

PARENTING AS A CHOICE: MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS AND
CHANGES COUPLES EXPERIENCE DURING THE
TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

By

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ABSTRACT

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This literature review explores the choices and changes that take place during the transition to parenthood. A summary of the current literature outlines several relevant topics including choices related to parenthood today, fertility and motivational factors, readiness and timing, the connection between marital and parental satisfaction, parental expectations, the role of work and finding balance between work and home, and the influence of societal shifts. Therapeutic implications drawn from these findings are addressed.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Everyday, many couples are faced with the decision of whether to have children. In this paper, I will explore what motivates couples to choose parenthood and what changes actually take place during the transition. My exploration process includes a summary of related literature as well as reflections of my own that may be helpful to future parents and/or to therapists. Inevitably, the reflections and suggestions that I make include my values and personal beliefs, which will not fit or hold true for every person reading this paper. Although my focus is on heterosexual couples, I am not disregarding the possibility of some of the information holding true for gay and lesbian couples as well. Areas that are addressed include the choice of whether to be a parent, fertility and motivational factors, readiness and timing, the connection between marital and parental satisfaction, parental expectations, the role of work and finding balance between work and home, and the influence of societal shifts.

The topic of parenthood is fascinating because each person arrives at parenthood by traveling along a different and unique pathway. My research was prompted by this fascination, along with the hope of learning more about the possible roads couples travel, and of identifying what routes have been most successful for couples. As a therapist, having an idea of what a client's journey might look like can help bring understanding to his or her current circumstances. One common segment of a client's journey is marital issues, and they are often exposed as a client begins to share his or her journey with the therapist. Having a better knowledge base about changes parenthood can initiate, and probable

results from those changes, will allow me to better understand my clients and to identify possible roadblocks they could face in the transition to parenthood.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In recent years, there has been a drop in birth rates, along with a delay in childbearing (Cooney, 1993, p. 44). One factor that has and continues to influence this shift is the availability and improvement of contraception (Brooks, 1991). With the use of contraception, couples now can plan and choose whether or not to have children as well as when to have them (Michaels, 1998; Muzi, 2000). With these changes, parenthood is no longer inevitable, but this leaves couples with the next challenge of deciding how to make the decision of whether or not to enter parenthood.

CHOICE

Couples today have more choice around parenthood compared to previous generations, and this element of choice has opened up the door to a much more extensive decision-making process, which has not necessarily made the journey to parenthood any easier (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). “In the past, fewer choices meant less conflict between spouses, at least at the outset. Now, with each partner expecting to have a free choice in the matter, planning a family can become the occasion for sensitive and delicate treaty negotiations” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p.31). The consequences of choosing parenthood are very high in several domains, including financial and psychological, which is why one couple labeled their debate about whether or not to have a child as the “million-dollar decision” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Today, with so many changes taking place in our society, parenthood might be thought of as a risk because there is

less definition to roles and rules, which “raises the stakes as it sharpens the commitment” (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982, p. 7).

With the increasing choices around parenthood, questions become an essential component of the decision-making process for prospective parents. Once one or both partners begin to have thoughts and fantasies about having their own children, this signifies the starting point when couples begin their journey of the decision-making process (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). Despite the changes that time will bring to a couple’s decision, the questioning process allows partners to share their own personal thoughts, feelings, fears, and fantasies before a commitment is made (Lerner, 1999). An essential part of the questioning process is weighing the pros and cons, which are not necessarily the same for men and women (Lerner, 1999). Since parenthood does not always mean the same thing to both partners, the discussions that take place before a couple makes their decision can provide the couple with the opportunity to share and understand each person’s vantage point, in hopes of creating less tension and stress once a final decision has been made. Also, it is important to remember “there is not one ‘right’ way to enter parenthood, and there are so many factors in the decision to have a child that one cannot expect to be able to take them all into account” (Lerner, 1999, p. 27).

FERTILITY FACTORS

The factors affecting a couple’s fertility are extensive. These include demographic and background factors, psychological traits, attitudinal factors,

biological factors, social-psychological factors, and developmental factors (Michaels, 1988). For example, an individual raised in a large family with the belief that a family is not “official” until the addition of children would most likely choose parenting without much hesitation if the person continues to carry that belief into their own marriage. These factors are not concrete as far as their effect on all couples, but they may influence a couple’s fertility.

In addition, cohabitation may influence on fertility. Research suggests that couples tend to have their first childbirth at an earlier age if they have not had cohabitation experience (Corijn & Liefbroer, 1996). Marital first birth timing is also influenced by the amount of time a couple has spent coresiding, in marriage and cohabitation (Manning, 1995). When a couple is determining when or whether to become parents, all of these factors are not necessarily discussed, but instead, many of them play a role in the decision process by influencing people’s choice(s) outside their conscious awareness.

