

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

THE IMPACT OF TIMING OF PARENTHOOD ON
RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

by

Dawn H. Furlong

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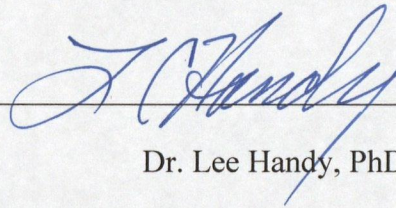
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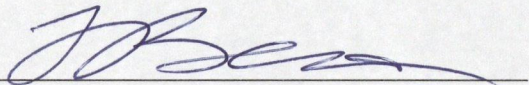
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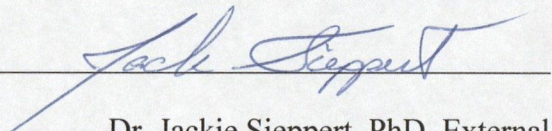
Dr. Lee Handy, PhD, Supervisor

Division of Applied Psychology

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "T. Beran", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Tanya Beran, PhD

Division of Applied Psychology

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Jackie Sieppert", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Jackie Sieppert, PhD, External

Faculty of Social Work

Dawn H. Furlong
University of Calgary, 2008
Dr. Lee Handy, Committee Chair

THE IMPACT OF TIMING OF PARENTHOOD ON RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION

ABSTRACT

The negative impact of the transition to parenthood on dyadic relationships is well-documented in the literature, and research is continually attempting to explain this phenomenon. The purpose of this study was to assess whether relationship satisfaction is dependent on the length of relationship when couples enter the transition to parenthood. Fifty-five heterosexual couples who were new parents of children aged three to 24 months participated in the study. Participants completed a demographics questionnaire and filled out the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS) as a measure of relationship satisfaction. The findings indicated that although length of relationship did not conclusively predict relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, length of relationship was a positive predictor of dyadic satisfaction while a negative predictor of dyadic cohesion, both subscale measures of the DAS. Limitations of the current study and directions for future research are considered.

DEDICATION

I dedicate this research to my patient and loving husband, Robin, for enduring the late-night talks, offering endless support throughout my studies, and helping me realize the beautiful and amazing possibilities of a relationship as we transition to parenthood.

And to my brilliant daughter, Ava – you entered our world perfectly timed in the midst of this project, helping me to truly understand what it means to become a parent and inspiring me beyond words. You have made our lives, and our marriage, richer than I could have imagined, and I will forever be thankful to you for that.

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Introduction and Literature Review

“It's not only children who grow. Parents do too. As much as we watch to see what our children do with their lives, they are watching us to see what we do with ours. I can't tell my children to reach for the sun. All I can do is reach for it, myself.”

~ Joyce Maynard ~

The transition to parenthood is thought to be one of the happiest and most rewarding times in a person's life. In nine short months, a new life is brought into the world in a way that seems nothing short of miraculous. At the same time, for most people, the psychosocial transition to parenthood is a lengthier process than just nine months, beginning with a flicker of initial contemplation of conception and continuing on long after the birth of the couple's first child. Undoubtedly, becoming a parent is one of the most magical times in a person's life; however, there are also many adverse side effects, such as an overall decrease in relationship satisfaction (Cusinato, 1994; Gottman, 1999; Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000). In fact, Shapiro, Gottman and Carrere found that 67% of all couples, with the majority being the wives, experienced a significant drop in marital satisfaction within the first year of the first baby's life, and this all-too-often initiated the cascade toward divorce. As widespread as the research is on the transition to parenthood, the answer for why some couples experience this drop in relationship satisfaction and others do not remains rather elusive.

The transition to parenthood is an important topic worthy of research efforts for at least two reasons. First, parenthood is a widespread, nearly universal, phenomenon: 90% of married couples and countless cohabiting couples make the transition to parenthood (Glade, Bean & Vira, 2005). This means that all kinds of people from many different walks of life become parents, warranting research attention that, in turn, will allow us to better understand the complexities behind this transition and what these people are going through. The knowledge and understanding we can derive from research on the transition to parenthood helps us to develop

empirically based interventions in the field of psychology, and even more specifically, in couples and family counselling. Second, research has already shown that the transition to parenthood impacts many different areas of life, and especially the marital relationship. In fact, research has shown that “the marital relationship impacts parental sensitivity, investment in the child, and overall quality of parenting,” making this topic worthy of the focus of researchers so that appropriate interventions may be applied in clinical settings (Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005, p. 322). The primary focus of this paper is to explore the impact of parenthood on marital relationships, with special attention focused on factors that predict relationship quality or satisfaction over the transition to parenthood.

In order to understand the nature and complexity of the transition to parenthood, the different areas of a person’s life that are impacted will first be explored. Specifically, seven categories will be looked at: physical and health, cognitive, psychological, social, vocational/career, spiritual, and relational. Second, recent research on predictive factors of successful transition to parenthood will be explored, with special attention focused on factors that predict relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood. Third, current literature will be used to debate the current research question of whether or not length of relationship predicts relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Finally, hypotheses for the present study will be explored.

Areas of Change During the Transition to Parenthood

According to Antonucci and Mikus (1988), the transition to parenthood is accompanied by a dramatic shift in roles, relationships, priorities, thoughts, feelings, behaviours and, due to all of these shifts, a change in personality. As will be explored in this section, the transition into the role of a parent is often experienced as stressful and chaotic. As would be expected, such an

upheaval in a person's external world typically leads to changes internally as well. Although men and women tend to experience certain aspects of the transition to parenthood in similar ways, there are also numerous differences (see also Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004; Fedele, Golding, Grossman, & Pollack, 1988; Lawrence, Nylén & Cobb, 2007; Salmela-Aro, Nurmi, Saisto, & Halmesmaeki, 2000; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, & Wilson, 2003). Also, several life domains are affected by the transition to parenthood, such as physical/health, cognitive, psychological, social, vocational, spiritual, and relational. A focus will be placed on the relational aspect since it is the focus of the current research question, however, the other categories are being considered as well since none of these categories are mutually exclusive, and, therefore, all likely play an important role in the relational changes that occur during the transition to parenthood.

Physical/health. The topic least discussed in the literature was the physical and health changes during the transition to parenthood, probably because it is the most obvious. A few researchers did note that the transition to parenthood brings about major physical and health changes for both parents but, as one would expect, more predominantly for women (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Cusinato, 1994; Salmela-Aro et al., 2000). There are major changes to the physiology and appearance for women during and after the pregnancy. Once the baby has arrived, both parents typically spend large amounts of time, energy and effort invested in making adjustments at home and in their lives to fit the new addition, which can lead to an overall sense of exhaustion for both parents (Antonucci & Mikus; Cowan & Cowan). Finally, because of the physiological changes combined with the lack of energy, both parents typically experience concerns over their sexuality, although this is more pronounced for women. Such changes likely play a part in the amount of affection expressed in the marital relationship

following the birth of a baby (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). Physiological changes are also a part of various stages of the lifecycle, but the extreme changes occurring throughout pregnancy and early-childhood parenting are typically expected to be more or less temporary. An important consideration here, however, is that women tend to be less distressed over the physical and health changes of pregnancy and parenthood when they believe these changes to be temporary, rather than permanent (Antonucci & Mikus).

Cognitive. Likely because of the exhaustion parents experience with a new child, cognitively they are also likely to feel unorganized and to have a sense of disequilibrium (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988). As Antonucci and Mikus describe, parents' lives are changing dramatically and at times there are feelings and concerns over whether or not they are in control of their lives. They struggle over issues of dependence and independence and, related to this, issues of autonomy and separateness. That is, just as when you become an adult you struggle with being an independent person while remaining dependent on others, having a child is often the first time when parents experience having someone dependent on them for all of his or her basic life needs. It is this overwhelming sense of responsibility that is one of the most challenging aspects of adulthood for many people (Cusinato, 1994). Furthermore, parents also experience new feelings of nurturance, deprivation and, oddly enough, aggression (Antonucci & Mikus). Such an ability to give and to sacrifice can take a substantial amount of maturity to do.

Another part of the cognitive transformation is a change in goals. Salmela-Aro et al. (2000) discuss how pregnancy and parenthood "changes individuals' motivation and life orientation" (p. 171). They looked at women's and men's goals during the transition to parenthood and found that women's goals change much more than do men's. In pregnancy,

women are more focused on childbirth and motherhood goals and after birth they are more focused on family and health-related goals. This lends support the belief that parenthood leads to more selfless priorities and goals, which is another sign of maturity. This change in priorities and goals is also thought to play an important role on the marital relationship following childbirth as well (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Fedele et al., 1988). Women, especially immediately following childbirth, often take their cognitive focus off of satisfying their husband's and marital relationship needs, since their cognitive focus needs to be on breastfeeding or other primary needs of the infant. Although the husband typically expresses a cognitive understanding of his wife's priority changes, emotionally he may begin to feel replaced and/or neglected.

Psychological. Psychologically, during the time of pregnancy is when the transition to parenthood begins, if not even sooner than that, as parents begin to adapt their lifestyles, physical environment and emotions in anticipation and preparation for the new child (Cusinato, 1994; Perren, Von Wyl, Simoni, Stadlmayr, Buergin, & Von Klitzing, 2003). The pregnancy initiates the end of the individual's old, more selfish views of the world as well as initiating the end of the relationship as a simple dyad, as the parents begin bonding emotionally with their mental representations of their unborn baby. Perren et al. use the term "triadic capacity" to explain the readiness of each parent to incorporate a third person into their "mental and relational lives" without excluding themselves or their partner (p. 55). A person's triadic capacity is directly related to a person's adjustment during the transition to parenthood. Women tend to have a more difficult time with this adjustment than do men, due in part to the added stress of all of the new responsibilities they take on as compared to their husbands (Cusinato).

Both men and women tend to describe the parenthood stage of the life cycle in more negative terms (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988). This could be due, in part to

there being an overall decrease in self-esteem for women, whereas it remains more stable for men. In more extreme cases, as women are trying to balance their feelings of separateness and relatedness, tension is created that can lead to post-partum depression (Fedele et al., 1988). In raising children, parents have to “modify their own intrapsychic processes such as repressed memories, emotions, conflicts, and disappointments” (p. 89). This process can create a great deal of psychological confusion on the part of the parents as they are adjusting to parenthood.

As negative as much of the literature is on the effects of the transition to parenthood, a more positive effect was discovered by Salmela-Aro et al. (2000) which suggested that women and men typically express the rewards of parenting as far outweighing the costs, even if the focus of other research suggests different. The transition to parenthood also leads to increased maturity as a warm, caring, selfless side of us develops (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988). Although it has already been mentioned that there is a decrease in self-esteem during this transition, the flipside can also be argued: that parents feel more valuable with an overall increase in self-esteem and self-confidence. As would be expected, parenthood is important to a person’s identity and self-concept: “adding ‘mother’ or ‘father’ to one’s identity can be a positive experience, conferring a ‘grown up’ status on men and women” (Cowan & Cowan, 1988, p. 127). And with parents going through this transition together, they can also feel more psychologically connected as a family unit because of their new-shared roles as parents. Cusinato (1994) describes how parents receive a tremendous amount of gratification in watching their child play, learn and grow and being able to participate in the different stages as the child’s primary guide to life and learning.

Social. Many of the positive, ‘grown up’ psychological effects of the transition to parenthood can be explained in part by looking at the societal view of parenthood. Indeed, family life and parenthood is highly valued in our society (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cowan & Cowan,

1988). Couple's often feel more respected in the community once they have children because they have more of a sense of being a "real" family. New parents often experience a more positive relationship with their own parents because the new grandparents begin to include them more as adult members in the extended family circle, as well as the new parents now appreciate more of what their own parents went through (Cowan & Cowan). With this greater social acceptance as adults and as a family, this can have an important positive influence on the marital relationship. Furthermore, during the transition to parenthood new parents typically show an increased interest in social issues, although there is less involvement in them due to the channelling of the majority of their energy into the parenting role.

The socially positive impact of childbirth is also mediated by the extent of the parents' social network, which has a huge influence on the psychological well-being of parents (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988). Indeed, the downside of parenting on the parent's social lives is that there is less time to engage in socially rewarding recreational activities that may have been enjoyed prior to becoming parents, as well as there is less time for relationships outside of the new nuclear family unit (Cusinato, 1994). At times, this significant restriction on individual recreation can cause some resentment in one or both parents that may be projected to their partner or child. However, if the couple can learn to enjoy the new recreational activities as a family unit, they may find it is a much more rewarding way of spending their time. On top of this is that new families also find that there is more time spent with extended family as they integrate the new family member into the broader family circle.

