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## From Partnership to Parenthood: A Review of Marital Change Across the Transition to Parenthood

*The transition to parenthood is generally seen as one of the most challenging events in the early stages of marriage. But is it really that detrimental for marriage and do all couples go through the same changes? This article provides a state-of-the-art review of research on marital change across the transition to parenthood. I first address to what extent the transition to parenthood affects the partner relationship. I then consider factors that explain why some couples fare better or worse than others across the transition to parenthood. Two factors that play a central role are (1) adaptive processes and (2) personal and situational characteristics. Finally, this article builds an evidence-based case for an integrative model of the transition to parenthood.*

Over half a century ago, LeMasters (1957) interviewed a group of young parents and found that 83% reported an “extensive” or “severe” crisis in adjusting to their first child. LeMasters conceptualized the family as a small system and argued that adding a new member to the system implied a drastic reorganization of that system. He further claimed that even though “babies do not usually appear to married couples

completely by surprise” (p. 355), children and parenthood were so romanticized in society that couples were caught unprepared. Since LeMasters presented his discovery, numerous studies have been done to investigate the marital changes that accompany the transition to parenthood. One of the most significant changes identified in this large body of research is that marital satisfaction and marital quality decline after the birth of the first child (e.g., Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1983; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; see Belsky & Kelly, 1994, for an overview). (Throughout this article, the use of the words *marriage* and *marital* is not meant to ignore or exclude unmarried partners who become parents. In general, there has been little agreement in the literature on the use of concepts as marital quality, satisfaction, adjustment, and happiness; see Kluwer, 2000. In research on the transition to parenthood, studies have operationalized marital quality and satisfaction as multidimensional assessments of marriage and as spouses’ individual perceptions of their marriage, i.e., satisfaction. Marital stability generally refers to whether spouses stay together or not.) In addition, sexual satisfaction tends to decline (Grote & Clark, 2001) and patterns of intimacy and communication change, and new parents report increased amounts of conflict and disagreement relative to before childbirth (Cowan et al., 1985; Grote & Clark; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 1996, 1997; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007) whereas this increase in conflict is not observed among couples who remain childless (Cowan et al.; Crohan, 1996).

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The general view of the transition to parenthood that has dominated research is that becoming a parent entails primarily negative changes for the relationship. But is such a negative view warranted? And do all couples go through the same changes? Under which circumstances are changes more likely to occur? The current article addresses these questions and has the purpose of providing a state-of-the-art review of research on the transition to parenthood and building an evidence-based case for an integrative model of the transition to parenthood. The first section of this review addresses the scope of the problem: To what extent does first childbirth affect the partner relationship? The second section considers factors that explain why some couples fare better or worse than others across the transition to parenthood. Two factors that play a central role in how couples deal with major life transitions are (1) adaptive processes and (2) personal and situational characteristics (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). The third section integrates these findings into a model of the transition to parenthood and concludes with theoretical considerations, directions for future research, and practical implications.

#### THE SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM: MARITAL CHANGE ACROSS THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD

For most parents, the birth of a child brings joy and happiness, and parenthood knows many rewards, such as affection, a sense of achievement, the fulfillment of reproductive needs and social expectations, and relationship stability (Petch & Halford, 2008). At the same time, it requires adjustment to the new role as a parent and to having a baby that demands their constant care and attention. Coping with crying, the physical demands of breastfeeding, and disturbed sleep add to the challenges that couples face when they become parents (Petch & Halford). Babies and young children demand time and energy that parents can no longer spend together or by themselves. New parents, and mothers in particular, thus face a drastic change in their time schedule, spending much more time on family work than before childbirth (e.g., Belsky, Lang, & Huston, 1986; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988) and spending less time on leisure and activities together with their partner (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins,

2008; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; MacDermid, Huston, & MacHale, 1990). In fact, most of the leisure time that partners have together is spent with the baby (Huston & Vangelisti). Accordingly, the focus of attention and energy at home largely shifts from the partner and the self to the baby, and this can have an adverse effect on the marital relationship.

Some early studies on the marital career have claimed to find a U-shaped pattern for marital quality over the family life cycle, with the average marital quality being higher in the pre- and post-parental stages (e.g., Rollins & Feldman, 1970), but this appears to be a rather modest effect. Most longitudinal studies, following couples from pregnancy to after the birth of the first child, have found a small but reliable decrease in marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood (e.g., Belsky et al., 1983; Cowan & Cowan, 1992, 1995; Crohan, 1996; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Shapiro, Gottman, & Carrere, 2000). This effect has been found in studies in the United States (e.g., Belsky et al., 1983; Cowan & Cowan, 1992, 1995; Crohan; Hackel & Ruble; Ruble et al., 1988; Shapiro et al.), England (Moss, Bolland, Foxman, & Owen, 1986), Germany (Engfer, 1988), and The Netherlands (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), even though these countries vary substantially in parent benefits, child-care arrangements, women's employment patterns, and gender role divisions.

A major limitation is that many of the earlier studies did not use a comparison group of nonparents, so it is unclear whether declines in marital quality are because of the onset of parenthood or the mere passage of time in marriage. For example, a decline in marital satisfaction over time is not necessarily unique to couples having their first child, and some studies do not find a difference between first-time parents and nonparents (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; MacDermid et al., 1990; McHale & Huston, 1985; White & Booth, 1985). Studies that have answered to the call for including comparison groups of nonparents, however, have shown that first-time parents experience a greater and more sudden decline in marital satisfaction than nonparents (e.g., Cowan et al., 1985; Crohan, 1996; Doss, Rhoades, Stanley, & Markman, 2009; Lawrence, Rothman, Cobb, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008; Schulz, Cowan, & Cowan, 2006; Shapiro et al., 2000; for a meta-analysis, see Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003). This raises three important questions that

have received relatively little attention in the transition to parenthood literature so far. First, are negative changes inevitable when going through the transition to parenthood or do some couples fare better than others? Second, what is the magnitude of the negative effect and can it be attributed to the first childbirth? Third, are negative changes permanent or do relationships recover from the decline across the transition to parenthood? These questions will be addressed below.

#### *Are Negative Changes Inevitable?*

In the Penn State Child and Family Development Project, Jay Belsky followed a large number of couples from the first trimester of pregnancy to 9 months postpartum (Belsky & Kelly, 1994). A little over half of the couples experienced a moderate (38%) to severe (13%) decline in marital quality, as indicated by declining communication, declining feelings of love, increasing conflict, and increasing feelings of ambivalence. Many couples (30%) experienced no change and, surprisingly, some couples (19%) experienced an improvement in their relationship. Likewise, Belsky and Rovine (1990) studied 128 couples at four waves from the first trimester of pregnancy to 36 months postpartum. Overall, they reported linear declines in feelings of love and maintenance behaviors and linear increases in feelings of ambivalence and conflict across the transition to parenthood. When looking at various patterns of marital change, however, they discovered that 10% experienced an accelerating decline and 34% experienced a steady linear decline in the relationship. Thirty-five percent experienced no change, and 21% experienced a modest increase in the relationship.

