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Who Does What When Partners Become Parents: Implications for Men, Women, and Marriage

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SUMMARY. Forty-seven couples who were first-time parents were assessed in late pregnancy and again at 6 and 18 months postpartum. Fifteen couples not yet decided about having a baby were assessed at equivalent times. Actual involvement in household, decision-making, and childcare roles was determined by responses to a 36-item "Who Does What?" questionnaire. Psychological involvement in parent, partner, and worker roles was also determined, as was each partner's satisfaction with behavioral and psychological involvement in each domain. On the basis of global analyses, previous studies have suggested that new parents adopt more traditional roles. Item analyses indicated that men's and women's roles change in both traditional and nontraditional ways during the transition to parenthood, depending on the item and the time of assessment. Measures of individual and couple adapation were also obtained: self-esteem, parenting stress, and marital satisfaction. Men's *involvement* in family tasks was uncorrelated with their own or their wives adaptation in pregnancy but became linked with adaptation at 6 months postpartum. However, at 18 months after birth husbands' involvement in family tasks was correlated only with wives' adaptation. For both parents, *satisfaction* with family task arrangements becomes correlated with self-esteem, parenting stress and marital quality after childbirth; these measures of adaptation are more

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closely linked with role satisfaction than with actual sharing of family work.

Discussions of family roles in the early childrearing years almost inevitably focus on partners' division of household tasks, care of the children, and providing the family income. The ideology about how men and women should share these family roles appears to have shifted during the past three decades: women expect to work more outside the family while their children are young than their mothers did, while men are expected to participate in more of the family tasks than their fathers did. It is clear that women have entered the labor force in increasing numbers (Glick, 1979), but the expectation that husbands and wives will share family labor more equally appears to be ahead of current practices. Despite some recent indications that men are taking a significantly more active role in cooking, cleaning, and looking after their children (e.g., Pleck, 1981), women continue to bear the overwhelming responsibility for managing the household and the primary role in child care (Pleck & Rustad, 1980: Rapoport, Rapoport & Strelitz, 1977: Robinson, 1977), even when both partners work full time outside the home (Stafford, Backman, & Dibona, 1977: Szinovacz, 1977).

It is usually assumed that the tradition of gender-linked roles in young families is a continuation of earlier patterns of role socialization begun in the early years of marriage. But recent longitudinal studies support earlier cross-sectional findings: regardless of where couples begin on the traditional-to-egalitarian continuum, men's and women's family role arrangements become increasingly traditional after the birth of a first child (Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985; Cowan & Cowan, 1981; LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981; McHale & Huston, 1985). Despite some uncertainties about the *magnitude* of the shift toward gender-linked division of labor during the transition to parenthood (e.g., Goldberg, Michaels & Lamb, 1985), the *direction* of the shift appears to have been clearly established (Belsky & Pensky, 1986).

Given the pervasiveness of mothers' central role in the rearing of young children, it is ironic that recent studies of new parents have tended to highlight *fathers'* involvement in child care. Some researchers deliberately choose samples of fathers who are primary

caretakers of their children to examine men's changing parental role (Pruett, 1983: Radin, 1982; Radin, in press), while others describe more varied samples of men to search for predictive and concurrent correlates of men's participation in the care of their children (Barnett & Baruch, in press; Cowan & Cowan, in press[a]: Fein, 1978; Feldman, in press; Grossman, in press; Lamb, 1981; Palkovitz, 1984; Russell, 1982). The specific antecedents of fathers' family involvement seem to vary from one sample to another, although men's involvement in the care of their children seems to be predictable from a combination of measures of parents' individual characteristics, division of labor, and quality of marriage. There is substantial consensus across studies that the extent of father involvement, however large or small, is a product of both husbands' and wives' relationships with their families of origin and their coordination of current family and work roles.

In light of contemporary ideology emphasizing more egalitarian roles for men and women, the trend toward more traditional role arrangements after childbirth is usually interpreted as a negative and unfortunate outcome of becoming a family. We will argue that this conclusion is premature and incomplete. With data from our longitudinal study of partners becoming first-time parents, we will provide a detailed description of changes in men's and women's major roles during the transition to parenthood, and evaluate the impact of these role changes on men and women themselves, and on their relationships as couples.

In our examination of prior research we found five issues that require more systematic investigation:

1. The designation of role arrangements as traditional or egalitarian has been made by summarizing partners' division of labor across a wide variety of tasks. While we too have made generalizations based on summary data (Cowan & Cowan, 1983), our in-depth interviews with the couples in our study led us to suspect that men's and women's mutual role arrangements change in different ways on different family tasks. Item analyses may provide a more accurate description of what happens to family roles during the transition to parenthood.

2. Studies of role arrangements in the early years of family formation focus almost exclusively on role performance—who actu-

ally does what in a list of household, child care, and income-providing tasks. This focus on behavior ignores an important psychological component of this central aspect of married life—how a given role (e.g., father, wife) fits into each partner's self-concept (Allen & van de Vliert, 1984; Sarbin & Allen, 1968).