MOTIVATIONAL FACTORS INFLUENCING PARENTS’ CHOICE

Now that it has been determined that couples today have much more choice around parenthood and that there are several factors influencing fertility, the next question to address is ‘What motivates or influences couples to choose parenthood?’. “Partners’ reasons for wanting or not wanting to have a child are influenced by who they are, what routes they have taken to arrive at this time of life, and how they feel about their relationship; this is, their histories as individuals and as couples set the stage for whether their family-making discussions will be

smooth or rough sailing” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 34). This puts emphasis on each partner’s readiness and/or willingness to openly and honestly discuss themselves as individuals and as a couple.

COMMUNICATION

Through communication, couples can explore their ideas and further understand their partners and themselves. In order for couples to be able to express themselves and openly share their ideas with one another, it is necessary for them to learn or strengthen their communication skills within their marital relationship (Lerner, 1999; Ryder, 1995). If a couple has a difficult time communicating without children in the picture, this is probably an area that the couple should address before choosing parenthood. It is likely that communication will only become more difficult once a child arrives (Ryder, 1995).

FINANCES AND CAREERS

Research suggests that inevitably a couple’s finances and careers will be drastically altered once a child arrives. With this in mind, it is necessary that couples who are actively choosing to become parents take time to evaluate their finances before entering into parenthood. Children are very expensive and costs tend to increase as children get older (Ryder, 1995). Childcare becomes a large concern for couples, particularly those that are very career focused. In order to be prepared to make necessary changes, couples must give some thought to their current career position as well as to where they would still like to go in their

careers (Ryder, 1995). Depending on the timing of their first child, by choosing parenthood, both men and women are possibly limiting their professional potentials (Taniguchi, 1999). Research suggests that it is difficult to be fully invested in one's career once a child arrives, which means that the ladder of professional success often becomes limited and possibly shortened. In order to be most prepared and least disappointed with the parenting role, these are just a handful of the factors that must be taken into consideration before a couple makes the decision to enter into parenthood.

MYTHS ABOUT PARENTING

Even though parenting can be a wonderful experience, couples who are consciously choosing parenthood should be aware of the entire picture of parenting and children in order to gain an honest and real picture of parenthood. Cultural myths about parenting may mislead couples by portraying unrealistic views of parenting, especially for couples who have not given parenthood much thought, or for those who are unfamiliar with what parenthood involves. As research suggests, this lack of awareness can lead to a huge awakening for parents and eventually to disappointment. A few examples of misleading myths include the ideas that 1) parenting skills are instinctive, 2) parenting is fun, and 3) children are cute and sweet (Ryder, 1995,15-17).

These statements sound very appealing and inviting, but with a little bit of thought, these statements can easily be challenged. For instance, research demonstrates that parenting is not instinctive, but instead, it is learned through

example and education (Ryder, 1995). If a person is open to learning and has had good parenting examples to observe, most people can learn to be good parents, but instinct should not be a parent's crutch. Both myths two and three are partially correct, but it would be unrealistic to believe that children are fun all of the time, and that children can be nothing but cute and sweet. Most parents would describe another side to their children, which might include messy, confrontational, dirty, unpredictable, and much, much more. By looking at both sides, couples have a more realistic picture to base their decision on, hopefully leading to higher parental satisfaction.

As a future parent, it is important to be mindful of myths similar to these because with these expectations, it would be very difficult for parents not to be disappointed with the parenting role and/or with their child. In order to give parenting a fair and realistic perspective, it is important to look at the full picture of children instead of just the happy, easy parts. For couples to be aware of all aspects of parenting, they must make a conscious effort not to buy into the false picture that the media portrays, and if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

REWARDS OF PARENTING

The rewards of parenting can be endless and these are often the motivational influence that drives couples to choose parenthood. Parenting can create a new, redefined sense of love by creating a stronger connection between the couple, as well as a new experience of love all together as a family (Ryder, 1995). A parent's emotional fulfillment is further increased by the strong

connection created by the parent-child bond (Hildebrand, 2000). The following example illustrates this powerful emotional experience.

I discovered a capacity for imagining a kind of peacefulness and joy that I don't think I had ever had. Up until the baby was six months old, I would rock him and sing to him, and there was something purely physically and emotionally satisfying about that. Better than sex, and I had never found anything better than sex (Lerner, 1999, p. 20).

In addition to emotional growth, children's energy and simple pleasures have a way of making parents feel youthful and provide relief from everyday stressors (Hildebrand, 2000). Also, parents gain a sense of pride when children are able to successfully accomplish developmental tasks such as clearing the dinner table or brushing their teeth (Hildebrand, 2000).