Although the actual percentages will likely vary across samples, this work showed that many couples did not experience the widely assumed negative change across the transition to parenthood. The overall pattern of negative change masked much of the variation in marital change across the transition to parenthood, and this in of itself is an important finding. This may, in fact, be the case in many, if not most, studies on the transition to parenthood, as such work largely examines average levels of change instead of studying variability in patterns of change. An interesting question is what distinguishes couples that experience decline from those that experience no change

or improvement. This will be addressed in the second section of this review.

#### *What Is the Magnitude of the Effect?*

Twenge et al. (2003) presented a meta-analysis of the effect of children on marital satisfaction. Their primary goal was to verify the magnitude and direction of the effect and to investigate the scope and moderators of the effect. They included 97 studies (both published articles and unpublished dissertations and master's theses) reporting both longitudinal and cross-sectional studies. All studies used samples that included both parents and nonparents. Their results indicate that, overall, parents report significantly lower marital satisfaction than nonparents but that it is a small effect (effect size  $d = -.19$ ; Cohen, 1977). Women showed a slight but significantly larger effect size ( $d = -.19$ ) than men ( $d = -.13$ ), indicating that women's marital satisfaction declined to a greater extent than men's marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood. The effect size in studies comparing childless couples with parents of infants was moderate ( $d = -.38$ ) and significantly higher than the effect size of studies comparing childless couples with parents of children older than 2 ( $d = -.20$ ). This means that marital satisfaction declined to a greater extent among parents of infants than among parents of children older than 2, as compared to childless couples. The magnitude of this effect is in line with a study by Lawrence and coworkers (2008), who also found that parents of infants reported steeper declines than nonparents (effect size  $r = .24$ , which is considered moderate; Cohen).

Twenge and coworkers (2003) reported that men's marital satisfaction was relatively invariant across children's age ( $d$ 's ranging between  $-.25$  and  $-.30$ ). Women with infants, however, had much lower marital satisfaction ( $d = -.50$ , which is on the verge of a large effect), compared with childless women. Comparing childless women with mothers of children older than 2 resulted in a much smaller effect size ( $d = -.14$ ), suggesting that the difference between parents and nonparents occurs primarily during infancy but levels off when the child grows older. This is consistent with the findings of Doss and colleagues (2009), who reported a sudden decline in marital satisfaction among parents of infants, with large

effect sizes for both mothers ( $d = -.71$ ) and fathers ( $d = -.45$ ). Parents and nonparents, however, generally showed similar amounts of decline in overall relationship functioning of the first 8 years of marriage. Finally, Twenge and colleagues also reported a cohort effect, showing that more recent generations of parents experience greater declines in marital satisfaction.

Twenge and colleagues (2003) explained their results by the fact that women, parents of infants, and more recent birth cohorts experience more role conflict and a greater restriction of freedom across the transition to parenthood. Women must deal with more personal and career-related changes because of pregnancy, childbirth, and intensive postpartum child care than men. In addition, infants demand more direct caregiving than older children. Finally, more recent birth cohorts experience more nontraditional roles (i.e., more women have a professional career and men are more expected to participate actively in parenting), which requires more adjustment after childbirth (e.g., Jenkins, Rasbash, & O'Connor, 2003). Particular strengths of this work are that it combined the findings of many studies, provides information about the size and moderators of the effect, and used only studies that compared parents with nonparents. A limitation is that this work does not provide insight into the underlying processes that are at work across the transition to parenthood, as meta-analysis is a less suitable tool for testing mediation effects.

#### *Are Negative Changes Permanent?*

Although most longitudinal studies on the transition to parenthood focus on the first year after childbirth, several studies included measurements that go beyond the first year. Kluwer and Johnson (2007) conducted a 5-year longitudinal study and assessed relationship quality during pregnancy, at 6 months postpartum, at 15 months postpartum, and at 4 years postpartum. Their results showed that relationship quality decreased linearly across the transition to parenthood, but the effect leveled off somewhat between the third and fourth assessments. Belsky and Rovine (1990) studied couples at four waves from the first trimester of pregnancy to 36 months postpartum. They reported overall linear declines in feelings of love and maintenance behaviors and linear increases in feelings of ambivalence and conflict across the transition

to parenthood and showed that the observed marital changes across the transition to parenthood go beyond the first year after childbirth.

Using yearly measurements, Doss and colleagues (2009) examined the effect of the first childbirth on relationship functioning using longitudinal data over the first 8 years of marriage. Their results revealed that parents showed a sudden, small to medium-sized deterioration in relationship functioning, in terms of relationship satisfaction, problem intensity, poor conflict management, and negative communication, following the birth of the first child that tended to persist throughout the remaining 4 years after birth. They observed a gradual deterioration among a group of couples who did not have children during the study, and this deterioration entailed relationship satisfaction only. Finally, Twenge and coworkers (2003) concluded from their meta-analysis that having more children was related to less marital satisfaction ( $d = -.13$ ), implying that the decline in marital satisfaction tends to persist over time.

A relevant question in this regard is whether the decline in postpartum marital satisfaction in fact entails a decline back to prepregnancy levels of satisfaction because of a *transition to pregnancy effect*. This entails an increase in marital satisfaction from prepregnancy to pregnancy, because couples might experience a "honeymoon" of cooperation and togetherness during their first pregnancy (Doss et al., 2009). As one of the few, Lawrence and colleagues (2008) included prepregnancy rates of marital satisfaction to investigate this issue. Their study included four waves of data among 104 parent couples who underwent the transition to parenthood during the study and a comparison group of 52 nonparent couples who remained voluntarily childless. They found no evidence for a transition to pregnancy effect: Spouses' level of satisfaction did not increase significantly after they became pregnant.

#### *Summary and Discussion*

First, the research reviewed above showed that negative changes in the relationship are likely but far from inevitable. Roughly half of the couples experience negative changes whereas the other half experiences no changes or an improvement in the relationship. Second, the research showed that the negative effect of children on marital satisfaction is small but

can become quite substantial among parents of infants, among women, and especially among mothers of infants. It also showed that parents report greater and more sudden declines in marital quality than nonparents, although a decline in marital quality over time is common among nonparents as well. Finally, the effect of the first childbirth on the marital relationship appears to persist over time and does not result from increased levels of satisfaction during pregnancy.

Why, then, do some studies find no differences between parents and childless couples (Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; MacDermid et al., 1990; McHale & Huston, 1985; White & Booth, 1985)? Except for White and Booth, these studies based their conclusions on one sample of parents, and this sample might have had a larger than average number of parents who increase in satisfaction or remain constant. In addition, their sample (as well as the sample of White & Booth) was collected in the early 1980s, and perhaps there are differences between samples collected more recently as the gender norms have changed (Twenge et al., 2003). Finally, many of the earlier studies have not considered potential moderators of the effect of childbirth on the relationship. For example, although Cast (2004) found similar levels of individual and marital well-being among couples with children and childless couples, role incongruence negatively affected well-being among parents but not among nonparents. Therefore, an important question that will be addressed in the next section is why some couples fare better than others across the transition to parenthood.