3. Most researchers describe shifts in the role arrangements of new parents without presenting the participants' *evaluation* of their situation. A few recent studies (Cowan, Cowan, Heming, Garrett, Curtis-Boles, & Boles, 1985; McHale & Huston, 1985; White & Booth, 1985) do report pre- to postpartum changes in partners' satisfaction with their division of labor, but none has examined the connection between traditional or egalitarian role arrangements and men's and women's satisfaction with them.

4. As men and women acquire the role of parent, they experience significant changes in other major family roles, particularly those of spouse and worker. When mothers who were employed before they became parents tend to leave work for varying periods of time after giving birth, their husbands become the sole wage earners for the family. As partners shift these family and work roles, they spend more time with the newest member of the family and less time as a couple (McHale, Huston, & Macdermid, 1985). Perhaps as a consequence, there appears to be a decline in the quality of couple interaction (McHale & Huston, 1985; Raush, Barry, Hertel & Swain, 1974), and a small but significant reduction in overall satisfaction with the marriage (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Cowan et al., 1985; Grossman, Eichler, & Winickoff, 1980; Feldman & Nash, 1984; Shereshefsky & Yarrow, 1973). In most of the research on the transition to parenthood, changes in parent, worker, and spousal roles have been described separately. What has been missing from these studies is a detailed examination of the way in which changing involvement in and satisfaction with household chores, nurturing the young child, and earning an income are connected with partners' feelings about themselves and about the quality of their relationship.

5. In a previous report of our study (Cowan et al., 1985), we described the fact that men and women change in different ways and at different rates as they become parents. Already different in late pregnancy, partners' descriptions become increasingly discrep-

ant—in their attitudes, perceptions, roles, and marital descriptions—during the year and a half after the birth of their first child. Earlier preliminary analyses of our data suggested that men and women may also show different patterns of correlation between changes in their roles and their marital satisfaction. It appears as if role arrangements, and especially satisfaction with the arrangements, may be more central to the marital satisfaction of women than of men.

In the present study of first-time parents, we address each of these issues by examining men's and women's role changes and their consequences. We examine parent, partner, and worker roles in terms of psychological salience and actual participation, and also assess each spouse's satisfaction with his or her level of involvement. Our first goal is simply to describe changes in these major adult roles from pregnancy to 18 months after the birth of a first child. We then examine the correlations between role arrangements and role satisfaction separately for men and for women. Next we investigate how involvement and satisfaction as parents, partners, and workers combine to account for variance in the personal, parental, and marital adaptation of new parents. We will test the hypothesis derived from our own preliminary results that role arrangements and satisfaction become increasingly more important in understanding women's adaptation than men's in the early years of becoming a family.

METHOD

Participants and Design

The data reported in this paper were gathered as part of a larger longitudinal research and intervention study of couple relationships during family formation and development (Cowan et al., 1985). From the practices of obstetrician-gynecologists in the greater San Francisco Bay Area, from a Health Maintenance Organization, and from community-wide newsletters, we recruited couples who were pregnant with their first child. Couples in the last trimester of pregnancy were invited to participate in a study of how marital relation-

ships change during the transition to parenthood. The 72 couples who responded were interviewed and assigned randomly to one of three conditions:

I. The first 24 were invited to participate in one of six couples groups meeting weekly for six months with a male-female team of trained mental health professionals as co-leaders. Each partner filled out an extensive set of questionnaires and participated in a two-to-three-hour interview before the groups began. They were interviewed and assessed twice after the groups ended, when their children were 6 and 18 months old. The intervention is described in detail elsewhere (C. Cowan, in press [a], Cowan & Cowan, in press [b]).

II. Another 24 couples were assessed with interviews and questionnaires at the same points in their transition to parenthood, but they did not participate in a couples group. For most of the analyses reported in this paper, data from couples in Conditions I and II were combined.

III. A third sample of 24 couples was interviewed but not assessed in pregnancy, in order to examine the impact of the assessment. Fifteen of these couples who were available for follow-up were given full assessments at 6 and 18 months postpartum.

IV. Most previous studies of the transition to parenthood have not included a comparison sample of childless couples. In order to separate normal marital change over time from change attributable to becoming a family, we recruited couples from the same medical and community sources: they were not having fertility problems and had not yet decided whether to have a first child. Of these 24 couples, four separated or divorced over the next two years and five subsequently had children; the 15 who remained together and childless were assessed at Pretest, 9 months later, and again a year after that.

The participants ranged in age from 20 to 49 years: at the beginning of the study, the mean age of the men was 30.1 years, of the women 29.0 years. They live in 28 different communities within a 40 mile radius of Berkeley and Oakland. Total family income ranged from $7,000 to $70,000, with a mean of $25,500 when they entered the study. Eighty-five percent of the participants are Caucasian, and 15% are black, Asian, or Hispanic.

Measuring Instruments

Behavioral Role Performance and Satisfaction – Who Does What?

At each assessment period, both parents filled out the 36-item *Who Does What*? scale (Cowan, Cowan, Coie, & Coie, 1978). Three subscales of 12 items each ask partners to describe the couple's division of tasks in three areas of family life: (i) *household and family tasks* including laundry, cooking, care of plants or yard, and car maintenance: (ii) *family decisions* including plans for vacations, partners' involvement in work outside the family, and amount of involvement in the community; and (iii) *child-related tasks* such as feeding, dressing, bathing, arranging for child care or babysitting, and calling the doctor.

