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Baby Care: Fathers vs. Mothers



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How do husbands' and wives' everyday lives change when they become parents? By "everyday life" we mean their daily routines—their eating, sleeping, working, and playing routines. Also, how is the everyday life of a new father different from that of a new mother? These are the questions we set out to answer when we began our study of the transition to parenthood.

As studies of the transition to parenthood go, ours is unique in several respects. First, it is a study of parenthood as parents see it. Each interview was essentially open-ended and free-flowing, which is to say that the men and women in the study were encouraged to talk about what was important to them, not what we presumed to be important. Second, it is a participant-informed study. Married in 1970, we had our first child in 1979 which, coincidentally enough, happened to be the point at which we started to analyze the interviews. Thus, we were in the unusual position of experiencing our own transition to parenthood at the same time we were trying to understand the experiences of others. Third, it is a study of change. Each of the twenty couples in the study was interviewed not once but three times, during the third, sixth, and ninth months postpartum. Fourth, it is a study of both first- and second-time parenthood. Whereas most studies of the transition to parenthood focus only on the first birth, we thought it important to view the transition to parenthood as a continuum that, in principle, can extend the length of the childbearing phase. Last but not least, it is a study of social patterns, social processes, and sociohistorical conditions surrounding the transition to parenthood. All too often, researchers look only at whether or not new parents are "coping with" or "adjusting to" the transition to parenthood, while ignoring the transition to parenthood itself. As a result, we know very little about *what actually happens* when peo-

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ple become parents; and we know **even less about** how what happens is linked to larger sociohistorical realities. (For a detailed description of the methodology used in the study, see LaRossa and LaRossa, 1981.)

In our efforts to make sense of the transcripts, we found ourselves increasingly relying on three conceptual frameworks: the conflict framework, the choice and exchange framework, and the symbolic interactionist framework.

The *conflict framework*, of which the major premise is "when confronted with a choice under conditions of real or perceived scarcity, humans will be inclined to choose themselves over others" (Sprey, 1979: 132), proved to be the overarching orientation because of how central the "problem of continuous coverage" is to understanding the transition to parenthood.

A newborn child cannot survive on its own, but is dependent on adults to feed it, protect it from the elements, and teach it to use symbols (most importantly, language) so that it can become a functioning member of society. The helplessness of the human infant places a family that is in the midst of a transition to parenthood within the class of social arrangements that have as their primary function "coverage." For example, a medical hospital in the United States is a "continuous coverage social system"; there is always someone who is on call, ready to respond to the needs of the patients at a moment's notice (Zerubavel, 1979b). The same kind of coverage characterizes new parenthood. Having a baby launches a couple into the responsibilities of continuous coverage for that baby; someone, either the couple themselves or their representative (for example, a babysitter), must always be on call.

The obligation of having to be ready and able to care for their infant son or daughter tends to reduce the father's and mother's free time, the time when they can do what they want to do rather than what someone else (the baby) wants them to do. Indeed, it is the loss of free time accompanying parenthood that surprises and bothers new parents more than anything else (Harriman, 1983; Hobbs, 1965; Hobbs and Wimbish, 1977;

LaRossa, 1983). The scarcity of this valued resource creates a conflict of interest between the husband and wife. No matter how much they may try to avoid it, periodically there will arise zero-sum-game-like situations in which one partner's "winning" (being free to pursue his or her own interests) means that the other must "lose" (forgo his or her own interests for the sake of the baby). Conflicts of interest generally result in conflict behavior, tactics, and strategies which theoretically extend from verbal persuasion to the use of force, as both parties in the encounter pursue their own short- and long-term interests, often at the expense of the other.

It is this basic pattern—child dependency resulting in continuous coverage, which means a scarcity of free time, which leads to conflicts of interest and often conflict behavior—that cuts across the experiences of all the couples in our sample; and it is this basic pattern that explains why the conflict framework became the linchpin in our analysis.

Closely tied to the conflict framework is the *choice and exchange framework*, which operates on the assumption that "humans avoid costly behavior and seek rewarding statuses, relationships, interaction, and feeling states to the end that their profits [or outcomes] are maximized" (Nye, 1979: 2). The choice and exchange framework was found to be useful in understanding the organization of men's and women's commitments to activities, like infant care, outside employment, and recreation. The choice and exchange framework also helped us to understand how power relations in families are directly tied to institutionalized sexism and, more specifically, to the dependency of women on men. One reason that the marital power structure in the United States tends to be patriarchal is that women often have to rely on men for economic support.

Not as often associated with the conflict framework but just as important to our argument is the *symbolic interactionist framework*. The basic insight derived from this framework is that "humans live in a symbolic [conventional sign] environment as well as a physical environment," and

that "the best way to understand humans is to deal with the mentalistic meanings and values [the symbols] that occur in the minds of the people, because that is the most direct cause of their behavior" (Burr et al., 1979: 46, 49). The inability of infants at birth to use symbols, the different levels of value that fathers and mothers attribute to free time, the definitions of social structures as legitimate or illegitimate, and, finally, the symbolic or ideological aspects of conflict behavior are all crucial to our analysis and, indirectly, to the conflict framework which supports that analysis.

By accentuating the part that sociocultural forces and interactional contexts play during the transition to parenthood, the three frameworks, taken together, form the basis for a sociological—or structural—approach to the transition to parenthood. Up to now, transition-to-parenthood researchers have relied almost exclusively on an individualistic approach, an approach that focuses on biological or psychological explanations for parental behavior. Rossi (1977, 1984), for example, talks about the effect of biologically based gender differences on parenting, while Chodorow (1978) offers a psychoanalytic theory that locates the roots of fathering and mothering in the personality differences between men and women. In contrast, we hypothesize that sociological variables, such as social time, power, commitment, and ideology, do as good a job—if not a better job—of explaining the conduct of fathers and mothers vis-à-vis their children; and we believe that any theory of parenthood that strives to be comprehensive must include sociological as well as biological and psychological factors.