Vocational/Career. In a study done by Costigan, Cox, and Cauce (2003), dual-earner parents' work experiences and how they were related to parenting quality was looked at. It was found that a mother who had a more negative interpersonal environment at work showed a

decrease in her parenting quality, which also lead to similar changes in the father's parenting. Interestingly, it was found that the father's work environment was unrelated to his or the mother's parenting quality. They suggest that more effort should be placed on improving the work environment for women, especially those with young children, in order to promote a more positive developmental environment for the children at home, and also hopefully to alleviate some of the tension between the husband and wife.

At the same time with more women entering post secondary education and higher-level careers, parenthood can also lead women to become somewhat resentful toward their husbands when they feel that they had to give up some of their own ambitions and career goals in order to raise the new baby (Cowan & Cowan, 1988). This may lead more evidence to the idea of women having a hard time balancing work and parent roles, whereas men have been keeping these two roles more separate over the history of our more patriarchal society. Another social issue worth mentioning here is that with the rising costs of childcare, fewer and fewer women or men are even given a choice as to whether they can or should work or stay at home, since working can sometimes be unrealistic when your earnings are as much as the day care expenses.

Spiritual. The spiritual effects of parenting are probably the most positive effects of parenting. Antonucci and Mikus (1988) suggest that having a child increases a woman's sense of femininity and for men a sense of virility. Furthermore, women and men perceive parenthood to be a primary means to having a fulfilling life. Having a baby gives parents an increased sense of meaning to life and can make them feel that they are more valuable than they previously thought themselves to be (Cusinato, 1994). A consequence of this is how parents are also more likely to start thinking about the future, religion, and how to be more responsible and set a good example once they have children. Cowan and Cowan (1988) also describe how viewing the world through

your child's eyes is one of the best rewards of parenthood, as it allows us to remember our own innocence from our own childhood. Because of these spiritual rewards individually, it can also increase the spiritual connection between the husband and wife since they are experiencing this phenomenon together.

Relational. Outside of the changes to the relationship within the greater social network, parenthood also brings a great deal of other changes to the marital relationship, such as changes to the division of labour, time spent talking with one another, less satisfaction in marriage over time, and overall declines in marital adjustment (including satisfaction, communication, affection, similarities in values, and global adjustment) (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). The most common theme in the research, however, is the decline in relationship satisfaction (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Cusinato, 1994; Feinberg, 2002; Gottman, 1999; Grote & Clark, 2001; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008; Perren et al., 2003; Reichle & Montada, 1994; Salmela-Aro et al., 2000; Schulz, Cowan & Cowan, 2006; Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000; Sparks, 1996; Terry, McHugh, & Nollei, 1991), which, of course, is not necessarily mutually exclusive from any of the other factors that change during the transition to parenthood. Because of the significance of the marital changes during the transition to parenthood, this will be the focus of the current study.

Cowan and Cowan describe the transition to parenthood as more of a crisis for the marriage relationship than for the individual. In fact, couples who entered parenthood for the first time reported increased conflict and decreased feelings of love, whereas the same was not true for childless couples married the same length of time (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Belsky and Rovine (1990) also had similar findings in their research, with couples reporting decreased love for their partner, decreased open communication, and increased ambivalence about the marriage

in general. In fact, “both husbands and wives reported...a higher negative impact of events such as sexual difficulties, marital separation, major change in arguments with spouse, and divorce” (Curran, 2005, p. 57). Undoubtedly for many couples, the marital relationship often enters a state of crisis during the transition to parenthood. Now that this appears to be a commonly accepted fact among researchers, more recent research has been focusing on what exactly is contributing to this significant decline in overall relationship satisfaction among new parents.

A common theme in the research is *role dissatisfaction*: the impact of learning a new role as a mother or father and how it is given the highest priority, leading the individual to be less engaged in other roles (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988; 2000; Grote & Clark, 2001; Reichle & Montada, 1994; Sparks, 1996; Terry, McHugh, & Noller, 1991). More specifically, the literature explains that parenthood has a negative impact on the marriage by causing a decrease in marital satisfaction, likely stemming from there being less investment in the spousal role. Indeed, many couples have a hard time adding “parent” to their identity without a loss of either a “lover” or “worker” role. Cowan and Cowan (1988) confirm the significance of the new parent role by saying, “becoming a parent meant taking on a major adult role and continuing one’s family line linking the past with the future” (p. 114).

Another explanation offered by Cowan and Cowan (1988) is that unfulfilled or violated expectations of parenthood are the primary reason for a decrease in marital satisfaction, with the most common conflict being the division of labour (see also, Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000; Reichle & Montada, 1994). That is, women tend to make more sacrifices during the transition to parenthood than men, in that they take on more household responsibility but put work or study aspirations aside, even if it is just temporarily. An interesting part of this is that each spouse’s satisfaction with their spouse’s *perceived* contributions to household tasks was

positively related to marital adjustment during the transition to parenthood (Curran, 2005; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Terry, McHugh, & Noller). This suggests that an individual's perceptions may play a more important role in evaluating his or her relationship rather than the reality of his or her situation.

The true reality of parenthood is that new parents report more hours of housework than parents without children, and this difference is likely the greatest difference between the two groups, according to Nomaguchi and Milkie (2003). The overall increase in number of household tasks done during the transition to parenthood is dramatic: An average of six tasks per day prior to parenthood as compared to an average of 36 after entering parenthood (including childcare tasks) (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). Along with this significant increase in number of tasks, wives take on approximately 77% of these tasks (including childcare tasks) when they become parents, which is an increase of approximately 10% from before parenthood, whereas the husband does 10 % less than he did before parenthood. Two points are important here, however: (1) women are more likely decreasing their involvement in work outside the home during the transition to parenthood, which is likely why their involvement is increased, and (2) because of the huge increase in number of tasks, men are actually doing more tasks than before becoming parents (eight compared to two per day), even if it is 10% less than the percentage they contributed prior to entering parenthood.

Cowan and Cowan (2000) report that both women and men expect that the wife will do more childcare tasks, but both individuals underestimate how much more either will actually wind up doing. They further report that there is a shift to more traditional gender roles, and this is especially distressing, disappointing and tension-creating for couples that reported more egalitarian roles prior to the birth of their first child. What's more, these more traditional roles

continued on past the time when mothers have returned to work. Related to this finding, Reichle and Montada (1994) report that the three attributions most commonly associated with the division of labour dissatisfaction during the transition to parenthood, which often lead to an overall sense of relationship dissatisfaction, were anger, resentment, and disappointment. However, they also suggest that it is not simply whether or not the partners perceive that this shift to more traditional roles is unjust or not that leads to relationship dissatisfaction, more specifically, the spouse would need to be seen as part of the reason there was the shift to more traditional roles in the marriage. This is an important distinction since many mothers may stay at home for reasons other than because it is their partner's desire, such as them being unable to find work that pays well enough to make it worthwhile to go back to work and pay for childcare. It is also possible that a perception of unfairness in terms of giving and receiving in the relationship comes from already occurring marital distress, rather than the other way around, according to Grote and Clark (2001). They argue that men and women, when they are experiencing marital distress during the transition to parenthood, tend to focus on and seek out unfairness in the relationship.

Another explanation for the decrease in relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood is that women often experience an increase in relationship anxiety that can lead to maternal depression, which can lead to attachment insecurity and marital dissatisfaction for both partners (Feeney et al., 2003). Hopelessness and sadness were also common attributions about the marriage for many first-time mothers who reported depression, and the researchers found that there was a link between maternal depression and relationship problems (Reichle & Montada, 1994). However, all of this tends to be moderated by the husband's caregiving style and perceived supportiveness. Specifically, Tietjen & Bradley (1985) did a study that looked at the

effect of the husband's support and the social network's support on women going through the transition to parenthood. As would be expected, they found that the greater support the husband provided his wife, the greater adjustment to parenthood and the higher the relationship satisfaction; whereas the social network's support was not predictive of the mother's adjustment. Similarly, Sitrin (2001) found that women who were dissatisfied with their husband's support during pregnancy and post-partum reported greater dissatisfaction with their extended family and social network's support as well.

Thus far, the effects of the transition to parenthood on a person's physical/health, cognitive, psychological, social, vocational, spiritual, and relational aspects of life have been discussed as if these were neatly categorized areas that are mutually exclusive. However, as was mentioned earlier, all of these areas ultimately impact on one another. The most significant effect of all, it seems, is the downward turn in relationship satisfaction following the birth of a couple's first child, and this area, in particular, appears to be impacted the most by all of the different areas considered. To sum it up, "alterations in the division of household labor, sleep deficits, 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" (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995, p. 154).

Factors of Successful Transition to Parenthood

Why do we study relationships? This seems like a basic question, but it is an important one. Most researchers would likely say that this area of research is important to assist us in understanding relationships if we are to provide empirically based interventions and therapeutic tools to practitioners in order to help relationships stay together or even to break up. Gottman (1999) suggests that research on relationship counselling interventions has for too long focused

on dysfunctional couples rather than stable and happy couples, where we could learn the most in a much more direct way. In the same way, it seems important to study what factors contribute to couples that have been successful during the transition to parenthood, in terms of maintaining or increasing relationship satisfaction. Indeed, Shapiro, Gottman and Carrere (2000) found that relationship satisfaction remained stable or even increased for 33% of the couples they studied over the transition to parenthood. This is a sizeable population worthy of closer inspection in terms of what factors allowed these couples to be more successful in their marriage during this stressful transition.

Several researchers discussed the buffers against such declines in marital satisfaction as well as the positive relational experiences of parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; 2000; Feinberg, 2002; Lane & Wilcoxon, 1989; Lawrence et al., 2008; Perren et al., 2003; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). To begin with, Cowan and Cowan (1988) suggest that the couple's perspective of the transition to parenthood affected their marital satisfaction: Those who kept their distress at manageable levels and saw it as temporary had higher marital satisfaction than those who did not. This finding is especially important since it suggests that marriage therapists should normalize the stress for the couple and remind them that things will improve as the child grows older and life settles into a more predictable routine.

Another buffer can be found in looking at the concept of *coparenting*. Feinberg (2002) reviewed the research on the transition to parenthood to identify what factors enable couples to develop effective coparenting techniques, in order to assist in the development of effective interventions for couples transitioning to parenthood. Overall, Feinberg found that a couple's realistic expectations and feelings of readiness for parenthood were predictive of successful transition to parenthood, as determined by development of successful coparenting skills,

including marital adjustment and satisfaction. Coparenting, in this study, was described as the way that parents work together and it is moderated by four components: differences in values around childrearing, division of labour, level of support in the parenting role (vs. undermining one another), and management of family interactions (e.g., exposing children to parental conflict). These four components were found to account for many of the individual differences in the experience of the transition to parenthood. Furthermore, when these four factors were in place in a marriage with a new baby, couples experienced higher relationship as well as parenting satisfaction.

Perhaps another piece in developing successful coparenting skills is relationship maintenance, which has been found to be another predictor of relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood (Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz, & Sasaki, 2006). Relationship maintenance was described as the “ways in which couples communicate with each other to sustain intimacy, including discussing problems and trying to change behavior for the partner” (p. 189). Interestingly, the researchers compared couples’ representations of their own parents’ marriage to the level of relationship maintenance over the transition to parenthood, and actually found that the more harmonious the representations were (i.e., saw their parents’ marriage as having low levels of conflict and high levels of affection and communication), the greater the decrease in relationship maintaining behaviours during the transition to parenthood. In other words, it seems that the greater the contrast effect that comes from comparing their parents’ relationship to their own, the less relationship maintenance and thus the less overall relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Couples, therefore, should be encouraged to not idealize their own parents’ marriage so as to prevent a decline in their own relationship maintenance when they become parents.

Sometimes maintaining the marital relationship can be difficult with so many other changes occurring. For example, parenthood also often leads to more traditional relationship roles, and thus can lead to subtle shifts in personality as well for couples who start out with more egalitarian roles (Reichle & Montada, 1994; Sparks, 1996). Related to this shift is that consistency and congruence between one's sex-role orientation and actual sex-role in the relationship was a predictor of relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Therefore, since relationships tend to become more traditional during the transition to parenthood, couple's who start out with more traditional sex roles prior to the birth of their first child, and who are more satisfied with these roles, will experience less negative adjustment and higher relationship satisfaction during this time. Huston and Vangelisti (1995) actually found that mothers "who are in marriages with relatively equal division of labor report that they are less in love with their husbands and tend to be more negative," as compared to mothers who are content with childcare and household tasks as being their own special domain (p. 167). Egalitarian couples are not doomed, however, as Reichle and Montada also report that partners who both fight against the unjustness of traditionalized sex-roles in their relationship are more likely to feel more satisfied with their marriage. It seems reasonable to conclude that partners who are "on the same page" with regards to division of household labour appear to be the most satisfied with the marriage both before and after having children.