Each item was rated on a 1-9 scale for "How it is now," with 1 indicating that the woman does it all, 9 indicating that the man does it all, and 5 showing that partners share the task about equally. Partners also rated "How I'd like it to be" on each item. A simple average of the scores in each area of life reflected men's and women's *relative involvement* in household, decision-making and child care tasks.

A check on the potential bias of self-reported role arrangements is the correspondence between husbands' and wives' ratings. While each partner gave him or herself somewhat higher ratings of involvement than the spouse did, item correlations between spouses' ratings on household and child care scales averaged between .72 and .85 at all assessment periods. Item correlations between spouses' ratings of decision-making were lower (averaging .35 to .42), probably because the range of ratings on the decision-making items was quite restricted.

We created two indices of *satisfaction* within each area of "who does what?" The first was derived from a sum of the absolute discrepancies between ratings of "How it is" and "How I'd like it to be." The second was a simple rating made after filling out each subsection, in response to the question." In general, how satisfied are you with the way you and you partner divide the household, [or] decision-making [or] family tasks related to children?" Responses ranged on a five-step scale from very satisfied, through neutral, to

very dissatisfied. The correlation between the two indices was generally significant but low (.30-.40). They seem to reflect different aspects of parents' satisfaction with their shared participation in the day to day tasks of managing a household and a family. The discrepancy measure may reflect how close parents come to meeting their ideals, while the overall rating may provide a more direct measure of how they feel about the current arrangements.

Psychological Role Involvement and Satisfaction—The Pie

Given a page with a circle 4" in diameter, each participant was asked to list the main roles in his or her life and to divide *The Pie* so that each section reflected the salience or importance of each aspect of self, not necessarily the time spent in the role (Cowan et al., 1978). Even in pregnancy, some expectant partners included a "parent" aspect of self. Involvement in each role was calculated from the degrees of the arc of the circle encompassed by the "piece" of *The Pie*. Content analysis yielded a coding scheme that included: family roles such as parent, partner/lover; worker and student roles: leisure roles such as artist, gardener; and self-descriptive statements such as "me" and "myself alone." In this report we focus on parent, partner, and worker aspects of self. Participants completed one *Pie* for "Me as I am" and another for "Me as I'd like to be" at each phase of the study. The discrepancy between degrees of the arcs drawn for actual and ideal pieces for each major role was interpreted as an index of satisfaction with that aspect of self the greater the discrepancy, the less the satisfaction.

Indices of Individual, Parental, and Marital Adaptation

1. *Self-esteem*. At each assessment period, participants completed two *Adjective Check Lists* (Gough & Heilbrun, 1980) describing "Me as I am" and "Me as I'd like to be." An index of self-esteem was derived from the discrepancy between the actual and ideal descriptions using 8 of the subscales (Gough, Fioravanti, & Lazzari, 1983).

2. *The Parenting Stress Index* (Abidin, 1980) contained 150 items in its fifth revision, which we used; Abidin now has a final version with 100 items. It provides a total Parenting Stress score

and subscale scores in the Parenting domain (depression, attachment to the child) and the Child domain (demandingness, mood). Many of the child items were adapted from infant temperament scales. The instrument has been shown to differentiate parents who abuse their children from those who do not (Abidin, 1980), and parents of children identified as having emotional problems from parents of normal children (Hamilton, 1980; Lafiosca, 1981; Zimmerman, 1979). It was filled out by both mothers and fathers when their children were 6 and 18 months old.

3. *The Short Marital Adjustment Test* (Locke & Wallace, 1959), one of the most commonly used indices of marital adaptation, was completed by each participant in late pregnancy and again at both 6 and 18 months postpartum.

Procedure

At each assessment period couples were interviewed by a male-female researcher couple at home or in the Psychology Clinic. They were given a packet of questionnaires to be filled out independently at home, and reinterviewed once the forms had been completed.

RESULTS

Role Change over Time

Household, Decision-Making, Child Care Tasks, and Outside-the-Family Work

Involvement. Changes in men's and women's relative involvement in household, decision-making, and child care were analyzed in three, four-way mixed-model ANOVAs (Intervention × Time × Gender × Item). The intervention was treated as a between-subjects effect and the remaining variables as within-subjects effects. Different numbers of degrees of freedom associated with similar F-tests resulted from slightly different amounts of missing data in each analysis. Due to the complexity of the analyses, we did not include the nonparent couples, who, we know, remained relatively stable over time in these and other measures (Cowan et al., 1985).

We investigated higher-order interactions, and then lower-order

interactions and simple main effects, using Fisher's Least Significant Difference approach to correct for the possibility of family-wise error (Keppel, 1982). Since the patterns for couples with and without the intervention were not significantly different on these role variables, the results in this section are derived from 47 couples becoming families, 23 who participated in a couples group, and 24 with pre- and posttest measures but no intervention experience.