Frequently, both men and women choose parenthood because they yearn not only for the experience of having a close and special relationship with their children, but also because they anticipate personal inner changes (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Parenting not only promotes personal growth by increasing parents' awareness of themselves but also encourages further personal exploration and development (Coltrane, 1997; Hildebrand, 2000).

Parenthood generates development by giving couples the opportunity to refine and express who they are, to learn what they can be, and to become someone different (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982). Socially, parenthood moves the couple to adult status, because having children is often viewed by society as a marker event symbolizing an increase in both responsibility and maturity (Brooks, 2001; Michaels, 1988; Muzi, 2000). Many fathers state "that parenting helped them be more patient, tolerant, and mature" (Coltrane, 1997, p. 119),

leading to personal development and growth. Even though some of these changes and motivational influences may not be part of all couples' parenthood experience, it is helpful to have an idea of what to expect, and the possible areas of change that commonly take place.

Partially due to cultural messages, couples can feel that they are not considered a 'real' family until they choose to have children. Some couples may view the addition of children as creating a "true" family life-style, and begin to anticipate the enrichment that children will possibly bring to their relationship and their families (Ryder, 1995). As part of creating a family life-style, couples also choose parenthood so that they have someone to pass their traditions to, thus preserving their family traditions and heritage (Hildebrand, 2000).

Personal questions and curiosities can influence and stimulate the choice to parent. Some couples choose parenthood just for the experience; without it, they feel their lives might be unfulfilled and they might be missing out (Ryder, 1995). Another possible influence is a couple's sense of curiosity about such things as what their children might look like and/or what kind of parents they might be. The only way to fully answer these questions is to have children (Ryder, 1995). Lastly, some couples choose parenthood solely because they want to fulfill their role expectations, which most often are parallel with social norms (Ryder, 1995). As can be seen, there are many reasons why couples choose to enter into parenthood. Some couples are more conscious or aware of their reasons than other couples, but, in my opinion, it doesn't make their decision any more right. Personally, I value a couple's awareness, especially

since parenting is such a large decision to make with many life-changing effects. But, I also believe that a couple's conscious reasoning process does not guarantee they will be better parents than a couple with less awareness. It is part of human nature to take different paths to get to a similar place as others, so why should this not hold true for future parents?

ADDITIONAL REASONS TO CHOOSE WITH LESS GRATIFYING RESULTS

Unfortunately, not all reasons couples use to choose parenthood lead to gratifying results. Sometimes, a couple might choose parenthood only to end family and peer pressure. Research suggests this can result in the addition of large amounts of stress and strain on a couple's marriage along with decreasing each person's life satisfaction (Ryder, 1995). Another reason parenthood might be chosen is to trap a partner, in order to resolve an unstable relationship. According to research, this can add additional stress and strain on the relationship, causing it to dissolve even faster (Ryder, 1995).

Cowan & Cowan (1992) state that much of what happens after the birth of a baby is shaped by what is happening in couples' lives before the baby comes along. One of the most important things that happens in the pre-baby period is the way the couple goes about deciding whether to become parents in the first place (p. 32). If the choice is not mutual or children are not mutually desired in the relationship, this could create future barriers in both the marital relationship and in the parenting domain.

Two additional reasons used to choose parenthood that lead to less gratifying results include the desire to have a companion for life, and the desire to have someone as a caretaker later on in life (Ryder, 1995). If a person and/or couple make the choice to have children for any of the reasons that have been listed, the parent(s) may likely be disappointed and unhappy with their decision to become a parent.

DECIDING TRANSITION READINESS

Once a couple decides they want children, often, they wonder, “How will we know when we are ready to make the transition?” Even though there is not a universal parent readiness checklist fit for all couples, the factors that can influence a couples’ sense of readiness are similar to those that are considered when deciding whether or not parenthood is for them.

According to a study of first time fathers, three factors were identified as being significant determinants of parental readiness. These include 1) stability in the couple relationship 2) relative financial security, and 3) a sense of closure on the childless period of their lives (Coltrane, 1997, p. 130). If one or more of these areas are neglected, it could result in a much more stressful transition, leading to both marital and parental dissatisfaction. This is by no means an exclusive list, but there are some main areas that may be beneficial for couples, and particularly fathers, to address when determining readiness to enter parenthood.