#### WHY SOME COUPLES FARE BETTER OR WORSE THAN OTHERS

The previous section has shown that even though many couples fare quite well after the first childbirth, roughly half of the couples suffer from negative changes that can become substantial and that persist over time. This warrants further attention for the negative changes in relationships across the transition to parenthood, as relationship dissatisfaction, conflict, and parental distress have a negative influence on children's emotional well-being (e.g., Grych & Fincham, 1990), parenting styles (e.g., Erel & Burman, 1995), and even the offspring's marital harmony (Amato & Booth, 2001). Thus, it is crucial to understand why

some couples fare better than others across the transition to parenthood. This section therefore reviews research that has addressed factors that play a role in how couples deal with major life transitions. These factors are best captured by (1) adaptive processes and (2) personal and situational characteristics (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Adaptive processes refer to the ways couples deal with conflict and marital difficulties (Karney & Bradbury), which forms an important determinant of marital quality (e.g., Bradbury, Cohan, & Karney, 1998; Gottman, 1979, 1994; Kluwer, 2000). The nature of how couples deal with problems, stressors, and transitions can exacerbate or alleviate the impact of the event on marital quality. In addition, personal and situational factors can contribute to the impact of an event or transition and affect how couples adapt to the event or transition (Karney & Bradbury).

#### *Adaptive Processes Across the Transition to Parenthood*

One of the earliest attempts to explain why some marriages work and others do not focused on the behaviors that are exchanged during marital interactions (e.g., Gottman, 1979). Research in this behavioral tradition has concentrated on conflict and problem-solving behaviors, and the way couples interact and handle their conflicts was seen as one of the most important determinants of marital quality (e.g., Gottman, 1994). Karney and Bradbury (1995) argued that behavioral theory is the only theoretical perspective that specifies the mechanism of marital change, and according to Kelley and others (1983), variables that affect close relationships can only do so through their influence on partner interactions. Applying behavioral theory to the transition to parenthood, marital interactions (or adaptive processes; Karney & Bradbury) therefore play a central role in enabling couples to adapt to new circumstances and situations. I will therefore consider marital conflict, marital interactions, and other adaptive processes such as maintenance and support.

*Conflict frequency and conflict issues.* As noted in the introduction, cross-sectional and longitudinal studies have shown that new parents report increased amounts of conflict and disagreement relative to before childbirth



(Cowan et al., 1985; Grote & Clark, 2001; Kluwer et al., 1996, 1997; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert 2000; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), whereas the same increase is not observed among childless couples (Cowan et al.; Crohan, 1996). To what extent is this increase in conflict related to the decline in marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood? Kluwer and Johnson addressed this question using longitudinal data from 293 Dutch couples to examine the association between conflict frequency and relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. They showed that higher levels of conflict during pregnancy were related to lower levels of relationship quality across the transition to parenthood. Those with high levels of conflict and low levels of relationship quality during pregnancy were likely to suffer most from the transition to parenthood. This suggests that couples with low levels of conflict and high levels of relationship satisfaction during pregnancy fare better across the transition to parenthood. I will return to this issue in the last section.

What do new parents argue about? In a Dutch cross-sectional study, Kluwer and colleagues (1996) showed that the division of household labor, which is known to become more traditional after the transition to parenthood (e.g., Belsky et al., 1986; Grote, Clark, & Moore, 2004; Grote, Naylor & Clark, 2002; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Kluwer et al., 1997; Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 2002; Ruble et al., 1988), is a focal issue in marital conflict after the transition to parenthood. They showed that marital conflict over the division of labor was related more strongly to wives' dissatisfaction than to husbands' dissatisfaction. They suggested that the decrease in marital satisfaction among wives after the birth of the first child might be partly related to discontent and conflict about the division of household labor, although they did not test this assumption. Research has shown that women's expectations regarding the division of labor are often violated and that this negatively affects their marital satisfaction (e.g., Belsky, 1985; Belsky et al.; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Hackel & Ruble; Kalmuss, Davidson, & Cushman, 1992; Ruble et al.). In addition, major life changes such as the transition to parenthood often cause couples to reexamine their prior arrangements and reframe relationship events. Perceptions of injustice and imbalance often

become accentuated in this process (Holmes & Levinger, 1994). Other critical conflict issues across the transition to parenthood are the amount of time partners spend together, how leisure time is spent, physical and emotional intimacy, and paid work (e.g., working hours, working overtime; Kluwer, 2008).

*Marital (conflict) interaction.* In a three-wave longitudinal study among Dutch couples with measurements during pregnancy and 5 and 14 months postpartum, Kluwer and her coworkers (2002) showed that conflict interaction patterns changed across the transition to parenthood. Partners reported more demand/withdraw interaction and less constructive conflict interaction after the transition to parenthood relative to during pregnancy. The increase in demand/withdraw behaviors and the decrease in constructive behaviors appeared primarily between 5 and 14 months postpartum. This might be related to the fact that most women are back to work and juggling multiple responsibilities by this time. A limitation of this study is that their measurement of interaction patterns did not go beyond the 14th month postpartum, so we cannot conclude that the reported changes in marital interaction persist over time. In a vignette study among Dutch parents in the first 18 months after childbirth, however, Kluwer et al. (2000) showed that demand/withdraw interaction was a likely response to conflict over the division of labor at 18 months postpartum as well. There is the possibility that problematic communication sequences develop regardless of parental status, although it seems unlikely that parental status has no effect on marital communication, given the substantial changes in household labor and child care that ensue. Crohan (1996) also showed that new parents reported fewer positive behaviors, more negative behaviors, and increased avoidance across the transition to parenthood in a longitudinal study on the first 2 years of marriage, but she found similar changes among a comparison group of childless couples. There was one exception: New parents reported more passive avoidance (i.e., becoming quiet and pulling away from the partner) after childbirth than before childbirth, whereas this change over time was not observed among childless couples. She suggested that this increase might be because of the limited time and energy that new parents can devote to conflict resolution and that new parents might not want their child to witness

their arguments. In both cases, passive withdrawal might be a better option than destructive behaviors. Indeed, passive avoidance predicted increases in marital happiness at the postpartum measurement among new parents, whereas destructive conflict behaviors and active avoidance (i.e., leaving to cool down before talking out the disagreement) predicted decreases in marital happiness at the postpartum measurement. Although this points at the possibility that passive avoidance benefits new parents, passive withdrawal does not resolve the conflict issue, so it might reoccur in the long run (Crohan).

In a four-wave longitudinal study that included both observed interactions of couples during a problem-solving task and self-reports, Cox, Paley, Burchinal, and Payne (1999) found that couples in which neither partner showed positive problem-solving communication before childbirth expressed the least marital satisfaction and reported the biggest declines in satisfaction after the transition to parenthood (i.e., up to 24 months postpartum). In line with this, Shapiro and colleagues (2000), who conducted a longitudinal study on the first 6 years of marriage among couples who had their first child and couples who remained childless, found that wives who became mothers had relatively stable or increasing marital satisfaction during the transition to parenthood when their husband expressed fondness, affection, and high relationship awareness during the first year of marriage. In contrast, there was a steeper decline in marital satisfaction among mothers when the husband expressed negativity and disappointment. They note that wives might be particularly sensitive to their husbands' positive and negative behavior. This is corroborated by research by Kluwer and colleagues (2002), who found that wives were more sensitive to the way they were treated during marital conflict across the transition to parenthood than husbands (see also Kluwer, Tumewu, & Van den Bos, 2009).