In *household task involvement* we found statistically significant gender × item ($F = 3.99$; $df = 11/418$) and time × item ($F = 2.06$; $df = 22/418$: $p < .003$) interactions, with no significant main effects for gender or time. Although the correlations reported in the Method section indicated that men and women tended to agree in their descriptions of their division of household tasks, in fact partners showed different levels of agreement on different items. Specifically, partners tended to agree most about who takes out the garbage, pays the bills, and keeps in touch with family and friends, and least about how the shopping, meal preparation, and looking after the car was divided.

The shifts in allocation of household tasks are more complex than we reported prior to these analyses of item differences (Cowan & Cowan, 1981). Earlier, we reported no significant change in the overall *Who Does What*? ratings for household tasks: *on the average*, there was no shift toward men or women taking more responsibility for the overall load of household and family tasks as they became parents than they had before the birth. Women were doing more of these tasks overall, and they continued to do so during the transition. We also reported a marked change in role specialization. During late pregnancy, there was a tendency for both partners to have some responsibility for each of the tasks, just as Goldberg and her colleagues suggested (1985). After the baby was born, fathers tended to do more of some household tasks, while mothers did more of others. That is, parents described their arrangements on the 12 household and family task items as farther away from 50:50 and closer to 1 ("she does it all") or 9 ("he does it all").

Item analyses clarify the meaning of these trends. From pregnancy to six months after birth, along with what may be characterized as traditional increases in men's responsibility for providing the family income, and decreases in their doing the laundry, men

showed significant *increases* in their participation in meal preparation, housecleaning, and food shopping. During the next year, from 6 to 18 months after birth, men's participation in shopping and gardening increased significantly, but their contribution to meal preparation, housecleaning, and taking out the garbage declined. While these latter changes in fathers' involvement in household work could lead us to describe the couple as moving in a more traditional direction, the fact that about two-thirds of the women were returning to work at least part-time, thus increasing *their* contribution to the family income, would suggest a shift away from traditional arrangements. During the transition to parenthood, then, we see both traditional and non-traditional role changes in both spouses at different times.

The ANOVA of *decision-making* patterns indicated a main effect for items ($F = 8.18$; $df = 11/319$; $p < .0001$). According to both men's and women's ratings, men tended to have slightly but consistently more responsibility for financial planning, decisions about work outside the family, and when to initiate lovemaking, while women tended to have slightly more responsibility for making social arrangements, and for deciding about participation in community activities and religious organizations. This pattern of family decision-making in our sample of couples was unaffected by the transition to parenthood, at least in the period from late pregnancy to 18 months postpartum.

Recall that pre-birth ratings of *child-related tasks* were predictions of how the tasks would be divided after the child was born. Here, there was a clear and significant main effect of time ($F = 10.47$; $df = 2/60$: $p < .0001$). The actual division of child care tasks at 6 months postpartum indicated that men were doing much less than they or their wives had expected they would during the pregnancy assessment. There was, however, a significant increase in men's participation in the daily tasks of child care between 6 and 18 months after birth.

Shifts over time in caring for the children were complicated by both gender × item ($F = 2.35$; $df = 11/330$; $p < .05$) and time × item ($F = 6.43$; $df = 22/660$: $p < .0001$) interactions. As in the ratings of household tasks, men and women had slightly different perceptions of their involvement in the care of their child, depend-

ing on the item. They agreed most about who responded to the infant's cries, who bought toys, and who played with the child. They agreed least about who tended to take the child out, and who arranged babysitters and doctor's appointments.

The time × item interaction for child care tasks was relatively straightforward. The trend for mothers to be doing more of the care of the babies when they were 6 months old *than either parent had predicted* was evident for 8 of the 12 items. On four of the child care tasks, however, parents' expectations proved to be accurate: who would decide whether to respond to the child's cries: who would get up with the child in the middle of the night: who would do the child's laundry; and who would choose the baby's toys. It was predicted that these would be done more by mothers, and postpartum ratings showed that the predictions were correct.

Eight of the 12 items showed a significant increase in father involvement from 6 to 18 months postpartum, including bathing the baby and getting up during the night; fathers' participation in the other four tasks remained fairly constant: playing with the child, doing the baby's laundry, and arranging for babysitters and doctor's visits. Despite increases in fathers' involvement with their six-to-18 month olds, even the item with the highest father participation—playing with the child—received average ratings well below 5 ("we do this about equally") on the nine-point scale. Fathers are clearly taking part in their child's upbringing—perhaps more than their own fathers did—but mothers are carrying the major burden of child care.

Satisfaction with "who does what?" We considered including item differences in the ANOVAs of role satisfaction change, but decided that since they were based on discrepancy scores, compositing would be necessary to make them more reliable. Thus, we did three, mixed-model three-way ANOVAs (Time × Gender × Condition), with the condition variable comparing intervention parents, nonintervention parents, and couples not yet decided about having a baby ($n = 62$ couples).