FIRST BIRTH TIMING

After a couple has determined they are ready to make the transition to parenthood, they are then faced with the question of, “When should we have our first child?” It is clear that having babies relatively ‘early’ or ‘late’ in one’s life does have important consequences (Coltrane, 1997, p. 126). When taking this into consideration, couples should remember “the timing of crucial life events is not universal” for everyone (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982, p. 2). To be more straightforward, this means one couple’s choice of birth timing may be different than another couple who shares similar characteristics. From my perspective, this is perfectly okay because each couple’s life is very different. If everyone believed that couples should enter parenthood at one magical age, it could lead to a large number of unprepared couples choosing to make the leap only because they felt they were supposed to. This is probably more apparent in past generations because women in our society had a more defined and rigid role of the traditional homemaker. Today, women still feel the pressure to have children within a certain time frame, but there is more flexibility around timing and choice in general. Even though it cannot be said for sure, one of the repercussions of this cultural pressure would likely be lower parental and marital satisfaction for couples entering parenthood only on these terms.

Particular patterns have been identified for both men and women regarding their choice of birth timing. Entry times are referred to as early and late entry, with early typically referring to couples entering parenthood by or before the age of 25 and late entry as any time thereafter. Research demonstrates that

women entering parenthood early tend to rely on the mother role for their sense of self-worth, which leads to less role sharing and restricted earning potentials for mothers (Coltrane, 1997). Research goes on to suggest that entering parenthood later allows women to establish other identities, particularly in their careers, which encourages men to value the father role (Coltrane, 1997).

Another noted difference for those entering parenthood later, over the age of 27, is that couples tended to view parenting responsibilities as being more equally shared between both spouses, even if this ideal was not achieved (Coltrane, 1997). In contrast, couples entering parenthood earlier tended to leave the majority of the housework for the women (Coltrane, 1997).

In general, similar to women, men benefit from delaying parenthood because it tends to create less stress and strain altogether. “Delaying the transition to parenthood can help men avoid some of the financial and time strains that early-timed fathers face when they simultaneously launch a career and a family” (Coltrane, 1997, p. 129). Partially due to these lessened strains, “many of the late-timed fathers described relatively smooth transitions to parenthood” (Coltrane, 1997, p. 130). Even though these findings may not hold true for all couples, it appears that those couples choosing to enter parenthood later tend to encounter fewer initial strains, which leads to a more collaborative parenting team.

A number of changes take place during the transition to parenthood, resulting in the need for couples to renegotiate old rules and ways of life as soon as a child arrives. “Parenthood changes the ‘life space’ within which couples

function and brings with it a new set of tasks that require coordination between the spouses” (Johnson & Huston, 1998, p. 196). When making the transition to parenthood, couples are faced with new demands that challenge the norms that regulate their day-to-day activities (Johnson & Huston, 1998). Along with the addition of new tasks, challenges, and changes in “life space,” patterns of marital interaction are reorganized during the transition to parenthood (Johnson & Huston, 1998).

As part of the many changes that parenthood demands, the element of time becomes more precious with the arrival of a child. Once a couple enters parenthood, it is very likely that their social lives will change, which is highly connected to the couple's limited couple time and personal time (Coltrane, 1997). Couples do not lose touch with all of their social networks, but often, there are definite changes that take place. It is common for parents to seek friends with similar situations, which can involve the ending of some of their current relationships. As one father states, “Basically if the other people don’t have kids and if they aren’t involved with kids, then we aren’t involved with them. It’s as simple as that. The guys I know at work that are single or don’t have children my age don’t come over because we have nothing in common” (Coltrane, 1997, p. 137).

Another area where change commonly takes place for parents is in the organization of their social networks. Having children not only encourages parents to build new social networks with those who share similar family backgrounds, but also, “some parents reported that they regularly interacted with

people from a different social class, religion, race, or lifestyle, as a result of having children on the same team or in the same school classroom” (Coltrane, 1997, p. 137). In my opinion, by being aware of the possible social changes that could take place, parents can better prepare themselves by being mindful of their current friendships. This could mean finding creative ways of including close friends without children into their family activities, or possibly allowing and understanding the distance created within certain friendships.

MARITAL SATISFACTION

It is commonly believed that marital satisfaction declines when couples have children (Brooks, 1991). Recent research shows that couples choosing not to have children experience a similar decline in marital satisfaction during the same time period within their relationship (Brooks, 1991). Therefore, “parenthood does not cause the decline, but it does change a couple’s activities together” (Brooks, 1991, p. 17). In regards to the marital relationship, people often assume that there are huge differences between parent and non-parent couples. In actuality, there tends not to be a difference between these parent and non-parent couples in their overall satisfaction with their marriages, or in their love for one another (Brooks, 1991). According to Brooks (1991), some couples reported their marriage improved after the birth. It became a shared partnership, with more working together to accomplish tasks (p. 17). This finding suggests that our cultural assumptions do not always hold true. From my perspective, it could be beneficial to remember this when making decisions about

parenthood. Often what is generally thought to be true may not always be true or right for everyone.