Work and Play, Primary and Secondary Time

The continuous coverage of infants is somewhat unique in that it entails both work and play. Not only is it important to feed, clothe, and carry the baby, it is also important to play with the baby, since it is through play (and especially

games) that the child develops a concept of self, which is indispensable to becoming a full-fledged member of society (Mead, 1934).

In his 1965–66 study, Robinson (1977) discovered several things about child work and child play that we think are highly significant. First of all, he found that not only did housewives spend seven times as much time as employed men in child-care activities, and employed women twice as much time, but that while less than a tenth of women's child care was play, half of all men's child care was play (1977: 64–65). When one considers the range of activities that constitute "baby care," it is indeed remarkable that fathers are able to limit their own activities to such a degree. In their study of the content and organization of housework, Berk and Berk (1979) identify approximately sixty discrete tasks that can be categorized as baby care (1979: 265–275). However, only six of these tasks fall under the heading of play. Combining Robinson's and the Berks' surveys thus suggests that fathers are devoting 50 percent of their baby care time to 10 percent of the baby care. We also found that it was not uncommon for new fathers to define short bursts of play with their infants (often immediately upon coming home from work, or after dinner) as efforts which made up for the fact that they were absent all day or which balanced out their inability or unwillingness to take a more active part in the so-called "dirty work" (for example, diaper changing, feeding). The fact that playing is generally "cleaner" than other kinds of baby care and thus more desirable may only partially explain why fathers tend to prefer this form of contact with their children. The other, perhaps more important, factor in the equation is that play requires less *attention* than custodial responsibilities.

Here is what we mean: With the express purpose of measuring different levels of attention, Robinson's research was based on having families keep a log or a diary of their activities over a specified time, usually a twenty-four-hour period. Looking somewhat like a bookkeeper's ledger sheet, a time-diary lists the hours of the

day down the left-hand side of the page, and the following seven questions across the top (thus creating seven columns): "What did you do [at this time]? Time began? Time ended? Where? With whom? Doing anything else? Remarks?" (Robinson, 1977: 7). The first question ("What did you do [at this time]?") tapped into the subject's *primary* or main activity. The next-to-last question ("Doing anything else?") recorded the subject's *secondary* activity, which by definition was anything done secondarily and in addition to the primary activity. Robinson found that the comparisons between men and women with respect to primary child care were exactly the same as the comparisons for child care in general; that is, housewives spend seven times as much time in primary child care, and employed women spend twice as much time in primary child care as men (1977: 72). The principal reason for the similar figures can be traced to the correlation between the kind of child-care activity and the amount of attention devoted to that activity. In a footnote, Robinson reports that (1977: 70):

While over two-thirds of primary activity child care in the 1965–1966 study was "custodial" (feeding, clothing, chauffeuring, etc.) rather than "interactional" (reading, playing, etc.) in nature, the bulk of secondary activity child care consisted of interactional activities.

When we looked at our data in light of Robinson's findings, we came up with another factor that may help explain why fathers devote a greater proportion of their child-care time to play than do mothers. Not only is play cleaner than many other forms of child-care activity, but play also has the advantage of being less demanding in terms of the amount of attention that one must give to that activity. *Fathers, in other words, may choose play over work because play "eats" less into their own free time.*

How does play "consume" less free time? Think of play and work as ideal-typical poles of a hypothetical continuum. Toward the play end of the continuum one would include activities such as piggy-back riding, tickling, and hide-and-seek.

Toward the work end of the continuum one would include feeding, diaper changing, putting to sleep, and so forth. In the middle would be those activities that fall between play and work, the borderline cases: reading a story, giving a bath (with toys, of course), going on nature walks. Generally speaking, activities that are toward the play end of the continuum require less parental attention than the other activities. First, these activities are often shorter in duration. A piggy-back ride, for example, may last only two or three minutes. Yet at the end of the ride, the parent can legitimately terminate contact with the baby, often with the assistance of the other parent (for example, "Come on now, give Daddy a break, you tired him out"). Second, play activities are typically not as scheduled or as urgently required as work activities. The parent can usually decide when and how long to play ("Not now, later, but only for a few minutes"), whereas activities such as feeding and diaper changing are more on demand; letting one's child go hungry or remain dirty is frowned upon. Third, play activities are less bounded spatially than work activities. Roughhousing can take place anywhere in the house—in front of the television, in the backyard—which means that the parent can more easily integrate personal activities with play. Feeding and diaper changing, on the other hand, are usually done in specific locales, severely restricting the kinds of activities that a parent can perform in addition to child work.

Getting "Down Time"

P rimary and secondary are not the only levels of attention. There is logically a third level of activity, *tertiary* activity, which can be defined as time during which there is no social contact whatsoever. Of course, as with primary and secondary activity, tertiary activity must be operationalized in terms of some referent or referents. Thus, for example, a mother at work would be at a tertiary level with respect to her children, while being primarily and secondarily involved

with her job. If, on the other hand, her child happens to call her at her office, then during the phone call she would be primarily attending to her child, and secondarily attending to her work.

Rather than think of attention, one may think of social accessibility (Zerubavel, 1979a). In the primary mode one is most accessible to a referent, and in the tertiary mode least accessible to a referent. Hence, primary, secondary, and tertiary time actually represent points on a continuum that extends from being totally attuned or accessible to a referent (total connection) to being totally neglectful or inaccessible to a referent (total separation).