Satisfaction with the division of household and family tasks showed a significant three-way interaction among gender, condition, and time ($F = 3.15$; $df = 2/90$: $p < .05$). As we have suggested elsewhere (Cowan & Cowan, in press [b]: C. Cowan, in

press), the ongoing discussions in the couples' groups *during* the transition from couple to family seemed to keep partners' satisfaction with the shifts in household arrangements on a more even keel. Satisfaction remained stable for partners not having a baby, *and* for new fathers and mothers who had participated in the intervention. By contrast, fathers who had not been in a couples' group showed a decline in satisfaction with household division of labor over the 18 months of this study. Mothers without the intervention declined in household task satisfaction from pregnancy to 6 months after birth, but they returned to "baseline" one year later.

There were no statistically significant effects of gender, condition, or time on satisfaction with the arrangements for family decision-making over the transition to parenthood—not too surprising since partners described few changes in their patterns of making family decisions over the period of study.

Satisfaction with the division of child care tasks, assessed only in the 47 couples who had children, differed markedly for mothers and fathers at each assessment period ($F = 28.56$; $f = 1/45$; $p < 0001$). In both pre-birth expectations and post-birth realities, women described larger discrepancies between the actual and ideal division of child care tasks than men did. There was a trend ($p < .11$) toward a time effect, suggesting an increase in dissatisfaction at the 6-months-after-birth assessment with a return to pre-birth estimates of satisfaction when the babies were 18 months old. Is this increase-decrease pattern of satisfaction associated with the fact that fathers tend to decrease and then increase their level of participation in child care?

Involvement and satisfaction. Partners' style of dividing housework and family decisions was *not* correlated with men's satisfaction with those role arrangements at any of the three assessments. The more men expected to participate in the care of their babies, however, the more satisfied they anticipated they would be with the division of caring for the baby. The more involved fathers showed greater satisfaction with these arrangements at 6 months postpartum. By the time their babies had reached 18 months of age, similar to the findings in pregnancy, there was no longer a significant correlation between how involved they were in their children's day-to-day care and how satisfied they were with their involvement. Ex-

cept for a brief period of time during the transition to parenthood, then, the extent of father involvement has little to do with men's satisfaction with the arrangement of family roles.

By contrast, men's level of involvement in family tasks mattered to *their wives'* satisfaction: the more fathers were involved in housework and caring for the children, the more mothers were satisfied with the couple's division of labor at all assessment periods. These findings will take on greater significance when we examine the different links for men and women between the couple's role arrangements and marital satisfaction.

Psychological Involvement in Partner, Parent, and Worker Roles

We have previously reported analyses of change in partner/lover, parent, and worker aspects of self as assessed by *The Pie* (Cowan et al., 1985). For the childless spouses, changes were evident in several aspects of sense of self over the two years of the study: the partner/lover aspects of self remained stable from pretest to the first posttest, and grew significantly larger from the first to the second posttest: parent was a very small aspect of self at each of the assessment periods: and men's psychological involvement in worker remained stable, while women's increased over time.

Not surprisingly, new parents showed very different trends in their self-descriptions over the first two years of the longitudinal study. For both new fathers and mothers, the partner/lover aspect of self declined—from 28% to 21% of *The Pie* for men and from 30% to 18% for women. Men's sense of self as parent increased from 5% to 24%, while women's increased from 11% to 38%. The greatest contrast between men and women showed in their sense of self as worker: for men, it increased from 28% to 33% of *The Pie* from pregnancy to 18 months postpartum, while for new mothers it decreased from 19% to 11% from pregnancy to 6 months after giving birth, with a rise to 17% one year later. What these data suggest is that as psychological involvement in parenthood increases, it is accompanied by a sense of decreasing involvement in the role of spouse and lover for both mothers and fathers, and contrasting changes in work involvement for husbands and wives. In each case

women changed more than men, especially in the period from late pregnancy to 6 months postpartum. Certainly, these changes in the psychological sense of self are consistent with the behavioral role changes we have been describing.

The data from both behavioral and psychological involvement in family and work roles indicate that there is a complex set of interrelated changes occurring over the transition to parenthood that cannot be summarized on a single traditional-to-egalitarian dimension. The value of using both behavioral and psychological measures of role arrangements will become more apparent when we discuss the connection between these arrangements and measures of adaptation.

Consistency Over Time

Longitudinal studies of the transition to parenthood not only describe pervasive changes in mean scores and ratings: they also demonstrate remarkable consistency of individual differences over time (Belsky, Spanier, & Rovine, 1983; Cowan et al., 1985; Feldman & Nash, 1984: Grossman et al., 1980; Heinicke, 1984). By and large, individuals and couples adapting well to their first child are those who described less distress and more pleasure as individuals and couples before the baby arrived (Heming, 1985).

This same consistency can be seen in men's and women's perceptions of role arrangements and satisfaction on *Who Does What*? On household and decision-making involvement scales, correlations between pregnancy and 18 month postpartum ratings ranged from .56 to .81. Satisfaction in these two domains also showed reasonable consistency over the same time period ($r = .46$ to .56). There was very high consistency between 6 and 18 months measures of involvement in child care tasks ($r = .67$ for men and .76 for women), and low but significant correlations between parents' predicted involvement and satisfaction during pregnancy and their actual ratings almost two years later (see also Cowan & Cowan, in press [a]).