An important consideration when looking at changes in division of household labour is how father's perceived skills in terms of childcare tasks has been shown to predict more involvement by the father in these tasks, and thus lead to increased satisfaction with division of household tasks for both partners (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). It is also important to note that simply looking at father involvement in childcare tasks does not necessarily predict satisfaction

in terms of division of household tasks during the transition to parenthood. Quite the opposite, fathers who feel they have no choice in the amount of involvement they have with these tasks, especially when they feel incompetent or unskilled in this area, are likely to feel even less satisfied than those who are more involved on their own accord (see also Lee & Doherty, 2007). What is most important is whether or not each partner is satisfied with the amount of his or her involvement, which unfortunately is not very often the case. Even more importantly, it appears that men who feel more prepared psychologically for parenthood are more likely to be involved in household tasks including childcare following the birth of the baby, as well as to feel more satisfaction in their new role as father, which leads to greater relationship satisfaction as well (Condon, Boyce & Corkindale, 2004; Doherty, Erickson & LaRossa, 2006; Hawkins, Lovejoy, Holmes, Blanchard & Fawcett, 2008; Lee & Doherty). Based on these findings, interventions worthy of consideration could be father's preparation and childcare skills development, to help new fathers feel more prepared and competent when the new arrival comes.

As a whole in Western society, fathers tend to be more involved in childcare and household tasks, likely because of the increased involvement of women in the workforce over the last 50 or so years. This increased involvement of women in higher education and careers has led to the emergence of a new family dynamic: the dual-earner family. Huston and Vangelisti (1995) looked at the difference between dual-earner couples with children versus more traditional single-earner arrangements where one parent stays home, typically the mother, while the other is the primary breadwinner. Their results suggest that in dual-earner marriages, parents choose more *efficient* styles of interacting with their children, where each partner takes turns looking after the child alone while the other partakes in another activity; whereas single-earner couples tend to choose more *companionship* styles of interacting with their child, where both

partners find time to interact with the child together. It seems, then, that dual-earner couples likely spend less time together as a family unit, and along with that, less time together as a couple, and therefore likely experience a greater decrease in relationship satisfaction, simply because of the distance factor in not spending time together. Therefore, couples who spend more time together as a family unit, as single-earner families tend to do, are more likely to also reap the benefits of spending more time with their partner, which could lead to improved relationship satisfaction.

Probably one of the most related studies at this point is a longitudinal study that followed 130 newlywed couples over six years to identify the factors of a couple's relationship that predicted stability or a decline in marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood (Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). The researchers demonstrated that a husband's increased expression of fondness and admiration to his wife during stressful times, as well as both partners having an increased awareness of the other partner's life, efforts and contributions, termed *cognitive room*, were early predictors for stable or increased marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. On the other hand, a husband's negativity toward his wife and his disappointment in their marriage, or either partner describing their life as chaotic, predicted a decline in marital satisfaction. If the couple can be helped to create more buffers against the "detrimental" effects of parenthood, such as by being more supportive and caring, they will be better able to experience the transition to parenthood as positive, and to appreciate this new adult role in their lives.

Some research did tend to explore more of the positive aspects of parenthood that could be focused on as a buffer against relationship dissatisfaction. Perren et al. (2003) found in their study that expectant first-time parents actually experienced an increase in marital satisfaction

during the pregnancy, possibly due to expectant parents sharing “a common experience and a common goal and perhaps are drawn closer together” (p. 62). Cowan and Cowan (1988) describe how there is an increased emotional bond between the parents as they share the experience of raising a child in their own nuclear family. Along the same line, Lane and Wilcoxon (1989) also found that couples that shared a similar family-of-origin experience demonstrated higher marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood as compared to couples whose experiences with their family-of-origin were dissimilar. Finally, Lawrence et al. (2008) discovered that couples who were more prepared through various planning techniques prior to the birth of the first child, as well as couples who had a higher reported pre-pregnancy marital satisfaction, were protected from the well-documented marital satisfaction decline over the transition to parenthood. These are all important factors in terms of predicting successful transition to parenthood.

Length of Relationship as a Predictor of Relationship Satisfaction During the Transition to Parenthood

Over the last fifty years, fertility patterns and the rate and timing of parenthood have changed dramatically (Cusinato, 1994, Helms-Erikson, 2001). For instance, two out of three babies are born to a mother aged 25 years or older. Also, the introduction of contraceptives and ‘planned parenthood’ techniques have made it easier for couples to delay parenthood. Add this to the fact that more women are seeking higher education and have higher career aspirations than in the past, and so may be prioritizing parenthood less in the pursuit of these other dreams. All of these factors have lead to a larger range in terms of when a couple goes through the transition to parenthood. An important demographic is emerging: married couples entering the world of parenthood at a much later stage in their marriage. This growing emergence of a new family dynamic leads to the question of whether there is a difference between couples in terms of

relationship satisfaction when they have been together a short time versus a long time prior to the birth of their first child. In other words, are couples that become parents early on in their relationship or marriage experiencing a more difficult strain in their relationship, as compared to couples that delay parenthood, or vice versa? Interestingly, no available research has explored this question directly and the related research has proven rather inconclusive in terms of making a prediction either way.

To start with, it could be that couples may be more satisfied and less resentful if they have set their career before children and done some schooling (i.e., it may create less tension in the marriage). Women, more specifically, may feel that they have had the opportunity to achieve some of their own personal academic or vocational dreams, making them feel more satisfied and less resentful in becoming a parent. On the other hand, women who have worked hard to achieve these more personal goals may be more resentful in having to “give it up” in order to stay home, for whatever length of time is decided on, to raise the new baby; unless, of course, the husband decides to stay home, and in that case he may become more resentful in having to give up whatever job he had worked hard for. Glade, Bean and Vira (2005) discuss two contextual challenges that make the transition to parenthood more difficult: young age of parents and low-income difficulties. One factor of the challenge for younger couples is that they may lack the maturity and responsibility to deal with the new family dynamic, and it seems reasonable to assume that most young couples will not have been together as long as older couples. Along with the likelihood that younger couples are more likely to constitute the majority of shorter-term couples, and older couples are more likely to constitute the majority of longer-term couples, it also seems reasonable to predict that younger couples may not have as well-established careers as older couples, since many of the couples who delay parenthood likely do so in order to pursue

higher education and careers. Thus, shorter-term couples overall could be predicted to have more financial strain than longer-term couples, which is a contextual factor that predicts a more difficult adjustment during the transition to parenthood.

It is also interesting to consider the difference between dual-earner versus single-earner families in terms of which family dynamic is more likely to be representative of couples together a short time versus a long time. As was already discussed, Huston and Vangelisti's (1995) research suggested that we might be able to predict higher marital satisfaction when couples are in a single-earner family dynamic since these families are more likely to spend time together as a family unit, as opposed to dual-earner couples where the parents are more likely to take turns interacting with the children while the other parent does some other task. If we consider the likely possibility that many couples delay parenthood based on the fact that one or both partners are seeking out higher education and career possibilities, perhaps it would also be likely that these couples would be more likely to engage in a dual-earner family dynamic, rather than one parent give up the effort they put into obtaining higher education and career aspirations. This could possibly predict couples who are waiting longer to have children as being less satisfied with their marriage during the transition to parenthood, because they may be spending less time with the family as a unit in order to maintain the career that they worked so hard for. On the other hand, it could also be possible that couples who delay parenthood in pursuit of higher education and careers may be more financially stable, and thus may have more opportunity to afford one parent to stay at home creating a single-earner family dynamic, which could lead to higher relationship satisfaction in the long-run. As mentioned earlier, however, is that it is more important whether the couple is satisfied with this dynamic than whether they exist as a single-earner or dual-earner family dynamic.

Another argument can be made that couples who delay parenthood may not experience as significant a drop in relationship satisfaction as compared to couples together less time when they become parents because of the baseline level of relationship satisfaction at which each couple enters parenthood. For instance, we now know that marital quality drops significantly over the first ten years of the marriage, and then more gradually later (Curran, 2005). This means that relationship satisfaction has already decreased for couples who are together longer before becoming parents (i.e., a lower baseline to begin with), suggesting a less drastic drop following the birth of the couple's first child. At the same time, this could also be used to predict the reverse. That is, if they are already starting at a lower baseline, having a child may be the "straw that broke the camel's back" so-to-speak, and thus the new baby may just push already distressed couples over the edge into the distance and isolation cascade towards divorce (Gottman, 1999). It could also be argued that the longer a couple is together, the more "set in their ways" the couple would be and the more used to the dyadic unit they would be, therefore the more dramatic the shift and unsettling it would be in adjusting to the new triadic unit. However, it might also mean that the couple would be more bored with the dyadic unit and therefore they may be even *more* ready for the transition to parenthood, or a change in general.

Baseline of relationship satisfaction upon entering parenthood does, in fact, make a difference. Couples who reported the most marital difficulties before becoming parents lead to most marital difficulties after transition to parenthood (Cowan & Cowan, 2000). As well, couples that reported productive and confrontive styles of working out difficulties before becoming parents reported the least marital difficulties during the transition to parenthood. Again, using these research findings, we could predict that couples in longer relationships would report more marital difficulties during the transition to parenthood, since marital quality declines over the

duration of a relationship, and thus longer-term couples would report lower relationship satisfaction upon entering parenthood. However, we could also predict the reverse and say that couples in shorter relationships have not yet had much opportunity to develop productive and confrontive styles of working out difficulties, so they would be more likely to experience difficulties during the transition to parenthood. It does seem reasonable that couples who delay parenthood may have more time to develop better conflict resolution skills. However, as Gottman (1999) suggests, individuals typically enter a relationship with a certain conflict resolution style, and the dynamic that is created between the two individuals is rather difficult to change since conflict resolution style is a relatively ingrained part of our personalities.

A third argument can be made that couples who delay parenthood have more time to talk, plan, prepare, and anticipate changes before the baby comes. Also, when couples have more of a history together, they are more likely to have experienced some difficulties and struggles and making it through challenging times would add confidence to couples when they go through the transition to parenthood that they will be able to make it. Indeed, couples who have children sooner in their marriage are likely not planning parenthood out as carefully as those who wait and, contrary to previous research reported, are also more likely to have lower relationship satisfaction to begin with because they have not had enough of a chance to build and establish a strong foundation for their relationship (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). These researchers were comparing couples who have children with those who do not, but it seems fitting that this prediction could also be carried over to couples who wait less time before having children as compared to those who wait longer, as waiting longer would require more careful planning. In essence, while the longer term couple is planning parenthood, they would have more chance to establish a strong relationship foundation prior to bringing a child into the world.

Further support for this argument can be found in a study done by Huston and Vangelisti (1995), who discovered that wives who gave birth before their first wedding anniversary showed a sharper decline in satisfaction with division of household labour than wives who gave birth between their first and second wedding anniversary, because they had less of a chance to adjust to or modify their husband's role expectations with regards to the division of household labour. More specifically, it could be predicted that couples who are together for longer periods of time prior to becoming parents have more time to negotiate the division of labour before and after having children and thus may have more satisfaction around this division after becoming parents. Again, however, the author's point out that decreased satisfaction with division of household labour did not decrease relationship satisfaction for wives, but it did so for husbands. They suggest that women are better able than their husbands to separate the instrumental activities in a marriage from the relational ones. Nevertheless, whether it is the husband or wife who is feeling the most change in terms of relationship satisfaction, ultimately how a couple negotiates division of household labour appears to have a significant impact on the marriage during the transition to parenthood, and couples who have more time to do so likely would reach a more satisfactory conclusion.

Outside of household tasks, how free time is spent is also worthy of consideration, since the free time couples have to pursue enjoyable leisure activities diminishes greatly when they become parents (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). Because of this, couples who have been together longer may be more used to the flexibility and freedom they have in their relationship to do activities they enjoy either individually or as a couple, and they may have become so accustomed to these things that it makes the transition to parenthood even more difficult as they learn to relinquish some of these more enjoyable activities and flexibility in their lives. It seems fair to

assume that this adjustment may be more pronounced for couples that have had more time together in their marriage to establish these routines, and thus may make the transition to parenthood even more difficult than for those who have not established such routines over the long-term. However, Huston and Vangelisti also found that partners do not tend to “react to their more restricted schedules by increasing their negativity toward each other, they adjust by shifting their lifestyle toward a working partnership” (p. 164). It seems, then, that becoming more restricted in terms of social activities does not impact the marital relationship as much as it does the social relationships outside of the marriage.