When adults interact with each other, they generally have the freedom to move, within specified parameters and rules, across all three levels. A husband and wife can, for example, be involved in a very intense conversation one moment (primary status), then shift their attention to the television while still maintaining contact with each other (secondary status), and finally move to separate corners of their house to work on their individual hobbies (tertiary status). (Some husbands and wives might define this third move as secondary status because, as far as they are concerned, being in the same house means that they are *with* each other. But let us assume, for the sake of simplicity, that the husband and wife do not define their situation in this way, but believe that any time that they are not in face-to-face contact with each other, they are in a no-contact status.) The advantage of being able to move across all three levels is that husbands and wives can give each other their undivided attention at one moment, and then withdraw completely from each other the next. They can, in other words, coordinate a system of connectedness and separateness such that at one moment they are concentrating on each other, and the next they are essentially removed from each other.

This is very different from what it is like to interact with an infant. If a mother, for example, is alone with an infant at home, she can never move to a tertiary level, but must always be "up" or "ready" to attend to her child's needs. This is in-

deed one of the biggest surprises for new parents. They soon learn that infants are not only very dependent on them, but that the demands of infants are also nonnegotiable. The simple phrase "I'll be with you in a moment," which works so well in the adult world to delay moving to a primary or secondary level, is useless with someone who does not understand language. ("Infant" is derived from the Latin word *infans* which means incapable of speech.)

We do not mean to suggest that primary contact with one's child is unrewarding, or that some parents do not find pleasure in having an individual who is totally dependent on them. But as the couples in our study suggested over and over again, what can be unrewarding and unpleasant is the *repetitiveness* of that level of contact. No matter how much we love someone or something, satiation (too much of a good thing) reduces the reward value of that person or object (Homans, 1974: 29). Also the *pace* of parent-infant interaction can take its toll. As with assembly-line work (see Blauner, 1964) and air traffic control work, the most alienating and most distressing aspect of baby care is its pace. It is the baby and not the parent who generally controls when shifts from one level to the next will occur. The parents' job is to "keep track" of the child, who, if mobile (crawling or toddling), must be "plotted" in terms of direction, speed, and altitude (height).

It is perhaps worth noting that people who work in situations from which they cannot voluntarily withdraw, from which they cannot take "time-outs" when they want to but must wait to be relieved, have been found to be more prone to "burn-out," the symptoms of which include not only physical and emotional exhaustion, but social exhaustion as well, involving "the loss of concern for the people with whom one is working," taking a "very cynical and dehumanized perception of these people," and treating them accordingly (Maslach and Pines, 1977: 101; also Maslach, 1976). Thus, we suspect that there are parents who develop dehumanized views of their own children as a result of the constant attention they are giving to them, and that the parents who are

probably most likely to undergo this experience are those who “cannot do enough for their kids,” the supermoms and superdads.

Even when the baby is sleeping, an adult left alone in the house cannot move to a tertiary level. Although the parent will probably not be in the same room as the baby during nap time, the parent is still monitoring the infant, still standing watch. This is not to say that the parent will not feel restored by having an hour or two “off.” In reality, however, the “ah” feeling experienced by the parent when he or she carefully closes the door to the nursery after having just rocked the baby to sleep is because now there is time to be primarily involved in his or her own needs while secondarily involved with the baby’s needs, rather than vice versa. In short, after a hectic morning of being “up” for the baby—feeding, changing, amusing, watching, consoling, and so forth—the parent can now enjoy a long awaited *semi*-attentiveness.

If there are two adults in the house, the picture can change dramatically. Now each adult can slip into periodic “down times” while the other remains on a secondary level. Sometimes responsibility for the baby is formally arranged, as in those cases where fathers and mothers alternate who gets up in the morning with the baby and who sleeps late. However, more often than not, we suspect, the movement from one level to the next is informal and emergent, a procedure which can sometimes court disaster (He: “I thought *you* were watching the baby!” She: “And I thought *you* were watching the baby!”).

If one of the adults refuses to share responsibility for the baby, then the other must always be “up” or “ready.” Thus, while one parent watches television, reads a book, works in the den—essentially oblivious to the needs of the baby—the other must be continuously on guard. Again the formal/informal distinction applies. One husband in the sample formally announced to his wife that, as far as he was concerned, she was always on duty—seven days a week, twenty-four hours a day. With other husbands, the results were still the same—the wife always attending to the

baby—but the means were more subtle and more informal. Thus, a husband may claim that he, too, is in a secondary status with respect to the baby, but in reality he is technically in second while functionally in third; if the baby starts to cry or moves too close the house plants, he will not feel any compulsion to intervene, but will let his wife take care of it. Even more subtle is the strategy of arranging his activities so that he precludes his having to share in the baby work. The father who decides to pay the bills or perhaps clean the kitchen just when the baby needs to be fed or changed has effectively preserved a tertiary level of contact with his child.

The significance of negotiating protectiveness becomes clear at this point. It is quite common for fathers and mothers to debate over how protective they should be with their babies (for example, “Should we let her cry?”). Although the manifest function of these discussions is to decide what is best for the child, the hidden agenda is often what is best for the husband and wife. Should a father conclude that his wife is too protective (“You are spoiling her”), he can then justify his refusal to respond to the baby’s demands. However sincere he may be, the results are still the same—“down time” for the father, often at the expense of his wife. For example, one of the fathers went out virtually every night of the week, despite his wife’s protests that he should stay home with her and the baby. One of his responses to her protests was that if she were willing to hire a babysitter, she could join him. Since she refused (she felt that as a working mother it was bad enough that she had to leave her baby during the day; she was not going to leave her at night too), it was, in his opinion, basically *her* fault that the two of them did not spend more time together.

