Transition to Motherhood and Relationship Quality: Does Divorce or Separation History Matter?

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ABSTRACT. Despite the fact that many women in remarriages give birth to their first child, studies on the transition to motherhood do not acknowledge the impact of higher-order unions and vice versa. Currently, it is unknown how the relationship functioning of women undergoing the transition to motherhood is influenced by the new couples’ divorce or separation history. The aim of this study is to address this gap in the literature by examining the trajectory of 140 women, all expecting the birth of their first child, in function of the fact that they are, or not, in higher-order unions. Women completed, along with a demographic questionnaire, a measure of dyadic adjustment during the third trimester of their pregnancy and at six months postpartum. Results show that, as predicted, women whose partners are in higher-order unions experience a more important decline in relationship functioning following the birth of their first child than women whose partners are in first unions. These differences are largely independent of demographic variables differentiating higher-order unions from first unions, such as age of partners and length of relationship. The current study confirms that higher-order...
unions have the potential to be associated with relational difficulties even when no child was born from prior relationships. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

**KEYWORDS.** Divorce or separation history, transition to motherhood, relationship functioning, women, higher-order unions vs. first unions

The transition to parenthood, that is the introduction of a first child into a conjugal system, is one of the most common and most well-studied developmental transitions (Elek, Brage Hudson, & Bouffard, 2003). Prospective studies have documented modest but significant declines in relationship quality in most new parents, and in particular new mothers, following the birth of their first child (e.g., Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Crohan, 1996; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000; Porter & Hsu, 2003). This gender difference is explained by the fact that mothers typically are the central actors in their families. For most women, motherhood is an experience that provides rich sources of personal identity, but also unrelenting and burdensome responsibilities (Demo & Acock, 1996).

Another conjugal situation, which has the potential of being associated with relational difficulties, and this is especially true for women, is remarriage, or higher-order unions, by comparison with first unions (Vemer, Coleman, Ganong, & Cooper, 1989). Higher-order union is a term that encompasses different types of relationships: Both partners may be in a second (or more) union or the current union may be a higher-order union for only one of the partner (Coleman et al., 2000). Results showed that women in first marriages reported slightly greater marital satisfaction than those in remarriages (Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Knox & Zusman, 2001; Vemer et al., 1989). In addition, women in remarriages are more likely to experience a decline in relationship quality over an eight-year period than those in first marriages (Booth & Edwards, 1992).

Surprisingly, despite the fact that both spouses in many higher-order unions give birth to their first child (Coleman et al., 2000), researches on the transition to motherhood do not acknowledge the impact of remarriage and vice versa. Because the transition to motherhood is a stressful situation, it is very well-suited for investigating the impact of
divorce/separation histories of new parents on women’s relationship functioning. Currently, it is unknown how the trajectory of women undergoing the transition to motherhood is influenced by the fact that they are, or not, in higher-order unions. The aim of the current study was to address this gap in the literature. It can be hypothesized that the challenges related to higher-order unions would be added on top of those related to the transition to motherhood. As a result, this critical developmental phase would be more difficult for these women. In this study, both marriage and cohabitation will be studied in order to take into consideration (a) that cohabitation is more common among higher-order than first unions and (b) that an increasing number of individuals are cohabiting not as a precursor but as an alternative to marriage or remarriage (Coleman et al., 2000; de Jong Gierveld, 2004).

Despite the fact that, to the best of our knowledge, there are no published studies on the transition to motherhood in higher-order unions, a number of facts suggest that women in higher-order unions would be more likely to experience a decline in relationship quality following the birth of their first child than women in first unions. First, results showed that persons in remarriages reported higher levels of isolation and were more likely to be poorly integrated with parents and in-laws (Booth & Edwards, 1992). This could be particularly harmful in the transition to parenthood as the importance of social support in this context is well established (Simpson & Rholes, 2002). Second, people in remarriages are more likely to be willing to leave the relationship and willingness to leave increases the probability of a decline in conjugal quality (Booth & Edwards, 1992). Third, people in second unions are more likely to have (or have a partner who has) qualities that make it difficult for them to carry on sustained intimate relationships, such as risk and immature behaviours (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Coleman et al., 2000; Johnson & Booth, 1998; Prado & Markman, 1999). The qualities associated with being a conjugal loser increase the probability of a decline in relationship quality (Booth & Edwards, 1992). It can be argued that this decline would be accelerated in a critical period, such as the arrival of a first child. Finally, results showed that continued attachment to the former partner may be threatening for the new partner and may create conflicts in the relationship (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999; Knox & Zusman, 2001; Roberts & Price, 1989). It is well established that friendship with the former spouse is more likely when no child is born of the former union (Buunk & Mutsaers, 1999), which is the case here.