Current Prediction

So how do we make sense of all of this? There is plenty of research out there that can support the argument either way, so how do we make a prediction? There is a third possibility in all of this that has not yet been mentioned, and that is that couples are unique and dynamic units that vary on so many dimensions that to say they can be predicted on something as complicated as the transition to parenthood based on the length of their relationship alone is minimizing the complexities of relationships and this transition. In other words, perhaps length of relationship is not a predictive factor of marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. Indeed, Belsky and Rovine (1990) emphasize that marital patterns of change over the transition to parenthood are determined by multiple factors and are better looked at as individual differences than group differences. However, my guess is that, statistically speaking, length of relationship will be a predictive factor of relationship quality over the transition to parenthood because relationship dynamics do change so much and follow general patterns over time. Now the key question is which way does the prediction make the most sense?

There is key research that stands out in terms of being most relevant to the current research question. Lawrence, Nylen and Cobb (2007) found that couples who started with a higher level of marital satisfaction had higher expectations prior to becoming parents, and then also reported a greater decline in marital satisfaction after the baby was born. Similarly, Shapiro, Gottman and Carrere (2000) actually found that the higher the marital satisfaction to begin with, the more likely a couple will have children within the first four to six years of their marriage, and the more significant the drop in marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood because it had that much further to fall (again, support for the baseline argument mentioned earlier). Another finding was that couples who had allocated more cognitive room for each other and the marriage predicted stable or increased relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood. Cognitive room can be described as the amount of detail a person can recall about their partner or various parts of their relationship (Gottman, 1999). I would predict that couples who have been together for longer periods of time would have had more of an opportunity to increase the cognitive room for their partner and their marriage since they have simply spent more time getting to know their partner, and thus would be another piece of support for the argument that couples who have been together longer would experience less of a drop in relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. In sum, it seems that happier couples have children earlier and have higher expectations about becoming parents, and that both of these factors indicate a tendency towards a greater decline in relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood.

Related to these findings, I would also argue that couples who have been together longer may also have spent more time planning out parenthood, and thus may have increased cognitive room for the expectations they have about the changes that will occur during the transition. Therefore, they may have given more thought into how to maintain relationship satisfaction

during the transition to parenthood. These couples also may have been able to witness other friends and families going through the transition to parenthood and thus may have more realistic expectations of how their marriage may change when they do have children, as compared to couples who have children early on in their marriage. This does, in fact, appear to be the case. A study by Pancer et al. (2000) illustrates how complexity of expectations affects couples during the transition to parenthood. They found that increased familiarity and involvement with an event lead to more complex thinking about the event, so couples who are more familiar with the transition to parenthood will benefit by having more complex expectations in line with the realities of parenthood. More complex thinking and expectations about parenthood could come from couples seeing real-life examples of what the transition to parenthood looks like from their friends and family who go through it before them, which would be a more likely benefit of couples delaying parenthood. Similarly, these couples will have had more time in their marriage to discuss the potential adjustments that parenthood would require of them, and may develop more complex thinking about it along the way. At the same time, it could also be that couples who delay parenthood begin with more complex and realistic expectations about parenthood, which could be why they delay it, because they are giving themselves more time to prepare for parenthood. Either way, the research has shown that having more accurate, complex expectations about parenthood leads to better adjustment to parenthood as compared to those who start out with more simple expectations about parenthood. In fact, women, in particular, who enter parenthood with more complex expectations experience “reduced depression, increased self-esteem, and improved marital adjustment across the transition” (p. 273). Indeed, having the added time to prepare for parenthood gives couples more of a chance to prepare and develop strategies for dealing with some of the more challenging aspect of becoming parents because

they have anticipated them in advance. Couples who have been together a short time when they enter parenthood may be more likely to have romanticized expectations of parenthood and the violation of these expectations is what often causes much of the negative affect as well as a more strenuous adjustment to parenthood, according to Pancer et al. (2000).

The most related study to the current research question did consider the timing of parenthood as a predictive factor of marital satisfaction over the transition to parenthood (Helms-Erikson, 2001). The study specifically looked at couples ten years after the transition to parenthood to see whether or not couples who planned or delayed parenthood had higher marital quality as compared to couples who had their first child very early on in the marriage. The researchers were looking specifically at congruence between beliefs about and the reality of the division of labour among early versus delayed parents. Results of this research did not find that timing of parenthood on its own could be used to predict marital quality ten years after the transition to parenthood, although congruence regarding division of labour beliefs and reality did predict marital quality for early and delayed parents. However, there is reason to be concerned over the methodology of this study. Specifically, only in-tact, dual-earner married couples were used as participants in this study, which was assessing marital quality ten years after the birth of the couple's first child. This means that all of these couples had been married a minimum of ten years. Research has shown that the majority of divorces take place within the first seven years of marriage (Gottman, 1999), which means that many of the couples who did experience a significant drop in marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood may have already separated or divorced by the time this study was conducted. Thus, it would seem that the effect size of any of the variables looked at, particularly the timing of parenthood variable, would be understated in this particular study. Furthermore, the researchers distinguished "early" and

“delayed” couples based on the mother’s age at the first child’s birth, and did not consider the length of relationship when interpreting the results. Since we know that relationships evolve and change over time (Booth & Edwards, 1985; Gottman, 1999; Sterberg, 1986), this seems like a confounding oversight.

In sum, marital quality during the transition to parenthood may, in part, be predicted by differences in couples who have built a strong relationship foundation before becoming parents, which of course would be more typical of couples who have been in a relationship longer (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). Along with a stronger relationship foundation, these couples have had more time to discuss and plan for the changes that may occur, as well as they have had more opportunity to witness first-hand close friends and family going through the transition, leading them to have more realistic and complex expectations about parenthood, all of which have been shown to predict higher relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood.

The present study has been designed to assess the relationship between timing of parenthood and relationship satisfaction. Specifically, we will investigate whether short-term or long-term groups of couples can predict relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, with long-term couples predicted to report higher relationship satisfaction. Also, the question of whether length of relationship and relationship satisfaction have a positive linear relationship, with a prediction that dyadic adjustment and its four subscale scores will increase as length of relationship increases, will be investigated. Finally, we will explore whether or not long-term and short-term couples have different reasons for why and when they have children, so that we might be better able to explain and understand any findings that come out of this research.

Method

Participants

Fifty-five heterosexual couples (55 males and 55 females) between the ages of 23 and 42 years ($M = 31.2$) voluntarily participated in this study. All of the couples were currently together in a committed relationship, with relationship duration (from initial dating to current) ranging from two to 14.5 years. 95% of the couples who participated in the study defined themselves as married and 5% defined themselves as common law. In order to limit unwanted variability in the current sample, the requirements for participation included that both partners were over 18 years of age, both partners were willing to participate, there were no children from previous relationships, partners were together at the time of the child's birth, and all children had to be between three and 24 months of age, so as to capture the couple's initial reactions to the transition to parenthood. For the purpose of this research, the transition to parenthood is considered to have begun once the child is born and the couple has started to settle into a family routine but before they become more comfortable with these changes, and this window was hypothesized to be when the child or children are between three and 24 months of age. It is noted that since participants were not randomly selected, couples would be more likely to respond to participate in research such as this when they feel more or less satisfied with their relationship, and thus this sample likely would have been more biased towards happy couples. Furthermore, many of those who participated were recruited from a birthing preparation course, which also may limit the sample more towards those who are prepared for parenthood than not. 90% of couples who participated had only one child and 10% of couples had two children, with the ages of children ranging from three to 24 months of age. 60 couples were sent questionnaire packages:

Three couples were excluded from the study for not meeting the requirements for participation and two did not return the questionnaires, giving a response-rate of 92%.

Recruitment posters at various parenting classes and children's recreational sites, as well as word-of-mouth, were the tools used to recruit participants. Participants contacted the researcher by phone or email to volunteer and a few participants were contacted by the researcher upon referral from other participants. Informed consent was gathered first verbally on the phone or via email, and then in writing with an Informed Consent form that was included in the package mailed to participants. Participants were encouraged to participate out of interest in, and support for, the research on the transition to parenthood, but were not compensated in any monetary way. All participants were treated in accordance with the principles of the American Psychological Association (1992).

Materials

Two questionnaires were used in the study: a Demographics questionnaire and the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). The *Demographics* questionnaire (Appendix A) collected demographic information and an assessment of relationship and transition to parenthood assessment variables. The demographic variables were participants' sex, age, various assessments of the length of the couples' relationships (total length, years if common-law, years lived together prior to marriage, and years married), and the number and ages of children. The relationship and transition to parenthood assessment variables included the reasons *why* couples had children (e.g., "It Felt Right"; "Always Knew I'd Have Children"; "Wanted to Be Pregnant") and the reasons *when* couples had children (e.g., "Unplanned Pregnancy"; "Wanted to Be Financially Stable First"; "Biological Clock/Getting Older"), both of which were formatted as a "select your top three reasons" style of questioning. Choice items in these two categories were

collected by the researcher through casual interviewing of various couples and a focus group of five couples. Participants also had the option to write his or her own reasons if they could not find a particular reason on the list. Another set of four questions assessed the amount and type of preparation couples had for parenthood, such as the number of marriage preparation classes they have attended and the number of family and friends they have seen go through the transition to parenthood. Finally, six likert-scale variables assessed each person's expectations of parenthood and different aspects of relationship satisfaction (e.g., satisfaction with the division of labour and sex life).

The *Dyadic Adjustment Scale* (Appendix B) was used as an overall measure of relationship satisfaction. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale is a 32-item questionnaire of relationship adjustment (Spanier, 1976). It is designed for use with either married or unmarried cohabiting couples. The instrument provides a global score of dyadic adjustment and four subscales scores for dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion, and affectional expression. The global score can range from 0 to 151, with higher scores reflecting higher levels of dyadic adjustment. The Dyadic Adjustment Scale has been used extensively in couples research and has well-reported reliability and validity (Cohen, 1985; Spanier, 1976).

Procedure

After participants contacted the researcher offering to volunteer to participate in the study, the researcher mailed out a package consisting of a letter of introduction thanking them for participating and explaining the study, two informed consent forms and two questionnaire packages. Couples were instructed to fill out his or her own questionnaire package independently of the other and not to discuss responses until each person was done. Participants were instructed in the letter to "try your best to answer quickly and honestly so as to get your first response."

Participants were not under any time constraints and received no further instruction. A self-addressed, stamped return envelope was included so that participants could mail the questionnaire packages back to the researcher anonymously.

Results

Several statistical approaches were used to examine the research question of whether length of relationship is a predictor of relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood. The sample size of 55 couples was deemed adequate to be able to generalize to the public because of the number of variables being assessed. Within this study a research alpha of 0.05 was used, and results were interpreted using two-tailed probability because directionality was not hypothesized. This relationship between length of relationship and relationship satisfaction, measured by the Dyadic Adjustment Scale, was examined by assessing the averaged couple's score for length of relationship by total dyadic adjustment and the four dyadic adjustment subscales: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, affectional expression, and dyadic cohesion. The dyadic consensus subscale measures the extent to which a couple agrees or has conflict on various things in the relationship, such as how they handle finances, dealing with parents and in-laws, and household tasks. The dyadic satisfaction subscale measures relationship satisfaction based on an assessment of variables such as how often the couple considers divorce, confides in each other, and argues. The affectional expression subscale is an assessment of how the couple responds to and offers physical affection, measured by variables such as whether they kiss and whether they are "too tired for sex". Finally, the dyadic cohesion subscale measures how much time the couple spends together and feels "attracted" to one another, measured by variables such as how often they have a "stimulating exchange of ideas" and "work together on a project". Prior to examining the relationship between length of relationship and dyadic adjustment and its

subscales, data management and factor analysis of the *Demographics* questionnaire helped to clarify the research question of exactly how we would assess the relationship between length of relationship and relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood.