Helping Versus Sharing

The father who refuses, either formally or informally, to do anything is the exception, not the rule. What is the rule—as suggested by our

data and other studies—is that fathers will periodically move to a primary or secondary attention level with their infants, thus enabling their wives to get tertiary (“down”) time, but that when they do take over, they almost always assume that they are “helping” their wives rather than “sharing” the parental responsibilities.

Mothers are also likely to see fathers as surrogate parents, and, like their husbands, will use words such as “helping” and “babysitting” to denote the father’s contribution. It is interesting to note that in the 1701 pages of transcripts, *every* couple would, at least once in their interviews, refer to the husband as “helping” the wife with the baby, whereas not a single couple defined the wife’s parental responsibilities in these terms.

There are a variety of ways that a “helping” role can be performed. The first signs that the father will be less involved than the mother in child care can be seen before the baby arrives, during the pregnancy. More often than not, the wife will be the one to think first about and eventually buy several of the how-to books on parenting. If the father does read any of the books, either in whole or in part, it is likely to be as a result of the mother’s coaxing. Clearly, from the start, the mother is the one who is “in charge” of the baby. Her purchase of the books reflects what is generally accepted: Babies are “women’s work.” The fact that she will read the books more thoroughly than her husband directs what is to come: since the father is not as informed about what it means to be a parent, both parents will assume that Mom is the one to orchestrate and implement the child’s care. When and if the father does participate, it is presumed to be under the mother’s direction.

After the baby is born, performances which reflect and direct the father and mother’s separate roles become more sophisticated. Perhaps the most easily recognized is the behavior that ensues the first few times the father holds the baby. Upon being handed his infant son or daughter, he will often say something to the effect that he hopes he does not drop the baby. Then, while he is cradling the baby in his arms, the father will stiffen up, demonstrating both to himself and to

everyone in the room (including the baby) that this is not his accustomed role. Often, the coactors in this drama will reinforce the father’s definition of the situation by standing very close, as if to be ready to catch the baby should he or she actually fall out of the father’s arms. Another typical maneuver is to encourage the father to sit down, preferably in a stuffed chair, so that his arms can be supported. Throughout the scene, the father will ask for and the other performers will readily offer instructions on how to position the arms; where to hold the baby’s head, and so forth. Additional touches may include having someone gather everyone in the house so that they can see Daddy holding Junior or, even better, grabbing a camera to capture a “rare” moment for posterity.

In sociological terms, this scene is a perfect example of what Goffman (1961) refers to as *role distance*. The mock or comedic aspects of the performance indicate an attempt by the father to deny “not the role but the virtual self that is implied in the role” (1961: 108). In other words, the father is distancing or disassociating his self from the parental role.

The father’s performance stands in stark contrast to the mother’s actions when she holds the baby. Even if she does fear that she will drop the baby during those first few days of parenthood, it is considered poor form for her to display that fear. Rather, she is likely to try to appear as if holding the baby is well within her abilities. And the other performers in the room are likely to communicate to the mother that she does indeed look “natural” for the job.

The mother’s performance is the flip side of role distance. What she is doing is *embracing* the parental role—disappearing, as it were, “into the virtual self available in the situation,” confirming “expressively [her] acceptance of it” (Goffman, 1961: 106).

The role distance/role embracement distinction is actually a continuum, one that may be useful for understanding a puzzling set of findings. Studies indicate that most husbands and wives do not believe that men should do more family work than they are doing now. And among the minority

who do feel that men should contribute more, a greater proportion of men than women express an interest in expanding the man's family role (Pleck, 1976). Women, in other words, generally "want" to remain chiefly responsible for the house and for the children.

One explanation—perhaps the most popular—is that women have a psychological investment in their family roles, and become threatened if they cannot count on housework and baby care as their domain. For example, one of the case-study wives was very proud to be a full-time housewife and mother, feeling that these roles constituted her "career" in life. If her husband had decided one day that from then on he would take over a substantial part of the homemaking duties, we have no doubt that this particular woman would have indeed felt threatened.

In terms of what we have been saying, the psychological investment explanation focuses on the role embracement of the mother. Because her self is so closely tied to motherhood, reducing her role performances would undermine her identity. This is probably true for many women, but it does not seem to us to be the whole story. Also operating, we suspect, are the consequences of the father's role distance. To continue our discussion of the variety of ways that helping behavior may manifest itself once the baby comes, consider these role-distancing performances disclosed by the couples: A father "forgets" to change the baby's diaper for the whole time (about six hours) that he is "babysitting" while his wife has gone shopping; he claimed that he was just about to do it. A father just "gives up" trying to feed his infant son and concludes that he is just not "as good at it" as his wife is. A mother reports that her husband did such a terrible job of cleaning their daughter that she finally decided that it was easier for her if she just did it herself. And finally, a mother notes that when her husband did care for the baby he would always ask for her assistance, which meant that she ended up doing most of the work anyway. Thus, another explanation for why mothers do not want more cooperation is that they may not trust their husbands to **do a good job**

or they have learned that their husband's assistance is more trouble than it is worth.