The Pie measures of psychological involvement in parent, partner, and worker roles also showed significant correlations over time, ranging from .31 to .61. The consistency of *Who Does What*?

involvement and satisfaction measures, and *The Pie* measures strongly suggest that despite important role changes during the transition to parenthood, there is an underlying continuity to couples' role arrangements. How men and women rearrange their family and work roles in response to the arrival of a baby grows out of the patterns they have already established in their individual lives and in their relationship.

In sum, we have shown that it is not possible to categorize behavioral and psychological changes in family roles as moving unequivocally in traditional or egalitarian directions during the transition to parenthood. The psychological changes appear to be more traditional, with women taking on more parent involvement and less partner/lover and worker involvement than men. The behavioral changes are mixed. Men's and women's role specialization increases. Midway through the first postpartum year men participate more actively in some household tasks and outside-the-family work than they did when they were expecting a baby, but they are less involved in child care than they or their wives expected them to be before the baby arrived. During the next year men's participation in household tasks decreases, but they become more active in the care of their children. All of these changes toward and away from egalitarian family role arrangements occur in a context in which women are still fulfilling their traditionally-defined family role as primary caretaker of the house and the child, and men are more involved in work outside the family. We now turn to the question of how variations in role arrangements and satisfaction during the transition to parenthood are related to other domains of family life.

Role Correlates of Individual, Parental, and Marital Adaptation

Our model of family functioning during a major life transition (Cowan & Cowan, 1985) has indicated that there are close connections among events in five family domains: individual, couple, parental, family of origin, and outside-the-family. As a partial test of that model, we examined a number of multiple regression equations linking new parents' behavioral and psychological role involvement and satisfaction with three indicators of adaptation: self-esteem,

parenting stress, and marital satisfaction. As in any correlational analysis, multiple regression cannot determine causal connections, but it can show how behavioral and psychological measures of parent, partner, and worker involvement or satisfaction combine to account for variance in men's and women's adaptation at different points in the transition to parenthood.

Preliminary analyses indicated that *Who Does What?* ratings of child care involvement based on separate factor scores for daytime, evening and weekend, and nighttime periods provided more information than a single overall measure. These scores were based on items included in the 6 and 18 month postpartum follow-ups: they were not included in the pregnancy assessment. Eight variables representing aspects of role involvement were entered in each concurrent multiple regression equation: *behavioral involvement* in household, decision-making, daytime child care, evening and weekend child care, nighttime child care; *psychological involvement* in parent, partner, and worker aspects of *The Pie*.

As in a previous report (Cowan & Cowan [a]) global satisfaction ratings of household, decision-making, and child care were more strongly related to our adaptation measures than the actual-ideal discrepancies. These were entered into multiple regression equations along with discrepancy measures of satisfaction with parent, partner, and worker.

We chose the "backward elimination" technique to construct the multiple regression equations because it facilitated a test of our model. First, it entered into the equation all the measures that we expected would contribute to variance in the target. Then, it removed one measure at a time to assess whether the removal would significantly reduce the size of the multiple correlation. If the reduced correlation was still statistically significant, the variable was retained: if not, it was eliminated (Pedhazur, 1982). Beta weights describing the relative amount of variance explained are listed only when the variable was retained in the final step of the analysis (Table 1). We have included in Table 1 the more conservative *adjusted* R-squared estimates of variance accounted for by the combination of independent variables, to correct for the fact that the regression equations contain a relatively large number of variables relative to subjects.

Table 1

Role Correlates of Self-Esteem (SE), Parenting Stress (PS), and Marital Satisfaction (MS) during the Transition to Parenthood

	Pregnancy				6 months postpartum						18 months postpartum					
	Men		Women		Men			Women			Men			Women		
Involvement	SE	MS	SE	MS	SE	PS	MS	SE	PS	MS	SE	PS	MS	SE	PS	MS
household					-.31		-.29									.51
decisions					.16		.33								-.43	.07
child care					.16		.30								-.10	
- days																
- eves/weekends					.30		.29								-.35	.58
- nighttime					.22		.23			.33					-.13	.14
Parent					.38			-.39	.32	-.40					.29	
Partner																
Worker																
R					.61**		.65*	.39*	.32*	.51*					.61*	.71***
Adj. R^2					.20		.27	.13	.08	.22					.31	.39
Satisfaction																
household			.27		.18	-.28	.57								.47	.37
decisions		.27			.30	-.27				.31		-.42	.54		.18	.25
child care	.32	.25		.32	.31					.33	.35	-.21				
Parent								.31	.32	.35	.12		.26		.34	
Partner					.25	-.26						-.20	.30			
Worker						-.26						-.13			.17	
R	.32*	.37*	.27*	.32*	.52*	.51	.57*	.31*	.32*	.77***	.50*	.49*	.67***		.59**	.69***
Adj. R^2	.09	.11	.06	.09	.17	.15	.33	.08	.08	.54	.15	.13	.37		.27	.40

* p < .05
** p < .01
*** p < .001

Pregnancy

The first general conclusion to be drawn from the upper left section of Table 1 is that neither psychological nor behavioral role *involvement* was related to self-esteem or marital satisfaction in expectant parents. Only a few single global ratings of satisfaction with *Who Does What*? were correlated with how satisfied men and women were with themselves and their marriage (lower left section of Table 1). In only one case did measures of role satisfaction combine in the regression equations and in no case did the single role satisfaction measure explain more than 11% of the variance in men's and women's adaptation during pregnancy.