*Other adaptive processes.* Relationship maintenance involves the ways in which partners communicate with each other to sustain intimacy and closeness, including discussing problems, expressing needs, and accommodating to the partner's needs (Braiker & Kelley, 1979). Maintenance predicts relationship satisfaction in the long run (Huston & Chorost, 1994). Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz, and Feldman (2005) showed

in a longitudinal study that relationship maintenance decreased after the transition to parenthood. In addition, dyadic emotional attunement, which involves verbal and nonverbal cues of emotional availability and responsiveness, also decreased over the transition to parenthood (Curran, Hazen, Jacobvitz, Feldman, & Sasaki, 2006).

The availability of social support (from partner and close others) has been associated with reduced distress during times of stress (Rafaeli & Gleason, 2009). Rholes, Simpson, Campbell, and Grich (2001) reported that women perceived significant declines in spousal support and increases in spousal anger across the transition to parenthood. The husbands' perception of their own support also declined (see also Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, Tran, & Wilson, 2003). This might account for an increase in distress across the transition to parenthood; Stemp, Turner, and Noh (1986) showed that initial postpartum support provided by the husband was associated with less postpartum distress among wives 1 year later. Social support, as assessed by the frequency of contact with relatives, friends, and neighbors, did not influence changes in distress. Thus, spousal support might buffer wives' increase in postpartum distress. A critical note is in place, however, because these authors used a measure of marital intimacy as a proxy for spousal support. In addition, supportive actions have been found ineffective or even harmful at times because they can undermine a recipient's self-esteem and focus the attention on the stressor (for a review, see Rafaeli & Gleason).

*Summary and discussion.* The research reviewed above consistently showed that marital conflict increases across the transition to parenthood and that marital (conflict) interactions become increasingly negative and decreasingly positive. Furthermore, adaptive processes such as relationship maintenance, emotional responsiveness, and spousal support decrease across the transition to parenthood.

The change in marital (conflict) interaction appears to affect wives more than husbands. This might contribute to the decline in marital satisfaction that is found to be steeper among wives than among husbands. The reviewed findings further suggest that the transition to parenthood fortifies relationship problems that already exist during pregnancy. Thus, those

who have little conflict and show positive interactions prior to childbirth are less vulnerable to declines in marital quality across the transition to parenthood. The research reviewed in this section showed similar results for samples of Dutch (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Kluwer et al., 1996, 1997, 2000, 2002) and American (Cowan et al., 1985; Cox et al., 1999; Grote & Clark, 2001; Shapiro et al., 2000) respondents and for African American versus White American spouses (Crohan, 1996). The fact that new parent benefits, child-care arrangements, women's employment patterns, and gender role division are very different in both nations adds to the robustness of these marital changes across the transition to parenthood.

Although a substantial proportion of couples experience negative effects in marital (conflict) interaction, it is clear that some do not. It remains for future research to further clarify such issues. In addition, a question that has yet been unanswered is *why* changes in marital (conflict) interaction occur. One reason might be that new parents have less time and energy to spend on the constructive resolution of conflict. The reported increase in conflict avoidance and withdrawal points in this direction (Crohan, 1996; Kluwer et al., 2000, 2002). New parents have to deal with stress and time pressure (e.g., combining work and child-care demands), noise (e.g., coping with crying), and parental fatigue (e.g., because of breast feeding and disturbed sleep). Time pressure, noise, and fatigue might diminish partners' *self-regulatory strength*, which represents their capacity to control impulses at a particular time and in a particular situation. Self-regulatory strength is a limited, depletable, and renewable resource that fluctuates as a function of situational factors such as stress, frustration, or exhaustion (Baumeister & Heatherton, 1996). Finkel and Campbell (2001) showed that self-regulatory strength depletion decreases the likelihood that individuals engage in accommodative behavior (i.e., responding constructively rather than destructively to negative partner behavior). Thus, new parents might report more destructive conflict behavior and fewer constructive behaviors because they have a depleted self-regulatory strength because of stress, time pressure, noise, and fatigue. Given that the burden of family labor falls on women, the deleterious effects of stress, limited time, and fatigue may fall

disproportionally on wives, with subsequent reductions on their self-regulatory strength. Interestingly, recent interventions focused on relationship enhancement or prevention across the transition to parenthood include teaching couples emotional regulation skills (e.g., Shapiro & Gottman, 2005).

A related issue is that new parents are preoccupied with the baby, who requires constant 24-hour care and is completely dependent on them. This might cause new parents to be less psychologically available and less responsive to their partner's wishes and needs. Perceived partner responsiveness refers to the belief that the partner is cognizant of, sensitive to, and behaviorally supportive of the self (Reis, Clark, & Holmes, 2004) and is an important element of constructive conflict behavior and relationship maintenance. Finally, the combination of paid work and family work might cause the so-called work-family conflict and stress to spill over to the relationship (e.g., Bolger, DeLongis, Kessler, & Wethington, 1989; Repetti, 1989). An important direction for future research is to investigate the determinants of changes in marital interaction after first childbirth because this could provide crucial insight into the psychological mechanisms of marital change across the transition to parenthood.

#### *Personal and Situational Characteristics*

Personal or situational characteristics, such as attachment style and personality, can function as vulnerabilities or resources. They can contribute to or alleviate stressful events and affect how couples adapt to individual and marital difficulties (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Indeed, several studies have investigated the individual, child, and marital characteristics that render couples more or less vulnerable to negative changes across the transition to parenthood.

*Social economic status.* In their attempt to explain why some couples experience decline and others improve, Belsky and Rovine (1990) concluded that those who were younger, less educated, and married fewer years and those with lower incomes more often experienced a decline rather than improvement. They argued that younger and less educated parents and those who earn less are less prepared for the challenges of parenthood in terms of time, energy, money,



and commitment. By contrast, Twenge et al.'s (2003) meta-analysis showed that parents with a high socioeconomic status (SES) experienced a greater decline in marital satisfaction than parents with a middle-class or lower SES. They argued that high SES individuals experience more autonomy and freedom because of their income and professional careers than low SES individuals, which might require more adjustment after childbirth. Although these contrasting findings might be explained by the fact that Belsky and Rovine's sample consisted of predominantly middle- and working-class families, further research is needed to solve this issue.

*Gender.* As mentioned earlier, the decline in marital satisfaction occurs more strongly among wives than among husbands (e.g., Twenge et al., 2003). This can be explained by the fact that wives must deal with most of the personal and career-related changes resulting from pregnancy, childbirth, and intensive postpartum child care. For example, a major change that occurs after the transition to parenthood is that gender roles become more differentiated and that the division of labor becomes more traditional. Early studies showed that women generally take on an even larger share of family work than prior to childbirth (e.g., Belsky et al., 1986; Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Ruble et al., 1988), and recent studies show that this is still the case (Grote et al., 2002, 2004; Kluwer et al., 2002). As noted earlier, many women expect the division of family work to be more egalitarian after childbirth than it actually turns out to be, and this violation of expectancies negatively affects their marital satisfaction (e.g., Belsky, 1985; Belsky et al.; Goldberg & Perry-Jenkins, 2004; Hackel & Ruble; Kalmuss et al., 1992; Ruble et al., 1988). Accordingly, the new division of labor generates considerable discontent for wives because it is not living up to their expectancies (see also Kluwer & Mikula, 2002). This suggests that pregnant women who have more realistic expectations about the division of labor after childbirth will suffer less violation of expectancies after childbirth.