What about the fathers? Although fathers are more inclined to "want" to increase their participation more than mothers "want" them to, the number of fathers who advocate change is still small. Role embracement and role distance can still apply. While the mother embraces parenthood, the father is embracing the traditional male role, which means he sees himself more as the breadwinner than the caretaker. His job, as some of our husbands said, is to "put the food on the table and pay for the kid's college education." Thus, many fathers take exception to the claim that they do not care for or about their children. They point out that although they may not be involved in the day-to-day feeding and cleaning of the baby, they are very much involved in the day-to-day responsibility of providing financial support. Indeed, they argue, because their responsibilities in this realm are so time consuming and energy exhausting, they cannot possibly help their wives more, nor should they be expected to. Even if the wives themselves are employed, many fathers still insist that their jobs are more pressure-laden than their wives' jobs are, and that they still, therefore, should not be expected to help more around the house. (Studies have found that the wife's employment has a negligible impact on the husband's housework and child-care responsibilities [Berk and Berk, 1979; Pleck and Rustad, 1980; Robinson, 1977].) One father in the sample resented the whole idea that men in this society must hold a job, while women can presumably take off when they like to have a baby. The implication was that although men may be "helpers" at home, women are "helpers" in the economic world.

Related, of course, to the father's embracement of the traditional role is the fact that some men have a psychological investment in *not* helping more at home. In their minds, husbands who do too much housework and baby care are not "real men."

The fact that fewer mothers than fathers advocate change is, however, the real puzzle, the solution to which may be linked to the use of the

word "help" to denote the father's parental performances. If the wife believes that her husband's contribution to child care is an act of charity, a "gift" from him to her, then each time the husband helps with the baby, he alters the social exchange balance in the marriage. Having done his wife a "favor," both he and she expect that the favor will be returned (*quid pro quo*). The form of the repayment may not be known. It can, itself, be an act of charity (for example, helping the husband pay the bills), or simply an immediate response to a request (for example, sex even though she is tired). The norm of reciprocity (Gouldner, 1960), nevertheless, dictates that over time role partners will strive for a balanced exchange (Blau, 1964).

Thus, the reason that more mothers than fathers may not be too keen on the idea of having men help more (and significantly, it is in terms of "help" that the surveys are sometimes phrased; see Robinson, 1977, for example) is that mothers may not want to "pay the price." They may not be comfortable with the deferential stance they are expected to take to offset their husband's gratuities (cf. Bell and Newby, 1976).

Of course, the choice may not be theirs to make. The few studies that have examined whether the marital power structure changes after the birth of a child have found that marriages typically become more patriarchal during the transition to parenthood (Cowan et al., 1978; Meyerowitz and Feldman, 1966). Speculation on why this shift occurs has generally centered on the fact that many women quit work when they have their first baby (see Hoffman, 1978, for example). Since power is inversely related to dependency (Emerson, 1962), the increased financial reliance of the wife on the husband is presumed to decrease her power in the relationship, all other things being equal (cf. Blood and Wolfe, 1960). We would hypothesize that the wife's power will typically decrease, regardless of whether there is a change in her employment status. The unrelenting demands of an infant increase the wife's dependency on the husband for

"down time." Though she may not like the fact that when she does get relief from her husband it is defined as a gift for which she will be beholden, she is not likely to cut herself off from his aid. Nor is the husband likely to stop contributing care, particularly if he begins to sense that his wife is indeed grateful for his support. Some husbands in our sample, in fact, tried to increase their wives' dependency not by doing more baby work, but by demanding that their wives acknowledge that since they did a lot more than most of their male friends, they should be appreciated more than they are now. In short, we suspect that marriages tend to become more patriarchal after the birth of the first child because of the socially defined character of baby care.

As might be expected, there are always exceptions to the rule. Women can and do increase their power in a relationship by using their children to increase their demands on their husbands (LaRossa, 1977: 45-46). Also, husbands and wives who do not see the husband's contribution as "helping" are less likely to have the power-dependency balance in their marriages dramatically altered.

One final point on helping: One of the few studies to examine how (rather than whether) the marital power structure changes after the first birth found that couples use more "coercive tactics" (power plays, guilt induction, disparagement) with each other when they become parents (Rausch et al., 1974). These tactics may very well be related to the power-dependence imbalances that are created by helping behavior during the transition to parenthood. If so, then having a baby could, for some couples, precipitate a cycle of mutual coercion escalating ultimately to the use of physical force. The existence of a relationship between parenthood and marital violence is not unheard of. Gelles (1975) found that a disproportionate number of women are hit by their husbands while they are pregnant. And Straus et al. (1980) recently reported that the most likely conflict to lead to blows between a husband and wife is conflict over children.

The Reification of Infants

After reading the transcripts only once, we realized that the value of parenthood was different for the fathers and mothers in our sample. What we did not immediately realize, but what became more apparent with each successive reading, was the way in which the fathers' and mothers' value differences influenced their interactions with their children. In a nutshell, because of the configuration of the fathers' values, they were more likely to act toward their infants as if they, the infants, were *things* (reifications).

One of the fathers, for example, said that his mind would often wander while he was talking with people. His wife, in particular, would become annoyed when, in the middle of a conversation, she would sense that he had "left." The father said that he was working very hard to break this habit with his wife, but that when he did it with his new son, he did not feel that guilty. Since his son was too young to sense that he was not getting his undivided attention, he could, as he put it, "fink [out]" on his kid. Critical to this father's attitude was his disappointment with very young babies. As far as he was concerned, they could not "interact." When the father made this remark, his wife immediately disagreed, saying that their son, and indeed all infants, could interact, but on a different level. The mother, in other words, seemed more sensitive to the fact that infants may not be able to use symbols, but they can communicate through signs (for example, crying means "I want something"). In general, the mothers in the sample were more sensitive to their infant's abilities than the fathers were.