Marital dissatisfaction may be based on a mismatch between sex role attitudes and parents' actual behaviors (Brooks, 1991). This refers to parents who have to do more childcare and household work than they may desire, which then lowers their marital satisfaction.

The phenomenon of the “stalled-revolution” also fuels the fires of marital conflict. The stalled revolution refers to a situation in which work roles have changed but family roles have not (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 26). If there is conflict around work and household responsibilities, it is interesting to note that couples are typically in one of two spots, 1) having work environments that do not have family friendly policies, or 2) not having made necessary changes in the home environment. Either position leaves the couple strained, which leads to the potential for marital conflict.

PARENTING SATISFACTION

Several factors have the potential to influence parenting satisfaction, but the strongest predictor is marital happiness (Roger & White, 1998). Couples who are unhappy in their marriage often have lower satisfaction with the parenting role and vice versa. Two additional factors influencing parental satisfaction include family structure and parents' gender (Roger and White, 1998).

Family structure refers to the organization of family members, which determines family interactions. With the diversity of today's families, there are

multiple ways families can be organized, and this can result in differences in a couple's parenting satisfaction. For example, parenting satisfaction is higher for both parents when they are parenting only their own biological children (Roger & White, 1998). Hence, parenting children that are not biologically one's own can lead to a less satisfying parenting role. Today, the majority of families do not represent the traditional idealized nuclear family with a white picket fence. Instead, due to the increase of divorce and remarriage, and increasing proportion of families are stepfamilies. Couples in blended families who are considering having children of their own should be aware of the potential for a decrease in marital satisfaction.

Regarding gender, men and women tend to perceive parenting satisfaction very differently (Roger & White, 1998). Often, fathers more closely link marital and parental satisfaction. Mothers are more likely to separate the roles of mother and wife, making less of a connection between these two roles. In general, however, parenting satisfaction for both mothers and fathers is significantly influenced by the quality of their marital relationship (Roger & White, 1998). Research emphasizes the strong influence the quality of the marital relationship has on parenting satisfaction (Roger & white, 1998). As previously stated, parental satisfaction is highly influenced by marital satisfaction and when one falls short, the other often falls short for both parents. In light of these findings, it would be difficult to make a case challenging the interrelatedness of these two roles.

Parenthood is not a predictable journey, and it is hard not to enter into the experience without expectations. It might be considered essential for some couples to have and/or learn a sense of flexibility, and a willingness to reassess their expectations as they travel the road of parenthood. Unless a couple learns to set aside some of the unrealistic expectations they brought into parenthood, they potentially face relationship difficulties (Muzi, 2000). As one example, researchers found that couples maintaining more romantic marriages, before the birth of their first child, reported more problems after their child was born than couples entering parenthood with less romantic marital arrangements (Muzi, 2000). At the same time, not all couple relationships fall apart after entering parenthood. Those whose relationships deteriorate often are “younger and less educated, with more limited financial resources available to them; one or both of the parents exhibits low self-esteem; the husbands are rated as less sensitive” (Muzi, 2000, p. 23).

The addition of a family member can create a large amount of stress on a couple’s marriage (Lerner, 1999). Not acknowledging this simple fact often leads parents to disappointment and causes tension within the marital relationship. No matter how hard a couple works at keeping child-raising issues out of their marital relationship, there is still the tendency and likelihood that unplanned problems will come up. Before long, the couple can find themselves in a disagreement with one another without either of the partners ever intending to start an argument (Lerner, 1999). From my perspective, couples should be aware of the unpredictable daily life events children tend to initiate. These

events can cause confusion when couples cannot understand why they argue about a particular topic or why one partner has a short temper about a thought-to-be neutral topic. I believe that both partners need to learn forgiveness in order to offer each other support and patience when parenting roadblocks arise.

Similar to marriage and other significant life events, parenthood not only requires change, but also involves compromise. Couples must learn to negotiate household and childcare responsibilities and routines that will fit with the parental values and interests of both of them (Brooks, 1991). Cultural-based assumptions often influence this process, particularly around gender role issues. Gender roles refer to the responsibilities and tasks that are associated with a particular gender. “The artificial separation of women’s and men’s experience, based on traditional gender-role assignments-- woman as the nurturer of men and children in the intimate private world, man as the generator of works and ideas in the public world of policy and enterprise; woman confined to domestic tasks, man to worldly ones---is being revised” (Daniels & Weingarten, 1982, p. 7). With the revisions that are taking place, the traditional gender-role assignments are becoming obsolete and no longer fit for many people in our culture. As a culture and as individuals, there is a need to redefine the roles that have been in place for generations, in order to adjust to the evolving current and future changes.

