shared their feelings, and did something nice for each other about as often as nonparents (MacDermid et al., 1990). Parents and nonparents also were equally involved in talking

about their personal needs and trying to work out their problems. As suggested by Cowan and Cowan (1988), parents may be able to communicate more effectively with one another, knowing that they have less time to interact with each other.

While sexual intercourse was curtailed during the later stages of pregnancy and during the postpartum period, declines in sexual activity among new parents were otherwise no greater than the abatement of nonparents' sexual behavior. At times new parents had to be creative about sex, and even then things sometimes didn't go as planned; however, they recognized these changes as part of their own decisions regarding childbearing, not just as a result of the presence of their child.

The parent and nonparent groups were equally likely to bicker, argue, criticize, or turn down each other's sexual overtures—either before or after the birth of a child. Because negativity is a particularly sensitive barometer of spouses' marital satisfaction (Huston & Vangelisti, 1991; Karney & Bradbury, 1997), this finding lends further credence to describing the arrival of a child as changing couple's lifestyles rather than producing a "crisis" in their marriages. What takes place is largely a shift in lifestyle rather than diminishing affection resulting from more restricted schedules and greater tension.

### Conclusions and Directions for Future Research

The birth of a baby clearly has an impact on marital behavior patterns and individual identity. Spouses change the way they organize their instrumental tasks and leisure time. Wives' face new questions about establishing a maternal identity that also include career identity. Husbands face new questions about being both a "good provider" and a nurturant caregiver. Husbands engage in fewer of the leisure activities they enjoy, but may also find satisfaction in competence at parenting tasks. The responsibilities that accompany childcare limit the amount of time spouses have to spend together as a couple. Accordingly, parents report spending less time in conversation than do nonparents. Although new parents change many of their behavioral patterns, the socioemotional aspects of their interaction do not differ from those of nonparents. Because socioemotional behavior is an important predictor of spouses' relational satisfaction, the lack of difference in this domain of marriage for parents and nonparents suggest that parenthood, per se, need not encourage decreases in spouses' marital satisfaction and love. Data from the PAIR project support this claim.

Having noted that parents do not differ from nonparents in terms of the way they evaluate the quality of their marriages in the PAIR project, it is important to acknowledge that the changes that accompany parenthood are more easily managed by some than others.

Our efforts to trace the multiple ways parenthood affects marriage and to identify the conditions under which parenthood affects satisfaction fits into a new, emerging paradigm that seeks to create a richer, more balanced portrait of the transition to parenthood. Researchers are poised, we believe, to recognize that parenthood includes greater opportunities as well as problems, and that the overall effect of parenthood on marriage reflects the operation of a number of causal dynamics.

Future research in this vein ought to study the potential differences between working-class and middle-class couples. Researchers further need to expand work on the transition to parenthood to include unwed mothers and fathers because first-time parenthood increasingly takes place outside of marriage. Nearly 40 percent of births in the U.S. are to unwed mothers and fathers (U.S. Center for Disease Control, 2011). Scholars are beginning to examine the influence of families and social networks on the relational

world of unmarried parents (England & Edin, 2009; Hofferth & Goldscheider, 2010; McLanahan, 2009). Increasing research on the larger sociocultural context of the transition to parenthood, including particularly race and ethnicity, will largely impact our understanding of the transition to parenthood and its effects on parents and their relationships.

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## Note

- 1 PAIR stands for Processes of Adaptation in Intimate Relationships. The acronym captures our interest in studying how couples adapt or adjust to one another as they move through their life together. Readers interested in learning more about the results should consult the project website: [www.utexas.edu/research/pair](http://www.utexas.edu/research/pair).

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