Sexual dysfunctions and relationship satisfaction through the transition to parenthood: A dyadic study

Katherine Bécotte 1-2, Catherine de Pierepont-1,2, Isabell Lessard 1, & Audrey Brassard 1-2

1 Université de Sherbrooke, 2 Centre de recherche interdisciplinaire sur les problèmes conjugaux et les agressions sexuelles

Abstract

The transition to parenthood (TP) is a major life event accompanied by many challenges requiring great relational and sexual adjustment from parents and couples (Doss & Rhoades, 2017). Most research on the new parents’ sexual life during the TTP was conducted among women as they are greatly sought physically during the TTP, but also psychologically. Sexuality, however, is a dyadic process and, so men must be included. The present research used dyadic data to better understand the associations between both partners’ sexual functioning and relationship satisfaction during the TTP. The secondary data from a mixed study on the intimacy, sexual experiences and needs of 67 couples during the perinatal period were analyzed. Both spouses responded to validated online questionnaires on a secure platform. Path analyses based on the Actor-Partner Interdependence model (APIM: Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) revealed that women and men’s sexual function was positively related to their own relationship satisfaction (actor effects). Partner effects were also found: Women’s sexual function was positively related to their male partners’ relationship satisfaction and men’s sexual function was positively and strongly related to their female partners’ relationship satisfaction. The APIM also controlled for the high correlations between both partners’ sexual function scores as well as their relationship satisfaction. The model explained 67% of the variance in women DAS scores and 62% in men DAS scores. The results of this study highlight the importance of addressing sexual difficulties of both members of couples that can be experienced during the TTP since they are related to relationship satisfaction.

Introduction

• The transition to parenthood (TP): the period between the couple’s decision to have a child and the end of the child’s first year is recognized as a major life event requiring great individual and conjugal adjustments (Adamsons, 2013; Doss & Rhoades, 2017).

• According to Polomos and Dubéau (2009), intimacy – including sexual expression – is the most affected conjugal relationship dimension during TTP. The lack of sexual intimacy contributes to the partners’ dissatisfaction and resentment, which can lead to separation or divorce (Briggs et al., 2005; Polomos, 2007).

• A review focusing on women prenatal and postnatal sexual dysfunction revealed (Serati et al., 2010):

• A significant decline in sexual function during pregnancy and up to 6 months postpartum.

• The delay before resuming postpartum sexual activity could be explained by breastfeeding, dyspareunia, and postpartum pelvic floor dysfunction.

• Khajehei, Doherty, Tilley, and Sauer (2015) have shown that during the first year after childbirth:

• 64.3% of women reported sexual dysfunction

• 70.5% of women reported sexual dissatisfaction

• Otherwise, a consensus emerged from the literature that a majority of couples (50–70%), and especially mothers, saw their relationship satisfaction decline during the TTP, while others had a stable satisfaction (20–35%) or an increased satisfaction (7%–15%) (Doss & Rhoades, 2017; Mitnick, Heyman, & Smyth Step, 2009).

• Women without children have better sexual functioning and higher marital satisfaction than women with children (Pourakbaran & Yazdi, 2015).

• Nezhad and Goodarzi (2011) have also found a significant positive association between sexuality and relationship satisfaction for both men and women.

• Most research on the new parents’ sexual life during the TTP has been conducted among women as they are greatly sought physically during the TTP, but also psychologically. Sexuality, however, is a dyadic process and, as such, men should be included.

Methods

Participants

• N = 67 couples (134 participants)

• Age: 22–27 years (5.2 %), 28–33 years (61.9 %), 34–39 years (32.8 %)

• Marital status: Married (77.6 %), common-law partner (22.4 %)

• Average length of cohabitation = 4.9 years (SD = 2.46)

• Education: 20.9 % had a high school degree or a college degree, 79.1 % had a university degree.

Instruments

• French version of the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (DAS: Baillargeon, Dubois, & Marineau, 1986; Spanier, 1976). A 32 items scale measuring relationship quality (α = .96) through 4 subscales (consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression).

• French version of the Female Sexual Function Index (FSFI Rosen et al., 2000). A 19 items scale measuring women’s sexual function (α = .97) through 6 dimensions (desire, arousal, lubrication, orgasm, satisfaction, pain).

• French version of the Brief Male Sexual Function Index (BMFSF: O’Leary et al., 1995). An 11 items scale measuring men’s sexual function (α = .94) through 5 dimensions (excitation, erection, ejaculation, problems, satisfaction).

Procedure

• Data come from a larger mixed methods study where the objective was to describe changes in the transition to parenthood within a larger mixed methods study. The French version of the Desire Questionnaire (Doss, 2008). A 28 items scale measuring desire (α = .92) through 4 subscales (desire, sexual interest, attraction, and romantic attachment).

• Eligibility criteria: Heterosexual couples with a first child between 6 and 12 months living in Eastern Ontario.

• Only data concerning sexual function and relationship satisfaction after pregnancy (0-6 months after birth) were presented here.

• Path analyses based on the Actor-Partner Interdependence Model (APIM: Kenny, Kashy, & Cook, 2006) were conducted with the AMOS software.

Results

Figure 1. Associations between sexual function and relationship satisfaction in the postnatal period

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual function W</th>
<th>Relationship Satisfaction W</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β = .38***</td>
<td>R² = .67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β = .20***</td>
<td>R = .62***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual function M</th>
<th>Relationship Satisfaction M</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>β = .52***</td>
<td>R² = .62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>β = .65***</td>
<td>R = .82***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

** p < 0.001

References