In their longitudinal study, Lawrence, Nylen, and Cobb (2007) found that husbands and wives had very different expectations and perceptions about the transition to parenthood. Men tended to expect fewer positive feelings about parenting, less competency, and a more

difficult infant temperament during pregnancy than women, and they tended to perceive their experiences more negatively on these issues after childbirth. They also showed that associations between the violation of expectations and marital satisfaction varied as a function of the specific domain of the expectation. Husbands who received less outside help and support than they expected reported marginally steeper declines in marital satisfaction. Wives who expected the baby's temperament to be easier and who expected to feel more positive as a parent experienced steeper declines in marital satisfaction after childbirth, and wives who felt more negatively about parenting than they expected reported marginally steeper declines in marital satisfaction.

In sum, men and women become increasingly different from one another across the transition to parenthood, as compared to nonparents, and this difference appears to be associated with dissatisfaction and conflict (Cowan et al., 1985). Although husbands experience fewer changes in their lives after childbirth than women, for example, because of their lesser involvement in housework and child care, they appear to experience parenthood less positively than wives.

*Planned versus unplanned pregnancy.* Several researchers have studied the effects of planned versus unplanned pregnancies on the decline in marital quality across the transition to parenthood. One line of reasoning is that parents with unplanned pregnancies are more at risk for a decline in marital quality because many conditions related to unplanned pregnancies (i.e., neuroticism, stress, insecure attachment) are also related to marital problems (see Bouchard, Boudreau, & Hébert, 2006). By contrast, a seemingly counterintuitive line of reasoning is that unplanned pregnancies are less apt to be coupled with a decline in marital quality because couples who have not planned their pregnancy are more anxious and doubtful about how things will turn out. They benefit from the contrast between expectations and actual experience, whereas those who planned the pregnancy tend to experience violated expectations (see Belsky & Rovine, 1990).

Empirical results from longitudinal studies that included a measurement of pregnancy planning are not consistent. Belsky and Rovine (1990) found that marital quality declined more

when the pregnancy was planned compared to when it was unplanned. Bouchard et al. (2006) found similar results among French Canadian couples, showing that couples with unplanned pregnancies experienced higher levels of relationship functioning after the transition to parenthood than during pregnancy. Couples with planned pregnancies experienced lower levels of relationship functioning after the transition to parenthood than during pregnancy. In contrast, Cox et al. (1999) found that couples with unplanned pregnancies showed larger decreases in marital satisfaction relative to those with planned pregnancies. When the pregnancy was unplanned, partners exhibited lower levels of positive marital interaction compared to those who had planned their pregnancy. Likewise, Lawrence et al. (2008) found that husbands (but not wives) who planned the pregnancy experienced fewer declines in marital satisfaction than those who did not plan the pregnancy. Wright, Henggeler, and Craig (1986), however, found that wives (but not husbands) reported higher postbirth marital adjustment when they reported more planning for the pregnancy.

The inconsistency in findings might be caused by the way pregnancy planning was measured. Some studies used dichotomous measures (planned vs. unplanned; Bouchard et al., 2006; Cox et al., 1999), others used a 7-point scale (Lawrence et al., 2008), and some are not clear about how it was measured (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Wright et al., 1986). In addition, spouses did not always agree on whether the pregnancy was planned, and, in those cases, the wife's report was sometimes followed (Cox et al.), the pregnancy was labeled unplanned (Belsky & Rovine), and others did not report how they dealt with the disagreement (Bouchard et al.; Lawrence et al.; Wright et al.). It may be that the partner's own perceptions of whether a pregnancy is planned or not is more critical, because this will affect how he or she will manage own expectations and actual experiences.

*Depression.* The transition to parenthood is especially difficult for roughly 10% of the new mothers who develop a postpartum depression serious enough to interfere with their daily lives (Campbell, Cohn, Flanagan, Popper, & Myers, 1992). Childbirth can trigger or aggravate depression in wives (O'Hara & Swain, 1996), and marital dissatisfaction and

lack of support play an important role in generating postpartum psychological distress (e.g., Stemp et al., 1986). Cox and colleagues (1999) found that partners with more depressive symptoms during pregnancy reported decreasing levels of satisfaction across the transition to parenthood, but only those with more depressive symptoms *and* with unplanned pregnancies failed to recover from the increase in negative marital interaction during the first year after childbirth (i.e., they did not show a decrease in negative interactions during the second year after childbirth).

*Characteristics of the child.* Although most research on the transition to parenthood has focused on the relationship between the parents, the child is part of the family system as well. Some authors have addressed the gender of the child to explain changes in the relationship. Cox et al. (1999) found that the birth of a girl was associated with greater declines in marital satisfaction and positive marital interactions over time than the birth of a boy. Parents of unplanned girls were particularly at risk for increasing negative interactions during the first year. In line with this, Doss and colleagues (2009) found that girls were associated with larger declines in mother's marital satisfaction and larger increases in father's reports of problem intensity. The association between child gender and marital quality is explained by the fact that fathers tend to show more active parenting with sons than with daughters and that active parenting is a basis for marital stability (Cox, Owen, Lewis, Henderson, 1989). Indeed, divorce is more likely when couples have only girls (Morgan, Lye, & Condran, 1988; Raley & Bianchi, 2006). Cox et al. (1999) further argued that wives' expectations will be less violated across the transition to parenthood when their husbands participate more in childrearing and care with their sons, thus causing their marital satisfaction to drop less when they have sons. Active fatherhood is an important component for wives' role balance (Marks, Huston, Johnson, & MacDermid, 2001).

Other child characteristics that have been studied are the unpredictability of the baby (i.e., being more irregular in their daily rhythm of eating and sleeping) and the fussiness of the baby (i.e., how much the baby cries and fusses). Predictable and calm infants make the transition to parenthood a more pleasant

experience and allow the parents to spend more time together. Because women are the primary caretakers of infants, mothers can be expected to be affected more by the baby's temperament than fathers. Belsky and Rovine (1990) found that the unpredictability of the baby indeed discriminated between women who reported a decline versus women who reported improvement in their marital quality across the transition to parenthood. Wright and colleagues (1986) found higher postbirth marital adjustment among women when their baby was lower in fussiness and difficulty. Using the same Infant Characteristics Questionnaire (Bates, Freeland, & Lounsbury, 1979), Hackel and Ruble (1992) expected baby fussiness to increase the importance of confirming expectations regarding the division of labor, but they found no significant effects. Thus, child temperament may affect feelings about the marriage but not in relation to the division of labor.