Another way of describing the different attributions that fathers and mothers gave to their infants is to say that mothers were likely to see their infants as more "interpersonally competent" than fathers saw them. The more interpersonal competence that one imputes to other actors in a relationship, the more satisfied one is with that relationship (Burr et al., 1979). Thus,

we would hypothesize that mothers generally enjoy the relationship with their infants more than fathers do.

All of this is not to say that fathers do not want their children, that they do not think they are rewarding. Nor do we mean to suggest that there are not moments when mothers would just as soon hide from their kids, or that mothers do not have other reasons, besides simple enjoyment, for wanting to be mothers. Rather, the point is that the socially determined configuration of values for fathers and mothers is different. To explain what we mean by this, we will apply the often-used intrinsic/extrinsic distinction to parental values.

A *value* "is the position of anything in a preference ordering" (Kuhn, 1974: 107). All social objects, including people, have some value—and often a complex of values—attached to them by others. Essentially, there are two kinds of values—intrinsic and extrinsic. The *intrinsic value* of something or someone is the amount of sheer pleasure or enjoyment that one gets from experiencing that object or person. The *extrinsic value* of something or someone is the amount of social rewards (for example, money, power, prestige, approval, positive self-image, avoidance of stigma or physical pain) associated with having or being with that object or person.

If, for the sake of simplicity, we divide both intrinsic value and extrinsic value into "high" and "low," we arrive at the following ideal types:

- A. High Intrinsic Value, High Extrinsic Value
- B. High Intrinsic Value, Low Extrinsic Value
- C. Low Intrinsic Value, High Extrinsic Value
- D. Low Intrinsic Value, Low Extrinsic Value

Configurations "A" and "D" in their most extreme forms would include "love" and "hate," respectively. Thinking in interpersonal terms, an "A" type would be the parent who very much enjoys interacting with his or her child, and who derives prestige and social approval from being a parent. An example of a "D" type would be the parent who has decided not to keep his or her

baby because of the lack of both enjoyment and perceived social rewards accompanying the transition to parenthood. Category "B" would, in its extreme form, include fathers and mothers who get a thrill just from being in contact with their kids but who have never seen their children as assets to be displayed or bartered. And finally, category "C" would, in its extreme form, include fathers and mothers who see their children only in utilitarian terms, as commodities in the interpersonal marketplace. Though presented here as dichotomous variables (high/low), intrinsic value and extrinsic value are, in reality, continuous variables (highest . . . midpoint . . . lowest). Hence, whereas it may be difficult to conceive of the four types in their most extreme forms, the chances are that all of us have directly or indirectly known people who more or less conform to one type or another. We may not know, for example, a parent who derives only intrinsic benefits from being a parent, but we can perhaps think of fathers and mothers who just seem to get "a charge" out of being parents, and who seem to be relatively uninterested in the extrinsic payoffs.

The relevance of the typology to understanding the reification of infants is that category "C" is a reified relationship. To see a baby largely in terms of the social rewards which he or she provides is to dehumanize the baby. We recognize that this statement is itself a value judgment, but we believe that "thing-like relationships" is an accurate description of some of the interactions that were described during the interviews. To be more specific, and to return to the central point about father-child relationships, our data suggest that there are many fathers who could be said to, more or less, fall into category "C," many fathers who certainly want and treasure their children, but who do not really enjoy being with their kids. Sure, they will roughhouse with their toddlers on the living-room floor, and will blush when hugged or kissed by their one-year-olds, but when you really get down to it, they just do not have that much fun when they are with their children. If they had their druthers, they would be working at

the office or drinking at the local pub—and quite often they are doing precisely that either in fact or in fantasy—but they commit themselves to their kids out of a sense of responsibility.

Relationships which are perceived as primarily obligatory take on a very different character than intrinsically valued relationships. First, obligatory relationships operate at lower levels of attention than intrinsically valued relationships, which is to say that there would be more divided attention, more secondary activity in these relationships. Also, obligatory relationships are generally more routinized, so as to facilitate the addition of other activities (and other people) when enacting the obligatory relationship. Thus, we would hypothesize that Low Intrinsic/High Extrinsic parent-child relationships would be marked by more multiple activities and, because they can be easily routinized, more play activities than High Intrinsic/High Extrinsic parent-child relationships.

The best example of this was provided by the father who complained that his son could not interact and who said that he had developed a series of "tricks" which helped him get through any extended contact with his son. Basically, the tricks were toys and events which kept the baby distracted, and which thus decreased the father's level of attention. The father had also learned what particular sequence of introducing the tricks worked best for distracting the baby the longest. Thus, the father would initiate a routinized series of distractions when his son started to get too demanding.

Reification of children can spiral. Parents who, from the start, assume that their infants are not interpersonally competent may conclude that they do not enjoy being with their children, which can result in a lowering of their attention and routinization of their interaction with their kids. This strategy can prevent the parents from effectively discovering that their children (1) may be more interpersonally competent than they originally thought they were, and (2) are becoming more interpersonally competent with each passing day (because of developmental changes). Not being

receptive to these changes may contribute further to the parents' low level of enjoyment when they are with their children, which may mean that they will withdraw even more, and so on. The significance of this hypothetical pattern is that it suggests that child-care differences between couples and between fathers and mothers are not simply a function of internalized value differences being "played out," but are a consequence of *interactional processes* that take place during the transition to parenthood itself.

