

Mothers' and Fathers' Early Relationship With Their Infant: Similar Yet Temporally Discordant Themes

La relation initiale des parents avec leur nourrisson: Thèmes similaires quoique temporellement discordants

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ABSTRACT

Objective: To examine first-time mothers' and fathers' themes in their relationship with their infant, how these themes change during the first four months postpartum, and similarities and differences in mothers' and fathers' themes.

Participants: Eighteen first-time mother-father couples were separately interviewed at one, six and 16 weeks postpartum.

Data Analysis: Audio-taped, transcribed interviews were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach.

Results: Our findings reveal a common set of themes for mothers and fathers in relation to the infant : 1: Discovery, 2: Physical Proximity, 3: Emotional Closeness, 4: Initiation of Complementary Interactions and 5: Commitment to Love and Care. However, there was a striking lack of concordance between mothers and fathers for these themes at each point in time.

Conclusions: Mothers' and fathers' experience of the early relationship with their infant is unique. Focussing on maternal as well as paternal ways of experiencing the early relationship with their infant sets the way to understanding early developing relationships in the family context.

KEY WORDS

mother-child relationship, father-child relationship, parent-child relationship, infants

This article has been peer-reviewed.

RÉSUMÉ

Objectif : Décrire l'établissement de la relation mère-enfant et père enfant au cours des quatre premiers mois de la vie de l'enfant ainsi que les similitudes et les différences entre les mères et les pères dans l'établissement de cette relation.

Participants: Dix-huit mères et pères d'une même famille ayant été interviewés à 1, 6 et 16 semaines suivant la naissance de leur enfant.

Analyse des données : Selon les principes de l'analyse en théorisation ancrée.

Résultats : L'établissement de la relation mère-enfant et père enfant s'exprime dans 5 composantes de cette relation, soit: 1. La découverte, 2. La proximité physique, 3. L'échange affectif, 4. L'initiation d'interactions réciproques et 5. L'engagement. Une de ces composantes caractérise l'expérience des mères et des pères à

chaque temps de mesure, soit 1, 6 et 16 semaines. Les mères et les pères s'influencent mutuellement mais développent une relation unique avec leur enfant.

Retombées : Le modèle de l'établissement de la relation mère-enfant et père-enfant émergeant de cette étude permet de guider l'évaluation et l'intervention auprès de la relation parents-enfant à la période postnatale.

MOTS CLÉS

attachement parents-enfant, relation mère-enfant, relation père-enfant, périnatalité, nourrisson.

Cet article a été évalué par des pairs.

Editor's Note: The title of this article reflects the reality that the study was conducted with opposite-sex couples who were the biological parents of the infant and therefore, contains gender-specific responses. Future original research or reviews on comparative studies on same-sex or adoptive parent relationships is welcome. Please contact the Editors for submissions.

The establishment of the mother-infant and father-infant relationship is one of the most challenging tasks of becoming a parent for the first time because of all the sensitive and personal issues that are involved in developing a nurturing relationship with the infant. Parental behaviour with an infant, as opposed to parents' experience of their relationship with their infant, has been studied from multiple theoretical and disciplinary standpoints. Lacking is a perspective that brings developmental, systemic and parental experience together to account for the establishment of the early parent-infant relationship. For instance, it is not clear "if and how" mothers and fathers differ in their experience of the developing relationship with their infant. In this study, our aim was to examine mothers' and fathers' themes of their relationship with their infant during the first four months postpartum in mother-infant and father-infant pairs with healthy first-born infants.

Background

The early parent-infant relationship, often referred to as "parent-infant attachment" is the process by which parents develop a sensitive, affectionate, nurturing and secure relationship with their infant.^{1,2} The establishment of the parent-infant relationship is a complex process involving neurobiological, psychological and social factors. With the birth of the baby, oxytocin levels elevate with an effect on the onset of maternal behaviours promoting closeness, breastfeeding, and visual awareness.³ This physical readiness for mothering has been highlighted by Klaus and Kennell⁴ and later Klaus,

Kennell & Klaus⁵ who suggested the phenomenon of "maternal bonding" which is the onset of maternal behaviours and affect that promote attachment between the mother and the infant in the early postnatal period. Although many authors have critiqued Klaus and Kennell^{6,7}, the work of these paediatricians is applauded for its great impact on settings and practices that support development of the early parent-infant relationship.