Although couples filled out the questionnaire package individually, scores between male and female partners were averaged since the prediction was based on the couple's score of relationship satisfaction and not based on gender. It was decided to assess relationship duration by using the total *length of relationship* (question 4a), including dating period, because the prediction was also based on the entire time couples had getting to know one another and no specific predictions regarding length of marriage or cohabitation were made. A total preparation score (*PREP*) was compiled by collapsing across questions 8a through to 8d, as all of the items were used to predict how much preparation a couple assessed themselves as having prior to the transition to parenthood. Finally, questions 8e through to 8j used likert-scale ordinal variables to assess the degree to which couples agree or disagree with statements about their relationship over the transition to parenthood. The statements were all based on factors that have contributed to relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood in past research. A factor analysis was run on these six variables and two factors were identified. Table 1 displays how the variables loaded on each factor. The variables that loaded highest on Factor 1, which will be called *relationship* from here on in, were a couple's sense of having "realistic expectations" and a couple's level of satisfaction with "division of labour", "childcare tasks" and "sex life". The variables that loaded highest on Factor 2, which will be called *environment* from here on in, were a couple's report as having "discussed expectations" and the extent to which they see themselves as having "social support".

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted in order to compare the couple's *length of relationship* (short-term couples vs. long-term couples) with the *environment* and *relationship* factors. Couples were divided into short-term and long-term couples by using the average length of relationship across all couples, which was eight years. This division was a favourable split since the groups were nearly even. Short-term couples ($N = 27$) had a length of relationship range of two to seven and a half years, whereas long-term couples ($N = 28$) had a length of relationship range of eight to 14.5 years. Use of MANOVA requires randomness,

Table 1

Factor Analysis¹: Variables Belonging to Each Factor

	<i>Factor 1 – "Relationship"</i>	<i>Factor 2 – "Environment"</i>
<i>Variable:</i>		
8e. "Discussed Expectations"	0.201	0.758*
8f. "Realistic Expectations"	0.630*	0.498
8g. "Social Support"	0.075	0.819*
8h. "Division of Labour"	0.864*	0.211
8i. "Childcare Tasks"	0.900*	0.044
8j. "Sex Life"	0.578*	0.132
<i>Eigenvalue</i>	2.33	1.56
<i>% of Variance</i>	38.9	25.9

* Indicates which variables load highest on each Factor.

¹ Principal Component Analysis followed by Varimax with Kaiser Normalization

independent cases and large numbers (e.g., 30 or more) per group. In this study there were independent cases and nearly 30 participants per group. Since participants volunteered and were not a random sample, a test for normality within each group and equality of variance were assessed. The normality assessment revealed one outlier in the short-term couples group and was eliminated from the MANOVA analyses. Finally, equality of variance was shown to be established within the statistical output.

The means and standard deviations for the *environment* and *relationship* factors are displayed in Table 2. Interestingly, short-term couples rated both factors slightly higher than long-term couples, but the overall MANOVA was not significant, $F(2,51) = 0.65, p = .527$. Furthermore, the main effect of *length of relationship* on the *relationship* factor was not significant, $F(1,52) = 1.19, p = .280$, nor was the main effect of *length of relationship* on the Table 2 *environment* factor, $F(1,52) = 0.64, p = .427$. The results indicate a lack of support for

Table 2

Factor Means

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>N</i>
1 - Relationship	4.17	0.67	54
Short-term couples	4.27	0.68	26
Long-term couples	4.07	0.65	28
2 - Environment	3.78	0.61	54
Short-term couples	3.86	0.62	26
Long-term couples	3.72	0.59	58

the prediction that different factors known to influence relationship satisfaction are affected by the length of a couple's relationship.

A MANOVA was conducted in order to compare the couple's *length of relationship* (short-term couples vs. long-term couples) with the four DAS subscales scores: dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction, affectional expression, and dyadic cohesion, as well as overall across the four subscales. The mean ratings for short-term and long-term couples for the various subscales and the MANOVAs are reported in Table 3. Long-term couples' scores were slightly higher than short-term couples' scores on dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction and affectional expression, whereas short-term couples scores were slightly higher on dyadic cohesion.

Table 3

MANOVAs and Mean Ratings for DAS Subscale Scores: Testing Effect of Length of Relationship on DAS Subscale Scores

	<i>Short-term Couples (N=26)</i>	<i>Long-term Couples (N=28)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Overall Across Subscales (Multivariate Analysis)</i>			1.24	(4,50)	0.305
<i>DAS Subscale: (Univariate Analysis)</i>					
Dyadic Consensus	49.31	49.70	0.05	(1,53)	0.830
Dyadic Satisfaction	39.58	41.02	2.60	(1,53)	0.113
Affectional Expression	8.63	9.11	1.15	(1,53)	0.288
Dyadic Cohesion	16.56	16.50	0.01	(1,53)	0.940

However, none of these results were statistically significant. The absence of any significant effect of *length of relationship* indicates a lack of support for the prediction.

A two-tailed t-test was used to assess the effect of *length of relationship* on total *dyadic adjustment*, as dyadic adjustment is a summary variable of the four DAS subscales and thus there were issues of collinearity in running a MANOVA. In other words, dyadic adjustment is highly correlated with the subscales so a MANOVA analysis was not an appropriate statistic to use. The mean ratings and t-values for both dyadic adjustment t-scores and raw scores are presented in Table 4. Long-term couples scored slightly higher than short-term couples on dyadic adjustment, however, this difference was also not significant, indicating a lack of support for the prediction.

In order to examine the prediction more closely, it was decided to run analyses on the extreme groups for *length of relationship*. The extreme short-term couples were selected as the bottom third (*range* = 2-5.5 years, *N* = 15) of the *length of relationship* variable and the extreme

Table 4

T-test of Effect of Length of Relationship on Dyadic Adjustment

<i>Group</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>Std. Deviation</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>t-score:</i>						
Short-term Couples	27	49.78	6.68	-0.67	53	0.505
Long-term Couples	28	50.89	5.61			
<i>Dyadic Adjustment:</i>						
Short-term Couples	27	114.52	11.98	-0.61	53	0.546
Long-term Couples	28	116.32	9.98			

long-term couples were selected as the top third (*range* = 9-14.5 years, *N*=25) of the *length of relationship* variable. The mean ratings for extreme short-term and extreme long-term couples for the various subscales and the MANOVAs are reported in Table 5. Extreme long-term couples had slightly higher scores than extreme short-term couples on dyadic consensus and affectional expression, while extreme short-term couples had slightly higher scores on dyadic cohesion, but these differences were not significant. Interestingly, the difference between groups on dyadic satisfaction was larger than the other subscales, with extreme long-term couples scoring higher than extreme short-term couples, but this difference was only on the verge of being significant at

Table 5

MANOVAs and Mean Ratings for DAS Subscale Scores: Testing Effect of Extreme Groups in Length of Relationship on DAS Subscale Scores

	<i>Extreme Short-term Couples (N=15)</i>	<i>Extreme Long-term Couples (N=25)</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Overall Across Subscales (Multivariate Analysis)</i>			1.56	(4,35)	0.206
<i>DAS Subscale: (Univariate Analysis)</i>					
Dyadic Consensus	49.50	50.32	0.21	(1,38)	0.648
Dyadic Satisfaction	39.10	41.38	3.89	(1,38)	0.056
Affectional Expression	8.67	9.10	0.57	(1,38)	0.456
Dyadic Cohesion	16.73	16.52	0.05	(1,38)	0.823

$p=0.056$.

Thus far statistical analyses were used to compare group means using t-tests or MANOVA, however, it is also worthwhile to look at the prediction using regression analyses. For this analysis we used length of relationship in its continuous form, not divided into two groups. A hierarchical regression was used to assess whether *length of relationship*, in its continuous form, could be used to predict the four DAS subscales. Collinearity is often a problem with regression when we find the correlations between predictors are too high, which was the case with the DAS subscales. When all four subscales, including dyadic consensus and affectional expression, were regressed with *length of relationship*, the collinearity index was too high. When dyadic consensus and affectional expression were omitted from the analyses, leaving only dyadic satisfaction and dyadic cohesion, collinearity was no longer an issue. The correlations between dyadic satisfaction, dyadic cohesion and length of relationship are reported in Table 6.

Table 6

Correlations between Dyadic Satisfaction, Dyadic Cohesion and Length of Relationship

	<i>Length of Relationship</i>	<i>Dyadic Satisfaction</i>
<i>Dyadic Satisfaction</i>	0.249*	
<i>Dyadic Cohesion</i>	- 0.079	0.549**

* $p < 0.05$ ** $p < 0.01$

Dyadic satisfaction was looked at independent of dyadic cohesion, *Model 1*, and the overall regression analysis revealed that although dyadic satisfaction and length of relationship were positively related, dyadic satisfaction did not significantly predict length of relationship on its own. However, when dyadic satisfaction and dyadic cohesion were considered together, *Model 2*, the prediction was significant. In other words, dyadic satisfaction and dyadic cohesion *together* predict length of relationship. The overall regression results are reported in Table 7.

Table 7

Overall Regression Result with ANOVA Test for Model Validity

	<i>R</i>	<i>R Square</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Model 1:</i>	0.25	6%	3.49	0.067
Dyadic Satisfaction				
<i>Model 2:</i>	0.36	13%	3.83	0.028
Dyadic Satisfaction				
Dyadic Cohesion				

When we look at the regression comparing the effect of Model 1 to Model 2, as seen in Table 8, dyadic satisfaction was positively affected by length of relationship and dyadic cohesion was adversely affected by length of relationship, although the latter was just on the verge of being statistically significant at $p = 0.051$.

Table 8

Regression Coefficients Table Comparing the Effect of Model 1 to Model 2 on Length of Relationship

	<i>B</i>	<i>Beta</i>	<i>t-value</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>Model 1:</i>				
Dyadic Satisfaction	0.20	0.25	1.89	0.067
<i>Model 2:</i>				
Dyadic Satisfaction	0.34	0.42	2.70	0.009
Dyadic Cohesion	-0.35	-0.31	-1.99	0.051

To help understand the regression further, scatterplots were created based on Model 2. The scatterplots of the regression reveal a moderate linear trend between dyadic satisfaction and length of relationship, Figure 1, and between dyadic cohesion and length of relationship, Figure 2.