*Attachment and representations of early family relationships.* Secure attachment is considered an inner resource that buffers people from experiencing declines in marital satisfaction when major stressors are encountered, whereas insecure attachment makes people more vulnerable during times of stress (Karney & Bradbury, 1995). Hazan and Shaver (1987) applied the ideas of Bowlby (1969) on the relationship between infant and caregiver to adult close relationships and argued that close relationships in adulthood reflect enduring styles of attachment developed in early childhood.

Rholes and colleagues (2001) and Simpson and colleagues (2003) measured ambivalence and avoidance by asking how participants thought and felt about their romantic partners in general, including (but not limited to) their spouse. High attachment ambivalence among women who perceived low levels of support from their husband prior to childbirth predicted declines in marital satisfaction (Rholes et al.) and increases in depressive symptoms (Simpson et al.) after the transition to parenthood. Highly ambivalent people are more concerned that their partner is unavailable to provide support when needed, and they experience more feelings of resentment toward their partner that stems from inadequate support provided by earlier attachment figures compared with low ambivalent individuals (Rholes et al.).

Curran and colleagues (2005) assessed partners' current state of mind regarding attachment experiences by probing for memories of their own relationships with their parents. They showed that insecurely attached partners reported fewer maintenance behaviors prenatally and reported the sharpest declines in maintenance behaviors across the transition to parenthood compared with securely attached partners. Nevertheless, many insecurely attached adults develop secure representations of attachment through positive relationships later in life, becoming *earned secure* (Curran et al., 2006; Paley, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 1999). Curran and colleagues (2006) assessed partners' recollections of the quality of their own parents' marriage, arguing that children's observations of their parents' marriage are internalized as mental representations of marital relationships. They showed that this predicted emotional attunement between partners 24 months postpartum. Interestingly, they showed that partners who recalled more conflict, less affection, and less communication in their parents' marriage but who were insightful about these memories reported more emotional attunement than other groups, including those who were insightful about positive experiences. They suggest that partners who insightfully recalled negative interactions between their parents were better able to anticipate marital difficulties and more motivated to maintain emotional attunement than partners who are more defensive about their childhood memories. Women who recalled parental negative interactions and were low on insight were the most likely to show lower emotional attunement across the transition to parenthood compared with other groups. This supports the notion of intergenerational transmission of marital harmony.

*Work factors.* Only a few studies have considered the role of paid employment in marital change across the transition to parenthood. Kluwer and coworkers (1996) showed that husbands' but not wives' working hours lead to marital conflict about paid work among new parents. Working overtime (i.e., spending too much time on the job aside from normal working hours) was the main issue leading to discontent and conflict about paid work among new parents. In addition, women whose employment status was not congruent with their preferences reported more anger and anxiety (Klein, Hyde,

Essex, & Clark, 1998) and dissatisfaction with the division of labor (Kluwer et al., 1996) after the transition to parenthood. Working non-day shifts, often used as a strategy to avoid the high cost of child care and to maintain exclusive parental care, is a risk factor for depressive symptoms and relationship conflict across the first year of parenthood (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007).

*Gender attitudes.* Parents with more traditional sex-role attitudes and a less traditional division of labor reported more conflict and less love across the transition to parenthood than other groups (MacDermid et al., 1990). A less traditional division of labor is not congruent with their traditional attitudes, causing conflict to arise. Kluwer et al. (1997) found that traditional wives and wives with a traditional husband were more likely to avoid conflict when aggravated over the division of labor than egalitarian wives and wives with an egalitarian husband. These women might suppress their discontent rather than risk the potentially negative consequences of conflict engagement, because contesting traditional roles is not appropriate for traditional women.

*Summary and discussion.* The studies reviewed above have examined the impact of individual, child, and situational characteristics on marital change across the transition to parenthood. Depression, the birth of a daughter, insecure attachment, and incongruence between work and division of labor status versus personal preferences render couples more vulnerable to negative changes across the transition to parenthood. Empirical evidence on the role of social economic status, pregnancy planning, and baby fussiness is inconsistent, however. A limitation of research on personal characteristics is the use of different measurement techniques, which constrains the comparison and interpretation of the findings. In addition, most of the research reviewed above focused on partners' vulnerabilities rather than resources. The field could gain much by focusing on partners' resources in order to obtain insight into what helps partners to make the transition to parenthood more smoothly.

What remains unclear is how basic relationship variables like commitment vary across the transition to parenthood and, more importantly, how the relationships of couples with high commitment are differentially affected by the

transition to parenthood than the relationships of couples with low commitment. Commitment is likely to increase across the transition to parenthood: Having children together increases partners' investments in the relationship, which is known to increase commitment (Rusbult, 1983). This is inconsistent with the decline in marital quality across the transition to parenthood, however, as an increase in commitment would predict an increase in marital quality as well (Rusbult). Hence, more research is needed to resolve this issue.

#### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

There is a long history of research on marital change across the transition to parenthood. Strengths of this research tradition are that most studies employed longitudinal designs and many recent studies have included comparison groups of nonparents. This has enabled researchers to draw conclusions about the types of change as well as whether changes can be attributed to first childbirth. More recently, studies have begun to address how couples differentially adapt to first-time parenthood and the factors that relate to these different adaptations. A limitation, however, is that much of this research has been atheoretical, examining various different variables for their effects on marital change across the transition to parenthood. As a result, a theory or an integrative model of the transition to parenthood is lacking. A challenge is, therefore, to develop a theoretical model that explains why and how relationships change across the transition to parenthood. This final section addresses these theoretical considerations, directions for future research, and practical implications.

#### *Toward a Transition to Parenthood Model*

The *Vulnerability-Stress-Adaptation* (VSA) model of marriage (Karney & Bradbury, 1995) offers a model than can be applied to the transition to parenthood, integrating various theories of marriage. On the basis of crisis theory (e.g., Hill, 1949), the model draws attention to external stressors to the relationship that require adaptation. On the basis of behavioral theories (e.g., Gottman, 1979), the model assigns a central role to *adaptive processes* and calls attention to partners' behaviors and cognitions and the way partners and couples challenge stressors

and transitions. According to the model, marital quality is enhanced when couples deal with stressors in constructive ways and worsened when adaptive processes are poor. In addition, the model considers *enduring vulnerabilities* that each partner brings into the relationship that can contribute to the experienced stressfulness of the event and affect how couples adapt to new circumstances and situations.

In terms of applicability to the transition to parenthood, the model is useful because the reviewed research has shown that marital change across the transition to parenthood is affected both by adaptive processes and by personal and situational characteristics. The model can make the valuable point that relationship quality changes as a result of the interplay of who we are (enduring vulnerabilities), the circumstances we encounter (the transition to parenthood), and the way in which we respond to those circumstances (adaptive processes). The previous review has shown that personal and situational characteristics can increase the chance of experiencing negative changes in marital quality and of adapting poorly to the transition to parenthood. The model can, therefore, account for variations in marital changes between and within couples (Karney & Bradbury, 1995).