All these data converge to suggest that women in higher-order unions would be more likely to experience a decline in relationship quality fol-
lowing the birth of their first child than women in first unions. However, in light of past findings, the differences are expected to be small (Kurdek, 1990; Vemer et al., 1989; Voydanoff, Fine, & Donnelly, 1994). The analyses will enable us to examine the impact of the transition to parenthood on women’s relationship functioning (a) if their partners are in higher-order unions, (b) if they are themselves in higher-order unions, and (c) if both themselves and their partners are in higher-order unions (Booth & Edwards, 1992). In accordance with the procedure proposed by Kurdek (1990), the analyses will be executed with and without the controls for demographic variables that differentiate first and higher-order unions, given that these differences are likely part of the divorce/separation history effect itself. For example, people in remarriages should be older than those in first marriages because it takes time to experience marriage and divorce (Kurdek, 1990). Thus, controlling for demographic variables might wash out any divorce/separation history effect. However, one might also argue that if divorce/separation history effects are robust, they should explain variance in relationship functioning over and above what is accounted for by background variables (Kurdek, 1990). This debate gives the impetus for investigating the impact of higher-order unions with and without controls for associated demographic variables.

METHOD

Participants

The participants in the study were 140 French-Canadian couples, all undergoing the transition to parenthood for the first time. The two members of the couple participated in the research project. However, for the purposes of this study, only the data for women were considered, with the exception of men’s demographic variables (for instance, their divorce or separation history). Women had been living with their partners an average of 6 years ($SD = 3.39$) at the start of the study, and were either simply cohabiting (21%) or were legally married (79%). The age range of the women was 20 to 39 years ($M = 28.03, SD = 3.97$). The average education level of women was 16 years ($SD = 2.46$). The mean annual income for women was $34,000 ($SD = $20,009) in Canadian currency. Forty-four percent of women have given birth to a girl and 56% to a boy. Three have given birth to twins, eight to a premature
baby, but none to a handicapped child. Most of the pregnancies (85%) were planned.

**Procedure**

The couples for this study were recruited from prenatal classes offered by the French regional hospital. Interested couples were invited to complete twice the questionnaires under study. Informed by previous theory and research on the transition to parenthood (e.g., Delmore-Ko, Pancer, Hunsberger, & Pratt, 2000; Simpson, Rholes, Campbell, & Wilson, 2003), we conducted the first assessment during the third trimester of the mother’s pregnancy ($M = 32.38$ weeks of gestation, $SD = 3.55$) and the second approximately at six months postpartum.

Interested couples were interviewed in laboratory settings at Université de Moncton. Participants completed the questionnaires separately from their partner. The research assistant was present throughout to ensure compliance with these instructions. Only the French versions of the questionnaires were used. At Time 2, a small number of couples asked to complete the questionnaires at home due to the difficulties of coming to the laboratory with a young child. This procedure has been allowed in order to reduce the attrition rate as much as possible. All the participants received a written summary of their answers to questionnaires in reward for each of their participation in the study. The written summary described the questionnaires and provided a short individualized interpretation of the scores obtained by each participant (see Bouchard, Sabourin, Lussier, Wright, & Richer, 1998 for previous use of this procedure in longitudinal studies with other samples of couples). To ensure confidentiality, the participants only received information about themselves and not about their partner. In addition, couples were paid $15.00 (Canadian currency) for each of their participation.

**Prenatal and Postnatal Measures**

*Demographic Variables.* A demographic questionnaire asked participants to report, for instance, their age, actual marital status, education level, annual income, and length of relationship. At Time 1, this questionnaire also contained a yes-no question evaluating divorce or separation history: “Have you ever experienced a divorce or relationship dissolution?”