The establishment of the early parent-infant relationship is also highly determined by psychological factors such as past representations of attachment and mental health. Parents who have secure attachment patterns to their parents in their infancy are prepared to develop a secure relationship with their infant⁸ compared to parents who experience insecure or rejecting attachment patterns in their own childhood. Also, several studies have documented the compromising impact of postpartum depression and parental stress on mother-infant affect and affect regulation⁹. Depression and stress compromise parent-infant interactions by diminishing emotional availability as well as sensitivity in parent-infant interactions.

Finally, social factors such as socioeconomic status, marital status and level of education all play a role in the ability of the parents to establishment a relationship with their infant in the postnatal period.

The parent-infant relationship is a crucial determinant of the infant's physical and emotional

development. The quality of the parent-infant relationship has been related to physical growth in the infant¹⁰, her/his capacity to resist infection¹¹, the development of language¹², and motor development¹³. Infants who develop in a positive relational environment with their parents are more confident in their own capacities, adapt successfully, have greater self-regulation abilities, and establish secure relationships with others¹⁴. Conversely, infants exposed to a non sensitive relationship with their parents are at greater risk for diverse developmental impairments, such as failure to thrive¹⁵, behaviour problems¹⁶, and social maladjustment¹⁴. As health professionals, we are in a strategic position, during the pre or postnatal follow-up or as a home visitor, to help promote the establishment of a positive parent-infant relationship and help to prevent difficulties in the ways parents and infant interact.

The Early Mother-Infant Relationship

When looking closely at the literature on the early mother-infant relationship, we observe that there have been very few studies focussing on the mothers' intimate experience of the developing relationship with their infant. Mothers' experience of the establishment of the relationship with their infant has been studied mainly from a psychodynamic perspective with emphasis on how the mother perceives her baby and herself in the mothering role. For example, in her seminal work Benedek¹⁷ described the reciprocal confidence built in the mother-infant relationship when the mother perceives herself as able to meet her infant's needs successfully, which psychologically results in the baby translating the good mother into the good self through positive introjects. Most recently, Rubin¹⁸, interviewed more than 100 women and identified four maternal tasks occurring during pregnancy and into the early postpartum: 1. seeking safe passage for herself and her child; 2. ensuring the acceptance of her child by significant persons in the family; 3. "binding-in" to her unknown child and the idea of having a real child and; 4. learning to give of herself. These tasks address attainment of the mothering role but contain less information about developing the mother-infant relationship. Some researchers have

interviewed mothers, focussing on issues related to the establishment of the mother-infant relationship, such as time spent with the infant¹⁹, interpretation of the baby's behaviour²⁰, affection toward the infant²¹ and acquaintance with the infant²². These studies were influential in beginning to build a knowledge base about mothers' experience of the establishment of the relationship with their infant but more work is needed to fully grasp the mother's experience.

The Early Father-Infant Relationship

Recent data on the establishment of the father-infant relationship suggest that this relationship must be considered within a paradigm that accounts for its uniqueness²³. There are quantitative differences in the way mothers and fathers interact with their infant and qualitative differences as well. For instance, fathers participate less than mothers in caregiving activities but spend greater time in playful interactions with their infant²⁴. Moreover, they are most likely to be engaged in more physical play with their infant than mothers²⁵. Lamb²⁶ has been among the first authors to account for this distinction between mothers and fathers by suggesting that fathering comprises three components: interaction, availability, and responsibility.

It is worth noting that the fatherhood research has mostly been done with young children and adolescents. Much less work has been directed to understanding the process by which fathers establish their relationship with their infant in the weeks following her/his birth. Some data on early father-infant relationships suggest that fathers tend to hold and rock their babies more than mothers in the days following birth²⁷, to adopt a more rhythmic pattern in touching the infant²⁸, to experience feelings of jealousy and anxiety²⁹, and to show less ability in communication with their young infant³⁰.

The literature on the fathers' perspective of the establishment of the relationship with their infant is limited and has focussed on role transition and related internal issues. Different studies by Anderson³¹, Henderson & Brouse³² and Jordan³³

interviewed fathers with the aim of identifying and describing fathers' themes in the development of their paternal identity and the relationship with their infant. They found that fathers go through a set of stages marked by the need to be recognized as a father by the mother and other significant persons in the family, as well as feelings of ambivalence toward the baby, especially when the mother is breastfeeding. They concluded that the father-infant relationship in the postpartum period is greatly influenced by internal factors, such as a need to find a personal way of parenting the infant, as well as external factors, such as the mother-infant relationship.