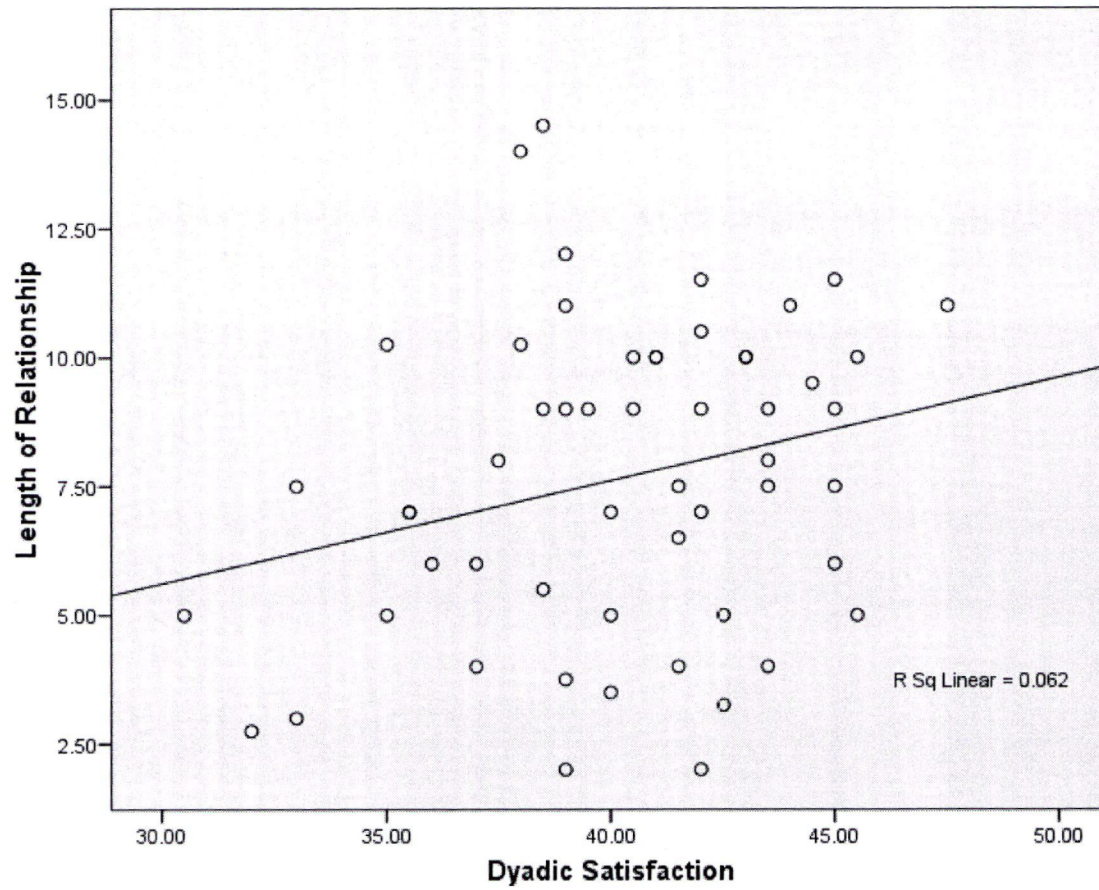


Figure 1. Scatterplot Between Length of Relationship and Dyadic Satisfaction

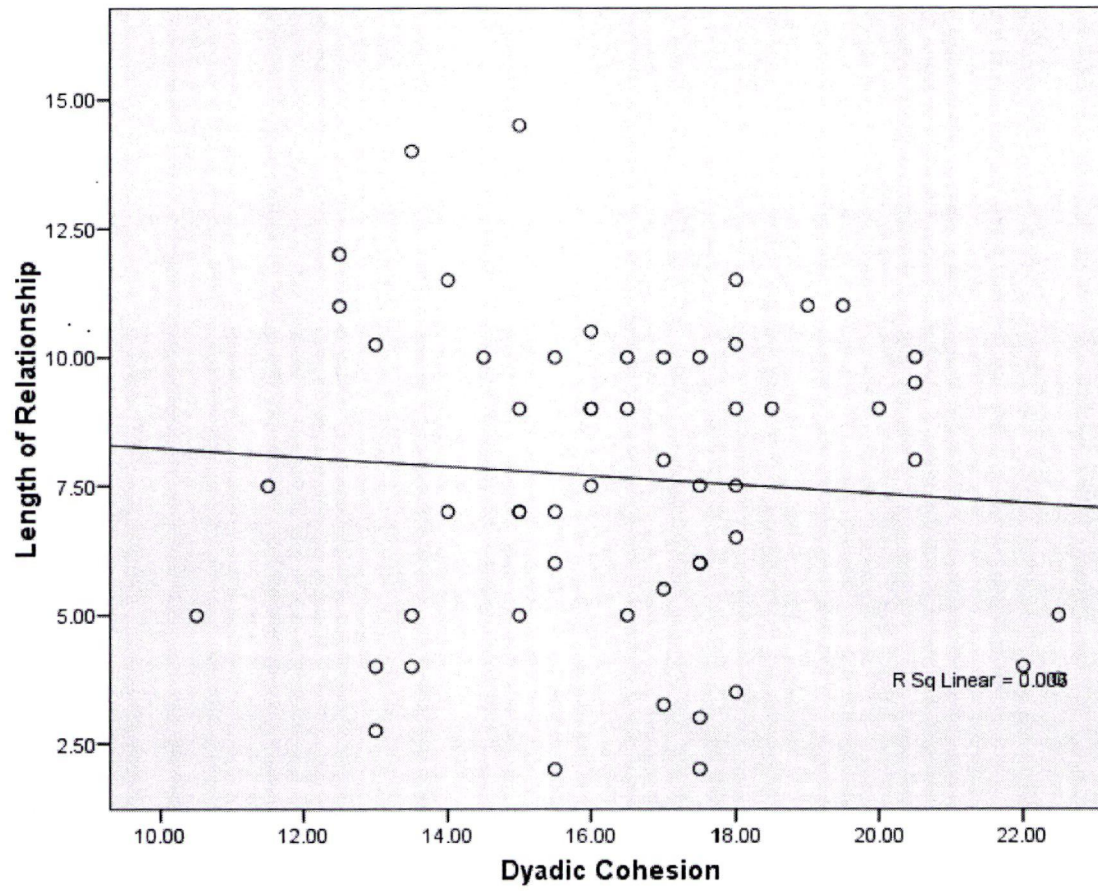


Figure 2. Scatterplot Between Length of Relationship and Dyadic Cohesion

A final analyses was used in order to assess whether the reasons why and when people had children were different between short-term and long-term couples. The top three reasons couples said *why* they had children were “it felt right” (87.3%), “always knew I’d have children” (83.6%) and “wanted to be pregnant” (58.2%). The top four reasons that couples said influenced *when* they had children were “wanted to be financially stable first” (65.5%), “to give relationship time to grow/develop before children” (65.5%), “planned pregnancy” (70.9%), and “biological clock/getting older” (54.5%).

A contingency table analysis revealed that although a larger percentage of long-term couples selected all of the top three reasons *why* more than short-term couples, these differences were not significant. The frequencies and chi-square values are reported in Table 9. It should be noted that the contingency table analyses were also taking into account those couples who did not select the top three items. The difference between men and women on each of these items was analyzed as well using a chi-square test, and it was found that men and women did not significantly differ on “it felt right” or “always knew I’d have children”. However women, not surprisingly, chose “wanted to be pregnant” (72.2%) significantly more than men (27.8%), *Chi-Square Value = 10.57*, *df = 1*, *p = 0.001*.

A contingency table analysis was also done on the top four reasons that influenced *when* couples had children. The frequencies and chi-square values are reported in Table 10. More long-term couples selected “time for relationship” as a reason *when* they had children, but this difference was not significant and men and women did not differ significantly on this item either. A larger percentage of long-term couples selected the “planned pregnancy” reason, although this difference was not significant at *p = 0.066*, whereas a larger percentage of short-term couples selected the “biological clock” reason, although this difference was not significant at *p = 0.058*.

Table 9

Contingency Table Analysis of Main Reasons Why People Had Children on Length of Relationship

<i>Reason Why</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Selected as Reason</i>	<i>Chi-Square Value*</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>“Felt Right”</i>					
Short-term Couples	22	81.5%	1.60	1	0.252
Long-term Couples	26	92.9%			
<i>“Always knew”</i>					
Short-term Couples	21	77.8%	1.33	1	0.295
Long-term Couples	25	89.3%			
<i>“Wanted to be pregnant”</i>					
Short-term Couples	15	55.6%	0.15	1	0.787
Long-term Couples	17	60.7%			

*Chi-square value based on a comparison of all counts, including those couples that did not select the item as a reason for why they had children.

Men and women also did not differ significantly on either of these items. Finally, the largest difference was found with long-term couples selecting the “financially stable” reason more than short-term couples, $p=0.008$. A chi-square test also revealed that men chose this reason (64.4%) significantly more than women (35.6%), $Chi-Square Value = 6.36$, $df = 1$, $p = 0.01$.

Table 10

Contingency Table Analysis of Main Reasons When People Had Children on Length of Relationship

<i>Reason When</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Selected as Reason</i>	<i>Chi-Square Value*</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<i>“Financially Stable”</i>					
Short-term Couples	13	48.1%	7.03	1	0.008
Long-term Couples	23	82.1%			
<i>“Time for Relationship”</i>					
Short-term Couples	15	55.6%	2.30	1	0.109
Long-term Couples	21	75.0%			
<i>“Planned Pregnancy”</i>					
Short-term Couples	16	59.3%	3.49	1	0.058
Long-term Couples	23	82.1%			
<i>“Biological Clock”</i>					
Short-term Couples	18	66.7%	3.14	1	0.066
Long-term Couples	12	42.9%			

*Chi-square value based on a comparison of all counts, including those couples that did not select the item as a reason for when they had children.

Discussion

Although the research on the transition to parenthood is extensive and the negative impact of this transition on marital relationships is well-documented, whether or not the timing of parenthood has an impact on relationship satisfaction has not been explored in depth. This is especially important since we are seeing an increase in the heterogeneity of those couples entering parenthood, particularly with age of first child. Specifically, one third of children are born to mothers age 25 and under, while the remaining two thirds are born to “delayed” couples (Helms-Erikson, 2001). With an increase in heterogeneity comes also new complexities to individual couples’ unique circumstances, such as a greater diversity in terms of education and career status, maturity, and general life experiences, and improving our understanding of these complexities will assist us in developing more well-informed educational and therapeutic practices.

Two theories have been mentioned in past research in order to describe and explain the considerable impact of the transition to parenthood on dyadic relationships. The first theory suggests that most couples experience a substantial qualitative change to their relationship when they go through the transition to parenthood, and this change is considered to be sudden, adverse and long-lasting (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Pancer et al., 2000). Within this theoretical framework it is suggested that most couples need to be intervened with therapeutically in order to navigate this challenging and stressful time in their relationship. Couples are often seen as victims who are unprepared for this upheaval in their relationship and need outside help in order to stabilize the marriage. A lack of significant differences between long-term and short-term couples would seem to support theory 1 by demonstrating a more universal effect of the transition to parenthood.

The second theory describes the transition to parenthood as “a significant but transient stage in the development of marriage and families” (Lawrence et al., 2008, p. 41; see also Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 2003). Theory 2 says that this transition is temporary and unsettling within the relationship to varying degrees, depending on that particular couple’s individual capacity and resilience to handle these challenges, and that these changes are quantitative and small in magnitude. However, what the important distinction here is that many couples are seen as having the ability to adapt to the changes brought on by parenthood. The focus of this theoretical framework is to educate and prevent breakdown of the marital relationship by preparing couples to anticipate change and to provide couples with the tools to increase their ability to adapt to such change. Finding significant differences between groups would seem to support theory 2 by demonstrating that specific characteristics of particular couples can help them adjust and adapt better or worse during the transition to parenthood. The premise of these two theories will be explored within the context of the present study.

The purpose of this study was to examine whether or not parents who begin the transition to parenthood earlier fare better or worse in terms of relationship satisfaction than couples who have been together longer when they begin this transition. Based on evidence in past research, it was predicted that couples who were together longer when entering parenthood would report a higher level of relationship satisfaction, since they would have had a longer time together to negotiate many of the factors that have been shown to lead to relationship dissolution, such as division of labour, coparenting strategies, mutual understanding and support, and perspectives and expectations about becoming parents. This prediction was examined using a survey format with interested couples volunteering to complete a demographics and relationship satisfaction (e.g., dyadic adjustment) questionnaire package.

Several variables that have been demonstrated in past research to contribute to relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood were assessed in the demographics questionnaire. Specifically, whether couples discussed or had realistic expectations about becoming parents (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Curran et al., 2005; Feinberg, 2002; Lawrence, Nylen & Cobb, 2007; Pancer et al., 2000), whether couples identified themselves as having social support (Antonucci & Mikus, 1988; Cowan & Cowan, 1988), whether couples are satisfied with the current division of labour and childcare tasks (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Pancer et al., 2000; Reichle & Montada, 1994), and whether couples are satisfied with their sex life (Curran, 2005; Curran et al., 2006; Shapiro, Gottman & Carrere, 2000) were assessed using a self-report measure. Two factors were discovered out of these variables: whether couples had realistic expectations, were satisfied with the division of labour and childcare tasks, and were satisfied with their sex life loaded onto the same variable and whether couples discussed expectations and felt they had adequate social support loaded onto a second variable. Although unexpected, these results provide some interesting insight into how various beliefs and circumstances can influence each other.

It was decided to label the first factor as “relationship” because, as stated above, whether a couple identifies themselves as having realistic expectations and whether they are satisfied with the division of labour, childcare tasks and their sex life have been shown to positively impact relationship satisfaction. A couple who reports having realistic expectations about the transition to parenthood is more likely feel that their relationship is less strained than a couple who is struggling with adjusting to failed expectations. Furthermore, division of labour, childcare tasks and sex life are relational elements and were assessed as a couple’s level of satisfaction with those items, so it seems reasonable to label them as a *relationship* factor.

The second factor was more difficult to label, as the variables that load together seemed unrelated at first glance. It was decided to label the second factor as “environment” because whether a couple discussed their expectations prior to having children and whether couples report satisfaction with the level of social support they have during this transition appear to be more external factors related to their environment. More specifically, it could be argued that a couple who has more social support would likely be reporting it as such because this support network has helped them feel prepared and supported as new parents. Additionally, a good support network may have brought things up to the couple that they had not thought of regarding becoming new parents which lead to more discussion about their expectations.

In line with theory 2, it was predicted that couples who had been together longer would rate themselves higher on both the *relationship* and the *environment* factors than short-term couples. Contrary to the prediction, short-term couples rated both factors slightly higher than long-term couples, even though these results were not significant. These slight differences could be argued to be too small for consideration, however, a larger sample size and a greater range in length of relationship may have magnified these differences. The lack of a significant relationship between long-term and short-term couples would seem to lend support to theory 1, which suggests that couples are generally all affected in the same way by the transition to parenthood. Nevertheless, discovery of these two factors raises questions about how various beliefs and circumstances may run parallel during this transition, and warrants further research attention.