ROLE SHARING

In the past two decades, families have placed an increasing amount of emphasis on role sharing and egalitarianism (Booth, 1994). Even though some couples have freely chosen to practice an egalitarian arrangement within their families, for others, role sharing is more of a practical necessity due to the many underlying demographic, economic, and social forces that shape families' lives (Coltrane, 1997).

One of the largest changes is the increased active participation of fathers in parenting. No longer is Dad just the bread-winner, but now, he can also be seen and expected to change a diaper and wash the kitchen floor. Getting fathers more involved in active parenting not only balances out the couple's work load, but research demonstrates that father involvement and nurturance has benefits for children. Father involvement is positively associated with a child's intellectual development, increased social competence, and the ability to express and understand feelings and emotions (Booth, 1994).

The age a couple enters parenthood is another factor influencing whether or not a couple will role share once parenthood arrives. Couples entering parenthood in their late twenties or thirties are more likely than younger couples to share more of the housework and childcare (Coltrane, 1997). This connects back to the discussion of first birth timing, because couples entering parenthood at a younger age, before the age of 25, often use traditional gender roles to create their identities. For these couples, the thought of giving up or sharing any

of the 'assigned' roles and responsibilities may be riskier, which can lead to perceiving role sharing as a personal threat.

Role sharing can play an important part in parenting, but not all men and women view it as essential, particularly women. Despite the increase in role sharing, research demonstrates that women often maintain the emotional well being of the marriage, and work to avoid potential conflicts around childcare issues (Johnson & Huston, 1998). From my perspective, it is unfortunate that in order to prevent marital conflict some women hold back their feelings of dissatisfaction about imbalances in parenting and marital arrangements. For some women, it can be more important to keep the peace than to have their husbands do their fair share (Johnson & Huston, 1998). Research shows that "more sharing is evident when wives negotiate for change, delegate responsibility for various chores, and relinquish total control over managing home and the children" (Coltrane, 1997, p. 201).

In many situations, it seems evident that in order for change to occur wives must be the initiators. As stated before, this could potentially cause marital disruption, but depending on the situation, if a woman does not speak up, it is as if she is then agreeing to maintain the traditional woman gender role script. This script leaves most mothers feeling overworked, exhausted, and unsatisfied, and it has consequences in terms of the marital relationship.

With the decisions and actions of wives, the family and marital climate can rapidly change. Through adjusting their own behaviors, expectations, and perceptions, wives have the potential to act as gatekeepers of marital conflict

(Johnson & Huston, 1998). In general, women tend to have a lot of potential power when it comes to children and family arrangements, but they must decide whether or not they will make use of it. This decision is often made by deciding whether or not the end goal or desire is worth the energy needed to make the necessary changes and adjustments.

A couple's expectations and perceptions of one another and of themselves can highly influence their satisfaction with the parenting role. In general, "people seek to conform to the expectations that others have of their behavior, especially if the other person is significant or valued in some way by the actor" (Bruce, Combs, & Litton Fox, 2000, p. 128). In regards to marriage and parenting, this appears to be particularly true. The spousal expectations a woman sets for her husband regarding help tend to highly influence both marital and parental satisfaction for both spouses. Again, this further supports one of the most consistent findings in the literature, that there is a definite positive relationship between marital interaction and parental quality (Bruce, Combs, and Litton Fox, 2000). It is also interesting to note that "wives' perceptions of the fairness of the division of household labor are better predictors of marital conflict than the actual extent of inequality" (Greenstein, 1995, p. 37). When a wife's expectations are not met by her spouse, it becomes more likely that the couple will experience a decline in both marital and parental satisfaction on top of increased difficulties transitioning into parenthood (Bruce, Combs, and Litton Fox, 2000). Unmet expectations could result in a wife's built-up resentment towards her husband, which might limit their communication during the transition

process and create future barriers. It is also plausible that women minimize their expectations as a way of avoiding disappointment and conflict (Bruce, Combs, and Litton Fox, 2000, p. 128).

WOMEN'S EMOTIONAL WORK LOAD

Despite the possibility of expressing choices that could influence the family and marital dynamics, it is not uncommon for women to choose the preferences of their husbands. The “unconscious adaptations wives make to the preferences of their husbands may be a key ingredient in recipes for marital success, and in order for husbands to reciprocate the adaptations of their wives, this unrecognized work of love needs to be made visible” (Johnson & Huston, 1998, p. 200). Personally, I believe it could be very beneficial for couples to be aware of these findings before children arrive so they have the opportunity to spend time discussing some of the common hidden factors that do not always get named or brought out into the open, but unfortunately can cause distress and dissatisfaction.

THE INFLUENCE OF WORK

As part of the many changes taking place in our culture, work is one of the areas under revision in regards to gender-role assignments. Overall, it has not been an easy or smooth transition for the work world or for families. Due to these continual changes, the element of work has become a growing concern for families and for prospective parents.