*Relationship Functioning.* The Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976) is a 32-item questionnaire of relationship functioning. It is de-
signed for use with either married or unmarried cohabiting couples (Spanier, 1976). The instrument provides a global score of dyadic adjustment and four subscale scores for consensus, satisfaction, cohesion, and affectional expression. Only the global score was used in this study. The global score can range from 0 to 151, with higher scores reflecting higher level of dyadic adjustment. English and French (Baillargeon, Dubois, & Marineau, 1986) versions of the questionnaire possess adequate psychometric properties. Cronbach alphas were respectively .88 at Time 1 and .91 at Time 2.

RESULTS

As indicated earlier, the analyses will focus on the impact of the transition to motherhood on women’s relationship functioning (a) when women’s current partners are in higher-order unions vs. first unions, (b) when women are themselves in higher-order unions vs. first unions, and (c) when both women and their partners are in higher-order unions vs. first unions. Analyses will first be conducted without controls for demographic variables. Additional analyses in which demographic variables differentiating first and higher-order unions were controlled for will be presented after the main analyses.

First, a 2 × 2 ANOVA with men’s divorce or separation history (i.e., first union or higher-order union) as a non-repeated factor, and time (i.e., prenatal or postnatal assessment) as a repeated factor was conducted to assess differences between groups on women’s relationship functioning as measured with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale. Results are presented at the top of Table 1. Analyses revealed a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 138) = 18.49, p < .001$, but no main effect of men’s divorce or separation history, $F < 1$. However, and most importantly, a significant interaction between time and men’s divorce or separation history was observed, $F(1, 138) = 4.20, p < .05$. This interaction is attributable to the fact that women whose partners were in higher-order unions reported a more important decline in relationship quality following the birth of their first child than women whose partners were in first unions.

A similar analysis was conducted, this time with women’s divorce or separation history as the non-repeated factor. These results are reported in the middle of Table 1. Results revealed a significant main effect of women’s divorce or separation history, $F(1, 138) = 4.70, p < .05$, as well as a significant main effect of time, $F(1, 138) = 13.45, p < .001$. 
However, the interaction did not reach the threshold of significance, $F(1, 138) = 1.15, p = .29$. Results showed that women, whatever their own divorce or separation history, reported significantly less relationship functioning after childbirth than before. In addition, women who had experienced a divorce or relationship dissolution in the past reported significantly less relationship functioning in their current union than women in first unions.

A $2 \times 2$ ANOVA was next executed to test the impact of higher-order unions when both partners are in higher-order unions vs. when at least one partner is in a first union. Results are presented at the bottom of Table 1. A significant main effect of time was observed, $F(1, 138) = 12.24, p < .001$, showing that women reported less relationship functioning after childbirth than before. However, neither the main effect of divorce or separation history, $F < 1$, nor the interaction, $F(1, 138) = 2.15, p = .15$, was significant.

It remains to be investigated if the interaction between men’s divorce or separation history and time is still significant when demographic variables that differentiate men in first unions from those in higher-order unions are also controlled for. A MANOVA was first executed to investigate if men’s demographic variables significantly differ in function of men’s divorce or separation history. The between-subjects MANOVA with men’s divorce or separation history as the independent variable, and men’s age, annual income, and length of relationship as dependent measures showed that overall, the effect of men’s divorce or separation history was significant, $F(3, 131) = 10.64, p < .001$. More

### TABLE 1. Means and Standard Deviations for Women's Prenatal and Postnatal Relationship Functioning in Function of Divorce or Separation History