Our research team conducted studies aimed at identifying themes for both mothers and fathers in relation to their infant.^{34,35,36,37} In these studies, we identified and described five principal themes of mothers' and fathers' experience of the relationship with their infant in the postpartum period:

1. Physical contact: the ways parents communicate with their infant (touch, visual contact);
2. Emotional display: the sharing of affection between a parent and infant;
3. Initiation of complementary interactions: the initiation, maintenance and unfolding of social interactions between a parent and infant;
4. Commitment to love and care: the centrality of the infant in the parents' lives; and
5. Discovery: the process by which parents and their infant get acquainted.

Aims

The current study has three goals: first, to utilize the five themes we had previously identified to further explore parents' themes of their relationship with their infant longitudinally in the first four months postpartum; second, to examine the extent to which the five themes already identified saturated the content of the mothers' and fathers' narrative during the first four months; and finally to examine whether or not mothers and fathers reported similar themes at the same time. To our knowledge, this study is the first to examine both the development of maternal and paternal themes of their relationship with their infant and to account for their interplay, i.e.,

whether the themes are the same for mothers and fathers and whether or not these themes occur conjointly or not during the first four months of life.

Design

A qualitative design using a Grounded Theory approach was used^{38,39}.

Participants

Eighteen low-risk parental couples (18 mothers and 18 fathers) of a first born infant participated in this study. The mean age of the mothers was 25 years (SD = 3.9) and 28.4 years (SD = 3.9) for the fathers. The mean level of education was 14 years for both. The mean yearly family income was C\$30,000 - \$39,000. The mean gestational age was 40 weeks (39.57 - 40.4) and, mean birth weight was 3,441 grams (3,266 - 3,616). On average, the mothers had a mean parental leave of 103 days (SD = 68) and the fathers had a mean parental leave of 17 days (mode = two days). Mothers were the primary caregivers in these families.

The families were recruited through health professionals working with pregnant women. Participant families were included if the mother had a normal pregnancy and gave birth to a term and healthy baby. Families were excluded if a mother gave birth by Caesarean section or was kept in the hospital for more than four days (for maternal or infant reasons), an anticipated prolonged separation between the parent and her or his infant occurred, or if a separation/divorce occurred between the parents.

Data collection

Data were gathered through individual semi-structured interviews with the mothers and fathers in the natural context of their home at one, six and 16 weeks. These intervals were chosen because of their relevance to the establishment of the parent-infant relationship. Brazelton⁴⁰ describes these ages as "touch points" in the infant's development. We collected a total of 126 semi-structured interviews that lasted between 50 minutes and two hours. These interviews were audio-taped and fully transcribed for analysis.

Interview Guide

The Parent-Infant Relationship Interview (PIRI)⁴¹ guided the individual mother and father interview. The PIRI is a 60-90 minute interview made up of two parts and was developed by the authors of this study. The first part aims to examine representations of the parent-infant relationship. It consisted of 20 open-ended questions based on the five themes of the parent-infant relationship that we had identified in our previous work: 1. discovery, 2. physical proximity, 3. emotional display, 4. initiation of complementary interactions and 5. commitment to love and care. Among the topics broached by the PIRI were the mothers' and fathers' thoughts and feelings at their baby's birth and, currently, their feeling of getting acquainted with their infant, the strategies used to get acquainted with the infant, emotional communication with the infant, positive and negative feelings about the infant and parenting, physical contact with the infant (e.g., touch, holding, proximity), parent-infant interactions (e.g., achieving synchrony), caring for and soothing the infant, and centrality of the baby in the parents' lives.

The second part of the PIRI aims at examining, using five open-ended questions, the mothers' and fathers' reciprocal influences in the establishment of the relationship with their infant. In this second interview, we tap into issues such as similarities and differences in how mothers and fathers connect with their infant, reciprocal influences in the mothers' and fathers' way of connecting with their infant and couple issues with regards to the birth of the baby.