As time goes by, it becomes easier to identify and name the influences and repercussions of work on families today, especially around gender-roles. The changes that have taken place over the past two decades in women's employment patterns have led to concern about conflicts between work and family responsibilities (Joesch, 1997). Especially with the growing number of mothers in the work force, more and more "working mothers are coming home to face a 'second shift,' which includes running the household and caring for the children" (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 26).

Even though the work world can be a difficult place for both fathers and mothers, often men receive more credit and praise for family involvement compared to women (Coltrane, 1997). In addition, women working in male-dominated professions are subject to some of the pressures men face, "but they face a unique double-bind: ignoring the children is a sign of maternal neglect, but spending time with the children is perceived as a lack of career commitment" (Coltrane, 1997, p. 143). With these realities as part of our mainstream culture, it seems to mean that couples have to work that much harder to create something different than this accepted norm. But, those who try and fight the system by creating balanced roles between spouses end up "exhausted from bucking the strong winds of opposition---from parents, from bosses, from co-workers" (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 26). Like the double-bind previously mentioned, parents can find themselves in a similar struggle when judgments are cast on them from other parents and co-workers, leaving them in a lose-lose situation. Any way they

move leads them to the same stuck place, and it can result in a lot of extra pressure and stress on families and marriages.

SOCIETAL SHIFTS

Parenthood is not generally an easy transition or an all-gain experience. Instead, parenthood can have some costs involved. According to Cowan and Cowan (1992), "even though there are no historical comparative studies to substantiate the claim that the transition to parenthood is more difficult now than it used to be, the evidence of risks to the parents' marriage and the children's well-being continues to mount" (p. 29). Today's families need a new role model given that "only 6 percent of all American households have a husband as the sole breadwinner and a wife and two or more children ---'the typical American family' of earlier times" (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 27). Now, couples are having a difficult time establishing a new pattern because the families they grew up in are so different compared to the families they are wanting to create (Cowan & Cowan, 1992).

With our shifting cultural beliefs, parents' have experienced an increased emotional burden. According to Cowan and Cowan (1992), the greatest emotional pressure on the couple comes from the culture's increasing emphasis on self-fulfillment and self-development (p. 28). With these cultural expectations, new parents are left with the impression that "they ought to be able to make it on their own" (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 29). These expectations include raising children, working a demanding and fulfilling job, running a

household, maintaining family relations, being active in the community, and more. Today, “wives and husbands look to each other to ‘be there’ for them----to pick up the slack when energies flag, to work collaboratively on solving problems, to provide comfort when it is needed, and to share the highs and lows of life inside and outside the family” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 28). It is no wonder couples feel exhausted and overworked, and it seems doubtful that anyone could actually reach and maintain the cultural ideals that have been established for today’s families.

Attitudes, particularly about family, are another large part of the societal changes that have been taking place. An important attitude shift has taken place over the past three decades, which continues to place less emphasis on the family and more on the pursuit of individualism (Coltrane, 1997). Many of these attitude shifts have occurred in the context of growing individualism in our country as well as in other industrialized nations (Coltrane, 1997). “Surveys of childrearing values from the 1920’s to the 1970’s show that American parents have placed decreasing emphasis on obedience, loyalty to the church, and conformity, while putting increasing emphasis on autonomy, tolerance, and thinking for one’s self” (Coltrane, 1997, p. 202). With all of the shifts and changes that have been taking place, parents are finding it even more difficult to come up with a concrete model to follow because the range of acceptance is so much larger, and parents continue to search for a road map to follow.

COSTS AND LIMITATIONS

Along with the societal shifts taking place, parents have identified other specific costs in regards to choosing parenthood. In a study by Rosenbaum and O'Leary (1988), three factors emerged, which were labeled as costs or negative values of having children. The factors included 1) restriction, 2) negative feelings evoked by children, and 3) concerns about the child being poorly cared for (Michaels, 1988). These factors are part of the reason why the decision to have children can trigger the feeling of ambivalence.

Couples entering parenthood realize that there is a loss of freedom once the child arrives because they can no longer do as they please. Initially, the couple's world must revolve around the child because babies are very demanding and time consuming. Even though the immediate demand of care-taking decreases as the child gets older, children continue to be dependent on their parents for such things as physical, emotional, and financial support. And, research shows that children are associated not only with lower levels of social and economic resources, but also with higher levels of psychological distress for parents (Bird, 1997). In addition to the creation of higher levels of psychological distress, children may evoke other negative feelings in parents. Often, children can be noncompliant to parents' desires and/or rules, challenging such things as the parent's beliefs, values, capabilities, and self-esteem (Michaels, 1988).