The model also has limitations, however, in terms of applicability to the transition to parenthood. The previous sections have shown that the transition to parenthood cannot be considered a negative stressor per se, as many couples do not experience a negative change in their relationship. We should not forget the roughly 50% of the couples that experience no change or an improvement in their relationship after their first child's birth. In line with this, the model focuses on vulnerabilities rather than strengths and resources that partners or couples bring to the situation. This is typical of research on the transition to parenthood in general, as much of the emphasis comes from a deficit model, stressing the negative sides of becoming a parent. The field could gain much from research on partners' strengths and resources in explaining why they fare well across the transition to parenthood, despite the challenges. A further limitation of the model might be that its comprehensiveness makes a formal empirical test of the model quite difficult. Although general hypotheses follow from the paths in the model (see, e.g., Doss et al., 2009), the model appears

less suitable for the description and explanation of more detailed processes. For example, it tends to ignore gender differences, such as in the experience of the transition to parenthood (*his* vs. *hers*; Cowan et al., 1985), vulnerabilities (e.g., depression; Campbell et al., 1992), and adaptation (e.g., conflict behavior; Kluwer et al., 2000). Finally, the VSA model can be used to explain why marital satisfaction declines after the birth of the first child but not *how* it declines over time.

Several models have been proposed to explain how relationships, in general, deteriorate over time (e.g., Huston, Caughlin, Houts, Smith, & George, 2001; Kurdek, 2002). The *emergent distress model* (and the related *disillusionment model*) proposes that relationship distress is the result of changes in relationship functioning. Partners begin their relationships as affectionate lovers with idealized notions of each other and their relationship (e.g., Murray, Holmes, & Griffin, 1996). As relationships proceed, partners become more realistic and more aware of the limitations of their partner and their relationship. Thus, distress emerges from an increase in negative aspects of the relationship, such as conflict and negative behaviors (Gottman, Coan, Carrere, & Swanson, 1998) or a decrease in positive aspects (i.e., disillusionment; Murray et al.). The *enduring dynamics model* proposes that interpersonal patterns are established during the initial stages of the relationship and are maintained throughout the relationship. Individuals begin their relationship aware of their partner's shortcomings, and relationship distress stems from problems that existed at the beginning of the relationship, such as incompatibility in personality (e.g., Karney & Bradbury, 1995) and high levels of conflict (Huston, 1994).

Kluwer and Johnson (2007) applied these models to the transition to parenthood, and their findings point in the direction that relationship distress stems from problems that existed during pregnancy rather than from the emergence of distress after the transition to parenthood. In line with this, Wallace and Gottlieb (1990) showed that the best predictor of postpartum marital adjustment was the marital adjustment during pregnancy. In addition, Shapiro and colleagues (2000) found that the husband's positivity and negativity during the first year of marriage were significantly related to changes in wives' marital satisfaction across the transition



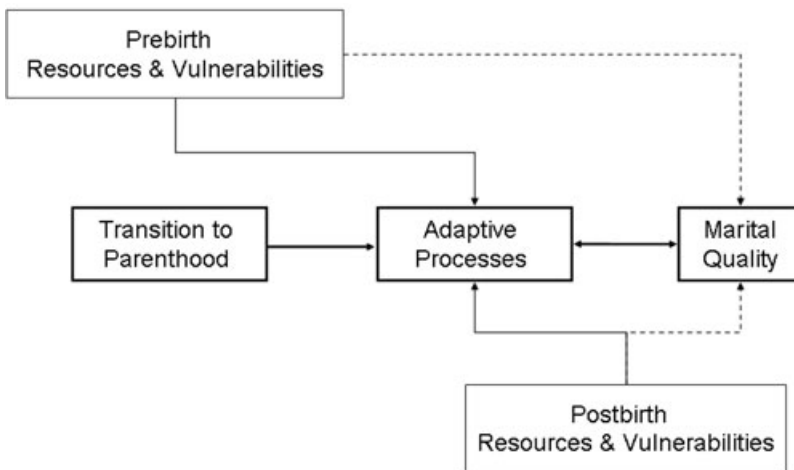
to parenthood. Moreover, Cox and colleagues (1999) found that the prenatal interaction style of both partners was associated with the level of marital satisfaction initially and the degree to which marital satisfaction declined after the transition to parenthood. Although prior research generally assumed that first childbirth substantially changed the relationship between partners, causing a decline in relationship quality (e.g., Hackel & Ruble, 1992), these findings suggest that the transition to parenthood intensifies relationship problems that already exist during pregnancy. This also suggests that couples with resources in terms of prebirth happiness and constructive communication can experience no changes or even improvement across the transition to parenthood.

Thus, in support of the enduring dynamics model of marriage (Huston et al., 2001) and indicative of the enduring vulnerabilities in the VSA model, there is evidence that relationships that suffer from larger declines in marital satisfaction are characterized by problems and incompatibilities that exist before childbirth and that become more evident after the transition to parenthood. These relationships are characterized by relatively low marital adjustment (Wallace & Gottlieb, 1990), high conflict frequencies (Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), low positive communication (Cox et al., 1999), high negativity by the husband (Shapiro et al., 2000), and low husband support (Stemp et al., 1986) before childbirth. In addition, partners

who experience larger declines in marital satisfaction are characterized by relatively low self-esteem and low sensitivity (Belsky & Rovine, 1990), depressive symptoms (Cox et al., 1999), and insecure attachment (Rholes et al., 2001) before childbirth.

Integrating the VSA model, which predicts marital quality from the interaction between personal characteristics and adaptive processes, with the enduring dynamics model, which predicts how relationships change over time, provides an integrative model for the transition to parenthood (see Figure 1). The transition to parenthood elicits adaptive processes (e.g., conflict, communication, marital interaction, spousal support, relationship maintenance) that determine (changes in) marital quality and satisfaction. The model considers not only the vulnerabilities but also the resources that partners or couples bring to the situation. These resources and vulnerabilities affect how couples adapt to the transition to parenthood and subsequently whether the transition to parenthood causes a (negative or positive) change in marital quality. On the basis of the research reviewed earlier, resources and vulnerabilities include not only prebirth personal and situational characteristics (e.g., SES, attachment, gender role attitudes, self-esteem, depressive symptoms, pregnancy planning), as suggested by the VSA model, but also prebirth *relationship characteristics* such as conflict frequency, marital adjustment, communication and support, as suggested by the enduring dynamics

FIGURE 1. TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD MODEL.



model. In addition, gender is considered a pre-birth vulnerability (or resource), as women are more vulnerable to negative changes across the transition to parenthood than men. Finally, the model includes postbirth resources and vulnerabilities (e.g., child gender, child temperament, depression, division of labor, work factors) that affect both how couples adapt and whether their marital quality changes across the transition to parenthood.

More research is needed to test this model across the transition to parenthood. This could provide more insight into whether the transition to parenthood intensifies relationship problems that already exist during pregnancy, whether first childbirth elicits relationship distress in and by itself, or whether these processes operate at the same time. A prediction that follows from the model is that couples with more (prebirth and postbirth) vulnerabilities and fewer resources become less adaptive across the transition to parenthood, compared with more resourceful couples, as indicated by an increase in conflict and negative interactions and a decrease in positive maintenance. Although prior research has primarily studied how personal and situational characteristics are related to changes in marital quality across the transition to parenthood directly, the model proposes that these relationships are mediated by adaptive processes. Thus, more attention should be paid to how personal, situational, and relational characteristics affect changes in marital quality *via* adaptive processes over time.