Data analysis

The data reduction and analyses were performed using qualitative analysis techniques related to the Grounded Theory Methodology.^{38, 39} Based on the recommendations from the leading authors in this field^{42,43,44}, we used a three-step procedure: 1. comprehending, 2. synthesizing, and 3. recontextualizing.

Comprehending was accomplished by coding the interview transcripts from the individual interviews. Coding consisted of applying word labels to every unit of sense in the verbatim, i.e., each line, phrase,

sentence or paragraph from the transcribed interviews that reflected one idea of the parent. These extracts were then merged into five categories: 1. discovery, 2. physical proximity, 3. emotional display, 4. initiation of complementary interactions and 5. commitment to love and care.

Synthesizing consists of grouping all of the mothers' and fathers' experiences to describe a typical case of parental experiences for each time point. We sorted out the most relevant and core themes of the mothers and the fathers by grouping the meanings at each time point. By this process, we moved toward a more generalized mode of description leaving only the common but important features.

Recontextualizing consists of determining how well the model can be generalized. In order to do this, we examined if our model fit the experience of all mothers and fathers (saturation issue). In all, two mothers and two fathers did not fit the model (see further writings for details).

In short, our analytic procedure was a blend of systematic techniques (such as coding the data) with interpretative techniques (such as interpreting how the categories are linked together in a theory-generating fashion) toward the development of an exploratory, hypothesis-generating model of the parents' themes of their relationship with their infant in the early postnatal period.

Rigour

Steps were taken to ensure credibility of the findings. First, the interviewers were carefully selected for their professional experience in interviewing individuals and families. They were trained for this particular interview format and were carefully supervised throughout the data collection period. The same interviewer was assigned to a family throughout the four months and conducted all the interviews. All these measures were successful in having sufficient structuring and knowledgeable, concise, sensitive and receptive interviewers⁴⁵.

Second, we submitted the PIRI to a process of verification. The verification of the questionnaires was done using a Delphi technique^{46,47}. Briefly, a

Delphi technique consists of the checking of the credibility of the questionnaires by a group of independent experts. The Delphi group was composed of 11 experts in the domain of parent-infant relationships and questionnaire development (e.g., child psychiatrist, parents, psychologist). The PIRI was sent to these experts by mail until consensus was achieved around the classification, formulation and ordering of the questions. We obtained this consensus within two mailings. Last, thirty percent of the data (38 interviews) was re-coded by four independent coders in order to establish test-retest reliability for the categories. All disagreements were resolved by consensus among the independent and the original coders.

Ethical considerations

This research was approved by the internal ethical review board of the Université de Sherbrooke. The parents were compensated for their time invested in this study.

Results

We identified five common themes that accounted for the mothers' and fathers' experience of the relationship with their infant: 1. discovery, 2. physical proximity, 3. emotional display, 4. initiation of complementary interactions and 5. commitment to love and care. Although the five themes are always present in the parents' representational ground of the relationship with their infant, one theme would come to the foreground at each point in time, that is at one, six

and 16 weeks. The theme in the foreground was taken to be the core theme.

One week

Discovery: The core maternal theme

Among the five themes, "discovery" emerged as being the core theme of the mother-infant relationship at one week. "Although she is our baby, it feels like she is a stranger to me." Mothers represent themselves primarily in relationship to their baby's needs, especially physical needs and most specifically feeding needs. "You are never quite sure if she has had enough [milk]."

Mothers would qualify the process of getting to know their baby as one that takes time, physical proximity and availability from the mother. "You just can't rely on maternal instinct with your first baby." All mothers felt that they knew their baby better at one week than in the first few days following birth. "It's once you're at home that you get to know your baby because in the hospital you have such little contact with her."

Once at home, they first relied on the baby's regular schedule for eating and sleeping to help them learn about their baby's way of expressing needs. Trial and error is the strategy these first-time mothers used most to learn about their baby. Mothers also felt that discovering their baby is a two-way process and that their baby is also getting a sense of who their mother is. In a sense, mothers would talk about "mutual discovery." They see their relationship with the infant as if there are limited interactional loops between them. "This is a one-way relationship in the sense that she expresses her needs and I respond to them." Also, mothers would talk about feeling overwhelmed by the caretaking activities, which left hardly any time to take their baby in their arms and experience the joy of being a mother.