Six Months After Birth

The picture changes graphically after the birth of a baby:

Men. Fathers of six-month-olds who were doing *less* housework and *more* child care than their peers, were feeling better about themselves and their marriages. In addition, the more psychological involvement men showed as parent, as measured by *The Pie*, the greater their self-esteem. Men's scores on the Parenting Stress Index were not correlated with involvement in caring for their child. However, the more satisfied they were with their involvement in caring for the baby, the less stress they experienced as a parent and the greater their self-esteem. Together, role satisfaction variables accounted for 15% of the variance in men's parenting stress and 17% of the variance in their self-esteem. Finally, men's satisfaction with the division of housework appeared to be the single most important ingredient of their marital satisfaction when their babies were six months old, accounting for 33% of the variance in their marital satisfaction scores.

Women. As we have come to expect, new mothers' patterns were somewhat different from new fathers'. Women with *less* psychological involvement as parent had higher self-esteem and lower parenting stress, although the correlations were quite small. This is in direct contrast with the trends for men. Further, when mothers with lower psychological *involvement* in the parent role had husbands who participated more often in looking after the child in the middle of the night, they were more satisfied with their marriage

(R = .51). A combination of satisfaction with several behavioral and psychological aspects of family roles was highly correlated with women's marital satisfaction (R = .77).

Eighteen Months After Birth

Midway through the second postpartum year, the difference between correlational patterns of men and women is even clearer.

Men. As in pregnancy, (a) men's behavioral involvement in household, decision-making, child care tasks: and (b) their psychological involvement in parent, partner, or worker roles were no longer connected with their self-esteem, parenting stress, or marital *satisfaction*. Different measures of role satisfaction combined to account for 15% of the variance in fathers' self-esteem, 13% of the variance in their parenting stress, and an impressive 37% of the variance in their marital satisfaction scores.

Women. At 18 months postpartum, none of the role involvement measures was associated with women' self-esteem, but *both* role involvement and satisfaction measures were highly correlated with parenting stress and marital satisfaction. Here again, mothers with smaller pieces of *The Pie* labeled parent experienced less parenting stress. In general, women were less stressed as parents when their husbands participated more in household tasks and care of the children, and when they themselves had more input in family decision-making.

Women's *psychological* involvement in or satisfaction with family roles did not seem to be an important factor in their satisfaction with marriage. Here, fathers' actual involvement in household and child care tasks accounted 39% of the variance in mothers marital satisfaction. Wives' satisfaction with the level of their husbands' involvement accounted for a similarly high 40% of the variance in their marital satisfaction scores.

DISCUSSION

The multiple regression analyses demonstrate clearly that behavioral and psychological aspects of being a parent, partner, and worker combine to account for a statistically significant amount of

variance in new parents' adaptation as assessed by measures of self-esteem, parenting stress, and marital satisfaction. They also demonstrate that it is necessary to consider the status of all major mutual role arrangements and satisfaction in order to understand how individuals and couples adapt to becoming a family.

We were surprised that work involvement as measured by *The Pie* did not prove to be a significant correlate of adaptation either for fathers or mothers. Using a more behavioral index of work involvement (not employed, halftime, full time) added the information that men who worked half time or less at 6 months postpartum tended to have higher parenting stress ($r = -.44$), and lower marital satisfaction ($r = .22$) than men who worked full time. But the same work index was unrelated to adaptation for women at 6 months postpartum and unconnected with adaptation for either men or women at 18 months after birth. Thus, while work involvement cannot be ignored at 6 and 18 months postpartum, it does not seem to be as centrally linked to individual and marital adaptation as the division of labor in the home and the couple's psychological involvement in parent and partner roles. Perhaps the many other studies that find work effects are focusing on families with older children and families with more than one child (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Crouter, 1982; Hoffman, 1979).

Is it possible to find out whether role arrangements influence adaptation or whether adaptation leads to specific role arrangements and satisfaction? Supplementary multiple regression analyses indicate that the findings reported above do not simply reflect associations between variables at a static point in time, but are a consequence of the fact that role arrangements and adaptation are tightly interlocked. *Changes* in role involvement from pregnancy to 18 months after birth account for about the same amount of variance in 18 month adaptation as concurrent correlates. Conversely, changes in adaptation predict role involvement and satisfaction at 18 months postpartum. Finally, pregnancy to 18 month postpartum changes in role arrangements and satisfaction are highly correlated with changes in adaptation especially for women. Role arrangements and individual or couple adaptation appear to move in tandem.

In our view, these findings support a family system model of circular rather than linear causality. We believe that the role

changes accompanying the transition to parenthood affect how men and women feel about themselves and their marriage. But partners' self-esteem and marital satisfaction in pregnancy also influence the way in which they arrange their roles and how satisfied each partner becomes with how family labor is divided. What these data add to the existing family system models developed by therapists working with dysfunctional families is the importance of "Who Does What?" issues in understanding both individual and marital adaptation during the period of family formation.