The hypothesis that a couple’s length of relationship could predict relationship satisfaction, measured as dyadic adjustment and its four subscales, was assessed using several different analyses in the current study. The averaged score for short-term and long-term couples

on each of the subscales of the DAS were first compared to see if, in fact, long-term couples assessed all subscale variables higher than short-term couples. Although it was found that long-term couples reported higher levels of dyadic consensus, dyadic satisfaction and affectional expression, while short-term couples reported higher levels of dyadic cohesion, these differences were not significant and thus this analysis did not support the prediction. Again, theory 1 seems to be more fitting with this result, suggesting that there would not be group differences. At the same time, it is noted that this particular MANOVA analysis may have been confounded by the fact that use of a MANOVA typically requires a minimum sample of 30 participants per group, whereas in the current study there were 26 short-term couples and 28 long-term couples (with outliers removed). Perhaps with a larger sample size the differences between short-term and long-term couples would be magnified.

Another analysis assessed the averaged scores for short-term and long-term couples on dyadic adjustment, which is the overall DAS score based on the four subscales. Again, in line with theory 1, long-term couples did assess dyadic adjustment slightly higher than short-term couples, but this difference was not significant and therefore did not support the prediction.

Because slight differences were found between groups on the first analyses, we decided to run further analyses on the extreme short-term and long-term groups. It was hypothesized that the difference between groups would be magnified if we looked only at the couples who had been together the least amount of time (two to five and a half years) and the most amount of time (nine to 14.5 years), eliminating those couples who fell near the average length of relationship of seven years. Similar results were found as when all couples scores were assessed, however, with the extreme groups the differences were magnified, particularly on dyadic satisfaction. That is, the extreme long-term couples' score was higher on dyadic satisfaction as compared to extreme

short-term couples and this difference was nearly significant, even though looking at only extreme groups meant that group sizes were even smaller than in the original analyses. Since the differences did appear to become larger when looking at extreme groups, it could be that, in line with theory 2, particular characteristics of a couple may help them fare better or worse in terms of relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood. However, since these results were still not significant, theory 1 seems to be maintained. The bottom line is that these varying degrees of group differences suggest that follow-up research should be done with a larger sample of participants to see if these differences are, in fact, meaningful.

Since the smaller sample size was considered to have possibly confounded the results with the MANOVA analyses, a regression was used as well to test the prediction. As mentioned in the results, although dyadic satisfaction was nearly significant at predicting length of relationship alone within the regression analyses, a significant model was found when we considered dyadic satisfaction and dyadic cohesion together. The most interesting aspect regarding these results was the *direction* upon which each variable predicted length of relationship. Specifically, it was found that the longer couples were together, the *higher* the dyadic satisfaction they reported while reporting *lower* dyadic cohesion. Dyadic satisfaction is likened to relationship satisfaction while dyadic cohesion is described as attraction between members of a dyad, in terms of being drawn to one another (Pittman, Price-Bonham & McKenry, 1983). The specific items on the DAS related to dyadic cohesion were whether the couple engages in outside interests together, has a stimulating exchange of ideas, laughs together, calmly discusses things, and works together on a project (Spanier, 1976). Thus, in the current study, the longer couples were together during the transition to parenthood, the higher relationship satisfaction they reported while reporting less of these items.

In a sense, these results indicate support for theory 2 and the prediction that the longer a couple is together when they enter the transition to parenthood the greater level of relationship satisfaction they report. Yet it is curious that this relationship tends to be dependent on the level of dyadic cohesion the couple reports. Perhaps this result is because the couples who were together longer were older and therefore could be said to have more maturity than the couples who were not together as long, and that this lead to an increased understanding of a lack of dyadic cohesion in their relationship. More specifically, since dyadic cohesion is about “doing” things together, a more mature couple may be more understanding of the fact that they are doing less together because they are busy raising a new baby, and those couples are more likely to report higher dyadic satisfaction because of this mutual understanding. However, the age difference between groups was less than a year, so it seems a large interpretive leap to conclude that these two groups would vary significantly in terms of maturity. Even the extreme groups’ age difference was less than that of the overall sample, which leads me to conclude that couples are increasingly diverse in that short-term and long-term couples are not necessarily distinct based on age factors. At the same time, it would be interesting to explore this further with a more diverse sampling, where the short-term and long-term groups do vary significantly in terms of age to see if age does play a factor in distinguishing groups in terms of relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood.

Another way of interpreting these findings also utilizes maturity as an explanatory factor. Instead of maturity in terms of *age*, however, one may also consider the maturity of the couple. Couples who delay having children until their relationship has matured may have come to accept that they have less dyadic cohesion, or that they do fewer things together, and are satisfied with that arrangement. Or perhaps they simply understand that there is less time to do things together

with the new baby to focus on. In essence, as a relationship ages or matures partners may become more comfortable with each other and feel less need to do everything together. Once the baby enters their world they likely feel more excitement about the baby and the newness surrounding that, and report more satisfaction when they do less together as a couple because it leaves them more time to spend time together as a family without the added pressure of trying to maintain the same dyadic activity level as before the baby.

The opposite scenario could work for earlier couples as well. Earlier couples may still be in more of an “infatuation” phase with their partner where they are used to doing everything together, and when the baby enters their world they struggle with the contrast effect of life before and after the baby. Earlier couples who try to maintain the same relationship they had before the baby, in terms of dyadic cohesion, would likely report less satisfaction because there simply is not enough time to continue spending so much time together and looking after the new baby. Therefore, couples who go through the transition to parenthood later are at an advantage because they are better able to negotiate and accept the natural changes that occur in their relationship because they have already started progressing in that direction anyways. As Sternberg’s (1986) Triangular Theory of Love explains, *passion*, which often characterizes relationships more in the early stages, tends to taper off over time. Passion is likely what drives couples to do everything together, in order to fill their emotional needs. Passion is also likely positively related to dyadic cohesion since dyadic cohesion is described as attraction to your partner. *Commitment* and *intimacy*, on the other hand, can be maintained or increased over the course of a relationship and are characterized by things like mutual understanding, loyalty and respect, and thus would likely be more of the driving force in more mature relationships. In this way, earlier couples who enter parenthood likely struggle to maintain their dyadic cohesion because it was the cornerstone of

passion in their relationship. It is this struggle which would lead them to report less dyadic satisfaction during the transition to parenthood.

In order to be able to understand group differences further and to be able to support explanations regarding results that would be found, it was decided to include an assessment of the reasons *why* and *when* couples chose to have children. This analysis also would help to draw out particular characteristics and beliefs couples have about parenthood, which could help to support either theory 1 or theory 2 if group differences are meaningful. In other words, if theory 1 holds true, then it would seem that the reasons why or when couples had children would be irrelevant, since there would be no group differences to explain. If, on the other hand, theory 2 were true, particular attitudes and beliefs a couple had about why and when they had children would help to explain the particular characteristics that allow different couples to function at different levels of relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood.

Couples were able to select their top three reasons *why* and *when* they chose to have children. The reasons why couples had children did not seem to be particularly suited to short-term or long-term couples, leading me to conclude that couples generally have children for the same reasons, regardless of how long they have been together. For the most part it seemed that couples choose to have children because of an innate sense of it “feeling right,” in that they simply just wanted to have children with their partner. Another main reason the couples in this study had children was because it was something they always knew they would do, indicating that having children was an innate individual desire independent of their partner. Finally, over half of the couples indicated one of the reasons they had children was because they wanted to experience a pregnancy. Interestingly, even though significantly less men chose this reason than women, over a quarter of the men in this study did select this as a reason why they had children.

It would seem that a large number of men are equally fascinated by the process of pregnancy as women.

The top four reasons, instead of three, for *when* couples had children were used because over half of the sample in this study selected these reasons, indicating that all were worth further exploration in the analyses. The differences between groups was larger on all of these items, suggesting that short-term and long-term couples in this study differed more on the reasons when they had children than the reasons why they had children, although not all of these differences were significant. This greater variability could be due, in part, to the fact that the reasons *when* couples had children would likely be more disparate between groups that are distinguished based on length of relationship than couples that are distinguished based on a non-time related factor. It seems more understandable that the reasons *why* couples have children would not be based on a time factor or how long a couple has been together.

Not surprising, more long-term than short-term couples said that they wanted to give time for their relationship to grow and develop before having children as a reason for when they had children, although this was not a significant difference. Long-term couples were also more likely to say that having a planned pregnancy was a reason when they had children, and this result was nearly significant. Because it is a fine line between what is significant and what is not, it seems reasonable to speculate about whether this difference is meaningful or not. Again, it could be argued that a larger, more diverse sample would have created a significant difference between groups on this variable. If, indeed, long-term couples select “planned pregnancy” as a reason for when they had children more than short-term couple, one couple argue the reverse that short-term couples are more likely to have unplanned pregnancies than long-term couples. This is interesting because past research has shown that unplanned pregnancies typically lead to lower

relationship satisfaction during the pregnancy and higher relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood as compared to couples who have planned pregnancies, who experience the reverse (Bouchard, Boudreau & Hebert, 2006). Hypothetically speaking, if the difference between short-term and long-term couples was significant on selecting “planned pregnancy” as a reason when couples had children, this particular study would have supported the prediction that short-term couples would report higher relationship satisfaction in the current study than long-term couples. Contradictions such as this tend to lead support to theory 2, where couples are affected to varying degrees by the transition to parenthood and have individual capacities to help them manage in unique ways.

“Biological clock/getting older” was nearly significant in differentiating the groups, thus it could be argued that with a larger and more diverse sample this difference may have been significant, warranting further consideration in terms of interpretation of this result. Keeping in mind that this difference was not significant in this study, it was still interesting to find that short-term couples selected “biological clock/getting older” as a reason for when they had children more than long-term couples, as this reason was predicted to be more applicable to long-term couples. However, since age was not a distinguishing factor between groups, this finding becomes less surprising. Perhaps since couples were essentially the same age in both groups, those who were in long-term relationships did not feel that getting older was a factor in when they had children because they knew eventually they would have children with their partner. Since short-term couples were essentially the same age as long-term couples but had been together for less time, it seems reasonable to conclude that they were older when they entered this current relationship as compared to long-term couples. Short-term couples, therefore, may have already been thinking about their age and wanting to have children when they entered their

relationship, which was why they had children sooner than long-term couples. Again, since this difference was not quite significant, these interpretations are only speculation in light of the belief that a larger, more diverse sample would have lead to more magnified differences between groups.

Finally, long-term couples did, in fact, say that they wanted to be financially stable first before they had children significantly more than short-term couples. Again, since age was not a factor in terms of distinguishing groups, this finding is interesting. In some ways it would seem that wanting to be financially stable first would only be a reason for couples who delay parenthood, since the very nature of *becoming* financially stable indicates that one would have to wait and work at it. Couples who do not wait as long before becoming parents would be less likely to choose any answer depicting a sense of “waiting” since they did not necessarily wait to have children. The reasons short-term couples would have for timing their children would seem more likely to be a *not* waiting item, such as “biological clock/getting older”, which was the case. In support of these findings, the study by Helms-Erikson (2001) did find that couples who delayed parenthood achieved higher levels of education and career prestige, were better off financially, and were more likely to have planned births. Again, however, it should be noted that in this particular study “delayed” parents were, in fact, older than “early” parents. Finally, another interesting piece to this finding was that men were significantly more likely to choose this as a reason for when they had children more than women, indicating that the male “breadwinner” mentality is still alive and active today.

Since differences between long-term and short-term couples on the reasons when they have children vary, it seems that the groups in this study have a diverse set of beliefs about when is the right time to have children. Group differences on this alone do not lend conclusive support

to theory 2, but do help to emphasize the fact that couples come with a varying set of beliefs and expectations about parenthood and these beliefs and expectations may influence how they adjust down the road to their new “parent” status.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Although there were some interesting findings in the current study leading one to speculate about a potential relationship between length of relationship and relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, some inconsistencies in the findings lead to inconclusive interpretations. Limited sample size has already been mentioned as a limitation in terms of generalization in the current study, especially with particular statistical analyses. Since many of the results in this study did indicate near significant differences between short-term and long-term couples, it would seem that a larger and more diverse sample would likely exaggerate many of these differences by creating a larger discrepancy between groups in terms of length of relationship, and thus should be considered as one suggestion for future research.