Aligning Actions and Traditional Divisions of Labor

It is clear from the above analysis that during the transition to parenthood, the probability of misunderstandings, screw-ups, snafus, conflicts of interest, and unplanned consequences is quite high. In a word, things can "get out of line" quite easily. Generally, these misalignments take two forms. *Interpersonal misalignments* are those situations in which there is a misunderstanding or basic conflict of interest between people. *Culture-conduct misalignments* are those situations in which there is a perceived discrepancy between the cultural ideals and expectations of the participants in a social system and their actual or intended conduct; they say one thing and do another (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976).

When people are confronted with either an interpersonal misalignment or a culture-conduct misalignment, they will engage in what are called (reasonably enough) aligning actions (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976). *Aligning actions* are principally verbal activities and include, among other things, *motives* ("answers to questions interrupting acts or programs" [Mills, 1940: 473]), *remedial interchanges* ("corrective readings calculated to show that a possible offender actually had a right relationship to the rules, or if he seemed not to a moment ago, he can be counted on to have such a relationship henceforth" [Goffman, 1971: 108]), and *accounts* ("a statement made by a social actor

to explain unanticipated or untoward behavior" [Scott and Lyman, 1968: 46]).

Aligning actions are central to a sociological perspective because they help us to understand a central sociological problem, namely, the existence of continuity and change in social life. Given instances of culture-conduct misalignment (the second of the two forms of misalignment), the major functions of aligning actions are to (1) "maintain culture in the face of conduct that is at variance with it," and (2) "provide a social lubricant that simultaneously permits social change and yet allows conduct to be linked to recognized cultural boundaries" (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976: 848).

With respect to the first function, aligning actions explain how a couple can believe that they have a role-sharing (nontraditional) system when their conduct clearly indicates that they have a role-segregated (traditional) system. The aligning actions in this case define role-segregated conduct as nothing more than a legitimate exception to the rule. Thus, for example, the couple who very much wants to institute an androgynous parental arrangement but who finds it virtually impossible to carry out, given the existing societal constraints, may conduct themselves on a traditional plane but continue to believe that they are "into androgyny" by defining their deviance from their beliefs as "excusable," "justifiable," and so forth. In other words, aligning actions are a form of situational ethics which allows people to hold on to their absolute standards. Of course, aligning actions need not be used conjointly by a couple. A husband may, through aligning actions, continue to genuinely believe that he is sharing the load despite evidence to the contrary. A wife may, through aligning actions, continue to honestly believe that she wants to be with her kids more than anything else in the world despite her efforts to disassociate from them.

The second function of aligning actions—the change function—is perhaps even more important than the continuity function, in that the change function provides a sociological explana-

tion for traditionalization during the transition to parenthood. Several studies have found that traditional marital behavior *increases* during the months following the birth of a first child (Cowan et al., 1978; Entwisle and Doering, 1981; Meyerowitz and Feldman, 1966; Raush et al., 1974). Explanations for why these changes occur have typically centered on either physiological or personality factors which are supposedly triggered by parenthood (Chodorow, 1978; Rossi, 1977, 1984).

We cannot test the relative validity of the physiological and personality explanations with our data. And this is not the place to embark on a review of studies which have attempted to test these two theories. We can, however, say this: The existing evidence indicates that physiological and personality factors are *not sufficient* to explain traditionalization after birth. As important as these variables may be, no one has yet conclusively demonstrated that physiology or personality, or some combination of the two, is all that is needed to understand why couples shift to a traditional family system during the transition to parenthood.

The inability of physiological and personality theories to explain everything points to the importance of including sociological variables in models of traditionalization. But we must be careful here; in principle, a sociological approach does not mean simply paying homage to societal factors impacting on couples after they become parents. Contending that society "forces" couples into traditional roles is to conceive of a society that is separate from, rather than integrated with, individuals. This approach is nothing more than deterministic reasoning disguised as sociological reasoning. Substituting societal determinism for physiological or personality determinism is *not* in keeping with a sociological perspective.

Thus, for example, when Michael Lamb, a psychologist by training, attempts to explain traditionalization by arguing that "the insistent and undeniable dependency of the baby makes equivocation or ambiguity about role demands more difficult to sustain than in the preparental phase,

and our society's expectations regarding nurturant maternal roles are more clearly defined than any other" (Lamb, 1978: 146), he falls short of offering a truly sociological explanation because he leaves open the question of exactly how societal expectations translate into marital behavior. Where Lamb's proposition actually fails is in his implicit assertion that traditional behavior is nothing more than cultural programming. As noted earlier, however, the relationship between culture and conduct is not as smooth as Lamb suggests. Whereas in earlier times traditionalization may indeed have been a puppet-like process, postindustrial society does not provide couples with a "clearly defined" script for how to act when a baby arrives. To the contrary, parental expectations in modern society are extremely complex and highly ambiguous (LeMasters, 1970).

The part of Lamb's statement that, in our opinion, should have been developed more is the beginning, where he says that "the insistent and undeniable dependency of the baby" poses special problems for new parents. Here he is suggesting some social interactional process operating to move the couple toward traditional role behavior. Our data suggest that the dependency of the baby on the parents is indeed an important factor in traditionalization, but that it is not simply a matter of making "equivocation or ambiguity about role demands more difficult to sustain." Rather, it is the dependency of the baby which creates a scarcity of free time, and which places the couple in a more competitive stance toward the other.