Emotional display: The core paternal theme

The fathers' core theme of the relationship with their infant at one week emerged as "emotional display". Fathers see their relationship with their infant characterized by a strong emotional involvement with some level of anxiety. "It's love at first sight! You're so happy but also a bit scared." They feel overwhelmed with happiness and are excited about

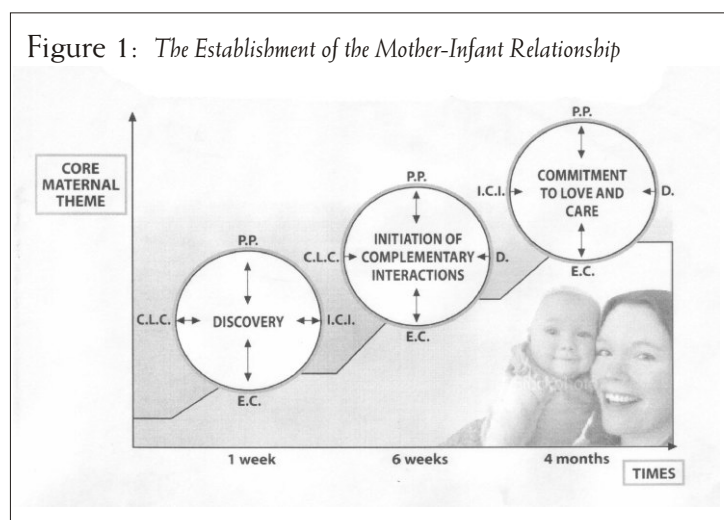
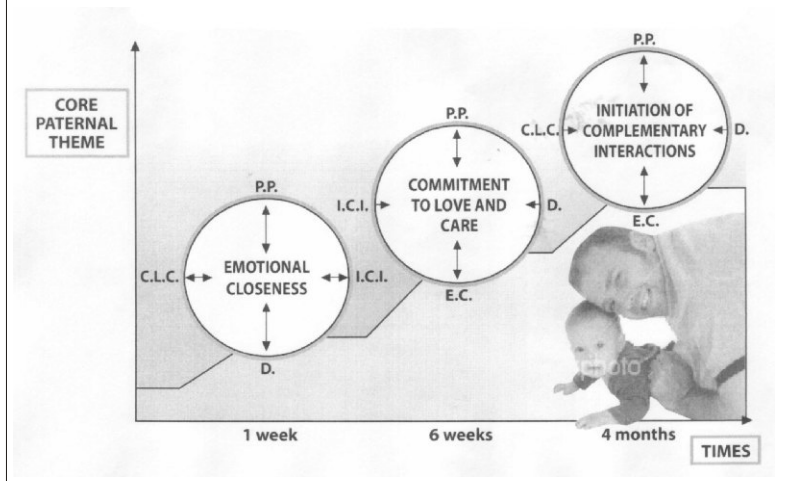


Figure 2: *The Establishment of the Father-Infant Relationship*



the infant's good health, appearance and resemblance to them and their partner. "To see the baby come out is a great relief . . . you are now sure that she is normal." They commit to loving and caring for their infant. They talk about the father they want to be and project themselves into the past and future. Fathers report that they were not well prepared for this emotional burst toward their baby. Although to us they seemed more emotionally involved with their infant than their partner, fathers would say that they are not as emotionally close to the baby as the mothers. They feel their baby needs its mother more than them at this moment and that their own need to be close to the baby must come after their baby's need of being physically close to its mother.

Like mothers, fathers also have the issue of getting to know their infant, but it is not as central for them as for their partner. Moreover, they are more interested in getting to know the infant's capacities than its physical needs. "She makes me laugh so much with her faces and gestures."

Six weeks

Initiation of complementary interactions: The core maternal theme

At six weeks, mothers have moved from discovering their baby to "initiation of complementary interactions" as a core theme in their experience. At this point, mothers' narratives are filled with statements regarding their anticipation of social interactions with their infant. "We are having nice

conversations together now".

Mothers are now attributing intentions of communication to their infant. This change motivates them to get more engaged in complementary interactions with their infant. At this time, the baby has also become a more interactive partner and reacts, vocally and emotionally, to its mother's cues. Moreover, mothers have now turned to the particular ways in which their infant communicates its needs.