The current study chose to focus on differences between couples rather than individuals because the current prediction was that *couples* would report higher relationship satisfaction when they had been together longer at the transition to parenthood as compared to couples who had been together a shorter amount of time. However, because of some of the gender differences identified in this and past studies (see also Bouchard, Boudreau & Hebert, 2006; Condon, Boyce, & Corkindale, 2004; Fedele, Golding, Grossman, & Pollack, 1988; Lawrence, Nylen & Cobb, 2007; Salmela-Aro al., 2000; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000; Simpson et al., 2003; Tietjen & Bradley, 1985), future research may want to consider a similar study design assessing individual differences and gender differences. This seems particularly important since ages were averaged across couples and may be the reason that no age difference was found between short-

term and long-term groups. More specifically, a 40-year old man and a 25-year old woman would have averaged out to be 32.5 years, when the individual experiences, perspectives and maturity levels might be completely different for each of these people. Although we know that age was not a confounding variable in this particular study, age is also an important factor that has been shown to influence relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood (Helms-Erikson, 2001) and should be considered in future research on the transition to parenthood.

Another consideration is that the overall prediction may have been too broad given the individual differences within and between couples, allowing too many confounding variables into the study. Past research has studied similar predictions from a more specific platform. Research has discovered that timing of parenthood, in terms of age of mother, when a couple first becomes parents does predict relationship satisfaction when one considers how the couple has negotiated division of labour (Helms-Erikson, 2001). Specifically, couples who entered the transition to parenthood earlier, or when the mother was younger, reported higher relationship satisfaction when the couple had negotiated a more traditional division of labour, with women taking care of more of the housework and childcare tasks. By contrast, couples who entered the transition to parenthood later, or when the mother was older, reported higher relationship satisfaction when the couple had negotiated a more egalitarian division of labour, with partners sharing housework and childcare tasks more evenly. These findings suggest that specific negotiations within a particular relationship can have an impact on a couple's relationship satisfaction over the transition to parenthood, and that this could have confounded the current study's results which lead to more inconsistent findings. The study by Helms-Erikson, as well as the current study, both suggest the timing of parenthood as an important variable in terms of relationship satisfaction, although these findings also emphasize that timing of parenthood

should not necessarily be considered independent of the multitude of other variables within a couple's complex relationship.

Other research has demonstrated that different personality factors moderate the effect of length of relationship on relationship satisfaction, at least for women (Bouchard & Arseneault, 2005). It was found that as the length of relationship increases, the effect of a woman's neuroticism on her dyadic adjustment became more negative. Interestingly, the effect of a woman's openness was positively related to dyadic adjustment earlier in the relationship and negatively later in the relationship. Although this particular study was not assessing dyadic adjustment over the transition to parenthood, it does bring to the foreground the importance of individual personality factors as moderators of relationship satisfaction over the course of a relationship. Since personality factors were not directly considered in the current study, this too may have been a factor that contributed to inconsistent findings.

Despite the limitations noted with the current study, many interesting findings were revealed and inform the current research on the transition to parenthood. This study used a fairly homogenous group of participants in terms of age, length of relationship and ages of children, and was not longitudinal in nature, and thus the results that were found are even more interesting given these limitations. Another strength, as noted in the results, was that the response rate to the questionnaire in this study was 92%. This response rate is partially due to gathering consent prior to mailing out the package. However, it is also noted that many participants expressed enthusiasm for the research topic when they initially contacted me to participate. Since couples were not rewarded in any direct, tangible way for their participation, one could assume that this area of research is of particular fascination to couples, particularly those going through the transition to parenthood. Thus, research on the transition to parenthood should be explored in

greater depth in order to help satisfy the curiosity of the general public and to better inform the educational and therapeutic practices that are used with couples today.

Conclusion

Although I have chosen to focus primarily on the challenges of the transition to parenthood, it is not the purpose of this study to neglect the positive elements of this transition as well. Of course there are many wonderful adjustments to be made, such as bringing couples closer by giving them a shared task, common goals, shared joys, and an increased sense of meaning and purpose in life (Cowan & Cowan, 1988; Curran, 2005; Cusinato, 1994; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995). Researchers have even found that marital quality may even increase over the transition to parenthood for some couples (Belsky & Rovine, 1990). However, the focus of this study on the more challenging aspects of the transition to parenthood is based on the fact that the negatives tend to outweigh the positives, statistically speaking (Curran). This imbalance creates the need for further research so that we, as psychology practitioners, may learn how to create and implement appropriate preventative educational seminars and therapeutic interventions designed to address these major challenges before and during this nearly universal transition.

Studying whether delaying parenthood has an impact on relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood is another piece in the complex puzzle when it comes to developing informed interventions for working with new parents. We already know that timing of marriage has an effect on relationship quality, with couples who marry earlier being at greater risk of marital dissolution than those who marry later (Booth & Edwards, 1985). Although the current study was unable to conclusively demonstrate the same effect of timing of parenthood, some of the current results indicate that it is a possibility. If, in fact, couples who wait longer to have children fare better in terms of their marital adjustment as compared to couples who have

children earlier in their relationship, then this is important information that may help inform couples' decisions about whether to wait or not when deciding to have children. Even more importantly, *why* couples who delay the transition to parenthood fare better can be analyzed, and hopefully the strengths they have can be shared with couples who choose not to wait in order to help buffer them against some of the more challenging or detrimental effects of becoming parents early on in a marriage. Ultimately, the goal in any of the research on the transition to parenthood is in one way or another aimed at increasing our understanding of one of the more complex and difficult transitions of life, with the hopes that we may be better able to help couples adjust so as to provide better family environments for our children to grow up in, giving them the best possible chance in life.

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Appendix A

The Impact of Timing of Parenthood on Relationship Satisfaction

Researcher: Dawn Furlong, BA, MSc (in progress)

Institution: University of Calgary

Phone: (403) 835-1902

Supervisor: Dr. Lee Handy

Phone: (403) 220-4069

The current study is looking at how relationships are affected by the timing of parenthood. Please answer all of the questions as accurately and honestly as you can. If you require further explanation for any of the questions, please do not hesitate to contact the researcher.

Requirements for Participation: Please note that the following are requirements in order to participate in the current study. If the following do not apply to you or you have any questions regarding the reasons for these requirements, please contact the researcher.

- Both partners are first-time parents (i.e., do not have children from previous relationships)
- Parents were still together at the time of the child's birth.
- Child or children must be between the ages of 3 and 24 months of age.

Demographics

1. Sex: M _____ F _____
2. Age: _____ Years
3. Are you and your partner currently separated? Yes _____ No _____
4. Relationship Duration:
For all of the following questions, if the response is less than a year, write "< 1". If the question does not apply to you and your partner, write "0".
 - a. How many years have you been with your partner total (including dating period)?

 - b. If common-law and not married, how many years have you lived with your partner?

 - c. If married, how many years did you live with your partner prior to getting married?

 - d. How many years have you been married? _____
5. Children
 - a. How many children do you have? _____
 - b. Please indicate the age(s) of your child/children (please keep in mind that your child/children need to be 3-24 months of age in order to participate):
 - #1 _____ (months)
 - #2 _____ (months)
 - #3 _____ (months) If you require more space, please use the space below.

Continued...

6. Reasons for Having Children

Please read through and check your top THREE reasons for why you and your partner had your child/children.

Unplanned Pregnancy _____ It "Felt Right" _____
 Cultural or Religious Beliefs _____ Pressure from Partner _____
 Pressure from Family/Friends _____ To Improve My Relationship _____
 Tax/Financial Benefits _____ To Fit In With Family/Social Group _____
 Time Off from Work _____ Always Knew I'd Have Children _____
 Increase Commitment from Partner _____ Wanted To Be Pregnant _____
 To Have Someone Who Loves/Needs Me _____
 Other _____ Please specify:

7. Timing of Children in Your Relationship

The following question is designed to determine the reasons why parents have children *when* they do. Please check your top THREE reasons as to why you and your partner had your child/children when you did.

Unplanned Pregnancy _____ Planned Pregnancy _____
 Career or Education Goals _____ Earn Parental Leave First _____
 Pressure from Family/Friends _____ "Biological Clock"/Getting Older _____
 Wanted to Be Financially Stable First _____
 Did Not Want Children Until Now _____
 To Have Children Close in Age to Friend(s)/Family Member(s) Children _____
 To Be Pregnant at Same Time as Friend(s)/Family Member(s) _____
 To Give Time for Relationship to Grow/Develop Before Children _____
 Other _____ Please specify:

Continued...

8. Preparation, Expectations & Support

If any of the following questions do not apply to you, please write "0".

- a. How many marriage preparation classes have you taken? _____
- b. How many times have you and your partner been to couples counselling (including current)? _____
- c. How many parenting classes have you taken (including current)? _____
- d. As an adult, how many close friends or family members have you seen go through the transition to parenthood? _____

Please circle the word that best describes how you feel about the following as you are going through the transition to parenthood.

- e. My partner and I discussed our expectations about parenthood before becoming parents.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

- f. Now that I am a parent, I feel that my partner and I had realistic expectations about parenthood.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

- g. I have a lot of social support as a parent.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

- h. I am satisfied with the division of labour in my relationship.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

- i. I am satisfied with the division of childcare tasks in my relationship.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

- j. I am satisfied with my sex life.

Strongly Disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly Agree

Appendix B

DYADIC ADJUSTMENT SCALE

Most persons have disagreements in their relationships. Please indicate below the approximate extent of agreement or disagreement between you and your partner for each item on the following list.

	<u>Always Agree</u>	<u>Almost Always Agree</u>	<u>Occa- sionally Disagree</u>	<u>Fre- quently Disagree</u>	<u>Almost Always Disagree</u>	<u>Always Disagree</u>
1. Handling family finances	5	4	3	2	1	0
2. Matters of recreation	5	4	3	2	1	0
3. Religious matters	5	4	3	2	1	0
4. Demonstrations of affection	5	4	3	2	1	0
5. Friends	5	4	3	2	1	0
6. Sex relations	5	4	3	2	1	0
7. Conventionality (correct or proper behavior)	5	4	3	2	1	0
8. Philosophy of life	5	4	3	2	1	0
9. Ways of dealing with parents or in-laws	5	4	3	2	1	0
10. Aims, goals, and things believed important	5	4	3	2	1	0
11. Amount of time spent together	5	4	3	2	1	0
12. Making major decision	5	4	3	2	1	0
13. Household tasks	5	4	3	2	1	0
14. Leisure time interests and activities	5	4	3	2	1	0
15. Career decisions	5	4	3	2	1	0

	<u>All the time</u>	<u>Most of the time</u>	<u>More often than not</u>	<u>Occa- sionally</u>	<u>Rarely</u>	<u>Never</u>
16. How often do you discuss or have you considered divorce, separation, or terminating your relationship?	0	1	2	3	4	5
17. How often do you or your mate leave the house after a fight?	0	1	2	3	4	5
18. In general, how often do you think that things between you and your partner are going well?	0	1	2	3	4	5
19. Do you confide in your mate?	0	1	2	3	4	5
20. Do you ever regret that you married? (<i>or lived together</i>)	0	1	2	3	4	5
21. How often do you and your partner quarrel?	0	1	2	3	4	5
22. How often do you and your mate "get on each other's nerves?"	0	1	2	3	4	5

	Almost Every Day 4	Every Day 3	Occa- sionally 2	Rarely 1	Never 0
23. Do you kiss your mate?	All of them	Most of them	Some of them	Very few of them	None of them
24. Do you and your mate engage in outside interests together?	4	3	2	1	0

How often would you say the following events occur between you and your mate?

	Never	Less than once a month	Once or twice a month	Once or twice a week	Once a day	More often
25. Have a stimulating exchange of ideas	0	1	2	3	4	5
26. Laugh together	0	1	2	3	4	5
27. Calmly discuss things	0	1	2	3	4	5
28. Work together on a project	0	1	2	3	4	5

There are some things about which couples sometimes agree and sometimes disagree. Indicate if either item below caused difference of opinions or were problems in your relationship during the past few weeks. (Check yes or no)

	Yes	No	
29.	0	1	Being too tired for sex.
30.	0	1	Not showing love.

31. The dots on the following line represent different degrees of happiness in your relationship. The middle point, "happy," represents the degree of happiness of most relationships. Please circle the dot which best describes the degree of happiness, all things considered, of your relationship.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6
Extremely Unhappy	Fairly Unhappy	A Little Unhappy	Happy	Very Happy	Extremely Happy	Perfect

32. Which of the following statements best describes how you feel about the future of your relationship?

- 5 I want desperately for my relationship to succeed, and *would go to almost any length* to see that it does.
4 I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do all I can* to see that it does.
3 I want very much for my relationship to succeed, and *will do my fair share* to see that it does.
2 It would be nice if my relationship succeeded, but *I can't do much more than I am doing now* to help it succeed.
1 It would be nice if it succeeded, but I *refuse to do any more than I am doing now* to keep the relationship going.
0 My relationship can never succeed, and *there is no more that I can do* to keep the relationship going.