With the increasing geographical distance between close family and friends, couples are faced with new obstacles. Today, it is more common for couples to live further and further away from their families, childhood friends, and

relatives, which leaves them in unfamiliar surroundings, often with fewer social networks (Cowan & Cowan, 1992). “Becoming a parent, then, can quickly result in social isolation, especially for the parent who stays at home with the baby” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p. 24). In my opinion, couples should try to avoid this trap by working together to build a dependable and supportive social network before their child arrives. This could provide the couple with a place to share their fears and joys while on the journey of parenthood.

Despite the costs that children can incur, there are also innumerable benefits children can bring to parents’ lives. After going through the full spectrum of events and changes that parenthood can promote, the decision does not become any easier. As stated by Lerner (1999), the long list of unconscious fears and longings that inspire pregnancies may have you shaking your head in dismay, but countless women reproduce for ignoble reasons (p. 14). Since there is no clear link between the unconscious motives that initially drive us to choose parenthood and how we eventually come to love and care for our children over time, it still remains a question why each and every parent chooses parenthood along with the unpredictable journey it takes them on (Lerner, 1999). “Because couples have to cope with both predictable dilemmas and unexpected events for each partner, it is a wonder that they ever arrive at the same conclusion about this major life step” (Cowan & Cowan, 1992, p 32).

CHAPTER 3: CLOSING SUMMARY

With all of the territory that has been covered, there are a few key areas that I would like to draw attention to as I deem them particularly important in the therapy realm. First, it is essential to understand the societal shifts taking place, particularly around gender roles. Families are changing, and there are not suitable role models for couples to follow. Parents today often grew up in very different family settings and structures than they are trying to create for themselves. Now, couples are left with the challenge to redefine their roles and responsibilities within a family setting. As therapists, we can aid couples in this process, but the awareness of these changes must first take place in order to help couples externalize this battle as something much larger than their individual relationships. Next, therapists can help couples identify the roles they have learned from their families of origin, and then go on to aid couples in openly redefining the roles and responsibilities they believe might work for their own families.

The element of work and the changes in the work force continue to have a direct influence on families, but unfortunately, the effects often go unacknowledged and are not openly addressed or discussed. Also, work policies often fall short of the demands placed on families today, making balance between work and family nearly impossible. With this reality, therapists can not only name this struggle but also can help couples reorganize responsibilities within their families in hopes of lessening some of the stress and strain caused by the overload of work and family.

Also, due to the financial need for both parents to work in many families today, role sharing becomes an important component in the balancing act of work and family. Unfortunately, women tend to experience the most work overload. They continue to take on the majority of the household responsibilities in addition to their outside employment, which often leads to resentment and marital tension. A therapist can name and explore this reality with a couple who might be struggling with this dilemma. All of the responsibilities parents must carry now can be overwhelming and very exhausting, and it can be helpful to normalize this reality before possible problem solving begins. Each partner brings a different set of role expectations to the relationship. If parenting and career arrangements are not discussed and mutually agreed upon before or after a child arrives, it often leaves couples feeling stuck and partners feeling resentful. Therapy can provide the couple with a place to begin to negotiate each person's role and family responsibilities, in hopes of reaching a more balanced and less strained arrangement for the couple.

Birth timing has also been shown to significantly impact the smoothness or roughness of the journey through parenthood. Exploring this impact can help couples who have entered parenthood at a very early age to better understand and identify possible factors related to this choice. Of course, not all couples who had an early entry into parenthood will face difficulties, but for those couples who do, there could be benefit from knowing they can make changes in their relationship that will help them balance out some of the areas that were never discussed and negotiated earlier on in their marriage.

In looking at the journey through parenthood, it is essential to recognize the influence marital and parental satisfaction have on one another for both spouses. As a therapist, it is important to see how closely these two roles are tied together. Often if there is dissatisfaction in one area more than likely there will be dissatisfaction in the other as well. Frequently, couples do not realize how much these two roles affect one another. Therefore, it could be beneficial for the therapist to name this and bring both areas out in the open, in hopes of improving both marital and parental satisfaction. This can help the couple to see the connection between the two, and identify areas where these domains cross over into one another.

Parenting is not an easy role to fill, and without good communication and a solid marital relationship, a couple choosing to enter parenthood could face numerous challenges and struggles. A therapist with knowledge about parenting decisions can help couples identify and understand the challenges of parenting. By creating a safe place to explore and experiment with new and different ways of filling their roles, a therapist can help a couple create a relationship that fits their marital and family expectations.

Although parenthood may be a conscious choice, change is inevitable. No matter how well a couple plans, there will always be unexpected twists and turns along the way. Entering into this unknown territory is part of what makes the journey through parenthood so interesting and challenging.

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