PREDICTORS OF CHANGE IN MATERNAL AND PATERNAL PARTNER RELATIONSHIP SATISFACTION DURING THE TRANSITION TO PARENTHOOD IN THREE COUNTRIES

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It is important to study the trajectory of partner relationship satisfaction in parent couples, because of its role in parental well-being and the parent-child relationship (e.g. Beach, Katz, Kim & Brody, 2003; Erel & Burman, 1995). Previous studies found a decrease in partner relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood (Mitnick, Heyman, & Smith Slep, 2009). The goal of this study is to examine parent (mental health problems), contextual (socioeconomic status), and child (sleep) characteristics as predictors of the trajectory of partner relationship satisfaction in first time parents from the third trimester of pregnancy (36W) until four months postpartum (4M).

This study is part of the larger international longitudinal study ‘New Fathers and Mothers Study’ examining relations between risk factors (e.g., parental stress) and child (cognitive) development from pregnancy to 24 months post-birth. The sample consisted of 355 families (UK n = 172, NL n = 97, US n = 86). Partner relationship satisfaction (36W and 4M), parental mental health problems (36W and 4M), family socioeconomic status (36W), and infant sleep (4M) were measured with questionnaires.

Overall, mothers were more satisfied with their relationship than fathers, $F(1, 346) = 5.75, p = .017, \eta_p^2 = .02$. There was a decrease in relationship satisfaction from 36W to 4M for both fathers and mothers, $F(1, 346) = 147.60, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .30$. The decrease in partner relationship satisfaction was stronger for parents who scored high on 4M mental health problems. There were no significant interaction effects between time and 36W maternal or paternal mental health problems, family SES, infant sleep, parent gender, or country.

These results show the robustness of the decrease in partner relationship satisfaction during the transition to parenthood and the role parental mental health problems play in this decrease.