#### *Other Directions for Future Research*

Other issues that require further research include research methods, the long-term effects of having (more) children on the relationship, role congruence, the role of the extended family, and cross-cultural differences. First, most research on the transition to parenthood is longitudinal, and this has led to important insights into the trajectories of marital change across the transition to parenthood. These studies, however, cannot draw conclusions about the more detailed dynamics of marital adaptation (i.e., marital interactions) across the transition to parenthood. Findings should be replicated using more intensive methods of data collection, such as diary methods and time series analysis, that allow for a more detailed test of marital change across the transition to parenthood. Second, what

is the impact of second and subsequent births on the relationship? Do relationships recover from the decrease in marital satisfaction later in life, when the children have grown up? Third, the transition to parenthood literature generally ignores the fact that the husband-wife relationship changes into a mother-father relationship. An interesting question is whether partners agree on their respective identities as a mother and a father. For example, Cast (2004) showed that this *role congruence* is an important factor in understanding marital quality among parents.

Fourth, the literature on the transition to parenthood generally assumes that families are arranged as nuclear units or small systems. The arrival of children, however, changes the relationships within the extended family (parents and siblings) as well. The transition to parenthood is often followed by opening the family subsystem to include more involvement with siblings in the form of emotional closeness and support (Connidis, 1992). In addition, grandparents provide child care and participate in shared activities when grandchildren are young (Silverstein & Marengo, 2001). Thus, an interesting question that deserves attention in future research is whether parents with positive instrumental and emotional support from close relatives fare better across the transition than parents without such support. This may vary widely across ethnic groups and cultures; for example, Silverstein and Marengo reported that African American grandparents were more likely to occupy functional roles (e.g., raising grandchildren and providing financial assistance) but less likely to participate in shared activities than White American grandparents.

This brings me to the last area that deserves attention in future research, namely, cross-cultural differences in the transition to parenthood. With some exceptions (Engfer, 1988; Feldman, Masalha, & Nadam, 2001; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007; Kluwer et al., 2002; Moss et al., 1986), the bulk of research on the transition to parenthood has used samples from the United States. Countries vary largely, however, in how much time parents have to adapt after childbirth in terms of maternity and paternity leave. In Scandinavian countries, mothers can take up to a year (or more) of paid maternity leave, and fathers also have a right to paternity leave. In other European countries, paid maternity leave varies between

14 and 28 weeks. The United States is the only industrialized country that does not provide paid leave for new mothers nationally, although there are exceptions in some states (Feldman, Sussman, & Zigler, 2004). How soon after childbirth mothers go back to work might have considerable impact on how couples adapt to the transition to parenthood. Feldman and colleagues (2004) have shown that shorter maternity leave (fewer than 12 weeks) was associated with more maternal depression and a more negative impact of childbirth on the marriage than longer maternity leave (more than 12 weeks). At the same time, longer maternity leaves might cause the division of labor to become more traditional. Thus, an interesting question to consider in future research is how relationship changes after the transition to parenthood vary across countries, for example, because of maternity leave length.

#### *Practical Implications*

The previous section suggests that the transition to parenthood intensifies relationship problems that already exist before and during pregnancy. This stresses the importance of helping partners to deal with relationship problems effectively in order to reduce prebirth conflict and negative interactions, which might help prevent increased relationship distress over the first few years of childrearing (see also Glade, Bean, & Vira, 2005). This is important not only to prevent serious relationship problems and divorce but also because parents' prebirth psychological adaptation and marital quality predict their parenting quality and children's adaptation (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cowan & Cowan, 1992; Cox et al., 1989) and because marital conflict impedes child development (Grych & Fincham, 1990).

In the past 15 years, considerable research has addressed the effectiveness of programs that assist new parents with parenting and the couple relationship. Petch and Halford (2008) reviewed 25 studies that included randomized controlled trials of programs that provided education to couples during pregnancy or in the first 6 months after childbirth. The majority of these programs, however, target mothers and focus on enhancing parenting competence. Of the five couple-focused interventions, three prevented the decline in relationship satisfaction after the transition to parenthood (Cowan

& Cowan, 1995; Midmer, Wilson, & Cummings, 1995; Shapiro & Gottman, 2005). Petch and Halford recommended that interventions should include both partners in their programs, instead of mothers alone. Doherty, Erickson, and LaRossa (2006) developed an eight-session program during the transition to parenthood aimed at increasing fathers' involvement and skills with infants. They concluded that a relatively brief intervention during the transition to parenthood can improve fathering. As noted before, father involvement is a basis for marital stability (Cox et al., 1989). Petch and Halford further recommended that interventions should include both infant care and couple processes. Prepared childbirth classes commonly focus on the pregnancy and delivery and rarely address the couples' adaptation to parenthood. Following the VSA model, adaptive couple processes should be assigned a more central role in childbirth classes, in order to prevent relationship quality from declining after childbirth.

Schulz et al. (2006) developed a preventive group intervention in which couples who were expecting their first child met weekly over 24 weeks in group meetings with a coleader married couple. Couples discussed a set of topics that are relevant to couple functioning (e.g., division of labor, couple communication, problem-solving styles, parenting, work, and social support) and salient issues or events. Although the intervention did not reduce the long-term incidence of divorce, Schulz et al. provided strong evidence for the efficacy of this intervention for couples who stayed together in stemming the often observed decline in marital satisfaction across the transition to parenthood over a period of almost 6 years. Interestingly, the issues that couples discuss in this intervention have been found to be highly relevant issues across the transition to parenthood, as indicated in previous sections and following directly from the VSA model (i.e., adaptive couple processes).

#### *From Partnership to Parenthood*

It is apparent from the present review that the transition to parenthood is a major change in couples' lives. Whether it implies an unwelcome change or even a crisis is another matter. The birth of a child brings joy and happiness, and parenthood knows many rewards. Indeed, many couples fare quite well across the transition to parenthood. This does not, however, obscure

the fact that many other couples experience a decline in marital satisfaction and an increase in marital conflict. Despite the many positive aspects of becoming a parent, these couples need to deal with the negative changes and manage the conflicts that might arise across the transition to parenthood. Further increasing our knowledge about both the negative and the positive changes that accompany this major life transition remains an important task for social scientists.

Characteristic of most research in the area, this review focused on the impact of the transition to parenthood on the relationship between partners rather than on the parental role or the relationship between parent and child. Obviously, this provides a limited view of the impact of the transition to parenthood in couples' lives. As LeMasters already claimed in 1957, the family is a small system, and adding a new member to the system implied a reorganization of that system. Future research should address the family across transition to parenthood as a changing system instead of only considering changes in the marriage. Given the importance, however, of relationship quality for partners' well-being and their child's development, the couple relationship should remain a focal point in research and practice. Important issues that await further research are why adaptive processes change across the transition to parenthood, whether the transition to parenthood intensifies relationship problems that already exist before childbirth, the long-term development of relationship quality among couples with children, and cross-cultural differences in the transition to parenthood. The development of intervention programs is essential to help couples adapt to the relational challenges that accompany the transition from partnership to parenthood.

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