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Divorce or separation history</th>
<th>First unions</th>
<th>Higher-order unions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prenatal</td>
<td>Postnatal</td>
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<tr>
<td>For men$^a$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$M$</td>
<td>125.01</td>
<td>122.92</td>
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<td>$SD$</td>
<td>10.51</td>
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<td>For women$^b$</td>
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<td>$M$</td>
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<td>For both partners$^c$</td>
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<tr>
<td>$SD$</td>
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**Note.** $^a$29 men were in higher-order unions, whereas 111 were in first unions. $^b$28 women were in higher-order unions, whereas 112 were in first unions. $^c$15 couples encompassed two partners, which were both in higher-order unions, whereas 125 couples comprised at least one partner which was in a first union.
specifically, separate ANOVAs revealed that men in higher-order unions were older, $F(1, 133) = 17.03, p < .001$, and were actually in relationship of shorter duration than men in first unions, $F(1, 133) = 8.15, p < .01$. In addition, they were more likely to be simply cohabiting with their current partner rather than being married, $\chi^2(1, N = 140) = 16.92, p < .001$. Consequently, a $2 \times 2$ ANCOVA with men’s age, length of relationship, and current conjugal status as covariates have been conducted. Results first revealed that none of these covariates were significant. In addition, when men’s age and length of relationship were controlled for, the interaction remained significant, $F(1, 136) = 4.60, p < .05$. When current conjugal status was added to the other two covariates, the interaction became marginally significant, $F(1, 135) = 3.47, p = .065$. In summary, results showing that women whose partners were in higher-order unions reported a more important decline in relationship functioning following childbirth cannot be accounted for by other demographic variables, such as age and length of relationship.

**DISCUSSION**

Results of the present study are clear and easy to summarize. First, they reveal that the number of individuals that had their first child in a second (or more) union in this study (see the statistics in the note below Table 1) is comparable to what was obtained by Cox, Paley, Payne, and Burchinal (1999) in a study on the transition to parenthood. The current study also replicates a relatively robust effect, that is the significant decline in conjugal adjustment for most first-time mothers following childbirth (see also, Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Crohan, 1996; Pancer et al., 2000; Porter & Hsu, 2003). Most importantly, and as predicted, results show that the decline in dyadic adjustment is more important for women whose current partners are in remarriages (or higher-order unions) than for other women. Moreover, these results are largely independent of other associated demographic characteristics. This having been said, women’s divorce or separation history is not without influence since those who have experienced a divorce or relationship dissolution are globally less conjugally adjusted at both points of assessment than those in first unions. Our conclusion in this regard parallels that of other researchers (Coleman et al., 2000; Knox & Zusman, 2001; Vemer et al., 1989) showing the small, but significant, relational cost associated with second unions.
As mentioned earlier in the introduction, higher-order union is a term that encompasses different types of relationships: The man, the woman, or both partners of the current couple may have experienced a divorce or a separation (Coleman et al., 2000). In the context of the transition to motherhood, our results show that men’s divorce or separation history matters the most. Although as predicted, the decline in relationship functioning associated with the transition to motherhood is rather modest, it remains that it is about three times larger for women who are married or cohabiting with a man with “baggage” (see Knox & Zusman, 2001 for a definition) than for other women with respectively a decline of dyadic adjustment of 5.90 and 2.08 (see Table 1). How can the deleterious effect of men’s previous divorce or separation history be explained? There is evidence in the literature that the way men handle conflict in a relationship is more important in terms of predicting the future than how women handle conflict (Prado & Markman, 1999; Stanley, Markman, St. Peters, & Leber, 1995). There is also evidence that men who had experienced at least a divorce or a separation in the past are more likely to manifest impulsivity and immature behaviours (Booth & Edwards, 1992; Coleman et al., 2000). It can be argued that these negative behaviours are likely to hinder men’s problem solving abilities which will, in return, harm their partner’s satisfaction. The men’s deficient problem-solving abilities would have more impact during the transition to parenthood than during most other periods because of its richness in challenges and potential conjugal difficulties.

In the vast majority of studies examining the impact of remarriages on people’s conjugal life, the new couples had to deal with the presence of children or stepchildren from prior relationships. The current study confirms that the simple fact of being in a second union has an impact on women’s relationship quality, even when there is no child from prior relationships. In addition, our results show that the relational cost associated with higher-order unions can be obvious as rapidly as a few months after the birth of a first child. By comparison, Booth and Edwards (1992) observed a similar decline in marital quality for people in remarriages, but over an 8-year period. In their study, Booth and Edwards did not control for the occurrence of the transition to parenthood among remarried couples. In light of current results, it can be hypothesized that a substantial part of the decline observed in Booth and Edwards’ study could be due to couples facing the transition to parenthood. Future research should address this issue. In addition, it would be interesting to assess the trajectory of women in first and higher-order unions beyond the acute period of the transition.
REFERENCES