The fact that role arrangements and adaptation become linked only after the birth of a baby is one example of what major life transitions do—they create functional relationships that were not present before, and they "unhook" functional relationships that existed before the life change occurred. Individual and family development, we are suggesting, is not simply a matter of change in average scores but also a change in the pattern of connections among variables. Given these shifting links between men's and women's roles and adaptation during the transition to parenthood, it is no wonder that babies tend to be blamed for causing parents' distress (Cowan & Cowan, in press [c]). Our data suggest that it is not the arrival of a child *per se* but the changes in parent, partner, and worker roles as they interact with feelings about oneself and one's marriage that create disequilibrium in the family system.

The data also suggest that disequilibrium does not inevitably lead to distress or dysfunction. While some couples make changes in role arrangements that lead to distress, others manage to become satisfied with their roles and to feel more positively about themselves and their marriage. It is noteworthy that men who participate actively in the care of their children show greater adaptation at 6 months after birth, and that their wives show greater adaptation at both 6 and 18 month follow-ups. Similarly, it is important to understand that women who manage to limit some of their psychological involvement in the parent role, and to maintain their investment in the spousal role, experience less parenting stress and greater satisfaction with their marriage. How some couples manage to arrange their roles in this fashion will be the subject of some of our future research.

The results of the multiple regression analyses also emphasized a

theme of our previous reports (Cowan et al., 1985) and those of other researchers studying couples becoming families (e.g., Feldman & Nash, 1984). Just as in Bernard's observation that there are "his and hers" marriages, we find his and her transitions to parenthood. At 6 months after birth some aspects of role arrangements and adaptation are correlated for both men and women, but one year later only women appear to link the couple's division of labor with their stress as parents and as spouses. It seems likely that at least part of the reported decline in marital satisfaction during the early years of family formation may result from the fact that new mothers and fathers are experiencing these major role changes in different ways.

Implications for Family Policy

We have underlined the fact that women are still assuming the major responsibility for family work in the early childrearing years. Nevertheless, our more detailed item analyses suggest that men increase their participation in specific aspects of family life during this time and women begin to move back to work outside the family. Based on our extensive interviews with men and women over the past 12 years, we believe that the usual tendency to describe men's family involvement in terms of psychological motivation (willingness or resistance) is an oversimplification (Cowan & Cowan, in press [a]).

In fact, there are many *barriers* to fathers' involvement in the care of their young children. Because women tend to reduce their involvement in outside-the-family work and are deprived of a major source of self-esteem, they are often reluctant to give up their special role, to "let men in." Men's increased involvement in the workplace is often a result and not a cause of their reduced opportunities for involvement in the parent role.

Furthermore, businesses are still reluctant to support men's paternal role beyond the first few weeks. When both partners work outside the home, men are very unlikely to stay home when the child is sick or child care arrangements go awry. And, since the Presidential veto of federal support for child care centers, no legislation has

been passed to provide both men and women with options to share work inside and outside of the family.

Our data do not suggest that increased father involvement in household tasks decision-making, and child care will inevitably lead to higher levels of individual and marital adaptation. Except in the first few postpartum months, men's level of involvement in the family is relatively independent of their self-esteem, parenting stress, and marital satisfaction. For women the correlations between role involvement and adaptation are higher but far from perfect. However, both men's and women's *satisfaction* with the who does what of life are consistently related to individual and couple adaptation during the first year and one half of family life. These findings suggest to us that family policies enacted by business and government will be most effective if they offer couples a choice about how to balance their work and family arrangements.

The case for increased support to couples so that they can adopt more satisfying role arrangements can be strengthened by considering the welfare of both parents and children. If 37% to 40% of the variance in men's and women's satisfaction with marriage at 18 months can be explained by satisfaction with role arrangements, then we have identified a key ingredient in the emotional climate of new parents' lives. But the ultimate pay-off for supporting more flexible family roles goes beyond the adaptation of the couple. Preliminary data from our assessments of the families when the children are three and one half (Cowan & Cowan, 1985) indicate that parents' individual adjustment and marital satisfaction are strongly connected with the quality of their parenting styles (e.g., authoritative, authoritarian, permissive). In turn, these styles are linked with the children's cognitive, personality, and social development, and the early emergence of internalizing or externalizing behavior problems. The findings suggest that parents who feel more stressed as individuals and as couples are less able to be warm, responsive, limit-setting and structuring as parents, and more likely to report difficulties in their children's adjustment. Thus, support for shifts in the division of family tasks toward arrangements more satisfying to the parents may ultimately facilitate adaptation in the development of their children.

While our data do not support ideological statements that the di-

vision of family tasks *must* be egalitarian, they do indicate that families may benefit from a reconsideration of current role arrangements. This reconsideration could be facilitated by new and more flexible family policies in government and in the workplace. We are concerned, however, with one sobering implication of our findings. Women's postpartum adaptation appears to be more sensitive to role arrangements than men's. We wonder whether this fact makes it more difficult for men to understand the need for changes in the who does what of family life. As long as the vast majority of policymakers are male, change in new parents' provisions for balancing employment and family work may occur more slowly than would be ideal for men's, women's, and children's adaptation during the early years of family life.

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