Although initiating complementary interactions with their baby has moved forward in the experiential foreground of the mother-infant relationship, the previous issue of discovering the baby is still close in the background. They feel that mutual adaptation with their baby is still occurring and that they know their baby much better - they have discovered their baby successfully. And although they can describe their baby's temperament now by outlining what their baby likes and dislikes, they also "know" that they are only at the beginning of discovering what their baby is like as a person. "There is still so much to learn about her."

Commitment to love and care for the baby: The core paternal theme

At six weeks postpartum, the fathers' core theme becomes "commitment to love and care for the baby". The strong emotional investment of the first week starts to give way to feeling a split between the demands of their job and those of their family. They struggle with their eagerness to become more involved in the relationship with their infant despite their other roles and responsibilities. "The baby is really part of my life now and I need to find more time for her and get to know her better." Finding time for their family is a major issue at this point, along with making themselves available for their baby. They represent themselves as enjoying being in the presence of their infant, but not always interacting with it as mothers do. Fathers see their commitment with their infant in a highly differentiated fashion. Although the father feels he knows his baby better, he thinks that his baby does not identify him as a principal attachment figure - the baby does not yet

love him enough, but rather as someone who takes care of the baby, or even for some fathers, as someone who is near the mother.

Interestingly, fathers represent their commitment to their infant in relation to the mother-infant relationship. With that in mind, they feel peripheral to the intimate relationship that has taken place between the mother and her infant. But still, they think that this close relationship between their partner and the infant is most important.

Sixteen weeks

Commitment to love and care for the baby: The core maternal theme

"Commitment to love and care for the baby" becomes the core theme in the establishment of the mother-infant relationship at 16 weeks. Mothers have a feeling that the communicative and emotional bond with their baby is established but still needs to be developed. Mothers report that the more time they spend and invest in the relationship with their infant, the more they feel attached to it. They believe that bonding with the infant does not have much to do with the infant's temperamental characteristics but is dependant upon their own commitment toward their infant and the parental role. All of the mothers talked about anger, shame, exasperation, helplessness even depression when they cannot soothe their baby's cries.

Mothers also become more aware of their personal needs and their own need for reinvesting in other dimensions of their life. Mothers expressed their eagerness to distance themselves from the close, almost undifferentiated relationship they have had up to now with their baby. Establishing distance from the infant, in their point of view, is possible only if their infant can be more autonomous and is able to communicate needs clearly so that other persons, such as the babysitter, may be sensitive in response to these needs.

Re-establishing a closer relationship with the partner is also an issue brought up by these new mothers. "[Having a baby] is wonderful but you must also return to other aspects of your life, otherwise it may become scary. It's not because I have a baby that the other parts of me – wife and worker – must vanish." This differentiation in

the mother-infant relationship was experienced with great anxiety by the mothers. They feared that re-investing other aspects of their life might lead them away from their infant because their bond is still vulnerable to external demands.

Initiation of complementary interactions: The core paternal theme

At four months, "initiation of complementary interactions" emerged as the major issue in establishing the father-infant relationship. Fathers feel they have to work on the uniqueness of their relationship with their infant in a context where the infant indicates that the mother is the principal attachment figure. "I am a father, not a mother." Most of them report feeling guilty for not investing as much as they would like in the relationship with their infant, in a way suggesting that their previous issue is not fully resolved. Their infant has begun to claim them for playful interactions, which makes fathers quite happy and reinforces these types of interactions. Fathers feel more in sync with an interactive baby. Now the baby has become more interesting. But although they still think their baby cannot recognize them as her/his "father," they think their baby is attached to them because of the greeting – smiles their baby reserves for them and not for strangers. But for some fathers, the fact that their baby is more attached to the mother is deceiving. "Rationally you understand that [the baby is more attached to the mother] but emotionally this is hard to handle."

Discussion

Our aim in this study was to examine first-time mothers' and fathers' themes of their relationship with their infant and how these themes change during the first four months postpartum. We also wanted to examine whether or not mothers and fathers worked on similar themes at the same time. In support of our previous work, our findings revealed a common set of five themes for mothers and fathers in relation to the infant: 1. discovery, 2. physical proximity, 3. emotional display, 4. initiation of complementary interactions and 5. commitment to love and care.

In this normative sample, parents' changing themes

were characterized by periods of stability of their themes followed by periods of disorganization as each parent moved on to a new theme for their relationship with the infant. Thus, spurts and disorganization appear to be a normal part of the parents' developing relationships with their infants.