Before the transition to parenthood, it is relatively easy for couples (and especially men) to believe that they are nontraditional in the same way that it is easy, during times of economic growth and prosperity, for the middle class to believe that it is not racist. In both situations, valued resources (time in one case, money in the other) are not immediately threatened. However, history has shown that when it becomes apparent that strict adherence to sexual or racial equality can mean personal losses, then the basic axiom of the conflict orientation applies: When resources

are scarce, people tend to choose themselves over others. Put simply, under conditions of scarcity, whites become more racist and men become more sexist. But in choosing themselves over others, both the middle-class white and the husband-father are faced with their own culture-conduct misalignments. In all likelihood, their behavior in the economic or temporal "squeeze" is at odds with their stated beliefs before the scarcity. This is where aligning actions come into play. By blaming others (their parents, their bosses, the government, and even the people they are competing with—blacks or women) and/or by justifying their conduct, they try their best to symbolically (but not behaviorally) mend their broken promises. Initially, these aligning actions serve as stopgap measures, helping the people in the system (both the "haves" and the "have-nots") cope with the transition, helping them maintain a consistent and orderly reality to their lives. Over time, the aligning actions help to transform the reality of the system itself.

In order to make our point clear, we should more precisely define what we mean by "traditionalization." Up to now, we have used the term to refer to increases in traditional behavior. This is because the existing studies on the transition to parenthood have employed the term in this way, and because it would not have been meaningful to question their approach until after we had introduced the change function of aligning actions. In truth, limiting traditionalization to behavioral shifts is theoretically vacuous. To know simply that a couple exhibits traditional behavior tells us nothing about whether the husband and wife "have their hearts in it" (role embracement), or whether they are mechanically "going through the motions." In other words, the meaning which the couple imputes to their activity is lost. We are not talking about whether the couple is "bothered" or "gratified" by their behavior. Rather, we are referring to the couple's total way of looking at what they are doing, their world view, their *Weltanschauung*. Although the studies which have focused on the transition to parenthood have equated traditionalization with behavioral

change, there are other studies which have attempted to assess the impact of parenthood by comparing couples with and without children, and which indicate that, in addition to changing their behavior, couples may also shift to traditional ways of thinking (Hoffman and Manis, 1978). If both the culture and the conduct of a marriage traditionalize, then *traditionalization is an organizational transformation rather than simply a behavioral change*. This is how we prefer to use the term, and for good reason. Our data suggest that, more often than not, the transition to parenthood initiates a systemic level change in marriage toward a more traditional social organization.

The key to the difference between the continuity and the change function of aligning actions is time. On a short-term basis, aligning actions serve a preservative function, allowing beliefs to persist despite contradictory evidence. But on a long-term basis, aligning actions serve a morphogenic function, allowing beliefs to drift, ever so gradually, in the direction of the misaligned conduct. The presumption being made here is that over extended periods of time "culture follows conduct" (Stokes and Hewitt, 1976: 848). Thus, on a short-term basis, the couple whose conduct after the birth of their child is more traditional than their beliefs can use aligning actions to preserve those beliefs. But on a long-term basis, their willingness to excuse and justify their behavior rather than actually make it conform to their beliefs will result in an adjustment of their beliefs to their conduct. They will, in other words, begin to develop a marital culture that is closer to (but not necessarily in exact correspondence with) their actual conduct. Thus, aligning actions serve as a "social lubricant" for traditionalization in that they allow misalignments to be explained away rather than seriously examined.

The legitimacy of aligning actions is also important. Not all aligning actions are honored—that is, accepted—by the "offended" party as a legitimate explanation for the misalignment. Whether or not an aligning action is deemed legitimate is a function of the social structural and

symbolic universe of the people in the interaction. For example, while it is generally considered socially acceptable for a father to say that his career is keeping him from his children, it is not as acceptable for mothers to use this excuse. It is also not as acceptable for mothers to say that they have less patience with their newborns than their husbands do, or that they are not as skilled in feeding, changing, or quieting the baby. If any of these aligning actions were offered by a mother, there is a fairly good chance that they would be disallowed by her husband, her family, her friends, and others. Thus, crucial to the traditionalization process is the availability of aligning actions that legitimate the father's withdrawal from baby care, and the corresponding absence of aligning actions that legitimate the mother's withdrawal from baby care.

The legitimacy of an aligning action is, however, not a given, which is to say that social actors cannot assume that an aligning action will be accepted when it is offered. The critical stage in the "life" of an aligning action is when the aligning action is presented and accepted or not accepted by the other party. Up until this point, the validity of an aligning action for any particular relationship is an open question. Only after the aligning action is presented *and* accepted does it become part of the social reality of the relationship. For example, when a husband says for the first time (perhaps just after he has had difficulty giving the baby breakfast) that he feels that he is inept at feeding his son or daughter, the wife's immediate response to the husband's assertion is critical. If at this point she does not challenge her husband's definition of the situation, or if she takes over responsibility for feeding the baby because of what he has just said, she has effectively endorsed the aligning action, accepting it, at least for the moment, as part of the consensual world. *Thus, the theory proposed here for the traditionalization process is both sociohistorical and interactional. As much as the aligning actions may appear to the husband and wife as realities that are "out there," programming their every move, the fact is that they*

are part and parcel of the negotiation process itself, intrinsic to the whole idea of social interaction.

Conclusion

Our objective in this chapter has been to present a sociological view of the transition to parenthood. We believe that the transition to parenthood offers the student of social life a unique opportunity to see in action what Mills (1959) meant by "the sociological imagination." Few family experiences provide so vivid a picture of how biography and history are dialectically related. Few family experiences are so close to the cornerstone of a society.

The picture of parenthood that we have presented may not be as "beautiful" as some people would like. Nonetheless, we think that it will be ultimately beneficial. By laying bare some of the social patterns, social processes, and sociohistorical linkages underlying conflict and sexism during the transition to parenthood, we have at least provided a clue into how we might go about improving the social world of fathers and mothers.

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