Disorganization allows for the undoing of old representations and provides the material to co-create new ways of representing their relations with one another and their ways of being together as a triad. Were there no disorganization and only fixed patterns of being together, there would be no way for relationships to change. Thus, as suggested by Tronick⁴⁸, we should be thinking of early parent-infant relationships and parenting in terms of "messy processes" out of which new representations and consequent ways of being together are created. The observed changes in the mothers' and fathers' themes indicate that these themes may be dynamically changing and that they are linked to internal and external demands on the individual, including the developmental changes of the infant⁴⁹.

That "discovery" emerges from the mothers' narrative as being a core theme at one week may, at least in part, be understood by the fact that they are the primary caregiver for their infant. Some authors underlined the existence of an acquaintance process as a first step in the experience of establishing any new relationship⁵⁰; this appears to be true also for the mother-infant relationship⁵¹.

At six weeks, the mothers' core theme had moved from getting to know their infant to the importance of establishing a positive communication system with their infant. This theme seems to be closely related to the one-to-two-month-old infants' social development with the need to establish a communication system with the primary caregiver characterized by reciprocity, role taking, positive affect and sensitivity⁵². Finally, the fourth month was characterized by the theme of being more autonomous and, at the same time, supporting their infant in its growing autonomy. Mothers seem to be closely tracking their infant's development, which gives support to theories of parental development

that argue the infant's maturational changes force change on the parenting system².

Although there was some level of anxiety in their emotional response to the birth of their infant, we observed that fathers generally experienced highly positive feelings regarding the birth of their baby and the fathering role. This clearly challenges the view that mothers surpass fathers in their affectionate behaviour, at least in the immediate postpartum period. We suggest that this change in the fathers' experience of establishing his relationship with his infant in the immediate postpartum period may, at least in part, be ascribable to the greater social emphasis on fathers and the father-infant relationship that has evolved over the last decade.²³ Their experience of not being invested enough in their paternal role at six weeks because of their work load is consistent with research that suggests fathers who are at work for more hours spend less time with their infants⁵³.

Most important findings in the present study suggest that fathers were actively looking for creative ways to get to know their infant better and spend more time with her/him. This subjective experience of fathering may suggest that there is an expressed need for fathers to connect with their infants. These findings also support evidence that there has been an increase in fathers' involvement with their infants⁵³. At four months, they claim to establish a relationship that is unique – different from the mother-infant relationship – with their infant. This is most important in understanding that there are stylistic differences in the fathers' subjective experience of establishing the relationship with the infant and that these differences must be taken into account when planning for paternal support programs and further research.

The striking lack of concordance between mothers' and fathers' themes at each point in time further qualifies the uniqueness and at the same time interweaving of these developing relationships. This adds to existing data suggesting that mothers and fathers do have different interactions with their infant²⁴. Mothers experience privileged contact

with the infant for nine months, which may permit them to resolve initial themes¹⁸. Mothers are more preoccupied with the infant in their themes whereas fathers are more preoccupied with the mother and how she is doing with the infant as well as with their involvement with the infant and their partner. Fathers do not get a chance to work on their issues with the infant, such as getting to know the infant and reciprocal communications, until later. As mothers and fathers provide different relational experiences for their infant, these experiences may contribute to enriching the infant's developmental environment and making it more complex.

Overall, mothers' and fathers' themes of the early relationship with their infant, their evolving nature over the first four months and their lack of concordance provide new windows from which the mother-infant and father-infant relationship can be evaluated and supported in the postnatal period.

These results must be viewed in relation to characteristics of our participants – a small, normative sample of first-time parents with healthy newborns – and are to be generalized with care. To understand fully the themes of the parental relationships, it is necessary to recognize the influence of factors, such as the varied social systems in which the families are embedded as well as the cultures in which they exist, as one would recognize differing developmental perspectives.

Conclusion

This study provides a set of themes for mothers and fathers during the postnatal period. These themes – the issues or concerns for the parent in relating to their infant in the present time of relatedness – add to our understanding of the establishment of the parent-infant relationship. Most importantly, focussing on maternal as well as paternal themes sets the way to understanding parental issues in the context of dyadic as well as triadic dynamics, responding to an urgent need for a more contextual approach in the practice and research in the area of early parent-infant relationships.

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